An attempt is made in this chapter to make a comparison of the Barmans of Cachar with other tribes, with special reference to the major plains tribal communities of Assam. In this connection, it is necessary to write a few lines about the major tribal communities of Assam.

In the preceding chapter, we have mentioned the name of the plains tribes as well as Hill tribes of Assam. Most of these tribal communities of Assam belong to the Mongolian group. The Mongolian belonged, in general, to the Tibeto-Burman family of Indo-Chinese group. The Kacharis, the Ravas, the Meches, the Miris, the Lalungs, the Garos, the Nagas, the Kukis etc. are members of the early Mongolian group that migrated to this country.¹ Now these communities have concentrated in different areas of Assam and have attained different socio-economic orders. Let us now see where the major tribal communities of Assam are living today:

1. Boro-Boro Kachari; They are the largest plains tribal community of Assam. As per 1971 census, total population of this tribe was 610459 which comprises 4.17 percent of state's total population. At present, they are concentrated in Kamrup, Goalpara, Sonitpur, Barpeta, Kokrajhar and Darrang district.

¹ Barua, Hem; 1962; The Red River and the Blue Hill, Gauhati, page - 48.
2. **Miri (Mishing)**; They are the second largest plains tribal community of Assam. According to 1971 Census, total population of them was 259551 which was 1.77 percent of the state's total population. They are found mostly in three districts of Assam, namely, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang.

3. **Kachari, Sonowal**; They are the third largest plains tribal community of Assam. As per 1971 Census, the total population of this tribe was 198619 i.e., 1.36 percent of the state's total population. They are concentrated in the Dibrugarh district including Dhemaji, Sibsagar and also Jorhat. A few Sonwal Kachari villages are also found in North Lakhimpur and Sadiya region.

4. **Rabha**; From the standpoint of numerical strength, Rabhas occupy the position next to Sonowal Kacharis. As per 1971 Census, the total population of the Rabhas was 138630. They are found in Kamrup, Goalpara, Sonitpur and Darrang districts, but their main concentration is on the South of the Brahmaputra in the District of Goalpara.

5. **Lalung (Tiwa)**; At present they are found in Kapili, Mayang, Bhurbhanda, Kathiatali and Kampur Development areas of Goalpara district. As per 1971 Census, the total population of this plains tribe was 95609.

6. **Deori**; The Deoris were the representative priest of the Chutias. The concentrations of Deoris are found in parts of North Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts of Assam. According to 1971 Census, there were 23,080 Deoris in Assam.
7. **Barmans of Cachar** : The Barmans are concentrated on Cachar district. The population figure of the Barmans in 1971 has already been stated earlier.

Besides these communities, there are some *Mech* and *Hojai* people in Assam. But their number is very small. As per 1971 Census, there were 2570 Mech and 2298 Hojai people in Assam. The author liked to include one Hill Tribe of Assam viz. the Dimasas of North Cachar in his comparative study because this will help us to ascertain the degree of change in between the Barmans and the aforesaid tribes who were once considered as belonging to the same tribe and had the same cultural order. About two and a half centuries ago, they were concentrated in the N.C.Hills.

Owing to the historical reasons as explained in the preceding chapter, a group of them migrated to this part and settled here. In course of time, there has emerged some differences in between these two tribes in regard to some socio-cultural aspects. According to one opinion, the Barman *have become completely assimilated with the Assamese (Bengalee in the Cachar plains) and have, to some extent, forgotten their own language and customs, the Dimasas, living in the fastnesses of the hills, removed from close contact with the people of the plains, have still preserved themselves to some extent as a tribal community with distinctive tribal features although the majority of them have become Hinduised.*

---

examine very closely the above mentioned remark. As per 1971 Census, there were 39,344 Dimasa Kacharis in Assam.

After taking the cursory look at the major tribes of Assam, let us now compare them with the Barmans.

Though there are many dissimilarities in the socio-cultural aspects among the different tribes, yet it will not be difficult to find out some common features among them. These are as follows:

(i) Almost all the tribal communities of Assam live in the isolated regions or hills. Urbanisation is almost negligible among them.

(ii) Among all the tribes of Assam, the clan system is prevalent. Each tribe is divided into a number of clans. Sometimes, clans are again subdivided into a number of sub clans. The most remarkable feature of the clan system of the Dimasas and the Barmans is that they have different clans for different sexes. The male clan is known as 'Seng fong' and the female clan as 'Jaddi' or 'Zulu'. The function of the clan is similar in all the tribes. The tribals follow the rule of clan-exogamy and thus the clans regulate the marital ties of the community.

(iii) The rule of endogamy is strictly observed in all the tribal communities. Any violation of this rule is supposed to destroy the purity, discipline and identity of the tribe and hence is punishable. Generally they excommunicate the offender violating this rule from the society.
(iv) The rice-beer is the most important item of consumption in almost all socio-religious functions. It is the part and parcel of their socio-religious life. In marriage, shradha ceremony and other functions, they consume rice-beer liberally.

(v) It has already been mentioned in the preceding chapter that all the tribal world is the abode of various kinds of spirits. Most of the tribals still believe that various kinds of illness is the effect of some malevolent spirits. There are some sacred specialists among the tribes who can appease these spirits. Pigs, fowls, rice-beers etc. are offered in the name of these spirits. Besides, most of the Hindu-tribals worship various gods and goddesses, generally worshipped by their non-tribal Hindu brethren.

There is a sect known as Vaismava among the Hindus. Accordingly to their cult, worshipping of different gods and goddesses, sacrificing of animals in the name of God, and the consumption of wine are prohibited. The Mishings (Miris) are also the followers of Mahapurushia Vaismav Dharma. But they worship different gods and goddesses. "Worshipping of spirits, sacrificing of fowls and consumption of rice-beer are practised hand in hand with the Vaismava ideals." Thus, it is seen that though the different ideals of Hinduism have taken their roots deep into the heart of various tribes of Assam, they have not completely given up their primitive beliefs.

(vi) The payment of bride-price is the common feature of marriage system among most of the tribal communities. This bride-price is known by different names in different societies. The parents of bride-groom pay some money to the parent of bride at the time of marriage. However, it is interesting to note that the Lalungs and the Karbis do not demand any bride-price in their marriages.

(vii) The womenfolk of each and every tribal community know the art of weaving. In almost all the houses, one can notice loom. They generally weave their own dresses and earn money by selling the surplus as and when possible. It is a subsidiary source of income. Again, Sericulture is also a cottage industry maintained by many of them.

(viii) The primary occupation of more than eighty percent of the working population among the tribal community is agriculture. At present, some diversification of occupation is noticed among the educated section only. The educated section are now serving in different offices. Still the fact remains that, group-wise, they are primarily agriculturists. The method of agriculture among the plains tribes and Hills tribes is naturally different on the basis of physio-geographical conditions. In the plains areas, the tribals are the settled agriculturists whereas in the Hills, they practise shifting cultivation.

The method and the harmful consequences of shifting cultivation have been described in chapter-I. Again in both hills and plains the agricultural technology is outdated and primitive. The use of fertilisers, pesticides, insecticides, irrigation and modern instruments is almost negligible in most of the tribal villages. There are some villages where not a single villager has accepted the modern method of cultivation till to-day.

(ix) In almost all the tribal villages, there are village organisations. Some officials are elected by the elder members of the village. These organisations settle all disputes in the village and take enthusiastic initiative in the observation of community festivals. The Headman of the village is respected by all and his authority is absolute in the village. The traditional organisation of the Dimasa at the village level is called salis, the village Council. In fact this salis is an organisation for village administration with multifarious activities.

The village council is headed by Khunang, the traditional village headman who has both executive and judicial powers. His executive powers consist mainly of giving guidance in respect of celebration of community festivals in the village, while his judicial powers consist of trying of cases, maintenance of law and order in the village etc.

In the traditional village organisational set up, the Dimasas have 8 (eight) officials. While five officials at the top, namely, Khunang, Dilek, Daulathu, Habaisagao and Pharai constitute the Senior group because of their age and seniority and are elected by the village elders in a formal meeting, the remaining three officials, namely, Mantri, Hangsebukhu and Jalairao constitute the junior group. The Khunang is the most powerful person in the village. The traditional village council with the eight sets of officials headed by Khunang settles disputes, tries cases of theft, incests, elopements etc. and the judgements delivered are binding on concerned parties.6

Among the Barmans of Cachar, the Khunang, Dilek and Habaisagao are the three officials of the village council, elected by the village elders in the same manner as in the Dimasa Kachari village. The functions of these officials are also similar to those of the Dimasa Kachari. However, the Khunang of the Dimasa Kachari has to perform some additional responsibilities like collection of house tax and agricultural tax, maintenance of birth and death register, maintenance of records of arms in the village, etc. Moreover, Khunang is also made responsible for execution of all developmental programmes in the village after emergence of the Autonomous District Council in the N.C. Hills.7 The Khunang of N.C. Hills is politically recognised as the Headman of the village,

whereas, in Cachar district, this village organisation is not politically recognised. Politically the village is under the Gaon Panchayat.

Among the Mishing, "the elderly men of a village constitute the Kebang." Complaints, whether social or religious, are brought to the notice of the Kebang which delivers judgement and punishes the offenders. The Gam or, of late, the Gaonbura acts as the Chairman. Punishments depending upon the nature of the offence, range from imposition of fine in cash or kind to bodily thrashing.

If controversy arises between two villages the matter is brought to the notice of the bigger Kebang or Bane Kebang where members of several villages assemble and take part in the discussion." In the Deori village, the Gaonbura is the head in all the socio-political activities and settles disputes in the village. But, for the smooth functioning of the religious matters, every village has nine officers. Similarly, in the Sonowal Kachari village, the Gaonbura assisted by the other officials is entrusted with the village administration.

The traditional village Council of the Lalungs is called 'Khel'. "The Gaonburah or the village headman presides over the sitting of the 'Khel'.

8. Kebang is lime a village Panchayat.
10. ibid, page 21.
11. ibid, page 29.
In selecting the headman due importance is given to the integrity and capabilities of the person. The 'Khel' also plays some role in the religious spheres. It is the 'Khel' which selects the 'Giyati' (priest) to preside over the religious performances. the 'Zolo' (An expert in folklore and religious matter), and the 'Barik' (Liaison official between the Gaonburah and the villagers) are elected by the 'Khel'. It is to be noted that although Gaonburah's decision in respect of all matters concerning the village is final, nevertheless, in the religious matters the decision of the 'Giyati' is final and the Gaonburah never interferes.\(^{12}\)

(X) Absence of bonded labour among the tribes of Assam is an important characteristic. In some states of India, e.g., in Orrissa, this system is prevalent.\(^{13}\) Indebtedness is the main cause of this system. Under this system, the tribal himself or one member of his family pledges to work for the creditor against a loan. The release of the person depends on the repayment of the loan. So long as the loan is not repaid, the person is compelled to work for his creditor.

Now the dissimilarities in the different aspects of the tribes are mentioned below:
(1) Among Dimasas, Mishings and Lalungs youth dormitories are found to be prevalent. The youth dormitories of the Dimasas is known as Nodrang. "The nodrang is meant for only the bachelors and it is also used as the club house of the village. There is no such dormitory for the spinsters and the women are not allowed to enter a nodrang.

After taking their evening meal in their respective houses boys assemble in the dormitory. Their sleeping mat, pillow and other personal belongings are kept there. In a dormitory the youth enjoy their evenings in their own way. Some may have special fancy for dance and music. So, they play their flute and drum and the village maidens sometimes join the party in the open courtyard of the nodrang for dancing". 14

According to Dipali D. Danda, "The nodrang works as a highly systematised organisation to celebrate the annual harvest festivals, Busu''. 15 Moreover, they perform some social service like tilling the land of an invalid, roofing the house of a widow, construction of roads and clearing of jungles. 16 At the age of 12 to 13 the boys become eligible for membership of nodrang. Among the Mishings (Miris), the Morungs serve as a bachelors' dormitory. But its function is somewhat different. "The Mishing Morung serves the purpose for the annual Porag and other major festivals. Public gathering such as

15. ibid. page 114.
16. ibid. page 114
Kebang are also held here. It is also the usual venue where the village Gams (chief) give judgement in different cases. Since the function of the Morung has changed to some degree, the building is not always maintained. "The Lalungs in a few villages still maintain their traditional youth organisation called 'Samadi'. It is a platform type house without walls and erected in a central place of the village. Only male persons are allowed to enter a 'Samadi'. It is a training institute where the unmarried youths learn music and art. They practise various kinds of handicrafts and, while sleeping at night, maintain the vigil over possible attack by evildoers. The young members of a 'samadi' are to be formally invited to socio-religious occasions like marriage, death rites etc. and they remain in charge of the reception. Success of a function largely depends upon the role played by the members of a Samadi". But among the Barmans of Cachar, such type of youth dormitories is non-existent.

(ii) Except Mishings (Miris), all the Hinduised plains tribes of Assam cremate dead bodies. The Mishing bury dead bodies irrespective of age, sex and nature of death. Again, there are slight variations regarding the funeral rites of the different tribal groups. As for Example,

after the death, the Mishings observe a four tier purificatory ceremony namely Tilani on the third day, sushi or payade on the sixth day, Mahekia on the thirteenth day and Daha after one year or so. The maximum to which the final ceremony Daha can be postponed is for a period of three to four years. Two or three families can jointly observe this function. Among the Dimasa Kachari of Assam, there is no fixed period of mourning nor any set restrictions to the mourners. Usually, the family members of the deceased do not take non-vegetarian or sour food for seven days after the occurrence of death. The clan members observe pollution for one day only.

Maimutharba, i.e., post-funeral ceremony is held at a suitable time between the seventh day and a year after the death. It depends on the economic condition of the family. But, among the Barmans of Cachar, the post-funeral ceremony is held at the thirteenth day after the death. Every day before the Shradha ceremony, meat, egg and a kind of leaf are given in the name of the departed soul. But the members of the family and clan take vegetarian diet. The Brahmin priest is engaged in the Shradha ceremony.

The main purification ceremony among the Lalungs is observed on the Seventh day of the death. The villagers are entertained in a big feast where pork and rice-beer form the most essential items. The Sonowal Kacharis observe a three-tier purifactory ceremony namely Tiloni on the third day, Dahdiniya daha on the tenth day and Kuridinia Kaj on the thirteenth day. Namkirtan (devotional songs) and a general feast are the main highlights of these functions.

(iii) The Boro-Kacharis are well known in the art of digging indigenous canal system to irrigate their fields. But among the other plains tribes, this skill is rarely found.

(iv) The food habit of all the plains tribes of Assam and other north-eastern regions is similar. Rice is the staple food. They also take leafy vegetables, pulses, fish, dried fish and meat. The fowl and pork are also taken. They also take rice-beer off and on. The Hinduised plains tribes of Assam except Dimasas do not take buffalo meat. According to Dimasa custom, when a man dies, an animal, generally buffalo is sacrificed and its meat is taken by all.

(v) There are some institutions among some of the tribal communities of Assam which run on the basis of cooperation. For example, the Bodo-Kacharis have their traditional ‘Raijani Bokhari’ or the common granary system raised and nurtured by household contributions almost in each Bodo-Kachari village. The contributions at a mutually agreed rate is made in kind and all the households of village are supposed to make contributions towards its growth. Once the contribution is made, it comes into the collective account of granary and is then owned by the villagers collectively. The basic intention of this granary is to render help at the time of distress, to any member needing it, usually at the time of paddy plantation. The rate of interest is normally charged at 25 per cent of the amount borrowed for one harvesting season and is payable in kind. The organisation also renders physical labour on intimation of a co-villager if he is unable to do so on his own. This is known as Saori or Sanguri. The Deoris have also a benevolent organisation called ‘Sariya Mata’ to help families, on their prayer, on occasions like building of a house or management of a marriage ceremonial work.


28. ibid. page 53.
Among the Dimasas, based on the principle of co-operation, there is a youth institution known as 'Hangsao'. The members of the Hangsao complete the unfinished work of each family of the village on the contract basis. The price they charge is nominal. After harvest, when the families are in a position to pay the amount of the contract, the members of the Hangsao collect the amount from each family. The amounts thus collected are spent by them at the celebration of Bishu festival. But, among the Barmans of Cachar, such type of activities on the basis of co-operation are non-existent. Helping attitude is there but it is not done by any organisation.

(vi) Literacy rate among the different tribes:

We have seen in the preceding chapter that the tribal literacy rate in Assam is much higher than in the all India level. But the literacy rate varies from tribe to tribe in Assam. Let us see the literacy rate of the different tribes already mentioned for comparative study. The percentage of literacy of the plains tribes of Assam as per 1971 is given in table 8.1.

The table reveals that the numerically small tribe, Mech, accounts for the first position in male literacy rate, while the Deoris and the Barmans come second and third respectively. The Male Literacy rate is the lowest among the Miris of Assam.

29. Directorate of the Tribal Research Institute, Assam: Bulletin of the Tribal Research Institute, Assam, VOL I Number III page 49-50.
Table - 8.1

Percentage of Literacy Among the Different Plains Tribes of Assam 1971

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No.</th>
<th>Name of the Tribe</th>
<th>Male Literacy Rate</th>
<th>Female Literacy Rate</th>
<th>Total Literacy Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Boro Boro-Kachari</td>
<td>29.73</td>
<td>11.06</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Miri</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kachari, Sonowal</td>
<td>35.36</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rabha</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lalung</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Deori</td>
<td>39.58</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Barmans in Cachar</td>
<td>37.97</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>30.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mech</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Hojai</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source:

The percentage of literacy is calculated by the author from the census report of 1971. Census of India 1971, Assam series 3, part II- C(i), Social and Cultural tables page 19-20.
As regards female literacy, the rate is highest among the Barmans of Cachar, followed by the Mech and the Hojai. The female literacy rate is lowest among the Miris.

Thus it is seen that Male literacy rate ranges in between 39.7 per-cent and 28.5 per-cent and the female literacy rate ranges from 7.5 per cent to 26.7 per-cent.

The overall literacy rate is highest among the Mech and the Barmans and lowest among the Miris. It is already stated that 1971 Census puts the state literacy rate at 28.1 per-cent. Literacy rate was 37.2 per-cent among the males and 19.3 per-cent among females. So, literacy rate is higher among the Mech and the Barmans as compared to All Assam average. The male literacy rate is higher among the Mech, the Barmans and the Deoris than the overall literacy rate of the state. The female literacy rate is higher among the Barmans and the Mech as compared to all Assam average.

The literacy rate of the kinsmen of the Barmans, viz., Dimasas, is far from satisfactory. It is calculated from the Census report of 1971 that the percentage of literacy among the Dimasa was 18.8. The Male and female literacy rates were 27.36 and 9.36 respectively.