CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1. The Problem.

1.1. The study of the social and economic life of small communities has long attracted the attention of sociologists and social anthropologists. The close connection that exists between social relations and economic activities in small-scale tribal and peasant communities leads the student of social science to conceive of and treat these two vital areas as a single field. In studies of the Indian peasant society, the socio-economic structure and its characteristic features have been explored by investigators for over the last two decades. But there are few studies focusing on the social and economic conditions of tribal groups. When one further delimits the area and considers the north-east region of India the study of socio-economic structures appear to be very few and far between.

1.2. This is not to deny the existence of some competent ethnographic accounts of a number of tribal groups. But we hardly find a detailed picture of a village society depicting the interrelations between social and economic activities. By treating the village community and its economy as a single field of activity, we intend to examine the character of village life as a whole. For this purpose, our choice fell on Betgarh and its people who represent social group which is half-way between a tribal and a peasant village community. In other words, this is study of tribal group from the hills which has migrated to the foot-hills region and adopted system of agriculture and in part at
least money economy of the plains. Besides this offers an opportunity to study a group where the boundary of the society is fairly easily definable in terms of a single village. This is difficult in the case of a peasant village with its participation in a regional caste society and many other alliances cutting across the villages. At the same time, its voluntary adoption of a peasant economy offers an opportunity to study the influence of this type of economy on the social structure of the village. Such a situation is difficult to find in north-east India where the tribal population in the plains has long acquired a social organisation akin to that of the plains people. In the hills, on the other hand, the communities are least affected, if ever, by the economy of the plains.

1.3. The Dafla village of Betgarh was selected, because the Daflas do not merely constitute a demographically important tribe in NEFA but also because they are one of the more conservative tribes who still follow many of the traditional ways. Moreover, there are very few examples where a hill tribal community has migrated to the plains and deliberately adopted an economy based on plough cultivation. The change in the method of production from shifting cultivation to plough cultivation is a radical one. Betgarh represents a 'mid-passage' between a pure hill economy with shifting cultivation and a peasant economy with settled agriculture. Social changes are continuing processes and important trends of social changes are noticed in contemporary Dafla life in this village. The forces of change and their operation too have a direct bearing on structural relationships, popularly known as maladjustments in tribal societies. The drastic change in habitat, productive system and general social-cultural-political milieu

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* The population of the Daflas, in NEFA, is 35,111 according to 1961 Census.
clearly offers a unique opportunity for observing the character and tenor of socio-economic change. What is more, Betgarh is now open to modernization activities of the Indian Republic of which it is an integral part.

1.4. It may be presumed that the Daflas who have migrated from the interior of the hills were mentally prepared to accept certain changes in their ways of life in the foothills. They have migrated to the plains with the intention of taking up a settled form of agriculture. This, in itself, is a consequence of changing ways of life of the people. The village was therefore expected to provide interesting data on the socio-economic adjustment of the people in a new ecological setting. Social relations are influenced by the social and geographical environment, especially in case of immigrants who must adapt themselves to a changed situation in their new habitat. Bose (1961, P.69) observed that as a result of economic changes, some traits tend to disappear from a culture while others continue in a modified form. Radcliffe-Brown (1952, P.193) pointed out that even in the case of most revolutionary changes some continuity with the original structure is maintained. The village under study provides an ideal situation to study the complexities of tensions and conflicts between old and new values, between indigenous and exogenous ideas and practices which appear in all transitional societies.

1.5. The physical mobility of the people involving several days' march to the plains of Betgarh is indeed remarkable. In spite of the physical limitations the Daflas of Betgarh are still in touch with their ancestral villages. Socio-economic conditions in the new environment necessitate contact with the Daflas in the hills. Even with certain hostile
groups contacts are maintained and stabilised by entering into ceremonial friendship pacts. The adaptation of people to a new environment is a gradual process, and migration to the plains resulted in their participation in a wider political and social environment.

1.6. Radcliffe-Brown (1952, P. 180) has pointed out that the systematic investigation of the nature of human society presents a set of problems, viz., social morphology - kinds of social structure, social physiology - functioning of the social structure, and the problem of development of new types of social structure. These three aspects were constantly kept in view during the field investigations.

1.7. Instead of concentrating on a limited problem, the study was designed to cover the general socio-economic life in the Dafla village with the above considerations in minds. The data and conclusions are presented in the following chapters. Chapter two provides a brief outline of the village, demographic features and village administration. How the quest for food and urge for security led to the formation of the village are described in this chapter. In the present situation the question of land-ownership causes conflicts and strife within the community which willy nilly has accepted the established authority of a regular administration. The means of maintaining some degree of peace in the village community are also discussed in this chapter. Chapter three gives an outline of the institutions - family, slavery, kinship, marriage and clan. Chapter four deals with the religious beliefs and practices of the people and discusses the relationships between magico-religious beliefs and practices and socio-economic activities. Chapter five gives a detailed picture of the
economic activities of the villagers. The utilization of natural resources and the process of a gradual shift to an efficient system of soil exploitation, the emerging pattern of social classes according to the type of land ownership and occupation have been discussed. At the end there is a discussion on the emerging pattern of the society at Betgarh in Chapter six.

2. Field Work.

2.1. This study is mainly based on field investigations of a total period of 14 months during 1956 and 1957. In addition to the intensive field work at Betgarh, I also stayed for a month at Kimin, a base camp of Subansiri district of NEFA. There I worked at Kimin village situated near the base camp and collected data from the Daflas of the interior areas, who came down to the office of Assistant Political Officer, Kimin and to the markets of the plains. Another four short follow-up investigations were undertaken during 1958-60. The demographic data and data on the economic activities of the village were collected in 1964, along with the field investigation of the Agro-Economic Research Centre for North East India, Jorhat, which has taken up the village in its programme of study of rural change. The demographic data of the village relate to 1964 and the economic data to the calendar year 1963.

2.2. Such a long and close association with the Daflas and particularly with the people of Betgarh enabled me to study them as their close friend and not as a stranger. The Daflas consider an outsider to be an intruder in their religious ceremonies and also in village councils. But in time
they invited me and enjoyed my company on ceremonial occasions. In fact, I was 'adopted' as one of them and was named after a cultural hero of the Daflas. Friendship was established with me by exchange of gifts ceremonially, according to their custom. Information collected could be tested in actual observances as the field investigations spread over a long span of time. Direct observation of events would not have been possible in a shorter period. I, however, could not stay within the village for field work, and stayed at a short distance.

2.3. In studying a society a knowledge of the native language is essential. But I did not try to learn the language fully because most of the informants knew Assamese. Some reliable informants interpreted the deliberations in socio-religious ceremonies. But in time, I could understand their language. Moreover, in field-work it became necessary to use certain Dafla terms which have no English or Assamese equivalents. The informants evinced more and more interest in the enquiries when the native terms were used.

2.4. Participant observation supplemented by intermittent enquiries was widely used for collection of the materials presented in this thesis. Besides, informants were interviewed to cross check the information collected by direct observation.

3. The Daflas - Early History and Relation with the Plainsmen.

3.1. The early history of the Daflas is obscure. Before the advent of the British in Assam, the Daflas came into contact with the plains people
of the north bank of the Brahmaputra as habitual depredators. Mackenzie (1884, P. 27) has referred to the Daflas as "entirely independent of Assam Raja and plunder the country contiguous to their mountains." It is mentioned by Bhuyan (1949, PP. 21–38) that the Ahom rulers of Assam were confronted with the responsibility of protecting the subjects of the northern foothill from the inroads of the tribes inhabiting the hills. Attempts were made to adjust their mutual relations but their strict observance could not be usually enforced as the tribesmen lived in inaccessible hills where the conduct of an expedition against them was invariably a matter of extreme difficulty.

3.2. As it was not possible to control the Daflas, the Ahom kings attempted a conciliation with them by assigning to them a number of paiks or bahatias - 'the serfs of the Daflas' in the bordering areas. An officer called Dafalaparia Phukan was appointed to look after these men. The bahatias were generally culprits convicted of various offences, and the land occupied by them became gradually a penal colony peopled by convicts and their descendants. Every ten houses of Dafla-Bahatias was to make over to the Daflas one "double cloth", one single cloth, one napkin, one dao, ten heads of cattle and four seers of salt as posa (blackmail–subscription) per year to ensure safety against depredations by the tribesmen (Mackenzie, 1884, P. 27).

3.3. During British rule, a treaty with the Daflas to the effect that thenceforward the Daflas were not entitled to levy any posa on
the bahatias and that they would receive a fixed amount from the Government in lieu of the *posa*, was entered into in 1936-37. In the same year the British Government distributed Rs. 2,500/- to 238 Dafla chiefs and agreed to pay the same amount annually. A written document (*patta* as they called it) stating the amount of *posa* was given to each Dafla chief and their descendants.

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* A specimen of fixation of *posa* from the Ryots (bahatias)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name of village</th>
<th>Ryot</th>
<th>Articles of posa</th>
<th>Value of Article</th>
<th>Order</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>253</td>
<td>Boya oria</td>
<td>Kandu via</td>
<td>One endi (big)</td>
<td>2/-/-</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>luri</td>
<td>Patiram</td>
<td>Two endis (small)</td>
<td>2/-/-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gagorgaon</td>
<td>Boria</td>
<td>One napkin</td>
<td>1/-/-</td>
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<td>Labu</td>
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<td>Kalita</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Village Hemkantha</td>
<td>Papongpani</td>
<td>Two seers of salt</td>
<td>5/-/-</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Mow</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sri President</td>
<td>Five seers rice</td>
<td>1/-/-</td>
<td>(Not clearly written)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bihgutikeot</td>
<td>Five seers of Lokhi Bamun powered rice</td>
<td>2/-/-</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sokori</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Satraka</td>
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</tbody>
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1. File No.167 of 1884, "Posa allowance to the Hill tribes of Darrang"—Serial No.3, Assistant Political Officer's Office, Charduar, Assam.
inherited it. As a matter of fact, this amount was never disbursed in actual payment. Claimants did not come regularly owing to the distances they had to travel, and the amount paid annually was less than the stipulated amount. But inspite of this agreement the Daflias continued their sporadic raids. The post of Political Officer for the Balipara Frontier Tract was created in the year, 1918 at Charduar where a posse of soldiers was stationed as a safeguard against occasional depredations. Thereafter raids by Daflias became very rare.

**From the following report, one can form an idea about the behaviour of the Daflas towards the bahatias or ryots, during the earliest part of the British rule:**

On 11th February 1884, Pareng complained before the Deputy Commissioner that he was entitled to Rs. 60/- a year as pension (Posa). His grandfather Bor Nareng and father Usirgam had this amount. So Mr. Williams called on Durgeswar Maunsadar of Kalbari for a fuller report about Pareng and his connection with Siram Gam. Durgeswar Maunsadar submitted a report, stating therein that the sister of Siram Gam was married to Bor Nareng according to Dafla custom and with her Siram gave ten houses of bahatias as dowry. Bor Nareng levied posa from these ten houses or families, for four or five years and after this when Siram's sister died he (Siram) forcibly levied posa from the above ten families. For this enmity Bor Nareng seized and carried away ten persons (Bolo Sarma and others) of Bhelaigao into the hills and confined them there at the beginning of British rule in this country. Upon this, the said Siram Gam with the assistance of Bhodia, Nirbi, Paro and others fought with said Bor Nareng, forced a victory over him, and released the ten convicts and also took possession of ten bahatias families of Gogalgaw, belonging to Bor Nareng. Some one or two years after this Colonel Vetch made the settlement of Dafla pension. As for Bor Nareng through fear, did not come down at the time of settlement, the sum of Rs. 5-3-0, value of cloth and other articles which he (Bor Nareng) had received as blackmail from his people of Gogalgaw was included in Siram Gam's pension.

(Source: File No.167 of 1884, Posa allowance to the Hill tribes of Darrang - Serial No.3, Assistant Political Officer's Office, Charduar, Assam).

4.1. It is against such a back-ground that the plainsmen regarded the Daflas as untrustworthy raiders. Haimendorf (1950, P.1) has mentioned that the Assamese term, Dafla like the term, Abor, seems to have originally meant 'wild man' or 'barbarian'. The closer contact between the Daflas and the plainsmen has now revealed that the Daflas do not deserve such an epithet. They do, no longer, indulge in nocturnal visits to the villages inhabited by the local peasants.

4.2. Early records on the Daflas are very scanty. In the census reports certain short but interesting accounts are available and in fact the spadework for the specialised studies has been done by the census. In 1881 census report, it is stated—"Miri, Dafla and Abor are names which have been given by the Assamese to three sections of one and the same race, inhabiting the mountains between the Assam Valley and Tibet, and settled also to some number in the valley itself, where they follow a system of migratory cultivation. The language spoken by all the three sections of the race is practically one and the same". The same report gives a very short account of Dafla socio-economic life. It is stated that the Daflas are less laborious cultivators than the Miris. Yet they regard themselves as superior to the Miris with whom they acknowledge no relationship.

4.3. In 1891 census report a short note on the Daflas is available. In discussing the social customs of the Daflas it is stated that the
Daflas purchase slaves from the Abors and in former times also carried off into bondage persons captured in the raids on the plains. The slaves are extremely well treated, are never sold and failing other heirs inherit the property of their Dafla masters. While discussing polyandry among the Daflas it is stated in the same report that true polyandry was not practised by the Daflas. A short description of the Dafla religion is also available in the said report.

4.4. In 1921 census report G.A. Nevill, who was the Political Officer of the Balipara Frontier Tract wrote a short but interesting account of the Daflas. It is stated that the Daflas have no chiefs and no social precedence. The village is the governing unit, and every member of the community has equal rights. The oldest and richest man in the village is usually looked upon as the headman. Nevill stated that the occasional polyandry mentioned by Dalton in Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal (1872) never existed among the Daflas. The rest of the note is confined to religious beliefs and practices.

4.5. Reliable data on Daflas based on scientific study is available from Haimendorf's "Ethnographic Notes on the Tribes of Subansiri Region" (1947). Although this report is not based on an intensive study of the Daflas, valuable data on certain aspects of Dafla socio-economic life is available therein. A much more detailed account of the Daflas is incorporated in a valuable publication Himalayan Barbary (Haimendorf, 1950). In fact, it is the first authentic report on the Daflas. The literature on
Daflas was further enriched by the publication of *Apa Tanis and their neighbours* (Haimendorf, 1962). Shukla's study *Daflas of the Subansari Region* (1963) is another important addition to the studies on Daflas.

A short account written by the present author *Studies in Dafla Social and Religious Life* was published in 1964. Census of India monograph series publication - *Jara - A Dafla village in NEFA* (Biswas, 1965) is the latest publication on the Daflas.