CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
A. LOCATION AND PHYSICAL FEATURE OF THE AREA:

Sonitpur is a district of Assam with rich cultural heritage. The geographical extent of Sonitpur district is between 26°35' to 27°12' North latitude and 92°20' to 93°52' East longitude. Prior to the 15th August 1983, it was the Tezpur sub-division of old Darrang district. Present Sonitpur district is located between Lakhimpur district in the East and Darrang district in the West. It is bounded on the North by the hills of Arunachal Pradesh and by the Brahmaputra on the South. The district contains an area of 5255 square kilometres.

Sonitpur district consists of a strip of flat land along the northern bank of the Brahmaputra measuring 135 K.M. from East to West and an average width of about 39 K.M. from North to South. The eastern end of the district is comparatively sparsely populated. Near the Brahmaputra, there is a belt of marshy land measuring three or four Kilometres in width. The level of the northern side is comparatively high. The country lying at the foothills is covered with dense evergreen forests. The Biswanath Plain, west to Behali, is an elevated region, which is of older geological formation than the other part of the district. A portion of the tract is covered with tea plantations and the lower land is greened with waving paddy fields.

There is no mountain in Sonitpur district. The only elevated tract consists of a range of low hillocks, between 60 to 155 meters height, clothed with grass and forest trees.
These hillocks are estimated to cover an area of about 65 square kilometres. The most remarkable range of the district is a small spur projecting from the Himalayas into the north Balipara, containing two low hills, namely Bhalukpung and Gossainlonga. A small range of low hills, with heights from about 90 to 140 meters near Tezpur town, run parallel to the Brahmaputra. The names of the hills are, Dhenukhana, Ouguri Pahar, Bamuni pahar, Bhairabi, Manikata, Bhomoraguri and Rudrapad hills. To the south east of the Borsola Mouza, there is one hillock named Singari hill.

**River System:** Due to heavy rainfall in the Himalayan and other watersheds of the northeast region of Assam is endowed with an extensive river system. The mighty Brahmaputra flows east to west by the Southern boundary of the district. It has many tributaries in the district. Among these, Bharali is the principal tributary. It rises in the Kameng frontier division (in Arunachal) and enters into Sonitpur district just north of Bhalukpung. From its source, it flows towards the east, then runs sharply to the south and finally follows a tortuous course to the Brahmaputra which joins about 11 kilometres east from Tezpur town. On its course through the plains of Sonitpur, this river frequently overtops its banks. The river is navigable throughout the year from Bhuragaon Bagicha to its confluence with the Brahmaputra, the total distance being about 64 kilometres. Its principal tributaries on the east bank are the Upper Khasi and Bordikorai and on the west bank the Upper and Lower Sonai and the Dhansiri.

Other rivers of the district having different lengths carry the drainage of the hills.
into the Brahmaputra. All the rivers have Southernly courses. They are mostly fed by numerous minor streams rising in various parts of the district.

One of the bigger streams is the Dubia or Kharo, which flows a Southernly and westernly course down to the Brahmaputra. Its largest sub-stream is the Balijan. The Behali Mouza is watered by the river Buroi and Borgang, two main tributaries of the district. There are a large number of streams or jāns which fall into the Brahmaputra. The Na-duar area is watered by the Ghiladhari and the Dekorai river along with some streams or small tributaries like the Momoi, the Sadharu, the Burhigang etc. West of Tezpur town, the drainage of the south hills is collected in a small stream called the Dipota. Then come the Gabharu and the Dhansiri with Noanadi as its big tributary and also the western boundary line between Sonitpur district and Darrang district.

Geology: The base of the district is formed of Archean gneiss, while the low hills near the Brahmaputra are an extension of the Pre-cambrian shield of the Karbi Anglong. The first hill north to Tezpur town forms a low ridge on the south bank of the Bharali river, rising to 245 or 275 Metres above the plain of Balipara. The ridge consists essentially of an unstratified drift of well rolled boulders and pebbles of gneiss and granite, undoubtedly of the Pleistocene age. The plain is made up of alluvium consisting of clay and in varying proportions ranging from pure sand near the Brahmaputra to stiff clay. The alluvium is believed to be underlain by younger tertiary rocks belonging to the Oligocene-Pliocene period over the gneissic basement. Structurally, the Brahmaputra valley is known as a
ramp valley.

B. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The history of Assam starts with the traditional (or mythical) rulers mentioned in the purānas. They were called Dānavas or Asuras and were evidently non-Aryan people1. Similarly, the name of Sonitpur as well as the traditional rulers of Sonitpur are also found in the epics and purānas.

Sonitpur, as described in the puranic literature, is identified as the modern town Tezpur. It is said that Sonitpur was ruled by a dānava king named Vānāsura and he was contemporary of Narakāsura, the king of Pragjyotishpur (modern Guwahati). The Bhāgavat Purāṇa and Vishnu Purāṇas narrate the story of Vāna, son of Baiśi. He had many sons besides a daughter named Ushā. Vānāsura was a staunch devotee of Lord Śiva. Aniruddha, grand son of Lord Krishna, was attracted by the beauty of Ushā and entered the castle where she was guarded. He married her according to the Gandharva system of marriage. Then he was captured after a valiant resistance and was atlast rescued by his grand father Krishna. The episode is narrated in an Assamese book named Kumāra Harana by Ananta Kandali, a noted Vaishnava poet of the 16th century A.D. Vāna's grandson made his Capital at Bhalukpung at the foot of the Akā hills2.

1 Choudhury, N.D.: Historical Archaeology of Central Assam p.63
2 Choudhury, N.D.: Ibid. p.67
According to the Yogini-tantra, Narasankara or Nāgakhya ruled in the Svamapith. The capital was at Pratapgarh near Biswanath, where the ruins of the fort attributed to him, are still in existence under the jurisdiction of Pertabghur Tea Estate. It is also said that, king Ramachandra, also known as Pratap Simha of Jitāri dynasty shifted his capital from North Guwahati to Pratappur in the mid 14th century. Pratapsimha was killed by his son Ārimatta. Some historians opine that once the modern town of Sonitpur was the Capital of Kamrupa. It is also said that, Haruppeswar city is nothing but modern Tezpur. King Harjarbarma of the Sālastambha dynasty had the Capital at Haruppeswar or Hatapeswar (Modern Tezpur). It is generally believed that, Harijara's Capital was at Haruppeswar, Hatapeswar or Hadappesvara as found in the inscription of the family and the place has been located near Tezpur. P. Bhattacharjee contents that Sālastambha himself shifted the capital of the kingdom to this place from ancient Pragjyotisha and that the name Pragjyotisha during the time of his dynasty stood for the Kingdom. K. L. Baruah holds the view that the capital was changed by Harijara. Haruppeswar or Hatapesvara is called as a victory camp (Jayaskandhavara) in the Hayunthal grant. Karnasuvarna in Bengal is also a victorious camps under the king Bhaskarvarmana. In the Tezpur Rock Inscription of the said king, it is simply called a pura (city). The Nowgaon grant of Balavarmana describes Hadappesvara as an ancestral camp (paitamaha Kataka). The Kataka, here does not stand for the permanent Capital city. Sālambha is described in the

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3 Bhattacharjee, P (ed): Kāmrupa Sāsanāvali, Intro, pp 22-25
inscription of Vanamāi as the lord of Pragjyotisha, which seems to stand for the capital, and the inscriptions refer to beautiful Hadappesvara from which the inscriptions (Sāsanas) were issued (Sri Hadappesvarat) and there is no definite indication here that it was the permanent capital of the family. The name Haruppesvara or Hadappesvara is derived from an Austric formation like hara or hārup which means to cover as with a basket or dish. It is associated with a deity and with the attainment of liberation with a Linga (Hataka or hetuka suulin). It is possible that a temple of śiva was built by Harjjara, which is said to have been rebuilt by Vanamāla. Extensive ruins of temples and buildings have been found in and around Tezpur which along with the existence of a tank (Harijara Pukhuri) keeps fresh the memory of Harijara. During the reign of Vanamāla, Hadappesvara must have extended over a vast area, which included the regions from the Bāmuni hills on the east to Dahparvatia on the west. It appears that the city of Hadappesvara was beautifully built by Harijara adorning it with temples and stately building and the place was used as a temporary residence to watch and guard against the incursions of the neighbouring tribes. The necessity to build the second capital city must have been felt because of the traditional rivalry with the western powers. However, it is obvious that, Tezpur was an important place at that time.

When the Ahoms entered Assam, then this region was under the Bhuiyās. Swargadeo Suhungmung (1497 A.D.-1539 A.D.) occupied the small states on the north bank of the Brahmaputra ruled by the Bhuiyās in 1505 A.D. Then the whole central

Assam region on the both banks of the Brahmaputra, including Kaliabor on the south bank and Biswanath on the north bank was called as Sala. In 1527, occurred the first Muhammadan invasion recorded in Ahom history. The Ahoms attacked the Muslim army in front and on both flanks and defeated it. They carried the pursuit as far as the Burai river. A fort was constructed at the mouth of Burai river and a detachment was posted at Phulbari. In 1529 he again went to Sala, whence he despatched filibustering expeditions down the kallong and up the Bharali. Turbak (a Muslim general) took up a position at the mouth of the Dikrai, while the Ahoms pitched their camp on the opposite bank. The final battle was fought near the Bharali. The battle was fought in 1533 A.D. and in this battle Mulagabharu, a brave heroine of Assam history fought against Turbak and was killed in the battle. At least, the Ahom won the battle. In this way, this region gained importance in the Ahom rule. It is worth mentioning that, sometimes it was captured by the Koch Kingdoms too. However, in the time of Ahom reign in Assam, it was mainly within the Ahom territory.

During the British period, this region was ruled by the British and then it was a part of Darrang district. After independence, the region was a Subdivision of Darrang district with the head quarters of the subdivision as well as the district head quarter at Tezpur. On the 15th August, 1983, the region got the status of a separate district named as Sonitpur with two Subdivisions, viz, Tezpur and Biswanath.

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C. PEOPLE

Sonitpur district is a sparsely populated district with a population of 14,18,484 (as per unpublished 1991 census Report)\(^7\). The population growth rate in between 1961-1971 is +27.62\% and 1971-1991 is +56.49\%\(^8\). From the picture we could assess that the population in the district has been increasing day by day.

Some rare stone weapons of quartzite, slate, gneiss and porphorite rocks discovered by W. Penny at Sakomato Tea Estate near Biswanath Chariali in 1900 A.D. and now preserved in the Pitt's Rovers Museum of Oxford University are said to be of the Neo-lithic age. These Neo-lithic weapons suggest that, people used to dwell here in the pre-historic time\(^9\). Perhaps, people of the Austric group were the first and foremost inhabitants of the district. Some names of rivers like Borgāng, Burhīgāng etc. are originated from the Astro-asiatic group of Austric language family. These names keep fresh the memory of the Australoids. On the other hand, there is no tribe of Austric origin except some tribes of tea garden labourers, who are comparatively new comers. All the major tribes reside here are Mongoloids. Perhaps, due to the strong expansion of the

\(^7\) Report collected from the Office of the Deputy Director Census, Govt. of India, Tezpur.

\(^8\) ibid.

Mongoloid group of people, the Austrics preferred either to quit the land or to mingle with the Mongoloids. Thus the process of assimilation began here in the pre-historic time.

The original inhabitants of the district was obviously identical to the inhabitants of Kamrupa. The Kālikā Purāṇa broadly describes the original inhabitants of Kamrupa as Kirāts with shaven heads and yellow skins. The kirāts or Mongoloid people were well known to the vedic Aryans. We find mention of them in the Yajur and Atharva Vedas. The Rāmāyana describes them as wearing thick top knots with conical heads, golden in appearance, fair looking and fierce. The Mahābhārata refers to them as Mlecchas. According to the Kurma Purāṇa, all the non Aryan tribes of eastern India were referred to under a group denomination as Kirāta as those of western India as Yavanas. The name kirāta was applied to a people living in the mountain caves in Samhitas. In later times the meaning of the item Kirāta expanded so as to signify any hill tribes. Therefore, it can be assessed that, once Sonitpur was also the homeland of some hill tribes belonging to the Austric or Mongoloid (Kirāta) group. In the process of migration, people of Caucasian and Dinaric origin also entered and settled in this alluvial country.

As per 1961 census report, of the total population of the district, 4.23% was Bodo-Kachari, while Mikir, Miri, Nepali, Munda and Oriya covers 0.02%, 0.77%, 5.23%, 2.6% and 3.38% respectively. Hence, on the basis of this report, we could generalise that it is a land of having mixed population and all the tribes and castes contribute to the field of

10 Govt of India: Census Report of India, Darrang Dist.
culture and the taking and giving process is on the way of processing.

D. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

The object of the present study is to describe various folk cultural elements spreading in the district. As such, the bulk of the data presented come from my own field investigation. In fact, Assamese culture may be said to be born out of the confluence of two closely flowing streams—the eastern and western... starting from western Darrang in the east to Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar and Rongpur in the west, there flows what may be termed as the western stream of Assamese culture. But, it is observed that, though the culture of the district has a keen relation with the eastern stream, yet has some differences with the eastern stream too. Moreover, complex population texture, impact of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement etc. has given a new dimension to the culture of the district. It is tried to present a comparative picture of the observation with a historical perspective. It is also tried to point out the degree of divergence of the local observations from the total Assamese culture.

E. SCOPE OF THE STUDY:

The study covers all the branches of folklore as accepted internationally in recent time in the chapters under the headings as:

1) Introduction,

Datta, B: A Study of the Folk-Culture of Goalpara District, G.U., P.17.
As nobody had studied systematically about folk-cultural elements in the district prior to this, so, it would debunk some new chapters to our knowledge of the rich folklore of Assam. As the Bodos, Mishings, Tea tribes and Nepalese account for a sizable portion of the population of the district, it has been my concern to include some information about the ingredients of their cultures, although a detailed analysis of these has not been included within the scope of this study.

F. METHODOLOGY:

The present study is mainly based on field work spreading over several years. In fact, my familiarity with the customs and tradition of the district began in my childhood as an inhabitant of the district led to urge to undertake the work. Apart from my own familiarity and field observation, I have used written sources including epigraphic records wherein certain folk-cultural elements of the district are described.
Data are gathered through the usual field techniques, viz, direct observation as well as with the help of interviews and queries. In some cases, everything are recorded in the field and sort out at home and in other, the hypothesis are tested at the field itself. Considerable library work is also involved with the study. The gathered information, data are compared with published and unpublished works and are verified by more knowledgable and competent informants, especially to the old people. Then, these are narrated with illustrations, photographs and possible references.