CHAPTER II

1. The Study Area

Our study area, the Lakhimpur Block, is one of the Development Blocks in Lakhimpur District, Assam. The District Lakhimpur is situated on the North Bank of Brahmaputra River. The District is bounded on the north by Subansiri and Siang Districts of Arunachal Pradesh; on the east by a part of Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh and parts of Dibrugarh and Jorhat districts of Assam; and on the west by Sonitpur District, Assam.

Lakhimpur district is comprised of two subdivisions; North Lakhimpur and Dhemaji. The Lakhimpur Block is in the North Lakhimpur Subdivision.

The Lakhimpur Block is bounded by Arunachal Pradesh in the north, Tehasi Mauza and Nowboisa Block on the south, Subansiri river and Dhaknakhara Development Block on the east and river Kanganadi on the west. The Headquarters of the Block is situated at Konwargaon, three kilometres away from the district headquarters, Lakhimpur town.

The Development Block was initially set up on 1.10.1961 and started functioning at project stage since 1.4.68. Now it is recognised as stage II Block. Under the developmental jurisdiction of this Block, there are 244 villages covering the geographical area of 832 square kilometers.
According to 1971 Census, the total population of the Block was 102,824, of which 54,146 were males and the rest females. The total number of scheduled caste population was 3,704 while the total number of scheduled tribe population was 72,634. Thus, 3.61% of the population was scheduled caste and 25.7% of the population was scheduled tribe. Among the tribal population, the majority belongs to the Mishing tribe. Other two important tribes are Damis and Kacharis.

According to 1971 Census, about 96% of the people were engaged in primary sector activities, mainly cultivation. The total cultivable land in the Block is around 50 thousand acres, supporting over a 100 thousand of population; the per capita cultivable land amounts to $\frac{1}{2}$ acre.

The Block is comprised of six Gram Panchayats and four Mauzas. The Block Headquarters is located at a distance of three kilometers from the railway station and the district headquarters. Within the Block there are four railway stations and seven post offices. Evidently, one post office serves 35 villages located in an area of over 100 square kilometers.

Three roads pass through the Block and are motorable. The total length of roads within the Block is 111 kilometers, out of which 52 kilometers are pucca and 61 kilometers are
gravelled. Out of 244 villages in the Block, 89 villages are connected by pucca road and are located within a distance of three kilometers the nearest railway station.

The Block is endowed with only one primary health centre and one rural dispensary. It is evident that provisions of health facilities in the Block is very poor.

There are 150 primary schools, 19 middle and secondary schools and 11 high schools in the Block. There are 9 adult literacy centres working at present in the Block.

Though about 96% of the people are engaged in cultivation, there is hardly any major or minor irrigation project functioning in the Block. As a result, the degree and extent of multiple cropping is very poor (1.12), that is to say that about 12% of the total area is doubly cropped. Provisions of institutional finance for agricultural and allied activities are very poor. There are numerous primary agricultural credit and multipurpose societies in the Block, but their poor status can be reflected by some statistics about them. The total number of memberships of these societies is 3605, the share capital is Rs. 36050, the total deposits Rs. 59,303, the loan advanced by them is Rs. 90,593. The outstanding loan amounts to Rs. 1,85,484 and the loan overdue is Rs. 85,316. These statistics show
that the financial and credit need of the farmers in the block served by these societies is indeed insignificant.

We have selected three villages from this Block for the purpose of the study at hand. These villages are: Mohaijan (Mishing) village, Sonari village and Bodhakora village. The first village is exclusively inhabited by tribal population, the second is exclusively inhabited by non-tribal population, and the third is a mixed village, inhabited by both tribal and non-tribal population. Now, we undertake to present a general description of these villages.

2. Mohaijan Mishing Village

Mohaijan Mishing village is situated in the eastern side of the Block headquarters. The village is inhabited by Mishing tribe population. The distance between the village and North Lakhimpur town is about 8 kilometers and the nearest railway station is 10 kilometers away from the village. The North Lakhimpur town is connected with the village by a PWD gravelled road which is not a public bus route. The usual modes of transportation to and from the village are bicycle, jeep, bullock cart, etc. It may be mentioned that the village, like most of the tribal villages of Assam, is not in an advantageous location. The distance
between the village and the river Dholnadi is about \( \frac{1}{2} \) kilometer only. During the rainy season, flood occurs very often and the villagers face serious transportation and communication problems.

According to 1971 Census, the village Mohaijan is reportedly a big village. But in fact, at present, the village is territorially divided into two villages, one inhabited by the tribal population exclusively and the other by a mixed population. The mixed village is ethnically heterogeneous, inhabited by non-tribals and tribals of different communities. But the Mahaijan Mishing village, that we selected for the study at hand, is ethnically one, inhabited exclusively by Mishing tribe. Mohaijan Mishing village is inhabited by 65 households and the number of population in the village is 385.

The Mishing tribe is a riverine tribe. This tribe is living amidst the Assamese people since the last seven centuries as far as the historical records are available. Amidst a chain of political, social and religious changes, which Assam has undergone in the last seven centuries, the Mishing tribe has been able to keep its own distinct identity. It has kept up its own dialect of language. Withstanding the influence of all changes, this tribe still maintains most of its characteristic social customs, mores, traditions, and religious beliefs.
The Mishings, now inhabiting the riverine areas of the Upper Assam Valley especially in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar and Darrang, are blood-relations of the tribal people living in the Abor Hills, now in the Arunachal Pradesh. Although there is no recorded historical evidence to ascertain the exact date and the causes of the Mishings coming down and settling in the plains of Assam, there is no dearth of folklore and folk-tales among the Mishings tracing their origin to the Abor Hills and the people now living there. The very distinct and main characteristic feature of a Mishing village is its location on the side of river. Because of such a location, these villages have to confront all the evils of natural calamities, such as flood, soil erosion, etc.

Like any other Mishing village, Mohaijan also is typically located on the side of river. Agriculture is the principal means of support of this village. Ahu variety of paddy is cultivated here. The cultivation of other crops is insignificant.

The institution of hiring labour is not yet evolved in this village. This is because of the institution of mutual help and cooperation among the households of this tribe living in the village. These tribal families extend mutual help and cooperation in cultivation — sowing and
harvesting, and construction of house, etc. This institution refrains the development of the typical market economy in which labour is sold and purchased.

It has been observed that the people of this village are strongly animistic in their religious beliefs and practices. To have a good harvest, to protect the life of the members of the family and domestic animals, they have to perform quite a number of rituals throughout the year propitiating the spirits.

Their consumption requirements are defined not only in terms of the day-to-day needs, but also in terms of the requirements for social and religious functions which involve a considerable amount of food materials. Retention of food grains for the next year in defence of the possible poor agricultural returns is hardly any matter of concern for them. In terms of both, food materials and human labour, the tribal religion and social functions are considerably expensive, which, consequently, affect retention of food grains. It has been observed that whatever this tribal community produced in a year, is totally exhausted within the same period as they observe social and religious functions several times a year. For the production of the necessities of life, the Mishings have to depend solely on the bounties of nature and the blessings of their deities.
They almost absolutely depend on agriculture. The family members are almost always engaged, along with all the resources at their disposal, for producing food from the land. They hardly take care for educating their children who, instead, are engaged in farming and allied activities, wherever they fit into the system. Lack of education makes them unfit for non-agricultural occupation outside the village. Their little concern for education is revealed by the thinness and irregularity of attendance of students in the primary school located in the village.

As regards the use of agricultural tools and implements by the farmers, they are typically traditional. They use wooden ploughs, spades, seed drill harrows, khanti, sickle, etc. They use bullock cart for carrying their agricultural products to the market.

Farming is absolutely rainfed. There is no facility developed for irrigation. As a result, no summer crops are cultivated. Almost all farmers cultivate the Ahu and Bao varieties of paddy that grow in the Kharif season.

It is to be noted that in general Ahu and Bao are cultivated by "spread" method, which is a specific practice of sowing paddy seeds. The field is ploughed and paddy seeds are spread in the field and the soil is lightly levelled.
The alternative practice (which Mishings seldom adopt) is of growing the paddy seedlings and when they are some 5 weeks old, uprooting them and transplanting them in prepared fields. This last practice is almost associated with cultivation of Sali variety of paddy (that Mishings seldom cultivate). Due to several technical reasons, in spread method more seeds are required per area of land cultivated. Secondly, a good number of seeds do not germinate at all as they are pressed underneath a heavy load of soil and some lie on ground and cannot take deeper roots. Again, since the plants are haphazardly distributed on the land, they cannot be easily freed from weeds. In general, they take longer time to grow and bear lower yield in comparison to transplanted plants. The "spread" practice prevalent among Mishings is one of the reasons why they reap poorer crops.

They solemnly believe that sowing by women gives larger amount of product. They worship the mother of earth and spread paddy seeds ceremonially. The dance sequence is performed and it is believed that it would appease the divine power who would bestow upon them a rich harvest. In the middle of cultivation they perform rituals so that ancestral spirits may protect the flowering sprouts from pests and other natural calamities.
Many of the ceremonies of sowing and harvesting are time bound. There are specific days and periods for performing them. It is very natural that it would affect their effectiveness. Since the farming is absolutely rainfed and rainfall is not very timely quite often, the time boundedness of sowing often does not concord with the technical requirements. The discordance between the timings of their ceremonial sowing and the opportune time suiting the rains that makes sowing most effective, is one of the reasons why they reap a poor harvest very often. But all this is due to some fault that they have committed by not being able to appease the spirits, they believe. To their mind it is not due to the fact that they have gone very far to appease their gods in observing ceremonial sowing when the technicalities did not quite warrant them. But whatever may be the reason, their belief in observing the sowing ceremonies more carefully next year is reinforced.

Their unshakable belief in sowing by women increases family involvement in farming. Harvesting also is done mainly by women. Further reinforced by the institution of mutual help and cooperation among the neighbours, their farming is cost-insensitive. They hardly use any input that they buy from the market. Hence they develop but weak and quite robust feeling about the "calculus of cost and
benefit." The induced insensitiveness makes them less indulgent in seeking out new methods and practices of cultivation and reinforces the existing practices of cultivation.

Their firm belief in the mercy and anger of spirits and gods as the causes of good or bad harvest does not allow them to protect their crops from pests and allied crop diseases by the use of chemicals. Obviously, other farmers living in surrounding villages use chemicals to protect their crops from pests (as we will see in case of the farmers in Sonari village) - they know this, but they do not like to adopt this practice. Nor they use any chemical fertilizers or manures like cowdung, etc.

The description that we have made above clearly shows that one of the reasons why the farmers of Mohaijan are likely to perform poor in raising crops is that the agricultural practices carried out by them are not efficient, though they have a system of rationalising beliefs that keeps them contented with the low yield and poor living standard. Naturally, no system of belief enters directly in the production function, which is a technical relationship between inputs and output. But the system of belief enters into the production function via making the allocation inoptimal and affecting the X-efficiency. We have
elaborated how Mishings of our study village do not make optimal use of the resources at their disposal and what are the reasons for such inoptimal utilization.

3. **Sonari Village**

The Sonari village is situated in the south eastern side of North Lakhimpur town. The village is inhabited by non-tribal population exclusively. This village is located at a distance of 3 kilometers from the town of North Lakhimpur.

The village is fairly large with 92 households. The total area of land owned by the households is 315 acres. The economy of the Sonari village is agricultural in the main, though about 40% of the worker population goes out to the town as industrial workers, artisans, shopkeepers and other professionals. Around 60% of the total workers is directly engaged in cultivation.

Winter paddy, locally known as Sali, is widely cultivated as the major crop. Ahu variety of paddy is the next popular crop. Some cultivators have deep tube wells for irrigation purpose. These cultivators grow Rabi crops also. Use of manures is very common. Cowdung is often piled up and spread as manure in the field a few weeks before sowing. Except in case of a few farmers, the use of
chemical fertilizers is not in vogue in general. Use of chemical fertilizers is frequent in Rabi cultivation. Use of pesticides is made by some farmers, but it has not yet been very popular.

Female participation in farming activities is, in general, not in vogue. A few families have been, nevertheless, observed in which women work in harvesting season. Children are not participating in farming activities at any stage. Almost all of them attend schools and colleges depending on their age. Hiring of labour for ploughing, sowing, weeding, harvesting, thrashing and carrying home from the field is very common. In the village there are a few landless households. But they supply only a small fraction of the total labour force hired by other farmers. The main supply of hired labour is from the workers inhabiting in surrounding villages. In a few families, there are no adults free to work on farms. They all are engaged in service in the town. For cultivating their land they depend solely on hired labourers.

Some farmers grow potatoes and green vegetables. Obviously they do not grow them for their own consumption. They are marketed to the town, which is located at a distance of three kilometers only. Cultivation of green vegetables is highly paying to them.
Cultivation of high yielding variety or improved variety of seeds has not yet been adopted. It may be so probably because most of the farmers do not have any irrigation facilities. Some farmers who have such facilities have not yet shown any interest in adopting the HYV cultivation.

There is nothing special to note with regard to the tools and implements being used in farming. They use wooden plough and other traditional tools. Thrashing is carried out in the traditional manner.

4. Bodhakora Village

The Bodhakora village is situated in the south eastern side of the town, Lakhimpur, at a distance of about 9 kilometers. The nearest railway station is at about 12 kilometers away from the village. A tributary of Subansiri is running by the side of the village.

According to 1971 Census, Bodhakora was inhabited by 1523 people out of which 1040 were tribals. The people of this village are the immigrants from various parts of Assam. Among the tribals, there are Sonowals, Kacharis, Lalungs, Deuris and Mishings. Although this is a village of mixed ethnicity, there is no observable impact of one community on the social customs, mores, traditions and beliefs of any other community living in the village.
Although the village is located at a little distance from the district headquarters, no marked diversification of occupation is noticeable in the village. The economy of the village is predominantly agricultural and subsistence oriented.

Though the village is located at a short distance from the district headquarters, there is no direct approach road to the village. From the town side, three kilometers of PWD gravelled road leads to the village. After that one embankment is constructed by the side of the village which serves the purpose of embankment-cum-road to the village. During the rainy season, floods occur very often and the villagers face acute problems in transplantation and communication. In fact, the village occasionally remains cut off from the rest of the place around for several days during rainy season. Almost all households own boats to be used on various occasions during rainy season.

Ahu variety of paddy is the major crop cultivated by the farmers in Bodhakora. Many farmers sow Ahu paddy in the month of June-July in the midst of floods and use boats to reach their field for sowing. On occasions, seeds are washed away by the flood water.
In the village two practices of paddy cultivation prevail. One in which paddy seeds are sown and when seedlings become about five weeks old, they are uprooted from the soil and transplanted in other fields. The other practice is of sowing seeds by spreading them in the field, and let them grow there till they bear paddy and are harvested. The yield rate of paddy in the first type of practice is rather higher than that in the second type of practice.

Use of fertilizers and pesticides is not prevalent. Even manures like cowdung are not used by the majority of farmers.

Hiring of labourers in farming activities is prevalent. Usually, tribal farmers do not hire labourers. This is partly because they get enough supply of labour from the womenfolk and children. They get cooperation from the other households belonging to their own community. Such a practice of cooperation and help is not observed across the community. However, female participation in farming is less frequent among non-tribal farmers. Hence they often hire labourers. But the major supply of labourers is from outside the village.
Apart from social relationship that may be expected to grow among the residents of the same village, the economic relationship across the communities is observed in Bodhakora. This economic relationship is mainly established due to lending of money. Some non-tribal farmers are professional money-lenders. Money-lending across the tribal communities is not observable.

There is a distinct difference in tribal and non-tribal communities with regard to their values about educating their children. These values are reflected in the fact that while no non-tribal children aged seven years were seen not going to schools, such cases in tribal communities in the village are many. The general literacy among the non-tribal adult population is higher than that among the tribal population.

Shop-keeping is the most important non-primary occupation in the village. But in shopkeeping only non-tribals are engaged. They sell the commodities of daily use. Prices of all commodities they sell are quite high in comparison to those prevailing in the Lakhimpur town. Shopkeeping and money-lending are often dealt in by the same family.
5. A Summary of the Typical Agricultural Practices in Sample Villages

In what we have presented as introductory notes on the villages that we have selected for our study, it is worth noting that two distinct types of agricultural practices are prevalent. One type of agricultural practice is associated with the tribal farmers and the other is associated with non-tribal farmers. The characteristic features of the first type of farming practice are:

(a) Absolutely subsistence-based farming; no trace of cash crops that may be sensitive to prices in the market.
(b) Exclusively Kharif cultivation and hence single cropping practice.
(c) Cultivation of Ahu and Bao varieties of paddy seeds.
(d) Cultivation by 'spread' method and absence of transplantation practice.
(e) Absolutely rainfed farming; no provision for irrigation.
(f) Supply of labour from family members and neighbours on cooperative and mutual help basis; absence of the institution of hiring labourers.
(g) Involvement of children in farming activities.
(h) Observing ceremoniality in sowing and harvesting. Rationalisation of good/bad harvest on various non-material reasons.
(i) Necessary involvement of womenfolk in sowing.

(j) No use of chemical fertilizers, cowdung and any other manures, no use of pesticides.

(k) Compulsion in following certain community norms about observing ceremonies in sowing, harvesting, etc. Such compulsions are social in nature and are administered by the respectable men of the community.

In contrast, the second type of farming practice is featured with:

(a) Predominantly subsistence-oriented farming; cash crops cultivated by some farmers mainly for selling in the market.

(b) Predominantly kharif cultivation, but Rabi crops are cultivated by some farmers. Double-cropping is not general, but some farmers do it.

(c) Cultivation of Sali variety of paddy.

(d) Cultivation by transplantation method.

(e) Predominantly rainfed farming, but some farmers have irrigation facilities.

(f) Male family members are working in the field, assisted by hired labourers. Absence of the institution of mutual help and cooperation for meeting the demand for labour in farming.

(g) No involvement of children in farming.
(h) No ceremonialities in sowing and harvesting. No rationalisation of good/bad harvest on the ground of non-material reasons.

(i) Rare involvement of womenfolk in sowing and harvesting.

(j) Use of fertilizers, manures and pesticides is in vogue, though not very extensive.

(k) No compulsion in adopting new practices and breaking away with prevalent practices of farming.

The two typical farming practices that we have identified above have more or less definite relationship with agricultural productivity. As we have already mentioned earlier, institutional and coercive aspects of agricultural practices do not directly affect productivity, but they do affect agricultural productivity by strictening or relaxing certain constraints on the choice of the pattern of allocation of resources and their exploitation for raising crops. Many of the aspects reinforce each other. We cannot help but note, moreover, that these practices are distinctly associated with particular communities. The association is not necessary, we concede; however, as the matter of empirical reality, they are at present coexisting. We believe that the association of communities with particular practices can be altered by deliberate planning efforts.
We do not believe the dictum: *stateways cannot change folkways.* Stateways need not always be coercive, formal and rigid. They may be planned to be persuasive, elastic and variable, and through them it is possible to modify the folkways by slow and long continued effort if the rituals are changed by minute variations.