Chapter- III

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF TRIBAL
IDENTITY IN BARAK VALLEY.

DEFINITION OF THE TRIBE:

The definition of Tribal population has been a controversial issue. Different authors have given different definitions on this concept in their own ways. W.H.R. Rivers defined a tribe as "a social group of simple kind, the members of which speak a common dialect, have a single Government and act together for such common purposes as welfare." But according to other anthropologists like Perry, habitation in a common territory is a vital feature of tribal organization which is lacking in Rivers' definition.

Pearson was of the opinion that "the Principle of the tribe is rooted in the Principle of kinship rather than that of territory." According to Piddington, "a tribe is a group of people speaking a common dialect, inhabiting a common territory and displaying a certain homogeneity in their culture." Thus we see that there is a diversity of learned

opinions as regards what constitutes a tribe. Mazumder has tried to define tribe enlisting all the universal characteristics of tribe. He defined tribe "as a social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous, with no specialization of function, ruled by tribal officers, hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect, recognizing social distance with other tribes or castes, without any social obloquy attaching to them, as it does in the caste structure, following traditions, beliefs and customs, illiberal to naturalization of ideas from alien sources, above all conscious of a homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration." 5 Prof. Dube has put forward some characteristics of tribes which are as follows:-

i) Their roots in the soil date back to a very early period; if they are not the original inhabitants, they are at least some of the Oldest inhabitants of the land.

ii) They live in the relative isolation of the hills and the forests.

iii) Their sense of history is shallow for, among them, the remembered history of five to six generations tends to get merged in mythology.

iv) They have a low level of techno-economic development.

v) In terms of their cultural ethos—language, institutions, beliefs, and customs — they stand out from other

sections of the society.

vi) If they are not egalitarian, they are at least non-hierarchic and undifferentiated.

Though there is no unanimity regarding definition of tribe and consequent to the growth of urbanization, some tribal societies are on the process of detribalization, yet "the concept will remain useful not only for understanding the way in which tribal societies have changed and are changing in the modern world but also as a theoretical understanding in the comparative study of social systems and institutions."

CONSTITUTIONAL DEFINITION:

The Indian Constitution, however, did not define the concept "tribe." But, according to article 342, the president may specify by public notification a list of Scheduled Tribes. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Amendment Act, 1976, specifies twenty-three Scheduled Tribes in Assam—14 Tribes in the two autonomous Hill Districts, namely, N.C.Hills and Karbi Anglong and 9 Tribes in the Plains Districts of Assam.*

The following are the different Scheduled Tribe communities in Assam, as recognised by the Government of India:

**Scheduled Tribes in the autonomous districts:**


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*This revised list was effected from 27.7.77, in Government of India notification number B.C./12016/34/76-SCT-V dated 27.7.77.*


**SCHEDULED TRIBES IN THE STATE OF ASSAM EXCLUDING THE AUTONOMOUS DISTRICTS:**


As per the policy of the Government of Assam, if the Scheduled Tribes of the Autonomous Hills Districts reside permanently in the plains Districts, they cannot be treated as Scheduled Tribes in the Plains. They are called 'Hill Tribes in the Plains'. Similarly, Scheduled Tribes for plains Districts, residing permanently in the Hill Districts, are called 'Plains Tribes in the Hills'. However, excluding electoral reservation they would be eligible for all economic, educational and employment benefits. 8

**THE PLAINS TRIBAL COMMUNITIES IN THE BARAK VALLEY:**

Tribal communities like the Barman, the Hmar, the Riang, the Halam, the Tipra, the Kuki, the Naga, the Garo, the Khasi, the Mikir etc. have been residing in this Valley. But all

these tribes are not getting similar treatment as regards economic, political and other matters. For example, as per 1971 Census there were 8594 Tripuri speaking Tribal Communities in the Barak Valley. But as per President of India's Notification, they are not treated as Scheduled Tribe in this Valley or Assam and, hence, are not getting any special facilities that their kinsmen are getting as Scheduled Tribe in Tripura. Thus, it is seen that the Tripuries in Tripura and the Tripuries of the Barak Valley being of the same race, are getting discriminatory treatment as regards economic, political, educational and employment benefits. A tribe is Scheduled only in the Scheduled Area but outside the Scheduled area they are treated as general population. Thus, the Scheduled Tribes of Tripura, eg. the Riang, the Halas, the Tripuri etc. are treated as general population in this Valley.

In the previous chapter, the table 2.4 shows that there are many Hmar, Khasi, Kuki, Naga, Garo and Mizo speaking tribal people in this Valley. But they are treated as "Hill Tribes in the Plains."

In this connection, it may be mentioned that there are some Dhewans and Rajbansis in this Valley. These Dhewans are said to be the descendants of Koch general. Though the Dhewans and Rajbansis were treated as Tribal Communities in the British Period, they are not treated as Scheduled Tribe now. Prof. Dube criticised the policy of admisibility of Tribal groups into the Schedule and said, "Several Communities, traditionally believed to be tribal, are included in the
Schedule and some have also been left out. On the other hand, some communities which are not conventionally regarded as tribal also find mention in the Schedule ....... The list is not final, addition and detection are still possible.\(^9\)

The Census reports of 1951, 1961 and 1971 have shown the total population of the different scheduled plains Tribes in the Barak Valley.

**Table 3.1**

**SCHEDULED PLAINS TRIBES IN THE BARAK VALLEY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scheduled Tribe</th>
<th>Census Years</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1951</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barmans in Cachar</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boro-Boro Kachari</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miri</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonowal Kachari</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabha</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Contd. .......

## Source: Census of India 1951, Assam, District Census Hand Book, Cachar District.

(As the policy of the Govt. of India was to discourage Community distinction based on Castes, Tribes etc., the data on the population of the individual Tribe were not available in the Census Report. Only population of the Scheduled Tribes is available;


* It seems that the total number of the population shown above is a little incorrect. It has to be decreased by two to find the correct total number, for, by adding together the number of population belonging to each community we find the total number as 15281. So, there is some error in the page No. 99 of Census of India 1971, Assam, Series III part I-A.

The Table reveals that the Barmans are the Principal Scheduled Plains Tribal Community in the Barak Valley. The other Plains Tribal like the Boro-Boro Kachari, the Miri-Sonowal Kachari, the Rabha etc. are not the permanent inhabitants of the Valley. They may come here in search of Jobs or some other

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lalung</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deori</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>6700</strong></td>
<td><strong>14076</strong></td>
<td><strong>15285</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Barmans generally live in the rural areas. As per 1971 Census out of 13,210 Barmans, only 50 lived in the urban areas.¹⁰

Let us now turn our attention to how, when, why and from where the Barmans have settled in this Valley.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:**

The Barmans in Cachar belong to the Bodo group of the people of Tibeto-Chinese family and mainly to its Tibeto-Burman sub-family.¹¹ The original home of this race was in China and Tibet.¹²

According to B.K. Barua, the original place of the Tibeto-Burman family was Western China near the Yang-tse-Kiang and Howang-ho rivers. From these places they went down the courses of the Brahmaputra, the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy and entered here.¹³ All the scheduled plains tribal communities of Assam belong to the Bodo group.

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The Kacharis do not have any written records regarding their socio-economic conditions or the state of their administration. However, from the 13th Century onwards, the past of the Kacharis can be known briefly from the historical works known as Buranji written during the Ahom reign. At the beginning of the 13th Century, when the Ahoms entered into Assam, the Kachari Kingdom was extended along the south bank of the Brahmaputra from the Dikhou to the Kolong or beyond. The Kingdom also included Dhansiri Valley and the tracts which now form the North Cachar Hills District. Towards the end of the 13th Century, the outlying Kachari Villages on the eastern bank of the Dikhou river withdrew to the western bank. The area, thus vacated, was occupied by the advancing Ahoms. For about a Century the river Dikhou served as the natural boundary between the two nations, namely, the Ahoms and the Kacharis. But, in 1490, a battle was fought between the Ahoms and the Kacharis on the bank of the Dikhou and the Ahoms were defeated; but in the next battle between them after thirty years the Ahoms pushed the Kacharis back to the Dhansiri River. The hostilities between the Kacharis and the Ahoms did not end there. In 1526 A.D., a fierce battle was fought on the bank of the Dhansiri and the Kacharis won it. But in another battle on the western bank of the Dhansiri, in the same year, Detcha, the brother of Kachari King, Khunkhara, was slain. Khumkhara fled from his capital. Detsung, a relative of the fugitive king was placed on the


throne on the condition that he would remain a subordinate to the Ahom King. But in 1536, a conflict arose between Detsung and the Ahom King. Ahom King then attacked Dimapur and Detsung was put to death. The Ahoms ransacked Dimapur. The Kacharis then left Dimapur and established their new capital at Maibong in the North Cachar Hills. But they could not stay there for long in peace. "It is recorded in the Bansabali of the Darrang Rajas that the Kachari King was defeated, about the middle of the Sixteenth Century, by Chilarai, the brother and General of the Koch King Naranarayan." At present, there are some Dhewans in Silchar subdivision, who claim themselves to be the descendants of the Koch accompanying Chilarai's army. Again "At the beginning of the Seventeenth Century, the Jaintia King Dhan Manik seized Prabhakar, the Chief of Dimarua, whose family owed allegiance to the Kacharis. Prabhakar appealed to the latter, and their king, Satrudhaman, demanded his release. Failing to obtain it, he led an army into the Jaintia Kingdom and defeated Dhan Manik, who, thereupon, submitted and undertook to pay tribute. He also gave two princesses to the Kachari King and made over his nephew and heir-apparent, Jasamanik, as a hostage. The latter was kept prisoner at Brahmapur which was afterwards renamed Khaspur. To commemorate his victory Satrudaman assumed the title Asimardan." He also defeated the


Page 11-12.


17. Ibid page 252.
Ahoms and changed the name of capital from Maibong to Kirtipur. During Kachari reign, the Mughals also attacked Cachar in 1612. The Kachari King showed allegiance to the Mughals, but, very soon, he had shaken off his allegiance. So, the Mughals made second invasion of Cachar in 1614. The Kachari King Satrudaman gave a strong resistance. But when the Mughals seized the fort and took to the policy of privation, the Kachari King was compelled to make a peace by offering 40 elephants and a tribute of 100,000 rupees and some other presentations for the Subedar. He also gave up Asuratekar where the Mughals set up a thanah. But very soon, the thanah of Asuratekar was evacuated and the Kacharis regained independence. 18

After the death of Satrudaman, Seven Kings namely, Naranarayan, Bhimadarpa, Indra Ballav, Birdarpa Narayan, Garurdhvaj, Makaradhvaj and Udyaditya ruled one after another in quick succession for about 75 years. During this period, the relation between Ahoms and Kacharis became strained.

In 1706, Rudra Singha, the Ahom King, with his big army attacked the Kachari Kingdom and occupied Maibong. The Kachari King at that time was Tamradhraj. He fled to Khaspur in the Cachar plains. This Khaspur subsequently became the new capital of the Kachari Kingdom. From Khaspur, Tamradhraj sent an urgent appeal to the Jaintia King, Ramsingh for help. But, before the arrival of Ramsingh, the Ahoms were compelled to return to their own kingdom as the climate of that place did not suit them. After that, Ramsingh reached this spot and instead of helping Tamradhraj imprisoned him. Tamradhraj, then

again appealed to Rudra Singha for his assistance in releasing him from captivity. Rudra Singh despatched armies to the Jaintia Kingdom. Ram Singh was defeated and was taken to the camp of Rudra Singha where he promised to pay tribute and agreed to visit the Ahom King once a year. But after arriving at Khaspur, he fell seriously ill and passed away. After the death of Tamradhraj, Surdapa Narayan, Kirti Chandra Narayan and Harish Chandra became the king one after another. On Harish Chandra's death, his son Krishna Chandra became the king. He married Indup-rava, the daughter of Manipur king Madhu Chandra. During his reign in 1790, an important event took place. According to E.A. Gait, the reigning family at that time was converted to Hinduism. "The Raja, Krishna Chandra, and his brother Govind Chandra entered the body of a copper effigy of a cow. On emerging from it, they were proclaimed to be Hindus of the Kshatriya caste...." But according to Achutcharan Choudhury Tattanidi, the Kachari King Biradarpas Narayan was the first who embraced Hinduism. A conch shell with ten incarnation inscribed on it, support this. But according to S.K. Chatterjee, from fifteenth century "Fuller Hinduisation of the Kachari ruling class appears to have begun.... From the end of this century, we have their kings bearing Hindu or Sanskrit names."
After the death of Krishna Chandra, his brother, Govinda Chandra became the king in 1813. He married Induprava, the widow of Krishna Chandra. But soon he fell into the Vortex of successive cataclysms. First, Koshidam, then incharge of N.C. Hills, rebelled with a view to forming an Independent Kingdom. Govinda Chandra by assassinating Koshidam succeeded to keep this rebellion down. But Tularam, the son of Koshidam, soon revolted against the Herambha Ruler. Govinda Chandra failed to put this rebellion down and lost the northern portion of his territory.

Again, Charjit Singh, the Manipuri King was deprived of the throne by his two brothers, Marjit Singh and Gambhir Singh and had to take shelter in the court of Govinda Chandra. In 1818 A.D., the Manipuris under the leadership of Marjit Singh of Manipur invaded Cachar Plains. Govinda Chandra sought the aid of Charjit Singh, the exiled Manipuri Raja. But instead of helping the Kachari King, Charjit himself occupied Cachar. In the following year, Marjit Singh was defeated by the Burmese and fled to Cachar with his brother Gambhir Singh. Three Manipuri Princes, namely, Charjit Singh, Marjit Singh and Gambhir Singh occupied whole Kachari Kingdom. Govinda Chandra was compelled to flee to Sylhet in order to save his life and, from there, he appealed to the British for help. Govinda Chandra, having failed to obtain help from the British, appealed to the Burmies who promised to reinstate him. The Burmese advance on Cachar alarmed the British who declared War. The Burmese were
defeated. The Manipuri Princes were expelled from Cachar. The British restored Govinda Chandra in southern Cachar. At that time Govinda Chandra shifted his residence from Khashpur to Haritikar. In 1832 A.D, Cachar was annexed to the British empire as Govinda Chandra died two years before of this annexation leaving no legal heir.

This is the brief history of the Barmans in Cachar. Thus it is seen that the Barmans are a section of Kacharis and they ruled in plains Cachar for about 230 years. According to Edward Gait, an eminent Historian, the Kacharis extended their rule in the Plains of Cachar around 1603 A.D. It is said that the Kachari King got the occupation of Barak Valley from the King of Tripura.

Thus, a certain Kachari King married the daughter of the Tripura King and obtained this land as a gift. Whatever the fact, it is not certain when the Kacharis shifted their Capital in the Plains of Cachar. Perhaps, the thinking of shifting Capital from Maibong to Khaspur began in 1696 A.D, when Tamradhraj being defeated by Rudra Singh fled to Khaspur. But actual shifting took place around 1750 A.D. They ruled Cachar roughly till British annexation.

During the Kachari reign in the plains of Cachar a cordial relation began to flourish between the Bengalees and the Barmans. The royal families at that time became patrons of Bengali Literature. "The Raj Darbar was adorned by a galaxy of

Benalee Scholars and some of the Rajas were well-known for their contribution to Bengali Literature. Krishna Chandra and Govinda Chandra made correspondences with the East India Company Government in Bengali. Govinda Chandra issued several statutes, popularly known as Govinda Chandra Ain, in Bengali with parallel Sanskrit in Bengali script. Maniram Barman, a member of the Darbar was a poet and his Bengali poems have been highly acclaimed. A number of Bengali Scholarly works were composed in the Herambha Darbar and notable of them are Naradiya Purana, Vivad Darpan, Kalai Puthi, Rindhan Vidhi and Rama Chandi.24 It is also known that Govinda Chandra himself wrote Kirtan-the song of the glory of Lord Krishna. This Kirtan used to be sung during the Simadh Ceremony. Moreover, 'Maharash Leela' and 'Dol Jatra' are the noteworthy Books written by Govinda Chandra.

The Kacharlis were very tolerant. During their reign, many Hindus and Muslims from the contiguous Bengal settled in this District and they were allowed by the Kachari Rulers to practice their own customs, usages and institutions. Some Kacharlis envinced a preference for many of the customs and institutions of the immigrants, although the orthodox section remain aloof and totally indifferent to the innovations.25

The Kacharis once attained a state of civilization considerably more advanced than the Ahoms. The use of brick for building purposes was then practically unknown.

to the Ahoms, and their buildings were of timber or bamboo with mud plastered walls. Dimapur, on the other hand, was surrounded on three sides by a brick wall of the aggregate length of nearly two miles, ...." In the V-shaped pillars of Dimapur one will find besides the presence of three types of Sculptural Designs or ornamentation namely Architectural, Geometric and Floral, the figures of animals like elephant, deer, dog and birds.  
