1. Grandmother and grandson
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

AN OUTLINE OF THE PROBLEM

An attempt is being made in the present study to describe the socio-economic life of the Assamese Nepalis in three villages under Darrang District of Assam with particular reference to Sipajhar area (Map 1).

North East India comprises the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. North East India is a region of wide ethnic diversity. The people of this region may broadly be divided into tribal and non-tribal ethnic groups. Migrations of different groups of people to this region from ancient time to the present time have significantly contributed towards the growth of ethnic diversity in this region. A
few ethnic groups have come into being as a consequence of prolonged interaction between the cultures of the migrants and those of the autochthones.

The state of Assam may be considered as a localized expression of the happenings in the whole of North East India since the historical time to the present. The people of Assam as in the case of North East India may broadly be divided into tribal and non-tribal ethnic groups. The non-tribal ethnic groups may again be divided into different religious groups having varied cultural traditions. The Assamese Nepalis constitute one such group. The Assamese Nepalis identify themselves with Assam, their homeland and Assamese as their language. The Assamese Nepalis also speak Gorkhali and Hindi. These Nepalis identify with the common culture, which they share with the Assamese people.

The Nepalis, who in demographic terms constitute 86.2 per cent of the total population of Nepal (27,676,547, according to 2001 census) occupy a distinctive position due to various historical, socio-cultural, economic, political and ethno-demographic factors including their migration to adjoining and neighbouring areas. The migration of the Nepalis has given rise to a number of local communities in different socio-cultural settings. The processes like acculturation and assimilation in the case of
the Nepali migrants have been operating in varying degrees. The single most important factor influencing the demographic aspects of Nepal is migration. There has been constant movement of people of Nepal internally from the hills to the plains, from the rural to urban areas and internationally across the borders in search of economic opportunities. In view of these developments, it has become necessary to understand the various aspects of life of the Nepalis. The situation obtaining among the Nepalis in Nepal and migrant Nepalis in parts of India has drawn attention of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, economists, political scientists and others to undertake various studies pertaining to the Nepalis.

The need for an objective understanding of contemporary Nepali social life cannot be over emphasized. There are frequent discussions at various levels of the problems of national integration in India and the position of different ethnic groups, both large and small, in the national society. It is assumed that a series of intensive local community studies dealing with the character of intra and intercommunity relations in different parts of India would provide us with a better grasp of the situation than what is obtained from generalized macroscopic study of a region. To this extent, the present study is assumed to have a
representative value for the Assam region. This representative quality of the present study needs to be seen in broad terms and not in details. For, the content and quality of Assamese Nepali social life observed in the specific three village settings are not likely to be similar in every detail in the case of other Assamese Nepali community of Assam. There are variations in the content and quality of social life from one local community to another. However, since the three selected local communities are localized expressions of the wider society and are not isolated worlds, such variations do not minimize the representative value of the present study. Dube (1967) has emphasized the need of studying the different ethnic minorities in India and unless it is done, it would be impossible to assess the existing social-cleavages and to suggest ways and means for reducing social distance between different groups with a view to evolving a more integrated society.

According to an estimate (Banerjee 1984: 37-38), there were about six million Nepalis scattered in various parts of India. The Nepalis are traditionally cattle breeders but many of them have also switched over to various wage earning occupations in rural and urban situations. It may be noted here that among the Nepalis of India various political processes are operating. The Nepalis of India have organized various movements like the Nepali
language movement to include it in the Indian constitution which is essentially an ethnic identity movement aiming at consolidating the ethnic identity of the Nepalis in the Indian context.

In so far as the distribution of the Nepalis in India is concerned, they are primarily distributed towards the northern and eastern part of India, down the Himalayas throughout the northern and eastern border of India. Thus, they are to be found in large numbers in Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, northeastern part of Uttar Pradesh, northern part of Bihar, northeastern part of West Bengal and throughout the Brahmaputra valley of Assam and in parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, etc., in North East India (Map 2).

The Nepalis from Nepal have migrated to different parts of India including Assam and its adjoining areas in North East India due to various reasons. These are broadly historical, political, economic and geographical.

The Nepalis who are variously denoted as Nepalis, Gorkhalis or Gurkhas (a generic term employed for the Nepali soldiers in the British colonial army) constitute at present one of the important population groups in North East India. They are to be found in almost all the eight states of the northeastern region. The Nepali migration to North East India took place from the 19th century.
Main concentrations of the Nepali speaking Population in India and percentages of Nepali speaking population (out of the total Nepali speakers = 2,871,749) in the States of India, according to 2001 Census

MAP- 2 CONCENTRATION OF THE NEPALI SPEAKING POPULATION
onwards. They came primarily in search of a living as soldiers, porters, herdsmen and marginal farmers. The establishment and consolidation of the British rule paved ways for such migration to this region. The migration primarily took place from Nepal and to some extent from Darjeeling and Sikkim (Gurung 2003 172-183).

Sinha (2003 31-53) observes that the first direct contact between the Nepalis and the northeastern region appears to have occurred in 1817, when 1,000 Hindustanis (people inhabiting India) and Gurkhas took part in the Sylhet operation as part of the Cuttack Legion (later known as the Assam Light Infantry). It is held that one Subedar, Jaichand Thakur, retired from the Eight Gurkha Platoon, Sylhet, got settled as early as 1824 at Shillong. About four decades after that Thurston records in his memoirs that an irregular corps consisting mainly of Gurkhas was stationed at Jowai in the Jaintia Hills during the 1862 rebellion. The Nepali presence was such that even before the capital of Assam shifted to Shillong, Thurston found in 1867, there were a number of Nepalis in Shillong. After their release from infantry services a number of Gurkhas settled down in Shillong and other parts of North East India.

The Assam Rifles (formerly known as the old military police in Assam) rehabilitated many Gurkha ex-soldiers numbering
3,000 individuals who were stationed in various parts of Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. There are a few predominantly Nepali settlements in these places. Most of them have adapted to the local situation in such a way that they are counted among the indigenous people with all the benefits, even though they have their own communities and their own way of life, speak their language and maintain their traditions. They have adopted the language of their neighbours, contracted marital alliances and have become inseparable part of the local economy.

The Nepali ex-soldiers were encouraged to settle down in the foothills near forest and in other strategic points of the frontiers. In this way certain pockets of Nepali settlements came into being in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland and Manipur.

These settlers with their peasant background and their discipline of the strict military training acquired an image as loyal citizens with pro-established attitudes towards the Government (Sinha *ibid*).

The Nepali herdsmen and farmers moved out of Nepal and its adjoining areas in search of new opportunities alone or sometimes in small groups of unskilled labourers. Besides the ex-soldiers and the marginal farmers and graziers, there are artisans and semi-skilled professionals in a newly emerging category of
white-collar employees among the Nepalis of the northeastern region. In the urban situations of northeastern India where there are no caste bound professional specialists, and where there are no artisans, the Nepalis have been able to fill the role of intermediary semi-skilled professionals. The types of work in which, the urban Nepalis are engaged are new to this region. There is little competition from the local communities and unlike the rural ex-soldiers and Nepali farmers, they rarely came into conflict with the local communities.

Several push and pull factors are involved which have resulted in the Nepali migration to parts of India including North East India. During the old Nepali regime, some of the communities of Nepal were considered as enslavable. A type of serfdom was prevalent in Nepal. The traditional ruling provisions of the region treated the untouchables harshly resulting many untouchables and tribes to migrate from their original inhabitants to other places (Sinha *ibid*) to get rid of oppression.

The harsh environment of the hills and also due to the limitation in available natural resources have also compelled many Nepalis to migrate from their original homeland, especially, following the increase of population.
There are a number of pull factors, which have influenced the Nepalis to migrate to parts of India during the British rule. During the Anglo-Nepalis war of 1814-15, the Britishers have found that the Nepalis are brave warriors, experts in the movements in wild and difficult mountainous tracks, less expensive as labourers and obedient servants. Because of the nature of the Nepalis, as pointed out above, they could gain confidence of the Britishers and thus could find out jobs as soldiers during the British rule in India.

Following the Anglo-Nepali war also further Nepali migration to North East India took place. The Anglo-Burmese war during 1824-25 led to the North East India coming under the British control. After the Anglo-Burmese war, a number of developments took place in this region including Sikkim, Bhutan, Darjeeling, etc.

The Britishers started tea plantations in northeastern India in the 1920s and 1930s. For tea plantations along with tribal labour force from Chotanagpur, the unskilled Nepali labourers were also recruited who were engaged in cleaning jungles and other works in the plantations. To understand the Nepali migration to Assam, the following factors need to be taken into consideration.
The Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950 and two other similar additional treaties of 1951 and 1956, conferred upon the Nepalis equal rights with the citizens of India including free movements, permission to seek employments, engage in business, acquire property and settlement (Hussain 1993 253-263). At present there has been several discussions both in India and Nepal about the treaty of 1950. It has been stated that the media in Nepal has been asking to 'replace' this treaty. On the other hand, in India there has been discussions 'to update' the same (Amar Asom, 20 Sept., 2008). During the Chinese aggression of 1962, the Government of India undertook various works to expand communication network in addition to existing ones in this region. The construction of new roads and new railway lines in this region created tremendous scope for the employment of the Nepalis.

OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of the present study is to describe the social, cultural and economic life of the Assamese Nepalis of Darrang district, Assam, with special reference to Sipajhar area. With a view to achieving the primary objective, the following aspects have been taken into consideration in the present study:
1) Aspects of social life of the Assamese Nepalis have been discussed in details. In this regard descriptions have been put forward about their family, kinship, marriage and division of labour in the family.

2) Aspects of economic life of the Assamese Nepalis have been discussed taking into consideration their economy, economic resources and agricultural cycle. Emphasis has been put in this study to analyse the extent of occupational mobility through generations among the Assamese Nepalis.

3) The folklore of the Assamese Nepalis has been discussed in details.

4) The quality and content of social relations between the Assamese Nepalis and the wider Assamese society has been taken into consideration with a view to understanding the aspects of assimilation of the Assamese Nepalis into the Assamese society. In this regard attempt has been made to understand the process of assimilation from micro to macro situation.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Nepal offers conspicuous variation and diversity in respect of society and culture. The Nepalis are stratified mainly into high,
middle and low castes and each caste is further divided into a number of sub-castes. Furer-Haimendorf (1966) has studied unity and diversity in the Chhetri (warrior) caste in Nepal. Rosser (1966) describes social mobility in the Newar (trader) caste system. Caste concepts and status distinctions in Buddhists communities of West Nepal is the theme of a study by Furer-Haimendorf (1966). Nakane (1966) has studied the interrelationships among the Lepchas, Bhotias and Nepalis in Sikkim.

It has already been pointed out that the single most important factor influencing the demographic aspects of Nepal is migration. Tiwari (1983) and Neupane (1975) have studied in details about the migration in Nepal. The migration of the Nepalis into India has been discussed by Banerjee (1984) and Srivastava (1979). The Nepali migrants who have settled down in India also took part in the freedom movement of India. These aspects have been discussed by Bhandari (1996). Subba (1992) has discussed ethnicity among the Nepalis, Lepchas and Bhotias and their development in Gorkhaland. Upadhyaya (1975) deals with population and development in Nepal.

Sinha and Subba's (2003) edited volume on the Nepalis in North East India presents articles by several scholars from India and Nepal which deal with various aspects of life of the Nepalis.
Many of the authors of this volume have written about their own communities, history, culture, recruitment in the arm forces, politics, settlement pattern, language, literature, etc. Dutta (1981) discusses development in the context of migration with particular reference to the Nepalis in North East India. Maitra (1995), Mukherjee (1998) and Ganchaudhuri (1996) have studied Nepalis in three northeastern states like Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Tripura, respectively. These studies have provided information about the Nepali inhabitants in these states.

The Nepalis in Assam have been studied by a number of authors. For example, Nath (2002) has studied ethnicity and cross-border movements in North East India with particular reference to Assam. Hussain (1989) has discussed the position of the Nepalis in Assam in the context of the Assamese nationality. The same author (1993) in his study of the Assam movement has also discussed the various aspects of the Nepalis in Assam in the context of the Assam movement, ideology and empiricity. Thapa (1995) discusses the Nepalis in the Assamese nation building process. Nath (2003) has discussed conflict-afflicted Nepalis of Assam. Dasgupta (2003) has made a study of the Nepalis of Assam and Upadhyaya (2003) discusses in details the
participation of the Nepalis in the electoral process of Assam since independence.

As ethnicity and cross-border movements have become important parameters in the study of immigrant communities, Nath (2002) has studied ethnicity and cross-border movements in North East India with particular reference to the Nepalis in Assam. Devi (2006) has discussed in details the history of the Nepali migration to Assam. The author is of the opinion that the growth dynamics of the Nepalis of Assam is relevant in the context of formulating and implementing policies for socio-economic development of the Nepalis and the economy of Assam.

In so far as the Assamese Nepalis are concerned, there are several studies undertaken by different authors. These studies deal with various aspects of their society, culture, religion, economy and political life. It should be noted here that almost all these studies of the Assamese Nepalis are in Assamese language. Chetri (1983) has written a book on society and culture of the Assamese Nepalis. This book takes into account the migration of the Nepalis into Assam, racial affinity of the Nepalis, language, culture, education and social system of the Assamese Nepalis, their folk customs, rites and rituals, marriage system and their folk art. The last chapter of this book is devoted to a discussion on
the contributions of the Assamese Nepalis towards the political, social, literary and culture of Assam. Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya (1977) have discussed the marriage system of the Nepalis. Sonar (2001) has very briefly introduced the Nepalis of Assam taking into consideration the views of a few Assamese litterateurs. Upadhyaya (2000) has discussed the position of the Nepalis in Assam.

The Assamese fortnightly magazine entitled Sreemoyee (8th year, 10th issue, 1994) was published as a special issue on the Assamese Nepalis. The various articles on the Assamese Nepalis published in this special issue give information about the socio-cultural, religious and economic life of the Assamese Nepalis. Kshattri (1996) has translated a book into Assamese from an original book in Nepali language written by Shyamraj Jaisi. This book discusses the emergence of the Assamese Nepali community in Assam. Neog (1974) has referred to the Assamese Nepalis as a socio-cultural unit in the context of the Assamese society. The same author has also discussed the process of assimilation of the Nepalis into Assamese Society. Thapa (2004) considering the Assamese Nepalis as indigenous (tholuwa) to Assam, discusses their migration into Assam, their contributions to the freedom movement of India, their language etc. Thapa (2007) has also discussed the contributions of Assamese Nepali women writers
towards Assamese language and literature. Thapa and Chetri (2006) have edited a book on the indigenous Nepalis of Assam. This book incorporates a number of articles written on various aspects of life of the Assamese Nepalis by non-Nepali Assamese writers. Sharma (2007) has discussed the contributions of the Nepalis (Gurkha) of Assam towards the freedom movement of India. Nepal (2000) has shown the similarities in respect of Nepali and Assamese proverbs. The same author (2007) has discussed in details the various aspects of folk life of the Assamese Nepalis.

**METHODOLOGY**

This is the study of a community to which I myself belong. Kiringbore, one of the study villages, actually happens to be my ancestral village where my kinsfolk live. In the other two villages, Hirabari and Tekeliakur Grant, also I have a number of kinsmen. There is always a possibility of getting involved or to be drawn into the local norms and patterns of life. In such a situation there is a likelihood of overlooking relevant facts, which might seem to be only too obvious to the ethnographer. This might affect the scientific validity of a study. Nukunya (1964 : 19), while studying
his own community faced many difficulties and discussed the advantages and difficulties of a local ethnographer.

As an Assamese Nepali, I enjoyed certain advantages in the fieldwork. Establishing rapport with the people and collection of data were easy due to my identification with the community. But I experienced disadvantages as well. Some people were reluctant to give me information on the plea that I might pass their personal information to other people in the community and thereby make things rather awkward for them.

It has been constant endeavour to keep in mind the disadvantages of a local ethnographer in presenting the material. An attempt is being made to present the material as objectively as possible.

Data for the present study were collected at two levels: materials from extant literature were collected through library research and secondly basic ethnographic materials pertaining to the present study were collected through field studies among the Assamese Nepalis inhabiting the study areas. Before undertaking the fieldwork, library work was undertaken in K. K. Handique library and the library of the Regional Centre of the Indian Council of Historical Research of Gauhati University and the departmental seminar library of the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, the library of the Historical and Antiquarian Studies,
In the second phase of work, field data were collected employing various methods and techniques. In this phase of work both qualitative and quantitative empirical data were collected. Both these types of data were collected mainly through open-ended interviews of a large number of informants. Basic demographic data were collected with the help of a structured schedule*. The qualitative data on various aspects of economic, social and cultural life were collected mainly through direct observation supplemented by interviews and case studies.

Fieldwork for the present study has been conducted in three villages as already pointed out. These villages were selected purposively. As compared to other Assamese Nepali inhabited villages in Darrang District, these three villages are quite old.

One of the most common techniques used in the context of the study of socio-economic conditions is the key informant interviewing. The key informants are those persons who by virtue of role or community position can provide relevant information. The key informants selected for the present study were those persons who are intimately involved in various aspects of the study groups in the three contexts. The questions asked to the key informants during the interviews were open ended.

* Appendix I.
After the completion of fieldwork, tabulation and analysis of the data were undertaken. Side by side, drawings of maps etc. were undertaken. Having completed these works, writing of the thesis was undertaken and completed.

**PRESENTATION OF MATERIALS**

The present chapter (Chapter I) has presented the outline of the study and discussed objective and scope of the study and reviewed related literature. The methodology adopted in the present study has also been discussed in this chapter.

The following chapter (Chapter II) has presented a profile of the Nepalis in general and the Assamese Nepalis in particular. Chapter III describes the setting of the district and study villages. This chapter also discusses some basic demographic features of the Assamese Nepalis of the study villages. Chapter IV is devoted to a discussion on the economic life of the Assamese Nepalis in the study villages. Chapter V discusses the various aspects of family, kinship and marriage of the Assamese Nepalis. Chapter VI describes the folklore of the Assamese Nepalis. Chapter VII examines the nature of social relations between the Assamese Nepalis and the wider Assamese society. This chapter also
discusses some aspects of the process of assimilation of the Assamese Nepalis. Chapter VIII summarises the study and concluding observations are presented in this chapter.