CHAPTER – IV

ETHNOLOGY OF THE TRIBES UNDER STUDY

A major part of the population of Assam is shared by a considerable number of Indo-Mongoloid communities scattered in different districts of Assam in plains as well as hill areas. Among the Indo-Mongoloid communities inhabiting in Assam and its neighbouring states like Arunachal, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland etc. some very special but common traditional culture can be observed. Use of wood, cane and bamboo in building houses and other implements and household materials, Changhor, Dekachang, Gabhoruchang, food habit, preparation of beer, traditional use of betel nut and betel leaf, democratic social set up, expertise of women in weaving etc. are various examples in this regard.

The greatest contribution of the Indo-Mongoloid people who made a ‘reservoir’ in Assam is that they brought into N.E. India, the technique of food production by plant cultivation and domestication of animals. They are the first cultivators of rice in India. For the first time they introduced the art of rearing silkworm as well as spinning and weaving of silk cloths.

Goalpara district comprise of some parts of the south bank of the river Brahmaputra and bounded by west and east Garo hill district of Meghalaya. The district is composed of total five big revenue circles, e.g. Balijana, Lakhipur, Matia, Dudhnoi and Rongjuli. Several villages of these revenue circles are the homeland of a large number of Indo-Mongoloid tribes like Bodos, Rabhas, Garos, Hajongs, Karbies etc. Numerically the most dominant aboriginal group of the district is the Rabhas followed by the Bodos, Garos and then Hajongs. Here these four tribes have been selected to study their ethno-medico-botanical aspects.
We have hardly had sufficient knowledge about the origin, culture, migration and perfect ancient history of many tribes of Assam including these four tribes. Written records are not sufficient to explain as to when and how these tribes were settled in both hilly and plain areas of Goalpara district. But from their dialects one may think that they belong to the Sino-Tibetan linguistic group. Perhaps, the Rabhas have migrated from the neighbouring areas of Iang-chikiang and Hwangho i.e. the North-West China. It is difficult to ascertain when these tribes had migrated, as authentic archeological findings are not available. These aboriginal ethnic groups speak different dialects and have separate socio-cultural traditions for which one group is easily distinguished from the other. But interestingly it is found that the food habit of all of these four tribes is more or less similar. These four tribes use varieties of herbs and herbal parts for the treatment of different major as well as minor ailments in their own respective traditional systems which are very interesting and have been taken for the present study.

THE TRIBES:

4.1 The Bodos:

The Bodos are a race of the Mongolian people who are described to be the inhabitants of a country, north of the Himalayas and West of China. This land is known as ‘Bod’ which means a homeland. It is also said that there were many parts of the country known as Hor Bod, Kur Bod etc. The inhabitants of Bod country are known as the Bodo-Ficha or Bodocha or Bodosa (Bodo means land and Ficha or Cha means children, hence children of the Bod country). In course of time they come to be known as simply Boddo-Bodo-Boro. Linguistically the Bodos include a large group of people who are the speakers of the Tibeto-Burman speeches of the North and East Bengal, Assam and Burma. All the Tibeto-Burman speaking groups are of Sino-Tibeto Origin.
4.1.1 Racial affinity:

The origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference, in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history. As remarked above, in feature and general appearance they approximate very closely to the Mongolian type, and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race (Endle, 1911).

Fr. Mathias Hermanns included the Boros and their allied tribes in the term ‘Indo-Tibetans’, Dr. S.K. Chatterjee called them ‘Indo-Mongoloid’ in his ‘Kirata-Jana-Kirti’. According to K.L. Barua, the Kacharis, Koches, Rabhas, Mech, Mikirs, Lalungs, Garos, Nagas, Kukis and the Chutiyas are the present day representatives of these later Mongolians or the Indo-Mongoloid and the tribe speaking Bodo languages seem to have occupied the plains of Assam for very long time. Regarding racial affinity, Sir Edward Gait was of the opinion that, “The Kacharis are believed to be very allied to the Koches, and also, so far at least as language is concerned, to the Chutiyas, Lalungs and Morans of the Brahmaputra Valley, and to the Garos and Tipperas of the Southern hills”.

The Bodo-Kacharis living in the present North Bengal and in the Western Part of Goalpara district are known as ‘Mech’. The Bodos are numerically and sociologically one of the most important tribes of the North-Eastern India, and are particularly scattered all over the plains of lower Assam. They belong to the Indo-Mongolian group of tribes who have been generally known as ‘Kiratas’.

The main inhabiting areas of the Bodos in the district lies between Dudhnoi and Dhupdhara.
4.1.2 Population:

The Bodos are characteristically Mongoloid in appearance with strong cheek bones, slit eyes, a slight growth of hair in the body and scant beard. They are shorter and stouter than the Indians of the North-east.

The Bodos are now largely concentrated in the Kokrajhar district of Assam followed by the northern belt of undivided Kamrup district, present Goalpara district and Darrang district. According to the census report of 1991 the total population of this tribe in Goalpara district against the total population and total tribal population of the Assam state can be mentioned as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/District</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Total Tribal population</th>
<th>Total Bodo population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>22414322</td>
<td>2874441 Male - 1461560 Female - 1412881</td>
<td>1267015 Male - 642443 Female - 624572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>668138</td>
<td>115099 Male - 58212 Female - 56887</td>
<td>31048 Male - 15694 Female - 15354</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>26,6555,28 Male - 13,777,037 Female - 12,878,491</td>
<td>3308570 Male - 1678117 Female - 1630453</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>822035 Male - 420251 Female - 401784</td>
<td>131800 Male - 66109 Female - 65691</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The census report of 2001 has not provided the total population of the individual tribes in Goalpara district. Through personal communication with the office of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council the total population of the Bodos and the Rabhas together in Goalpara district till 2005 is known as 1, 27, 273.

4.1.3 Social life:

4.1.3. (i) Village structure:

The mode of living of the Boro-Kocharis in compact villages putting barriers all around the homestead is a common sight to see. This speaks of their sense of privacy and esthetic concept in putting up a residential house. The people of Bodo
villages are specially skilled in the construction of irrigation canals and earthwork embankments for diverting water from river beds into their rice fields. Whenever the rainfall threatens to be below the average, the village headman with his associated elders fixes on the spot whence water is to brought from the nearest river to the rice fields. Here all the manhood strength of the village, each man armed with hoe, dao etc. are compelled to take up their abode until the necessary work has been fully carried out. Thus the Boro villages have a highly efficient and very inexpensive 'Public Work Department' of their own. The techniques of field operation for wet-paddy cultivation are more or less the same all over the Boro inhabited villages. The setting up of village granaries by the voluntary contribution of one's produce at specified rate is an instance of the spirit of mutual help and co-operative living in village units. Some village organizations like the youth clubs formed village-wise also help the villagers by making available funds created out of collective work or individual contributions in the Boro villages of the district.

4.1.3. (ii) House pattern:

The traditional houses of Bodos are made of mud plastered bamboo walls and thatched roofs (Ph-1). The houses are artistically designed and are built on separately facing each other and leaving sufficient space in between and also a spacious courtyard for threshing and processing paddies. Of course in present days the well to do section construct pucca or semi-pucca Assam type houses with C.I. sheet roofing and even R.C.C. multistoried building.

The houses are normally built on ground. They construct separate shades for cattle, ducks and poultries. Generally the campus of a Boro household is very neatly maintained. Almost all the families have their basti lands, some portion of which is used as jungles with different plant species like Anthocepalus chinensis (Lamk.) A. Rich, Albizia procera (Roxb.) Benth., Cassia fistula L., Dipterocarpus turbinatus Gaertn. f., Gmelina arborea Roxb., Artocarpus heterophyllus Lamk., Biscofia javanica Bl., Callicarpa arborea Roxb., Lagerstroemia reginae Roxb., Bambusa
arundinacea Willd., Bambusa balcooa Roxb., Bambusa vulgaris Schrad. etc. which provide them with house building materials like bamboos and firewood.

Each house with its granary (generally towards eastern direction) and other outbuildings is surrounded by a ditch and fence, the latter usually made of reed of ekra [Sclerostachya fusca (Roxb.) A. Camus], kher [Heteropogon contortus (L.) Beauv.] and split bamboo (Bambusa vulgaris Schrad.) etc. or split bamboo etc. The ditches which are 3-4 feet in depth, surrounds the whole homestead, the earth taken out from it being thrown up on the inner side i.e., that nearest to the dwelling house. The main dwelling house consists of 3 rooms, the room of the eastern side is known as ‘Ishing’, the middle one is known as ‘Okhong’ and the room of the western side is known as ‘Khophra’. In front of the main dwelling house a separate guest house is constructed which is termed as ‘Choura-Na’. On the 2-3 ft. high earth-works, reeds or split-bamboo (generally Bambusa vulgaris Schrad.) work are inserted forming the fence itself. It is found often inclining outwards at a very obtuse angle, so that the ditch and fence are not easily surmounted from the outside by the would be intruders. This type of semi fort like residential complexes have also been adopted specially by the Rabhas of South-Goalpara and this trend of identical constructions must have gone to them from the neighbouring Boro Kacharis.

4.1.4 Food habit:

The staple cereal food of the Bodos is rice. Although some families are producing wheat (Triticum aestivum L.) yet in their homes they normally do not take flour or atta. Generally they take boiled green vegetables seasoned with chillies and salt alongwith rice. A considerable number of wild plant species are related to the food habit of the Bodos of Goalpara district, some of which are also affective in curing many diseases. These wild plant species are more or less related to the food habit of the other tribes (i.e. the Garos, the Hajongs and the Rabhas) also and many of these species are sold by them in different weekly markets throughout the district (Ph. 13 - 16). Among these plant species mention may be made of the following:
4.1.4.(i) Vegetables (generally cooked):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scientific names</th>
<th>Plant/Plant part(s) used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Alocasia cucullata Schott.</td>
<td>Co, Lf pt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A. fornicata (Roxb.) Schott.</td>
<td>Lf pt, Lf (tender)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. A. macrorrhiza (L.) G. Don</td>
<td>Rh, Lf pt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A. odor a (Roxb.) Koch.</td>
<td>Lf pt, Lf (tender)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Alternanthera sessilis (L.) R. Br.</td>
<td>Sh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Amaranthus spinosus L.</td>
<td>Sh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. A. viridis L.</td>
<td>Sh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Amorphophallus bulbifer (Roxb.) Bl.</td>
<td>Co, Lf (tender)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. A. paeoniifolius (Dennst.) Nicols</td>
<td>Co, Lf pt, Lf (tender)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Angiopteris evecta (Forstn.) Hoffm.</td>
<td>Rh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Artocarpus heterophyllus Lamk.</td>
<td>Fr (young)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Asparagus racemosus Willd.</td>
<td>Sh (tender)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Averrhoa carambola L.</td>
<td>Fr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Azadirachta indica A. Juss.</td>
<td>Lf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Bacopa monnieri (L.) Pennell.</td>
<td>Wp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Bambusa balcooa Roxb.</td>
<td>Sh (tender)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. B. nutans Wall.</td>
<td>Sh (tender)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Basella alba L. var. rubra</td>
<td>Sh/Lf, Sd (tender)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Bauhinia variegata L.</td>
<td>Fl (buds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Boerhaavia diffusa L.</td>
<td>Sh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Calamus erectus Roxb.</td>
<td>Sh (young)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Cannabis sativa L.</td>
<td>Sh (tender)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Capsicum frutescens L.</td>
<td>Fr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Cassia fistula L.</td>
<td>Fl (buds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. C. tora L.</td>
<td>Lf (tender)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Centella asiatica (L.) Urban</td>
<td>Wp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Chenopodium album L.</td>
<td>Sh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. C. ambrosoides L.</td>
<td>Sh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Cissus repens Lamk.</td>
<td>Sh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Scientific Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td><em>C. quadrangula</em> L.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td><em>Clerodendrum serratum</em> (L.) Moon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td><em>Colocasia esculenta</em> (L.) Schott.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td><em>Cycas pectinata</em> Griff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td><em>Deeringia amaranthoides</em> (Lamk.) Interpr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td><em>Dendrocnide sinuata</em> (Bl.) Chew.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td><em>Dillenia indica</em> L.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td><em>D. pentagyna</em> Roxb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td><em>Dioscorea bulbifera</em> L.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td><em>Enhydra fluctuans</em> Lour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td><em>Eryngium foetidum</em> L.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td><em>Euphorbia hirta</em> L.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td><em>Garcinia pedunculata</em> Roxb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td><em>Gmelina arborea</em> Roxb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td><em>Hedyotis auricularia</em> L.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td><em>Homalomena aromatic</em> Schott.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td><em>Houttuynia cordata</em> Thunb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td><em>Hydrocotyle sibthorpioides</em> Lamk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td><em>Hyptis suaveolens</em> (L.) Poit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td><em>Ipomoea aquatica</em> Forssk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td><em>Kalanchoe pinnata</em> (Lamk.) Pers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td><em>Lasia spinosa</em> (L.) Thw.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.</td>
<td><em>Leucas plumetii</em> (Roth.) Spreng.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54.</td>
<td><em>Malachra capitata</em> L.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55.</td>
<td><em>Momordica charantia</em> L.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56.</td>
<td><em>Monochoria hastata</em> (L.) Solms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57.</td>
<td><em>Moringa oleifera</em> Lamk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58.</td>
<td><em>Morus australis</em> Poir.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59.</td>
<td><em>Murraya koenigii</em> (L.) Spreng.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60.</td>
<td><em>Musa bulbisiana</em> Colla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Species Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61.</td>
<td><em>Nyctanthes arbor-tristis</em> L.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62.</td>
<td><em>Nymphaea nouchali</em> Burm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63.</td>
<td><em>N. rubra</em> Roxb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64.</td>
<td><em>Oroxylum indicum</em> (L.) Vent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65.</td>
<td><em>Oxalis corniculata</em> L.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66.</td>
<td><em>Paederia foetida</em> L.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67.</td>
<td><em>Paperomia pellucida</em> (L.) H.B.K.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68.</td>
<td><em>Phlogacanthm thyrsiformis</em> (Hard.) Mabb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69.</td>
<td><em>Pogostemon pubescens</em> Benth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70.</td>
<td><em>Polygonum microcephalum</em> D. Don</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71.</td>
<td><em>Portulaca oleracea</em> L.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72.</td>
<td><em>Rorippa indica</em> (L.) Hochreut.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73.</td>
<td><em>Selaginella semicordata</em> (Hook. et Grev.) Spring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74.</td>
<td><em>Sesbania grandiflora</em> (L.) Poir.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75.</td>
<td><em>Solanum anguiivi</em> Lamk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76.</td>
<td><em>S. torvum</em> Swartz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77.</td>
<td><em>Spondias pinnata</em> (L.f.) Kurz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78.</td>
<td><em>Stellaria himalayensis</em> Maj.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79.</td>
<td><em>Thunbergia grandiflora</em> (Roxb. ex Rottl.) Roxb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80.</td>
<td><em>Trichosanthes dioica</em> Roxb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81.</td>
<td><em>Typhonium trilobatum</em> Schott.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82.</td>
<td><em>Vitex negundo</em> L.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83.</td>
<td><em>Xanthosoma atrovirens</em> Schott.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84.</td>
<td><em>Zanthoxyllum rhetsa</em> Roxb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85.</td>
<td><em>Z. oxyphyllum</em> Edgw.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**4.1.4 (ii) Wild edible fruits (eaten raw):**

2. *Antidesma acidum* Retz.
4. *A. lacucha* Buch.-Ham.
5. *Borassus flabellifer* L.
7. *Citrus medica* L.
8. *Dillenia indica* L.
12. *Garcinia cowa* Roxb. ex DC.
14. *Maesa indica* (Roxb.) A. DC.
15. *Melastoma malabathricum* L.
17. *Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn.
20. *P. emblica* L.
22. *Spondias pinnata* (L.f.) Kurz.
23. *Syzygium cumini* (L.) Skeels
24. *Tamarindus indica* L.
25. *Trapa natans* L. var. bispinosa (Roxb.) Makino
27. *Zizyphus mauritiana* Lamk.

For meat supply a traditional Bodo family rear fowls, pigs, ducks and goats. The flesh of other animals is scrupulously avoided. The poultries and pigs are not only reared for household consumption but these constitute as source of income specially for the women-folk who use the money for purchasing yarn, cloths, ornaments etc. Again fish forms a special delicacy in the Boro menu.
### 4.1.4.(iii) Rice-beer:

Rice-beer is prepared in most of the household and it is served to all irrespective of age and sex. The plant species traditionally used by the Bodos of Goalpara district for preparation of rice-beer cakes are mentioned as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scientific name of plant species</th>
<th>Part(s) used/Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Artocarpus heterophyllus Lamk.</td>
<td>- Lf/2 nos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Cannabis sativa L.</td>
<td>- Lf/8-10 nos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Cissampelos pareira L.</td>
<td>- Lf/6-8 nos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Costus speciosus (Koen.) Sm.</td>
<td>- Rh/50 gms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Emblica officinalis Gaertn.</td>
<td>- Fr/6-8 nos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Eleusine coracana (L.) Gaertn.</td>
<td>- Sd/25 gms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Psidium guajava L.</td>
<td>- Lf/4-6 nos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Spilanthes paniculata DC.</td>
<td>- Lf/12 nos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Scoparia dulcis L.</td>
<td>- Sh/12 nos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Saccharum officinarum L.</td>
<td>- Lf/150 gms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Oryza sativa L.</td>
<td>- Sd/2 Kg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is urgent to mix a necessary amount of old rice-beer cake along with these plant materials to prepare new rice-beer cakes. It is considered as the most valuable item for entertaining guests. Habit of taking tea or milk is less popular among them. The traditional elderly Boro people generally take red tea without milk and sugar.

They cultivate different species of rice i.e. *Oryza sativa* L. (e.g. Bodo, Sali, Ahu etc.), maize (*Zea mays* L.), sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum* L.) along with some vegetables like Bothua (*Chenopodium album* L.), different edible species of taroes (sp. of *Colocasia, Alocasia, Xanthosoma* etc.) and yams (*Dioscorea* sp), several species of potatoes including sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas* Lamk.), pine apple [*Ananas comosus* (L.) Merr.], papaya (*Carica papaya* L.), lemons including orange (*Citrus* sp.), banana (*Musa* sp.), black pepper (*Piper nigrum* L.) etc.
4.1.5 Dress:

According to their tradition every Boro-Kachari woman is expected to excel in the finer art of handloom craftsmanship. The yellow colour is the favourite choice of the Boro-Kachari woman which is distinctly visible in their dress materials, specially in their ‘DOKHONA’, i.e. the one – piece garment with attractive artistic design which covers from breast to ankles (Ph-5).

The traditional Boro men (both young and old) wear a home woven piece of cloth bigger than Gamosa and it is called ‘Gamscha’. The ‘Gamscha’ is generally green in colour though varieties of other colours also seen besides green colour. A piece of hand woven cloth covered with flowery design is also used by Boro men around their neck which is called as ‘Arnai’. An Arnai is about 3-3.5 ft in length and 8-10 inch in breadth. The male persons put on ‘Gamscha’ which hangs down to the knees from the loins. During winter they use to wrap the body with a wrapper of cotton or Endi spun woven at home. This wrapper is called ‘Jumgra’ or ‘Madamni Gamscha’. They also use a banian, a sort of coat of cotton or Endi. The cotton used in weaving is obtained mainly from Gossypium herbaceum L.

Other dress materials used during different dance recitals like ‘Bagrumba’ and ‘Kherai’ also give testimony to the artistic taste and décor of the tribe as a whole. In present days a lot of changes have taken place in the dress outfits not only of the male section but the female section as well. Similarly the art of dying yarn and clothes which was a community secret of the tribe is now gradually fading out. The traditional Bodo weavers of Goalpara district use different parts of many plant species in dying yarn and clothes among which the worth mentioning are –
Sc name of plant Sp. | Part(s) used | Dye obtained
---|---|---
1. Adenanthera pavonina L. | Rt | Red
2. Artocarpus heterophyllus Lamk. | Wd | Yellow
3. Baccaurea ramiflora Lour. | Bk & Lf | Chocolate
4. Bixa orellana L. | Rt bk | Brown
5. Jatropha curcas L. | La | Black
6. Mallotus philippensis Muell | Fr | Red
7. Morinda angustifolia Roxb. | Rt | Yellow
8. Musa bulbisiana Colla | Lf sheath (Ash) | Ash
9. Oroxyllum indicum (L.) Vent. | Bk & Fr | Black
10. Pithecellobium heterophyllum (Roxb.) Harid. | Fr & Lf | Black
11. Terminalia chebula Retz. | Fr | Black
12. T. citrina (Gaertn.) Roxb. ex Flem. | Fr | Black

Same condition is also applicable to the traditional ornaments which have now become museum specimen and a negligible number of ladies prefer to wear them at present.

4.1.6 Festivals:

The Bodos observe several major and minor festivals and ceremonies throughout the year which are mainly of three types such as – (a) Religious (b) Seasonal and (c) Agricultural. In fact, all the major festivals, and ceremonies, including the religious and seasonal festivals are closely connected with agriculture. Among the major religious festivals the ‘Kherai puja’ and the ‘Garja puja’ festivals are the most important ones.

The propitiatory rituals begin with different dance recitals alongwith singing of ballads in traditional tune. The ‘Doudini’ or ‘Deodhani’ who acts as the link man is believed to be the embodiment of the supreme power for the time being and capable of communicating oracles through his lips as per desire of the people participating propitiation. In a Kherai which held in the month of Kartik twenty dance recitals are instituted befitting the temperament of individual deities, through which the ethnic and
cultural identity of the tribe manifest fully. At the end of the ritualistic programme it is customary to pay homage to the patrilineal forefathers and also to offer a community prayer soliciting pelf, power and health. The Bodo-Kacharis believe that if anybody expresses any desires on this auspicious moment, it usually gets fulfilment.

In creating a festive mood of much gaiety and merriment, the 'Bagrumba' dance has a special attraction for the Boro-kachari girls. This is an occasion when only girls can take part. It is instituted just after completion of the plantation work probably to relax the pains of hard labour involved in it. The girls make their graceful debut in natural surrounding by wearing traditional costumes specially woven by them for the purpose which bear testimony to their inherent skill in textile workmanship and artistic idea of colour and shade. Main seasonal festivals of the Bodos are Baisagu or 'Bishu' or 'Bihu' in assamese (Spring time festival of total 7 days which includes Bathou Puja, Bhatheli festival etc.), Katri Gasa Saonai or Kati Bihu and Amthisua or Amati (Ambuvasi) etc.

In Baisagu programme of merriment like community singing and dancing continues till the seventh day of the month since the day of begining. In the Baishagu dance there is no bar either of age or of sex to join in their respective groups (Ph-9). The traditional musical instruments that are used in this dance festival are 'Kham' (Mandal), 'Jotha' (Manjari or Taka), 'Khawbang' (Tal), 'Gogona', 'Siphuri' (Flute or Banhi) etc.

Among the ceremonies directly related to Agriculture, the worth mentioning are – Khotia phonai (in Assamese Kathia or sowing seeds of paddy), Khotia phonai (uprooting the seedlings for transplantation), Mai gainai (Paddy plantation) Mainao lainai or Aglainai (Bringing Mainao or Laxmi from the paddy field to the house) and Engkham godan janai or new rice-eating ceremony.
4.1.7 Marriage:

The Boro-Kachari society has been found to be strictly maintaining the rule of clan exogamy in their marital relationship till the recent past. But the rigidity is gradually on the way to dilution. Though choice of marriage partner within the same clan is prohibited according to clan rule, the marriage among the Boro-Kacharis is found to be held within the same clan also. Due to impact of Hinduism (Vaishnavism) and contact with the plains population, they have a tendency to merge with the Hindu social fold. In the Boro society usual practice of contacting a marriage is by negotiation (‘Hathachuni’) and widow remarriage (‘Dhoka’) do often take place. In a marriage by servitude, the would be groom is to render physical labour usually for a period of one year but the period may be extended depending on the degree of satisfaction of the would be father in law, but now a days this system is not encouraged by the new generation. Therefore, negotiation marriage (‘Hathachuni’) has become the normal social custom. In the widow remarriage, the widower must cut off his all patrilineal relationship and induct himself to the ‘ari’ (clan) of the widow. In another type of marriage, when a girl goes voluntarily to a man with the intension of staying with him as husband and wife, then this type of unceremonious union is called as ‘Kharchanai marriage’.

The system of demanding bride price is still prevalent in traditional marriage of Boro society. In the traditional system of marriage, the groom instead of going to the bride’s house sends a little party to fetch the girl ceremoniously to perform the rituals at the groom’s house and a grand feast is thrown out in honour of the bride and her party to be taken at the bride’s house on return. The bridal party after leaving the groom’s house the groom party starts cleaning of the entire household and after cleaning the bride is asked to make a symbolic cooking and then to offer a little amount of cooked food to the household deities, first to Mahadeva and then to Mother Kamakhya. Then the bride is asked to touch the rice pot with her left hand and to take oath of fidelity to her new home. Then the new couple is given some sermons of married life by an elderly person or by the village ‘Douri’. This being over, the bride
herself is to distribute the residue of the feast at least once first to her husband and then to the invited guests. On the eighth day of the marriage the groom is to visit the father-in-law’s house with his bride and also wherever possible with his friends. With this ceremony a ‘Hatha-chuni’ marriage is said to be completed. Betal leaf (*Piper betle* L.), fruits of Areca nut (*Areca catechu* L.), leaves and fruits of banana (*Musa* sp.) are traditionally used in different stages of the marriage ceremony.

4.1.8 Religion and religious beliefs:

The religious philosophy of the Boro-Kachari tribe centres round and super power of ‘Bathou Barai’ or ‘Khoria Barai Maharaja’ which is analogous to ‘Sibrai’ or Siva of the Hindu Trinity. The Siju plant (*Euphorbia ligularia* Roxb.) is regarded as representing the ‘Bathou’ the supreme deity of adoration. Therefore, every traditional Boro-Kachari household is seen planting a ‘Siju’ plant alongwith a sapling of ‘Jatrasí’ (*Justicia gendarussa* Burm.) and a ‘Tulsi’ (*Ocimum sanctum* L.) in the northern corner of their courtyard. Next to Bathou, ‘Mainao’ (also called ‘Buli Buri’) is worshipped as the goddess of wealth. Besides these two primary deities, the Boro-Kacharis worship many other gods and goddesses comprising Agraug, Khoila, Khaji, Rajkhandra, Rajputhur, Asu mainao, Sali mainao, Bagraja, Basumati and Choudri. Some of these deities or Madai are benevolent and some are malevolent. The malevolent deities are regarded as the originator of all ills including natural calamities and for their propitiation sacrifices and offering of rice-beer are invariably necessary. The propitiation to benevolent deities like ‘Asu mainao’ and ‘Sali mainao’ is done for higher yield of crops as well as endowment of prosperity.

But the religious belief of the traditional Boro-Kacharis differ substantially with that of the ‘Brahmas’ who institute ‘Hom-Yojna’ before the sacred fire in all socio-religious obligations following the tenets preached by Guru Kalicharan Brahma. The Brahmas practise Vedic rites like other Hindus and they do not worship any spirits or power by sacrificing pigs and fowls and also by offering rice-beer. But culturally they do not differ from other traditional Boro-Kacharis.
4.1.9 **Language and literature:**

The Bodo language belongs to the western branch of Barish section under Baric division of the Sino-Tibetan family (Shafer, 1955). Grierson (1903) describes the Boro or the Boro-Kacharis as a member of the Bodo sub-section under the Assam Burma Group of the Tibeto-Burman Branch of Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese speech family. In Assam there are four distinct dialectal areas called as North-Western, South-Western, North-Central and Southern areas with Phonological, morphological and glossarial differences. The Boro speech areas of Assam intermittingly from the Western border of Goalpara district to the eastern boundary of Dibrugarh district.

Although the Boro language has no script of its own, it has been introduced as medium of instruction in the primary level in the Boro predominant areas of Kokrajhar District with effect from 1963 and now it has gone upto degree level. Devanagari script is now being used for the Boro language with effect from April, 1975. The Boro language has since been declared as an associate official language by an ordinance issued on 28th December, 1984.

Till the mid-nineteenth century, the Boro literature was composed of mainly oral literature such as folk songs, folk tales, ballads, proverbs etc. So, the sources of Boro literature are mostly indigenous. The written literature emerged first in the wake of the Brahma movement among the Boro-Kacharis which did the spade work for the development of Boro literature by different pioneer Bodo workers. At present the Boro literature has been growing rapidly and the ‘Boro Sahitya Sabha’ is making considerable effort in publishing Boro literary works in all fields. The Boro folk songs have a great bearing on their philosophy of life.

4.1.10 **Economic life:**

The changing trends in social outlook of the Boro-Kacharis can be visualised with the emergence of the 19th century. The traditional religious philosophy of the Boro-Kacharis began to change by the preaching of Guru Kalicharan Brahma who was inducted to the Brahma faith by Srimant Paramhangsa Sibnarayan Swami of
Calcutta and for whom the larger sections of this community became his followers to the wider fold of the Vedic Sanatan Dharma. This process initiated a social revolution among the Boro-Kacharis residing in and around Goalpara district. In its form and content the Brahma movement was more than a religious upheaval. It was a movement for total change of outlook in all fields—social, religious, political, economic and educational. The trend of higher education has since grown among the Bodos, mainly through the converted Brahmas and this section of people in the subsequent years were able to put into motion the political aspiration of the tribal people which ultimately led to the formation of the All Assam Tribal League in 1935 for achieving this purpose. Thus in the later days this sensitiveness to political problems grow stronger with the passage of time.

Besides socio-religious and socio-political fields changing trend is also observed in the livelihood pattern and the way of life of the Boro-Kachris of Goalpara district. It is true that still agriculture continues to be the primary source of livelihood of the tribe but now it has undergone many changes that prevailed till the fifties. In comparison to other plains tribal people, they have become more prone to the use of chemical fertilizer, pesticides and use of scientific knowledge in agriculture. It has become possible due to expansion of general and technical education among them. Alongwith enough cultivation of Ahu and Sali paddy, other cash crops like jute (Corchorus capsularis L.), mustard seeds (Brassica alba HK. f. & T and Brassica nigra Koch.) arecanut (Areca catechu L.) and sugarcane (Saccharum officinarum L.) is also cultivated in massive scale by the Boro-Kachari cultivators of Goalpara district. The Boro-Kacharis predominate in the commercial production of Muga silk, Assam silk and Endi cocoons and finished products from Endi yarn.

There is a good number of famous herbal medicine practioners of Bodo community in Goalpara district (Ph. 17-20). But it is observed that the herbal medicines are given free to the relatives and friends of the medicine men and sometimes sold in a cheap rate to other people in his/her own house or in the weekly
market. Nobody has taken this line as main earning source to improve their economic condition.

In the employment market it has been seen that some of the present unemployed Boro-Kachari youths have taken to diversified occupation. The Boro-Kachari girls have also come up in large numbers to join in the para medical and other technical jobs. Thus a trend of change has already set in and in the process the Boro-Kachari youths having technical or professional skill have been able to secure berths for themselves both in secondary and tertiary sectors.

4.2 The Garos:

The Garos are one of the scheduled tribes in the two Autonomous Hill districts of Assam, viz. the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills. The origin of the Garo families in the Karbi Anglong district could be traced back to the Garo Hills district of present Meghalaya. Thus the Garos are now mainly inhabitants of the present Garo Hills. As the Garo Hills are bounded on the north and west by the district of Goalpara, so a considerable number of people belonging to this tribe is found scattered throughout the district. There are a good number of Garo villages in Goalpara and South Salmara Sub divisions of present Goalpara district bordering Garo Hills of Meghalaya.

4.2.1 Racial affinity:

The Garos call themselves 'ACHIK-MANDE' which literally means – Hill man, 'ACHIK' means hills and 'MANDE' means man.

Like most of the tribes of N.E. India ethnically the Garos also belong to the Mongoloid race. The Garos believe that their original home was Tibet. It is believed that the Garos might have stayed in Tibet for an insignificant long time in course of their migration through the routes from Western China (Bordoloi, 1991). Like the other Bodo group of people the Garos belong to the Tibeto-Chinese family whose
cradle is said to have been the North Western China between the upper water of Yang-Tese-Kiang and Hoangho (Sangma, 1984). A Section of the Garos believe that in course of migration, they settled in Koch Behar for a few centuries together and later on spread upto the Mymensing district of present Bangladesh. The partition of the country at the time of independence had compelled them to migrate to the then undivided Assam. Like the other tribes of Assam the Garos belong to the Tibeto-Burman families of Bodo-linguistic group.

The Garos possess the Mongolian type of feature in a more marked degree with dark-tan complexion in comparison to the other tribes. Their faces are round and short, forehead projects very little beyond the eye which is very small. The whole face has the appearance of being flattened with normally straight hair and more often wavy and even curly.

Both Garo men and women are short with the average height of the former is 5 ft and the latter 4 ft 10 inch. The men rarely have hair on their faces though very few grow for beards. If a moustache is grown, it usually consists of a few hairs on either side of the upper lip, owing to the custom of pulling out the rest. They are friendly and pleasant in manner and usually exhibit very little trace of shyness. They are always suspicious for which it is not easy to obtain information and one has to always face them with their characteristic reply “Uija” “I do not know”. Both sexes of this tribe love an open air bath, but the fact is that skin diseases are very prevalent among them which prove that the Garos are not clean people. But at present, the continuous efforts of the American Baptist Mission have resulted in a higher standard of living among their converts. Christian villages show a considerable improvement and both men and women have learned to clothe themselves and to take a pride in personal cleanliness. If the rice crop fails they do not have to go hungry because they store so many other cereals like *Triticum aestivum* L., *Zea mays* L. etc. and edible roots of *Ipomoea batatus* Lamk., *Manihot utilissima* Pohl. etc. collecting from jungle, taroes like *Alocasia macrorhiza* (L.) G. Don, *Amorphophallus bulbifer* (Roxb.) Blume., *A.
campanulatus Blume ex Decne, Colocasia esculenta (L.) Schott, etc. and matured seeds and young shoots of different bamboo species like Bambusa vulgaris Schrad, Bambusa balcooa Roxb. etc. One great passion, the love of drink, does go some way towards pulling the Garos to poverty as for preparing his/her rice-beer he/she requires a great quantity of grain even exhausting granary early in the year and leaving himself very little to eat.

4.2.2 Sub-groups and clans:

On the basis of residence, dialectical and cultural variations as well as inter-tribe marriages the Garos are divided into several sub-tribes each of having specific cultural traits which can be mentioned as follows –


A clan is called as CHATCHI in Garo. Originally the Garos had three clans, namely, MARAK, MOMIN and SANGMA. Later on three other clans, namely, ABENG, ARENG and SIRA were created. These were in fact sub-clans of the original clans but in course of time they were branched away from the original clans and were developed later on into independent clans. All these clans are sub-divided into several sub-clans called MA’CHONG which literally means mother hood.

4.2.3 Population:

As per 1971 census the total Garo population in Assam is 9,139 out of which 5,222 persons are males and 3,917 are females the sex-ratio being 750 females per 1000 males. The total population of 9,139, of course, does not include the Garos living in the plains districts of Assam.

The Garos may be roughly divided into Hill Garos and Plain Garos. A considerable number of Plain Garos are found mainly in Goalpara and Kamrup district of Assam. The census report of 1991 did not mention the exact population of Garos in
Assam. However, mother tongue of few persons was identified as Garo during the census of 1991. So, on the basis of this data of Garo speakers as their mother tongue in Assam and in the district of Goalpara as per census report of 1991 can be shown in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/District</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Total Tribal Population</th>
<th>Total Garo population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>22414322</td>
<td>2874441</td>
<td>113408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male -1461560</td>
<td>Female - 1412881</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>668138</td>
<td>115099</td>
<td>23203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>26655528</td>
<td>3308570</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male - 13777037</td>
<td>Female - 12878491</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>822035</td>
<td>131800</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male - 420251</td>
<td>Female - 401784</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The census report of 2001 has not provided the total population of individual tribes in Assam as well as in Goalpara district. According to a personally collected data from the office of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council, the total population of Garos in Goalpara district is approximately 58,329 till 2005.

4.2.4 Social life:

4.2.4. (i) Village structure: Unlike other hill tribes, e.g. Nagas and Lushais, who build their villages on the slopes of hills, the Garos construct their villages in valleys or in depressions on the hill-sides, close to running water. They give great importance to pure water and it is an exceptional situation for them to live at any distance from a good stream. The sites chosen for the houses are generally steep, and the villages are rarely on flat ground.
It is the custom to plant numerous jack fruit trees (*Artocarpus heterophyllus* L.) in the entrance to nearly all old villages. Beyond the trees one have to pass through an irregular shaped open space called ‘atela’ or ‘sara’ where many of the religious ceremonies are conducted. The houses appear to be crowded together and very close to one another. At the centre of the ‘atela’ there is one house where the meetings of the village elders held. Several sacrificial emblems connected with funeral rites are seen in the villages here and there. There is a custom of building all the granaries in one place so as to protect grains from the danger of fire, entrance of rats and other vermes etc.

The main drawback of placing these granaries at a distance from other houses is that, these granaries are frequently attacked by wild elephants at night which find their favourite food in these granaries. In former days, Garo villages were of considerable size containing two to three hundred houses guarded by sharp-pointed bamboo stakes called ‘wamisi’ or ‘Panjis’ in Garo. Normally Garo villages are broken up into some small hamlets situated four or five miles apart, which, however, in most cases retain the name of the parent village. In order to distinguish them the name of the nokma (the village chief of the Garos) is added to the name of each hamlet. Garo villages occupy the same sites for a much longer time and are not moved more than once at least within thirty years.

4.2.4. (ii) Nokma and his role:

The traditional village chief of the Garos who is also the clan chief is called NOKMA. He is the custodian or guardian of all lands in and around the village. A NOKMA, however, cannot sell any land without the permission of his wife's MA’CHONG (motherhood). A man from another village may also cultivate Jhum land within a village with the prior permission of the NOKMA and if he is a non Garo he is required to pay land revenue to NOKMA in terms of paddy. Inspite of the fact that the Garos have a matrilineal society, the NOKMA, the male tribal chief of the village, play a very very important role in village administration like various personal
cases and disputes, observance of festivals, religious rites, marriages, death ceremonies, starting of cultivation, harvesting of new crops etc. and he is to be consulted before taking decision about all these matters.

4.2.4. (iii) Family structure:

The Garos follow the matriarchal family structure unlike the Rabhas, which were once matrilineal peoples. But the Garos have been maintaining this type of family structure without any erosion. The line of descent is always traced through the females only. The group on which the Garo society is based is the sub-clan MA’CHONG i.e. the ‘motherhood’. All persons belonging to a MA’CHONG trace their descent from a common ancestress or mother. So, the mothers are the head of Garo families and the father is considered to be an outsider only who is inducted to the family by virtue of marriage. The children also acquire the title of the clan/sub clan name of their mother only. Thus in a Garo family the father, according to the customs, is not required to play any dominant role.

4.2.4. (iv) House pattern:

Garos always build their houses on wooden piles and if possible on a steep incline (Ph-2). Some of the piles are therefore longer than others. These wooden piles are normally made from stem of Shorea robusta Gaertn., besides which some other plant species such as Artocarpus heterophyllus Lamk., Syzygium cumini (L.) Skeels, Albizia procera (Roxb.) Benth. etc. are also used for this purpose. The size of the posts used varies from 4 inch. to 6 inch in diameter. In case of houses of more than ordinary size, they are even bigger. On the top of the posts cross-beams are placed over which a layer of solid bamboos (generally Bambusa vulgaris Schrad.) are placed. Lastly, a layer of rough bamboo matting is covered on the solid bamboos to give the final form of the floor of the house. The walls of the house is also made of the same matting, and the roof is a substantial covering of thatching grass or leaves of bamboos (normally leaves of Bambusa arundinacea Willd., Bambusa tulda Roxb. etc.) or canes (usually leaves of Calamus latifolius Roxb.). The houses are very long and narrow in
comparison to the length. There are no side windows and the only opening is in the shape of doors at each end, thus the inner side becomes dark and gloomy. Every house is divided into three principal parts- the 1st part is known as nokra and it is used to keep mortar and pestle for pounding paddy, a stock of dry firewood, miscellaneous household requisites, and very often cattle too. The 2nd part occupies two third area of the whole house which is known as ‘nokganchi’ and is used part by part as drawing room, for preparation of beer, worshipping some spirits etc. The third part of the house is used as kitchen and fire place. Beyond the fireplace another clear space is there where the unmarried women of the household sleep. No apartments are partitioned off for other members of the family and they sleep anywhere on the floor. The last room of all is known as nokdring and it is the sleeping apartment of the owner of the house and his wife, beyond which again there is a small verandah, when the daughter of the house is married, a space is partitioned off for her and her husband in the main room. At one side of the nokdring there is often a latrine. Usually no windows are found in traditional Garo houses. Instead of window, sometimes a doorway is made, which leads out to a small platform, where the family can sit and enjoy the fresh air.

4.2.5 Food habit:

4.2.5. (i) Staple food and vegetables:

Like other tribes of the North-East India, rice is the staple food of the Garos. Generally rice is cooked in earthen pots and sometimes in bamboo tubes normally prepared from internodes of Bambusa vulgaris Schrad., Bambusa balcooa Roxb. or Bambusa nutans Wall. In addition to rice they also eat maize (Zea mays L.), wheat (Triticum aestivum L.) and tapioca (Manihot esculenta Crantz.) roots occasionally. Dried fish called NAKAM is one of the favourite delicacies. They eat fleshes of almost all kinds of animals except that of tigers and almost all kinds of birds. Another delicacy for them is the curry prepared from tender bamboo shoots (normally tender shoots of Bambusa balcooa Roxb. and Bambusa nutans Wall.). Oil or ghee is never used by them for cooking purpose. The wild edible plants or plant part(s) which are taken as cooked vegetables or raw fruits by the Garos are almost same with those used
by the Bodos of the district. They also use alkali obtained from ashes by burning dried rhizome of banana plant (*Musa bulbisiana* Colla).

### 4.2.5. (ii) Rice-beer:

Rice-beer is the most favourite drink for the Garos which they use as one kind of nutritious food and the young ones have a taste of it from the time of their mothers use to carry them on their back. For preparation of rice-beer cake, the Garos of Goalpara district also uses the same plant materials which are used by the Bodos of the district. But those who have accepted Christianity, disfavour drinking of rice-beer.

Smoking is enjoyed by both male and female and ‘khasreng’ is normally smoked by them. ‘Khasreng’ is one kind of cigarettee which prepared from tobacco leaves wrapped by sal (*Shorea robusta* Gaertn.) leaves.

### 4.2.6. Dress:

Garo dress is very primitive. The principal garment of man is the ‘gando’ a strip of blue cotton-cloth interwoven with lines of red. It is six inches wide and about six or seven feet long. It passes between the legs, coming up round the waist and ultimately the end being tucked in under the folds at the back. On his head the Garo wears a pagri, usually of dark blue cotton. But the pagri is never allowed to cover the top of the head. A cotton cloth or a blanket over his shoulders (when it is cold) completes the man’s attire. The cotton used for weaving is mainly obtained from *Gossypium herbaceum* L. The Garos of Goalpara district also traditionally use the same plant part(s) of the same plant species used by the Bodos of the district for dying yarns.

The dress of the Garo women consists of a piece of cloth 18 inches long and just broad enough to meet round her waist in the form of a petticoat. This garment known as riking, is universal except among the Christianized Garos and the inhabitants of the plains, whose clothing is similar to that of the Bengalis and non-tribal Assamese. On their shoulders, the women often wear a shawl of blue and
white cotton. During summer they are usually as innocent of covering the upper part of the body as the men.

The Garos, both men and women, are fond of ornaments but these are exclusively used by women. Ornaments used by men and women are alike (Ph-6). Examples of some of the ornaments used by them are - (1) NODONGBINR SISHA (Ear lobe ring) (2) NADIRONG (brass made upper-ear ring) (3) NATAPSI (ear-beads) (4) JAKSAN (Silver made bangles) (5) RIPOK (brass or silver made necklace) (6) JAKSIL (iron made elbow ring) (7) SENG’KI (waist band made of several rows of Conch shells) and (8) PILNE (one kind of head ornaments used during dance performances).

4.2.7 Festivals:

Singing and dancing are integral parts of the cultural life of both Garo men and women. In various festivals and ceremonies like selection of new NOKMA, death ceremony, annual worship at the sacrificial stone, entrance in a new house, inauguration of teachers’ dormitory etc. varieties of specific dances are performed. But the most lively and colourful dances performed by the Garos are during their harvesting festival called WANGALA otherwise known as the festival of hundred drums (Ph-10).

The number of musical instruments is only a few. They use three types of drums made of wood in different occasions –

(1) The longer one called DAMA (1.5-1.8 metres long)
(2) The shorter one called KRAM (shorter in length but bigger in diameter)
(3) The smaller one called NADID (much smaller than Dama or Kram)

The wood used for making these drums are normally obtained from *Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lamk., *Tectona grandis* L. *Lagerstroemia parviflora* Roxb. etc. They also use different kinds of wind instruments of various sizes in some of their festivals but do not use any string instrument.
4.2.8 Marriage:

The Garos strictly follow the rules of exogamy in case of marriage. That means marriage between a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan can not take place and if it happens then the couple is looked down upon by the society. Generally marriage proposal shall have to be initiated from the girl’s family and not from the boy’s family.

Marriage by capture, marriage by elopement, marriage as an outcome after a girl goes and sleeps with a boy of her liking stealthily at night, marriage after a boy takes food with a girl at her invitation etc. are other forms of marriage prevalent among the Garos.

Cross cousin marriage i.e. marrying the daughter of mother’s brother is a preferential system of marriage among the Garos. But marrying the daughter of the father’s sister is a taboo. Nowadays this rule has been slackened and even endogamous marriages also have been recorded among them.

After marriage the son-in-law has to reside in the house of his parents-in-law and becomes a NOKROM which means a kind of representative of his father’s clan in the family of his mother-in-law. There are two kinds of son-in-laws among the Garos, one is called NOKROM and the other CHOWARY. After the death of the father in law the NOKROM becomes the owner of everything. On the other hand the CHOWARY is not required to stay in the house of his parent-in-laws. After marriage he builds a house in the village of his wife at his own cost and then manages whatever landed property his wife receives from her mother through inheritance. If the father-in-law of a NOKROM is also the NOKMA or the headmen of the village, the NOKROM automatically becomes the NOKMA after the death of his father-in-law. Under no circumstances the son can become the NOKMA at the death of his father.

Generally, the youngest daughter is the most favourite member of the family. Ultimately she stays with the father and the person who marries the youngest daughter
becomes the NOKROM. This privileged daughter is called NOKNA, which means heirless.

Another interesting fact about the marriage of the Garos is in the system of marrying the mother-in-law and thus becoming the husband of both of his mother-in-law and her daughter at the same time. The Garos are polygamous in the sense that a man can marry more than one wife. He can marry two sisters of the same family also. Child marriage is unknown and divorce is common in Garo society. Absence of the payment of bride price is remarkable in the Garo society. Marrying the widow of the elder brother by the younger brother is prevalent but marrying the widow of the younger brother by the elder brother is forbidden.

The line of descent of the Garos is traced through the mother only because of being matrilineal. If the woman of the family does not have a daughter, she might adopt one of the daughters of her sister as NOKNA which is a common practice among the Garos. At the death of the women, property of the family does not pass on to the sons although there may not be any daughter in the family.

4.2.9 Religion and religious beliefs:

Although it is a fact that a major percentage of Garo families living within the territorial jurisdiction of Assam, have accepted Christianity, still they remember their traditional religious beliefs and practices. Their conversion to Christianity does not prevent them from practising some of the traditional religious rites according to the needs of the hour.

According to their traditional religious beliefs there is a Supreme Being and also numerous deities benevolent as well as malevolent. These deities exist in the sky, on earth, in water, in the hills and mountains, caves and so on. Each of the deities/spirits has an assigned role to play just like the division of labour in the human society e.g. —
1. TATARA-RABUGA - the chief deity of favour including Kalazar. For his appeasement expensive sacrifice of animals is necessary.

2. SALJONG - the Sun-God who gives everything to mankind. The greatest harvesting festival of Garos WANGALA is celebrated in his honour.

3. NOSTU-NOPANTU AND MACHI - the two harmless spirits who created the earth.

4. CHORABUDI - the protector deity of crops.

5. GOERA - the god of lightening and thunder.

6. KALKAME - the God responsible for the safety of human beings from all kinds of dangers and diseases.

7. SUSIME - the goddess of richness

For appeasement of all these deities, it is necessary to sacrifice birds and animals.

The Garos believe that a serious sin committed by a man might lead to his rebirth in this earth in the form of an insect or a plant. On the other hand a virtuous man or women is most likely rewarded to be reborn in the same MACHONG.

4.2.10 Language:

The language of the Garos is called Garo and it is one of the languages of the Bodo group of the Tibeto-Burman family (Grierson, 1903).

4.2.11 Economic life:

Like the other tribes of Assam, the Garos, too depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Besides paddy, they also cultivate maize (Zea mays L.) and varieties of taroes [specially corms of Amorphophallus bulbifer (Roxb.) Blume., Alocasia cucullata Schott., Alocasia macrorhiza (L.) G. Don, Colocasia esculenta (L.) Schott., Xanthosoma atrovirens Schott etc.], yams [like tubers of Dioscorea bulbifera L., D. esculenta (Lour.) Burk, D. Pentaphylla L and D. alata L.] and potatoes (like Ipomoea batatus Lamk., Manihot esculenta Crantz., etc.). They are very good horticulturists and they raise pineapples (Ananas comosus (L.) Merr.) and bananas [specially Musa...
sapientum L., *M. balbisiana* Colla and *Ensete superbum* (Roxb.) Chees] and verities of other species of *Musa* in huge quantity. Nowadays progressive cultivators cultivating with tractors, power tillers, pump sets for irrigation etc. are available among them. Generally the Garos are laborious ethnic group of North East India. A considerable number of Garo traditional medicine practitioners are found to be scattered in many Garo dominated villages of Goalpara district (Ph. 21-23). They earn a little through such practice also, but nobody has taken this line as occupation to strengthen his/her economic condition. Apart from taking various earning sources, their main avenues of regular employment are the police battalions and army.

Like other tribal societies of N.E. India, the Garo society has also been subject to social change and transformation due to implementation of different five year plans, impacts of the application of science and technology in the field of agriculture and several other activities in rural tribal areas which have also made the Garo society adaptable to changes.

There is a harmonious relationship between traditional leader and political leader in Garo society and conflict is insignificant between the two. Though nowadays modernism has transformed the Garo society to a great extent still it has not affected the core culture of the Garos.

4.3 The Hajongs:

The Hajongs are one of the numerically small Mongoloid communities of Assam. Major portion of the population of this tribe live in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya and a small number of them live in Assam. In the two autonomous hill districts of Assam viz. Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills they are recognized as scheduled tribe. Besides these two hill districts, a good number of Hajong villages found scattered over the plains of Assam in the Brahmaputra valley and mainly concentrated in Lakhipur area and Southern region bordering Meghalaya in the South Salmara subdivision of Goalpara district. At present a limited number of Hajong
families are found as inhabitants of Arunachal Pradesh also. Prior to independence of India there were several Hajong settlements in Mymensing and Sylhet district of present Bangladesh. But the partition of the country had resulted in migration of these people to then undivided Assam.

There has not been found any agreed opinion in regard to the place where the Hajongs originally inhabited. According to their own traditional belief they originally inhabited ‘Has pargana’ or in Hajo area of present Nalbari district. Because of some historical reasons they were compelled to leave Hajo area and they fled to Garo hills from where they spread to some places of Bengal like Mymensing, Sylhet etc. Whatever might be their original place of habitation, it could conclusively be said that the Hajongs like the other tribes of North-East, had been living in this part of the country including some areas of present Bangladesh, which was once an integral part of India, although due to various socio-political, historical and economic reasons they had migrated within a specific area either willingly or out of compulsion.

Regarding the name of the community ‘Hajong’, several opinions has been put forwarded by different scholars. One of the traditional ancedote assumes that the Hajongs were the descendents of the king Kumar Bhaskar Barman and the term Hajong is derived from the term ‘Haj’ which refers to the inhabitants of the ancient township of Hajo.

Mr. Ratan Kumar Rai Hajong is of the opinion that the term Hajong is derived from ‘Harajan’ which means a section of people who had accepted a new occupation by abandoning the traditional one. According to him ‘Ha’ means to express sorrow and ‘Jan’ means people. The Hajongs were once a part of a larger community (the name of that larger community has not been indicated). In course of time they broke away from the greater community and formed a separate entity by accepting a new occupation.
On the other hand, a few scholars are of the opinion that the word Hajong is derived from the Kachari word ‘Haju’ which literally means the people who live in high hills.

However, majority of the scholars are of the opinion that the word ‘Hajong’ is derived from the Garo word ‘Ha-jong’. In Garo ‘Ha’ means land and ‘Jong’ means ants or worms. Thus Hajong literally means land-ants or worms. Here ‘ants’ or ‘worms’ refer to people who are expert in ploughing, i.e. the Hajongs, mainly depend on agriculture with plough cultivation.

4.3.1 **Racial affinity**:

A lot of confusions are there regarding the racial affinity of the Hajongs. Colonel Dalton regards them as one of the branches of the Kacharis. He mentioned that “The Rabba and Hajongs of the Gawalparah District are branches of the Kachari race and connected with the Garos”. Further he also mentioned that - “The Hajongs appear to be identical with Hazai Kacharis of North Cachar ............”. Of course, Dalton did not mention in which way the Hajongs and the Hozais of the North Cachar Hills are identical.

In the census report of 1891 while the Hajongs have been considered as a separate tribal ethnic group, their racial affinity to the Garos and the Kacharis has also been referred to. Apart from the fact that in other socio-cultural and religious aspects also there are differences rather than alikeness between the Garos and the Hajongs, there could have close racial affinity between these two tribes, since they have been living in close proximity from time immemorial.

Mr. L.A. Waddel regards the Hajongs as the primitive Kachari of the hilly tracts. The Hajongs like to introduce themselves as Kshatriyas. Neither the Garos nor the Kacharis consider themselves as such.

Whatever might be their racial affinity, it is certain that like the other tribes of North East India, the Hajongs are also Mongoloids. With the successive hordes of
different ethnic groups, the Hajongs perhaps entered into this part of the country in the long past and moved towards south-east and finally settled in the Garo hills and adjoining areas which are now a part of present Bangladesh.

4.3.2 Population:

The Hajongs are a scheduled tribe in the two autonomous hill districts of Assam only where their population is 386 out of which there are 227 males and 159 females as per 1971 census. Numerically the population of Hajong in Assam is very very small. The population figure mentioned above does not include the Hajongs inhabiting the plain districts of Assam. The Hajongs constitute 0.0026 percent of the total population of Assam, 0.0240 percent of the total tribal population of Assam and 0.146 percent of the total Hill tribal population of Assam as per 1971 census. Their sex ratio is 700 females per 1000 males. From the point of view of literacy, the Hajongs are lagging far behind. The percentage of their literacy was 10.88 only against the percentage of the state literacy of 28.72 as per 1971 census. The level of literacy between the males and females among the Hajongs is 14.98 and 5.03 respectively as against 37.19 percent for males and 19.27 percent for females for the state of Assam. So, the level of female literacy is found to be almost one third of that of the males.

In Assam the Hajongs are scattered in different plain districts like Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Kamrup, Barpeta, Nalbari, Darrang, Nowgaon, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia and Dibrugarh. Out of these 14 districts Goalpara district shares the highest part.

In the census report of 1991 the exact population of Hajong in Assam has not been recorded. So, on the basis of the data personally collected in 1996 by Mr. Kanuram Hajong, Dhamar, Goalpara, a teacher, writer and General Secretary of “Assam Hajong Tribes Association”, the total population of Hajong tribe living in 14 plain districts of Assam and their total population in Goalpara district may be mentioned in the following table –
Table 4.3
Population of Hajongs in Goalpara district & Assam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/District</th>
<th>Hajong Population</th>
<th>Total Hajong Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>29,113</td>
<td>30,496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>11081</td>
<td>11,402</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total population of the individual tribes has not been shown in the census report of 2001. So, recent data on the population of Hajong in Assam as well as in Goalpara district has not been recorded here.

The Hajongs have seven clans (Bordoloi, 1991). But nobody actually knows the exact number of clans except three they have at present namely Chondi, Kendagaiya and Baliati. The fact is that whatever clans the Hajongs have at present all of these are patrilineal.

The Hajongs have a patrilineal family structure and the time of descent is traced through the father only. The father is the head of the family and after his death son(s) inherit his property. A daughter might inherit her father’s property after his death if he is sonless, but it has been observed among the educated sections only and not among the uneducated class which like to follow old traditional customary law. This is perhaps due to their living in close proximity with the Bengali people for centuries together.

4.3.3 Social life:

4.3.3. (i) Village structure:

Normally Hajong villages are found on high grounds preferably near their wet paddy lands. They do not follow any definite pattern or plan in constructing their houses. They construct their dwelling houses in clusters in the courtyard of the village headman called ‘Adhikari’ where 25-30 houses are haddled together in a disorderly manner facing east, west, south or north. The only prominent house in village is the house of the Adhikari. The fact behind the construction of such type of dwelling
houses is that it is a part of the defence strategy from outside attack which was very much common in the past due to inter-community fields. Thus, living in cluster has been in vogue since time immemorial and this type of villages are very much common in south Salmara and Lakhipur subdivision of Goalpara district.

4.3.3. (ii) House pattern:

The house of a common traditional Hajong villager has an earthen plinth and two thatched roofs on both sides (Ph-3). The walls are made of split bamboos and plastered with mud mixed with cowdung. Each family has normally a small house with three to four single room.

The main house building materials used by the Hajongs are bamboos and straw or ‘kher’ (*Heteropogon contortus* Beauv). Stem of different species of bamboos like *Bambusa balcooa* Roxb., *Bambusa vulgaris* Schrad., *Bambusa pallida* Munro etc. are thatched and used in making walls of houses. The walls of the houses are made sufficiently thick using several layers of mud mixing with cowdung which is a peculiar house pattern of the Hajongs.

Attached to the main house there is a protruding veranda either in the front side or in the back side where the family loom is installed. There is a small kitchen attached to the main room. A common courtyard is there amongst a few families which is used for threshing grains after harvesting paddy. Each family has a pile driving granary with floor made of split bamboos (usually *Bambusa vulgaris* Schrad.).

4.3.4 Food habit:

4.3.4. (i) The staple food and vegetables:

Rice is the staple food of the Hajongs like other communities of Assam. It is generally taken with vegetables and fish as a favourite item and occasionally with pulses twice a day. The wild edible plants or plant part(s) available in nature, which are taken as cooked vegetables or raw fruits by the Hajongs are almost similar which those used by the Bodos and Garos, of the district. Generally they do not eat pork and
fouls. However they eat meat of pigeon and goat. Milk and milk products are also taken by them. Eating of raw betal nuts \((Areca\ catechu\ L.)\) with betal leaves \((Piper betle\ L.)\) is a common practice among the Hajongs. Smoking is confined to the male persons only.

4.3.4.(ii) Rice-beer:

Rice-beer brewed at home is a favourite drink but it is taken occasionally. The Hajongs of Goalpara district traditionally use the same plant materials like the Bodos of the district to prepare rice-beer cakes. In the performance of rituals as well as socio-religious festivals of Hajongs rice-beer is not used.

4.3.5 Dress:

The Hajongs have their traditional dresses which are of course not found in varieties. The main dress put on by a Hajong women is called as 'PATIN' which is used by them as Mekhela and it covers their bodies from the chest to the feet (Ph-7). Patin is woven by women at their own traditional loom called BANA where the use of two hands is only necessary. A traditional Hajong woman do not use blouse instead of which a home woven cotton scarf with flowery designs called PASRA or AGRUN is used to cover the upper part of the body. Occassionally they use a piece of cloth around the waist which is called KAMARBANDHA .The cotton used for making cloth in the loom is normally obtained from \(Gossypium\ herbaceum\ L.\)

The men wear a home woven piece of cloth bigger than Gamosa which is called as NINGTI. During winter they use a scarf to cover their body and also use one kind of muffler around their neck called KAMPESH.

It is notable that all the cloths necessary for the marriage of a girl are required to be woven at the family loom, preferably by the girl herself.

Whatever ornaments the Hajongs now have, are totally used by women and not a single one by men. Most of their ornaments are made of silver and rarely gold.
Among different kinds of ornaments the worth mentioning are Kata baju, Bagh, Harsara, Gunjar, Kairu, Nalas and Kanful.

4.3.6 Festivals:

The Hajongs also observe three Bihus like other communities of Assamese society. They call Rangali Bihu as ‘SAITA SANGRANT’. On the first day of this festival the cows are bathed and worshipped in the evening. Shewing of Neem leaves (*Azadirachta indica* A. Juss.) and fixing of Neem leaves on the roof are two important events of the second day. It is believed that Neem leaves have very highly effective medicinal value and their shewing and fixing on the roof would keep diseases away from the family concerned for the entire year. The younger ones pay their respects to the elder members of the family on this day.

‘LEWA-TANA BIHU’ performed by the Hajongs during this festival is another important event. Here “Lewa” means creeper and ‘tana’ means pulling. Although practically no creeper pulling takes place among the Hajongs, still it is called ‘Lewa-tana-Bihu’. In this Bihu two groups of marriageable girls and boys putting on their traditional dresses and ornaments dance and sing songs of love in their own language (Ph-11). The contents of those songs find no difference with Bihu songs. In fact in the ‘Lewa-tana-Bihu’ intimate relationship grows between the young boys and girls according to their liking. Exchange of heart and mind takes place which ends up in marriage between the lovers in due course.

The Hajongs also observe Kati Bihu and Magh Bihu in the way of other sections of the Assamese society, which they call KATIGASHA and PUSHNA respectively.

On the day of the immersion of goddess Durga, they wash plough, bullocks and all other agricultural implements and these are worshipped on that particular day.
4.3.7 Marriage:

Regarding marriage the Hajongs fully follow the clean exogamy, i.e. no marriage can take place between a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan since they are considered to be brother and sister. They like to follow strict rule regarding marriage in the sense that no one is allowed to marry outside his or her community and those who violate this customary law will be expelled from the Hajong society. But owing to unavoidable circumstances sometimes the erring couple has to be inducted into the Hajong society paying fine in cash and providing a feast to the people of the concerned village. Since Hajong people are very much poor and such a process is extremely expensive for them, the youths of this community generally refrain from inter community marriages.

System of Ghar-Jangoi (keeping the son-in-law at the residence of his in-laws), polygamy (Marrying more than one wife), divorce and remarriage, child marriage etc. are completely absent or very rare in the Hajong society.

There are three types of marriages that are found to be prevalent in the Hajong society. They are (1) Negotiated marriage called Subha-Vivah, which is settled between both the societies of the boy and the girl. (2) Marriage between a widower and a widow or a divorcee called Hango. (3) Marriage by elopement called DAIPARA, which is totally disfavoured by the village elders and the society.

4.3.8 Religion and religious beliefs:

The religion professed by the Hajongs can be said to be Hinduism combined with their traditional religious practices. Most of them are Saktas although a few are found to be Vaishnavas also. They worship various gods and goddesses some of which are the Hindu ones and others belonging to their own traditional belief. They have a great regard for the Holy basil (Ocimum sanctum L.) plant which is planted in the eastern side of each and every Hajong house campus.
They believe in various evil spirits like Jarang Deo, Machang Deo, Zakhini, Daini, Maila, Bhut etc. They also worship snakes and snake goddess Manasa every year sacrificing white ducks, goats, tortoise etc. The Hajongs perform various Pujas in a year like ‘Bash Puja’ (Bamboo Puja), ‘Padma Puja’ (Snake Puja), ‘Kartik Puja’ (worship God Kartik for son and crop by woman only), ‘Brat Puja’ ‘Garam-puja’ (both Brat and Garam Puja are related to paddy ) etc. where the village headman called ‘Adhikari’ has to play the most important role.

4.3.9 Language:

The Hajongs have their own language which appears to be a mixture of Assamese and Bengali and called as Jharua dialect of Assamese (Majumdar, 1984). However Mr. Matilal Barman, regards the language spoken by the Hajongs of present as a branch of Kamrupi colloquial language (Barman, 1987). The Hajongs had their own language in the distant past but nobody knows how the language disappeared (Rai Hajong, 1982).

4.3.10 Economic life:

More or less the Hajongs are found to be settled as cultivators either in their own lands or lands given by non- Hajongs on Adhiaar system. Besides paddy (the principal crop), other crops like mustard (Brassica alba HK. f. and B. nigra Koch.), Jute (Corchorus capsularis L.) etc. are also cultivated by them. Whatever they produce is mainly meant for domestic consumption for the sustenance of the families and hardly keeping in view of the market economy or commercial purpose. 90% of the Hajongs depend solely on agriculture for their livelihood and 10 percent is dependent on service, small business, carpentry, labour work etc.

Both sexes of Hajongs work in the agricultural field like other tribes. They rear cattle, goats, ducks, and pigeons. Rearing of pigs and fowls is prohibited as per their customary rules.
There is not found even a single Hajong house without loom and all married as well as unmarried Hajong women are expert in spinning and weaving. All the cloths required for a Hajong family are produced at the family looms.

Hajongs are also expert in making bamboo and cane articles which are produced by the family members to meet the household requirement and the surplus articles are sold in the weekly markets. For making these articles different species of bamboos and canes are used among which Bambusa vulgaris Schrad., Bambusa tulda Roxb. Bambusa pallida Munro, Calamus erectus Roxb., Calamus floribundus Griff. and Calamus tenuis Roxb. are common.

A considerable number of Hajong ‘Ojhas’ and ‘Kavirajas’ has been found in different Hajong dominated villages of Goalpara district who have been successfully practising with herbal medicines since time immemorial (Ph. 24-27). But they have been practising either in a very cheap rate or without taking any fees from patient and nobody has taken this line as his/her profession.

Although the Hajongs are numerically one of the small tribes of Assam, but they have their own culture and tradition which is manifested in their dresses, songs festivals etc. They are less known because of lack of comprehensive literature and reports based on study on them.

Adaptability of the Hajongs to gradual change has been observed in present day situations. For example as per customary rules of Hajongs rearing of pigs and fowls was prohibited, which is now not considered as on offence. Change has also been found in respect of construction of the houses of progressive Hajongs outside the arena of the courtyard of the Adhikari. Their young and educated generation has realized that in the changing context of the human society the Hajong society alone cannot remain in original state or form.
The Hajongs are peace loving and mild natured people who are found to be conscious about the welfare and development of their community like other ethnic groups of Assam.

4.4 The Rabhas:

The Rabhas are one of the prominent nine Scheduled Tribes in the plains districts of Assam. They are widely scattered but mostly concentrated in the undivided districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang. There are evidences to suggest that Rabhas and their sub-groups are spread over states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and West Bengal besides Nepal and Bangladesh. They are mainly concentrated in Assam, Meghalaya and Kochbihar and also in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. Within Assam, Rabhas are concentrated mainly in Kamrup, Darrang, Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Goalpara districts besides border areas of Garo hills in Meghalaya.

4.4.1 Racial affinity:

Divergent views have been expressed by different scholars regarding the ethnic individuality of the tribe, its origin and the relationship with other tribal communities (Das, 1960). Major playair believed in the Tibetan origin of the Rabhas wherefrom migration had taken place to Garo hills area now in Meghalaya and then distributed in the plain areas of Assam. He also tried to trace some similarities between the Garos and the Rabhas in their language and culture. Hodson was of the opinion that the Rabhas constituted a major segment of the Bodo linguistic group further testify their affinities with other constituents of the Bodo groups like Garo, Kachari, Mech, Hajong, Koch etc. who belonged to the Mongolid stock. Dr. Grierson held the view that the Rabha was a Hindu name of the Kacharis and many of the Rabhas were actually Kacharis. But E.A. Gait identified them as a distinct tribe and
said that they were also known as Totlas and Datiyal Kacharis. Rev. E. Endle was also of the same opinion that sometimes the Rabhas of Darrang used to call themselves as Totlas. He also referred to the term ‘Datiyal Kachari’ signifying this tribe in Darrang district.

Dr. B.M. Das in one of his works had scientifically established the fact that the Rabhas were more closely allied to the Garos rather than any other tribe of the Bodo group. Dr. Das further supported the view put forwarded by E.A. Gait that the Rabhas were ethnically and culturally a distinct tribe. He commented “........it seems probable that Mongoloid people came in successive waves the north and north–eastern region. They have partly or wholly absorbed the autochthonous Australoid and later on formed various tribes like the Rabha, the Garo etc.

Rabhas have traditionally lived peacefully with their neighbours from different communities and in the process, they have set an excellent example of assimilation and co-existence while maintaining their own traditions and culture. The Rabhas have made significant contributions to different aspects of Assamese culture and literature.

4.4.2 Population:

The Rabhas are the fifth largest tribal group after Bodo-Kacharis, Missings, Karbies and Sonowal Kacharis as per the census report of 1971, according to which the total Rabha population in Assam was 1,38,630. Goalpara district shows the highest Rabha population in comparison to other Rabha inhabited districts of Assam. According to the census report of 1991 the total Rabha population in Goalpara district against the total population and total tribal population of Assam can be shown as follows:
Table 4.4
Population of Rabhas in Goalpara district & Assam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/District</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Total Tribal Population</th>
<th>Total Rabha Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td></td>
<td>22414322</td>
<td>2874441</td>
<td>236931</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male - 1461560</td>
<td>Male - 120139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female - 1412881</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
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<td>115099</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female - 56887</td>
<td>Female - 39878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>2001</td>
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<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>822035</td>
<td>131800</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male - 420251</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Female - 401784</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male - 66109</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female - 65691</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The census report of 2001 has not provided the total population of the individual tribes in Goalpara district. But through personal communication with the office of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council the total population of the Rabhas and the Bodos together in the district till 2005 is known as 1,27,273.

There are total seven sub-tribes of the Rabhas, such as- ‘Rangdaniya’, ‘Maitoriya’, ‘Pati’, ‘Koch’, ‘Billiya’, ‘Dahuriya’ and ‘Sangha’ (Endle, 1911). Of the seven sub-tribes, the Rongdaniya, Pati and the Maitoriya were described to be the dominant ones. But Gait had shown five sub-groups of Rabhas such as, ‘Rongdani’, ‘Pati’, ‘Maitory’, ‘Dahuri’ and ‘Kachari’. According to Dr. B.M. Das, Rongdani, Pati and Maitory use to enjoy superior status in comparison to the other sub-tribes and the Pati section is the most advanced section of this tribe with the adoption of Hindu customs for all intents and purpose and due to loss of their mother tongue had taken to speak a patois of the Assamese language. On the other hand, as Dr. Das said, the Maitori section resembled the Garos in their habit and custom.

In general appearance, the Rabhas show all the characteristics of the Mongolian stock- a round face, flat nose, prominent cheek bones, obliquely set eyes,
Fig. 4.1: Map of Goalpara district showing the distribution of Rabha, Bodo, Garo & Hajong population
sallow complexion, coarse hair, scanty beard and well-developed lower extremities. The physical characteristics as mentioned above may not be found in the same degree more particularly in regard to the pati section of the tribe, but the general features more or less hold good still now so far other sub-groups are concerned.

The Pati Rabhas are quite numerous in the southern bank in the belt stretching from Guwahati to Dudhnoi (Das, 1962) and almost all of them are Hindu. Numerically the Rongdanies are well represented in western Goalpara (South bank). Numerical strength of the Maitories is less than the Rongdanies in Assam. They are interspersed with the Rongdanies but they are mainly concentrated in Western Meghalayya followed by Pancharatna area of Goalpara. The Dahuri group is to be seen in north Goalpara. The population of the Totlas is found very less in the district of Goalpara (Fig. 4.1).

4.4.3 Social life:

3.4.3.(i) Village structure: The Rabhas prefer to live in compact blocks comprising of 50 to 100 families in each block. The campus of a Rabha household consist of four houses, one main house in the northern side where the head of the family resides, one guest house facing the main house, one outer house for the adult family members and a fourth one to use as cook shed. In addition to these, cow-shed, a granary and a poultry house is separately constructed in the campus where possible. This type of house campus is very much common in a typical Rabha village.

4.4.3 (ii) House pattern:

In some Rongdani villages only one living house stretching often from 13 to 15 metres in length is constructed which however is divided into three compartments known as ‘NOKSRAB’ (bed room of the head of the family), ‘TOGRAB’ (bed room for other family members and guests), and ‘ROSINOK’ (cook shed) in order from east to west.
The semi-fort like constructions with earthen barricades all around and the site plan for construction of houses adopted by Rabhas are identical with the Boro-Kachari households (Ph-4). It can be clearly observed in and around the villages of Chotamatiya in the district of Goalpara. The house building materials of a traditional Rabha house is obtained from *Bambusa balcooa* Roxb. (mainly for posts), *Bambusa vulgaris* Schrad. and *Bambusa pallida* Munro (for thatching walls of houses), *Bambusa nutans* Wall. (for fencing) and *Heteropogon contortus* Beauv. (for making roof).

Sometimes for making pillars of houses wood of different tree plant species are used by the Rabhas among which the worth mentioning are *Shorea robusta* Gaertn., *Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lamk., *Dalbergia sissoo* Roxb., *Biscofia javanica* Bl. etc.

**4.4.4 Food habit:**

**4.4.4. (i) Staple food and vegetables:**

Rice is the staple food of the tribe. The vegetables and raw fruits obtained by the Rabhas from different wild plant species available in nature in the district are almost similar with those used by the Bodos, Garos and Hajongs. Dried and powdered fish, pork and rice beer always attract the Rabhas.

**4.4.4.(ii) Rice-beer:**

The plant species traditionally used by the Rabhas of Goalpara district for preparation of rice-beer cake may be mentioned along with their mode of preparation as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scientific name of plant species</th>
<th>Part(s) used/Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>Ananas comosus</em> (L.) Merr.</td>
<td>Lf (tender) /125 gm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>Calotropis gigantea</em> (L.) R. Br.</td>
<td>Lf /1 only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>Capsicum frutescens</em> L.</td>
<td>Fr /7 nos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Clerodendrum viscosum</em> Vent.</td>
<td>Lf /2-3 nos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A considerable amount of old rice beer cake is mixed along with these plant materials for preparation of fresh rice beer cakes. Consumption of rice beer is gradually coming down because of many factors like enforcement of the excise law, economic pressure etc. Now rice-beer is brewed in a restricted manner and that too is connected with festivals, ceremonies etc. Further, pork and rice beer is strictly prohibited for those members of Pati Rabhas who have included themselves into the Mahapurusiya group of Vaisnava religion.

4.4.5 Dress:

The Rabha women are expert both in spinning and weaving and prepare dresses for own and all members of the family at their loom. The women’s dresses consist mainly of ‘Rifan’, ‘Kambung’ and ‘Khodabang’ which is compulsory for a bride at the time of her marriage. The male dresses consist of ‘Pajal’, ‘Khanse’, ‘Fali’, ‘Buksil’, ‘Passra’ etc (Ph-8). The ‘Passra’ of male dresses is made out of endi yarn (obtained from Silkworms reared on leaves of *Ricinus communis* L.), while the rest are made out of fine cotton (obtained mainly from *Gossypium herbaceum* L.).

The Rabha women have intensive knowledge in dying yarn purely by indigenous process using some common plant species. To obtain particular colour of yarn the Rabha women use these plant parts in the following way -
Scientific name of plant species | Parts used | Colour obtained
---|---|---
1. (i) Indigofera dosua Buch.-Ham. ex Don (ii) Lawsonia inermis L. (iii) Terminalia chebula Retz. | Bk & Lf Lf Fr | Purple
2. (i) Lawsonia inermis L. (ii) Morinda angustifolia Roxb. | Lf | Orange
3. (i) Indigofera dosua Buch.-Ham. ex Don (ii) Morinda angustifolia Roxb. | Bk & Lf Fr | Green
5. (i) Lannea coromandelica (Houtt.) Merr. (ii) Musa bulbisiana Colla (iii) Oroxylum indicum (L.) Vent. | Bk (resin) Lf sheath (ash) Bk & Fr | Black
6. (i) Artocarpus heterophyllus Lamk. (ii) Morinda angustifolia Roxb. | Wd | Yellow
7. Mallotus philippensis Muell. | Fr | Red

Particular plant parts are boiled along with white yarn for few hours and then kept in saline water for 24 hours to get the desired colour. Weaving is not only a secondary source of a Rabha woman but a part and parcel of her material culture. It is feared that the loss of this culture will tantamount to the loss of her ethnic identity.

4.4.6 Festivals:

The Rabha community as a whole does not have any national festival of their own but different ritualistic festivals are celebrated by different groups which relate more or less to their own religious concept and belief. Like other villages of the plain regions of Assam Rangali Bihu and Bhogali Bihu is celebrated by the Pati group of Rabahs. The Rangdani and Maitori groups celebrate ‘Baikho’ or ‘Khoksi’ Puja festival with the intention of propitiating ‘Baikho’ the goddess of wealth and prosperity. It is celebrated once in a year preferably in the month of Baisakh just before starting ploughing. This deity is propitiated by the Pati Rabhas along with their ‘Langapuja’. Nowadays in most of the Rongdani villages this festival has been substituted by ‘Hachong Puja’ which is organized at the specified place called ‘Hachang Than’.
‘Langapuja’ of Pati Rabhas is an another important festival which is celebrated in Baisakh or Jeth either in a forest area or on the bank of a nearby river. The word ‘Langa’ literally means ‘Mahadeva’. So, Mahadeva is the primary deity of Langa Puja. Besides Mahadeva some other deities such as ‘Dhan-Kuber’, ‘Thakurani’, ‘Dudh Kumar-Phul Kumar’ and Goddess ‘Baikho’ or ‘Khoksi’ also find place in the altar of worship. These deities are represented by different pieces of fine stones for each of them. Excepting the Dudhkumar-Phulkumar all other deities mentioned above are to be propitiated by sacrifices as per prescription.

Some Pati Rabhas hold ‘Kechai-Khaiti’ Puja simultaneously with the ‘Langapuja’. Alternatively this puja is known as ‘Dingapuja’, because a prototype of a ‘Dinga’ (boat) is made out of sheathing leaf petiole of banana (Musa sp.) plant and symbols of some deities such as Biswakarma, Chandidevi and Mahadeva along with all items of offerings are placed in this ‘Dinga’ and ultimately carried to a river bank for actual performance of the puja. It is notable that no sacrifice is made in this occasion and all items are offered in raw form. However, a duck or a goat is put inside the Dinga and is allowed to float as a symbol of sacrifice. Then all the members are to move homewards without looking back to it because it may entail disaster to the families. It is believed that Kechai-khaiti is the only deity to drive away all the evils from each and every house of the villages.

The Pati Rabhas of South-East Goalpara perform a socio-culturally important community festival called ‘Marepuja’ or ‘Maraipuja’ to propitiate Goddess ‘Monosa’ or ‘Bishahari’ (the queen of serpents). Normally the 5th lunar day in the dark-half of the month of ‘Sraban’ which is known as ‘Nag-panchami’ is taken as the most auspicious day for her propitiation. The propitiation is done through the performance of ‘Deodhani’ and Ozapali’ dances accompanied by traditional folk songs explaining the story of Sati-Beula. Sometimes this puja continues for 3 days and sometimes for one day only. When it continues for 3 days then it is known as ‘Gota-Marai’ and when
it is completed within one day it is known as ‘Ful-Marai’, but in both type a buffalo or a he-goat is sacrificed.

A dance programme known as ‘Hanaghora’ is instituted with the Rangali Bihu festival mainly by the Pati Rabahs. The ‘Hanaghora’ is believed to be the God of fortune for the community.

At the foot hills of the Dodan near Baida village of Goalpara subdivision, the Rabha tribe has been organizing a ‘Mela’ in the month of Chaitra known as ‘Dodan Mela’ since 1971. The main two objectives of this mela is firstly to pay obeisance to Sri Sri Risi (the creator and protector of all lives of the Universe) and secondly to pay homage to Dodan (the first hero of the Rabhas) and his skilled General ‘Marukhetri’. The homage is paid through the performance of ‘Farkanti’ dance by the Rongdani Rabhas (Ph-12). Both girls and boys take part in this dance. Almost all Rabha villages of the district get involved in this great mela.

4.4.7 Marriage:

Among Rabhas no marriage can take place between the same ‘Barai’ or between two Barais included in a ‘Hur’ i.e. Mitragotra. This rule is strictly followed by specially Rangdanies and the Maitories.

A younger brother can marry the widow of his elder brother but in no circumstances the reverse may happen. Similarly one can marry the younger sister of one’s wife in certain situations but not the elder sister if unmarried still. Marrying the daughter of one’s maternal uncle is permissible, but in present days this idea is noticed to be discouraged.

Among the Pati Rabhas proposal of bride’s party when confirmed to have been accepted then a large groom party with drummers, band parties and also pounded rice, bananas (Musa sp.), betel nuts (Areca catechu L.) and betel leaves (Piper betle L.) etc. arrive at the bride’s house and there they get formally married in the presence of
village elders, village Priest etc. The journey of the groom and her party to the bride’s house takes place either on foot or by means of a conveyance depending on the distance to be covered. After completing some customaries the rituals come to an end when all the members present in the occasion are entertained in a big feast (mostly non vegetarian) and it continues for the second day also till the return back of the bride party to their destination. This system of traditional marriage is common among the Pati Rabhas. Whatever be the form of marriage, it is customary to propitiate ‘Risi-sore’- the deity of family welfare by sacrificing a cock and a hen before the formal union of the groom and the bride.

In certain situations if separation is desired by the couple after marriage and it is recognized by the village elders then they may be ordered such an action through a system known as ‘Panchira’ i.e. tearing a betal leaf (*Piper betle* L.) at the signalling of the village council.

4.4.8 Religion:

Under the influence of Hinduism a considerable number of the Pati Rabhas have already assimilated with the neighbouring Hindu culture and have begun to take part in all religious festivals like the Durga puja, Kali Puja, Ganesh Puja, Siva Puja etc. This section of the tribe may be described as the followers of Saktism and Saivism over and above their addherence to the traditional faith in animism. It has been noticed that a major part of the tribe has become follower of the Vaishnavite School of the Mahapurushia section giving up all of their traditional manners and customs and in place of innumerable rituals they now resort to ‘Ek-saran nam dharma’ of the Vaishnavite culture as the sole guiding principle of their socio-religious life.

Another section of the tribe has adopted Christianity. This process of conversion to Christianity is distinctly visible in Dudhnoi area of Goalpara district. This section is found to be hardly reverted back to their original faith.
4.4.9 Language and literature:

Now the Rabha language is confined to the Rangdani and the Maitori groups. The Koch group also speak the same language spoken by the Rangdanies and the Maitories, but phonetics and word structure slightly differ. Minor groups like Dahuries and Songhas speak their own dialects and variations are observed between them. The Paties, Hanas and Totlas have already lost their mother tongues and now speak a Patois of the Assamese language.

The Co-ordinated efforts of some organizations like ‘Rabha Bhasa Parisad’ of Dudhnoi, ‘Rabha Sahitya Gosthi’ of Bondapara etc. are going on to give the Rabha language an identity of its own. First appearance of Rabha literary work was made only during post independence period, because of extremely low percentage of literacy and lesser number of educated persons. The local cultural units of the district formed under ‘Sodou Rabha Kristi Sangha’ in areas like Chotomatiya, Manikganj, Nadiapara, Jerdoba, Duramari, Bongaon, Chatabari, Baida, Salpara, Naguapara, Dokapara, Borshijhora and Debitola covering the district of Goalpara and border of Garo Hills (was a part of then Assam) were looking for dramatic literature which ultimately led to the production of some such literary books with materials rooted in the indigenous soil itself.

4.4.10 Economic life:

Like the rest of the other plains tribes, the Rabhas also derive their livelihood mainly from agriculture. They undertake cultivation of both Ahu and Sali alongwith some amount of pulses [like Cajanus cajan (L.) Millsp., Vigna mungo (L.) Hepper., Lablab purpureus (L.) Sw., Macrotyloma uniflorum (Lamk.) Verd., Pisum sativum L. etc.], mustard (seeds of Brassica alba HK.f.& T. and B. nigra Koch.) and jute (Corchorus capsularis L.) Those who reside on the bordering areas with Meghalaya resort to shifting cultivation to a certain extent. Though Rabhas are basically agriculturists and practise wet paddy cultivation, yet, the progressive elements in their operational techniques are awfully deficient. Only a small segment of the cultivators have taken to improved methods of cultivation leaving a large majority with their traditional system. This lack of general response to improved cultural practices is
partly attributable to marginal land holdings and partly to inherent poverty. The philosophy of easy contentment against the requirement of day to day life appears to be another impediment to the process of their economic growth.

Many traditional Rabha ‘Kavirajas’ and ‘Ojhas’ are found to be scattered in several Rabha dominated villages of Goalpara district (Ph. 28-31). Many of them are famous and reported to be successful practitioners by the village people. But none of them have taken this line as main profession. So, practice of traditional herbal medicine is not found to have remarkable contribution to the economic growth of the Rabha community.

The socio-economic life and traditional characteristics of Rabha villages have to a great extent been wiped out due to expansion of education, improvement of communication and social mobility of the people. Psychological preparedness towards achieving higher education both in the academic and technical fields is now distinctly noticeable in the Rabha villages. But the activities of the highly educated section of this community connected to the preservation of their cultural heritage are not so much encouraging. Now, the young generation of this community has become much interested to be associated with trade and commerce and the people falling under Tribal sub-plan areas have got enough opportunities to develop themselves in this line.

Assimilation to Hindu culture more particularly by the Pati section of the tribe is a distinct phenomenon for which in the recent past a changing trend has been noticed in their socio-religious, socio-cultural and socio-economic life. Conversion to Christianity of certain sections of the tribe is another factor for discontinuation of old traditional socio-religious rituals as well as socio-cultural traits of ethnic importance. The Farkanti (the death ceremony), the ‘Langa puja’ in the Pati villages, ‘Baikho Puja’ in the Rangdani villages etc. along with traditional melodies of ‘Lakhor Branshi’ ‘Turuliya’ Branshi’, ‘Baramahee geet’, ‘Bahurangee geet’ and dances etc. have lost much of their former glories. Such dilution to the traditions of the hoary past indicates some aspects of changes occurring in recent years among the Rabhas.
A view of the house pattern of the tribes under study

Ph. 1. Bodos

Ph. 2. Garos

Ph. 3. Hajongs

Ph. 4. Rabhas
The tribes in their native dresses

Ph. 5. Bodos

Ph. 6. Garos

Ph. 7. Hajongs

Ph. 8. Rabhas
Dances performed in some festivals / ceremony

Ph. 9. Bodos in ‘Baisagu’

Ph. 10. Garos in ‘Wangala’

Ph. 11. Hajongs in ‘Lewa tana bihu’

Ph. 12. Rabhas in ‘Farkanti’
Selling wild/cultivated vegetables in some tribal weekly markets

Ph. 13. Rongsai weekly market

Ph. 14. Dhanubhanga weekly market

Ph. 15. Damra weekly market

Ph. 16. Dudhnoi weekly market
Some Bodo traditional healers of the present study

Ph. 17

Ph. 18

Ph. 19

Ph. 20
Some Garo traditional healers of the present study

Ph. 21

Ph. 22

Ph. 23
Some Hajong traditional healers of the present study
Some Rabha traditional healers of the present study

Ph. 28

Ph. 29

Ph. 30

Ph. 31