CHAPTER SIX

Emerging Pattern of Society.

1. In the previous chapters an attempt has been made to depict the socio-economic life of the Daflas settled at Betgarh, a plains village of Assam, at foothills of NEFA. Betgarh provided opportunities for these immigrant Daflas to begin a new life. Availability of land for wet paddy cultivation and other facilities in the area attracted them to settle in their present site. The socio-economic life of the people, while adapting themselves to the new environment have encouraged the emergence of a new social pattern in the village.

2. Because of the present policy of the Government of India, the NEFA tribes have limited opportunity to establish contact with the rest of their countrymen. People from other parts of the country can cross the so called "inner line" (boundary line between Assam and NEFA) only when permission is received from the NEFA authority. This policy was evolved on the supposition that direct contact with the rest of the population would degenerate the rich culture of the people and reduce the proud diversity of the tribes to a 'muddy mixture'. Dr. Varrier Elwin, who was the Adviser for tribal affairs of NEFA formulated certain policies which are still followed by the Government. Elwin wrote: "All over the world
it has been noted that the break up of tribal society leads to a loss of tribal virtues and a rapid acquisition of the vices of civilisation" (1959: 49). He has also stated that "the fundamental point in tribal society and even the tribal physique, has been adapted through hundreds of years to a special kind of life in a special environment, and that there is grave danger in upsetting too rapidly the harmony between the two" (Elwin, 1959: 51).

Elwin also pointed out "when a man breaks a long fast, he is not immediately given a full meal, he takes a sip of orange juice. Otherwise he may fall seriously ill" (1959: 48). It seems that Elwin's hypothesis is that the NEFA tribes are culturally so hungry that they are ready to devour the culture of the neighbouring people whenever they come in contact with the latter.

3. Hogbin stated (1958: 14) that the change in particular aspects of culture is at any moment possible, if they come in contact with technologically more advanced people. Moreover, he argued (1958: 48) that "the remoulding of primitive societies, whether it is ultimately to the advantage of the people or not, is inevitable, and it seems to be just as inevitable that the individuals caught up in the transition should find the process uncomfortable". Hogbin's another important hypothesis (1958: 64) was that "tools are always judged according to one standard; customs on the contrary, are judged according to different standards".
Goswami (1967, P. 74), is of the opinion that a freer association with people bearing higher contents of culture, revitalises them to remodel their way of life without virtually effecting their ethos and values of life.

4. The changes that have occurred at Betgarh for nearly half a century as a result of direct contact with the plainsmen has thrown light on the validity or otherwise of the above assumptions.

5. Certain aspects of Dafla society have proved resistant to change; others have evolved rapidly in response to new conditions.

6. The highland Daflas have an economy based on shifting cultivation. But a glaringly noticeable feature of Betgarh is a complete change over to a settled peasant economy. The ecological setting has compelled them to accept new agricultural practices. Inspite of the acceptance of settled farming a large number of households depend upon forest products from which they earn a living by selling these in the local markets. Some of the Daflas have also accepted certain non-agricultural occupations. Importance of livestock farming in the village has increased due to the use of bullocks as draught animals. This is a significant departure from general practice of hills tribes who generally use domestic animals for sacrifices and not as draught animals.
The Daflas of Betgarh have adopted a number of innovations willingly. They have recognised the inadequacies of their technical apparatus for the new type of cultivation and accepted the implements and methods used by the plainsmen. They have been using the plough very efficiently and they can now make ploughs themselves. This, however, has not diminished the value of traditional tools like dāos which are not only agricultural implements but form an essential part of the bride-price.

Moreover, the yield per acre of major field crops and the income from agriculture has revealed that the Daflas are as efficient cultivators as the farmers in the plains. The average expenditure per household is found to be slightly higher than the average income per household and a few families have shown deficit in their family budget. This might have been primarily due to the purchase of new articles for daily use on account of change in traditional values.

Although the people of Betgarh have accepted the medium of exchange of the plains, they, however, carry on the bulk of their transactions in their traditional currencies. The value of their traditional currencies has not diminished as a result of the gradual monetisation of the village economy. Modern currency has entered into their traditional payment very insignificantly.

Many rural and tribal societies are highly integrated units in which the individual surrenders much of his personal rights to
the community. But Daflas are an exception to this general pattern. They are a very individualistic people. The village is not a tightly integrated and cohesive group. The individualism of Dafla society has been further intensified in the new habitat as a result of the private ownership of land.

11. The establishment of a bond of friendship through ceremonial pacts is a unique custom of the Daflas. This custom assists the normal functioning of society. Although in the present locality (Betgarh) inter-village friendship pacts become largely inoperative due to the establishment of regular administrative machinery, the traditional custom of cementing friendship relations through ceremonial pacts between rival groups still continues and shows no signs of decrease.

12. Elementary families are common and even a polygynous compound family is a combination of sub-families of elementary nature. In the new situation, the possession of individual landed property assure self-sufficiency and more independence to individual families. Due to the absence of communal landed property in the present locality, the bonds uniting wider kin groups such as the abong boro and the clan and the bonds uniting the village as a whole have diminished. Thus the individual ownership of land has changed social outlook significantly.

13. As the members of each clan are scattered in different localities, clan solidarity is reflected only in limited spheres
Clan solidarity finds little expression in socio-religious ceremonies due to the location of the village in a far distant place from the rest of the tribe who live in the Subansiri and Kameng districts of NEFA. Conceptually, however, the importance of the clan as a distantly related group has not diminished in the present habitat, though there are few occasions when it is demonstrated.

14. The emphasis on kinship persisted in the present locality and there is a marked tendency to maintain the kinship ideals of the hill Daflas. But in the present setting a number of changes in kinship practices have become inevitable. Certain ceremonies are performed in the absence of close kins who live in the hills and who obviously either receive no invitation or fail to attend the rituals because of the distance and the hazards involved in a long journey through the thick forest. A widow may face economic hardship when her jural inheritor lives far away in the hills. But the legal inheritor living in the hills will never withdraw his claim from his kinsmen in the plains, although he may not be able to assist his needy kinsmen. Similarly, a person living in the plains tries to assert all his claims over his kinsmen in the interior hills. Kinship in the present setting is in a process of modification without radical transformation.

15. The marriage system has not undergone any appreciable change even in the present locality. This is in sharp contrast to their adoption of wet rice cultivation in preference to jhuming. The richer
section of the people are still very eager to acquire more than one wife. In the hills, land being plenty, one having larger number of wives could produce more for one's family. In the present circumstances the importance of labour strength has decreased due to the limitation of cultivable land. Although most of the villagers are aware of it, the practice of polygyny continued as usual. The practice of polyandry is limited and has not undergone any change. Only a few persons disapproved of polygynous marriage as a 'shameful custom'. This change of attitude on the part of a few, though statistically insignificant, is possibly a pointer to the future.

16. The Daflas do not recognise chiefs, but the niebus (medicinemen) are very important personalities in Dafla society. This is because the niebus act as intermediaries between human beings and the supernatural world. As the Daflas have a firm belief that sickness, misfortune, accident and death are caused by evil spirits, the role of a niebu in the village has remained as important as it was in the hill villages.

17. In the present locality the supernatural deities and powers of the neighbouring groups of the people like the Assamese, the Miri and the Nepali etc. are believed to affect their internal life. This is obviously due to their cultural contact with these people living near their village. A Dafla niebu occasionally finds by divination that ailments are due to the influences of Harensi Givre (Non-Dafla supernatural beings and powers). The rich man is then
advised by the niebu to employ Hareng (Non-Dafla) practitioners
to appease the appropriate deity; for they can speak the language
of the deity. There are, however, some Dafla niebus who have learnt
other languages and specialised in appeasing the foreign spirits.
The Daflas have thus added a large number of deities of the plains
people to their own pantheon. But they do not regard Hinduism,
Christianity or any other religion as superior to their own. In fact,
they show very little interest in the religion of other people.

18. The movement of a community to a new settlement inevitably
produces social changes. At Betgarh new traditions have sprung up
in response to the demands of adaptation. But the Daflas have
maintained the hard core of their culture in the new locality with
minor adjustments. They are remoulding their society in such a
gradual and smooth way that they are not facing acute conflicts in
the process. They partially modified their ways of life to fit into
the changed social and cultural milieu.

19. During this period of about 50 years since their migration
to plains, the Daflas have demonstrated that the equilibrium of
society can be maintained even after radical changes in certain
aspects of their culture. In spite of certain changes, much has
remained intact in Dafla society. The acceptance of certain aspects
of the culture of the neighbouring plainsmen has not vitally affected
the care of their traditional culture. Their traditional values of life faced hardly any opposition or any fear of extinction. Rapid changes in their economic organisation have not resulted in equally radical changes in their social life. They freely continued to live side by side with the groups of people belonging to different levels of cultural attainments.

20. The study has revealed that social change can occur without any serious maladjustment or disequilibrium in the society. In some aspects the changes are very rapid, in others they are gradual. But in certain major aspects, no change occurred at all. That is to say, certain aspects of their culture are stable and unlikely to change for some time to come. Nothing that has happened till now has changed the fundamental social structure of the Daflas. An 'unbroken continuity' of tradition has been maintained. Cultural changes do not involve a break with the past but rather an evolution from the tradition itself.

21. It should, however, be admitted that their growing contact with the plainsmen has not always been happy. Some of them have become the victims of some vices of the modern society. Nevertheless such instances are few and the changes in Dafla society as a result of their migration to the plains village of Betgarh cannot be described as a "loss of tribal virtues and a rapid acquisition of vices of civilization". They have maintained their own particular distinctive culture.