The present study is an attempt to examine some aspects of socio-economic life of the people of Darrang district in Assam taking Chapai mouza, a revenue unit in the district, as a unit for intensive micro-level study. This work is designed within the framework of anthropogeography. The socio-economic conditions of a number of communities inhabiting varying physiographic areas in the mouza have been examined here.

As it has been stated earlier, Darrang is one of the plains districts of Assam embracing quite a large number of varied cultural groups. The district has altogether 27 mouzas and Chapai, the area of the present study is one of them. The overwhelming majority of the population of the mouza is rural and agriculturist by profession. In terms of physical features, population characteristics, mode of livelihood of the people and their ethnic background, Chapai mouza may be considered as a localised manifestation of the wider setting of the district. In view of this, a micro-level in depth study of the socio-economic
conditions of the people of Chapai *mouza* was undertaken in order to understand the overall situation prevailing in Darrang district as a whole. Having the problem of the present study introduced in Chapter I, the district and the *mouza* settings have been described in Chapter II.

The overall geo-ethnic environment of Chapai *mouza* has certain interesting features. The *mouza* can be broadly divided into two physiographic divisions, the built-up and the flood plain. The built-up area is inhabited by a number of communities - indigenous (the Hindus, the Muslims and the Bodo-Kacharis), inmigrants (the ex-tea garden labourers, the Hindi-speaking Muslims, the Marwars and the Bengali Hindus) and immigrants (the Hindus and the Muslims from erstwhile eastern Bengal and the Nepalis from Nepal). The flood plain area is, however, inhabited exclusively by the immigrant Muslims. Thus, the geo-ethnic situation of the *mouza* provides scope for examining the impact of historical, geographical and socio-cultural factors on the quality and content of socio-economic life of the people of the *mouza*. It is in this context that the present study has attempted to examine the distribution pattern and demographic make-up of the different communities, socio-cultural life including inter-community relations and economic characteristics of various communities living in different physiographic areas and also in rural and urban situations.

Migrations of peoples to Darrang district and Chapai *mouza* have significantly contributed towards the growth of ethnic diversity and also resulted in spectacular social transformation. A few ethnic groups have also come into existence in the area as a consequence of prolonged interactions between the migrants and the autochthones. The different communities inhabiting the study area, maintain
their separate identity through their exclusive community institutions and organizations. But at the same time, spatial proximity, sharing of common institutions and organizations, ecological setting and mode of livelihood have provided many opportunities of social contact among diverse groups. The participation of various communities in a common peasant culture and economy has helped to minimise the social distance between differing communities and has also provided avenues for various kinds of interactions. It has become evident from the discussions in Chapter III that interactions between the indigenous Hindus and the Muslims are more pronounced. This is because of the fact that these two communities have had a long period of coexistence at their disposal to reach mutual understanding and camaraderie.

To pass on to the demographic characteristics of the study area discussed in Chapter IV. The growth of population in Darrang district between 1901 and 1991 turns out to be abnormally higher than that of Assam and India as a whole. In Chapai mouza also the growth rate during that period is much higher than that of India, though it is slightly lower than that of the state. The fantastic rate of population growth in the district and that in the mouza is due mainly to immigration of peasants from the erstwhile East Bengal. This is evident from the fact that the flood plain area and seven villages in the extreme north of the mouza were vacant lands till 1901. These areas have come to be occupied by the immigrant Muslims since 1935 only. At present, the flood plain area and many of those northern villages are exclusively inhabited by the immigrant Muslims. As a result, the density of population in the mouza is found to be much higher than in many other parts of the district and more than double the density of the district as a whole.
The study area is inhabited by a number of religious and linguistic groups. The Assamese Hindus are the numerically dominant group in the mouza. In 1901 they constituted a little over 85 per cent of the total population. This percentage has decreased to nearly 58 per cent in 1985. This conspicuous decrease is due to the immigration of Muslim and Hindu peasants from eastern Bengal to this area. In 1901, there were no immigrant Muslims in the area and the Bengali Hindus constituted less than one per cent. In 1985, the percentage of immigrant Muslims soared to more than 15 per cent and that of Bengali Hindus to a little over 9 per cent. This increase is the result of the immigration of the Hindus and the Muslims. At present the proportion of immigrant Muslims in the area is much higher than that of the indigenous Muslims. The Bodo-Kacharis, one of the indigenous tribal groups, constitute nearly 7 per cent of the total population of the mouza.

The age-sex structure of the population of the mouza broadly indicates the characteristics of a growing population typical to agricultural communities. However, a declining trend of child population is also evident. There is communitywise variation in the age-sex structure. For example, decline of child population has started much earlier among the Assamese Hindus than among the Assamese Muslims, the immigrant Muslims and many other communities.

It is a fact that the less developed countries have higher child dependency ratio than the more developed countries. The dependency ratio is used as a measure of the impact of age composition on economy and as an index of socio-economic development. The higher is the child dependency ratio, the larger is the number of consumers, relative to producers. In the study
area, the dependency ratio is much lower than that of Assam and India as a whole. It is also lower than that of the less developed countries. Again, among the different communities of the study area, the dependency ratio is the lowest among the Assamese Hindus and the highest among the Bengali Hindus. It should be noted here that the people below 15 years of age in the study area are not always economically unproductive. As in many other agricultural communities some of them are also engaged in various economic activities.

An examination of the socio-cultural life of the people in Chapter V. shows that in the study area nuclear families are the dominant type. Both in rural and urban areas, this type of families predominate and in the urban situation their percentage is much higher than the rural areas. Of all the communities both in rural and urban areas, the Muslims show the highest percentage of nuclear families. The families have several socio-economic imperatives and often form part of the wider kin group. The trend of shifting emphasis from joint to nuclear families is clearly observed among different communities in the study area. Such a trend has also been noticed in some other areas of Assam (Cantlie 1984 : 37 -52 ; Medhi and Ali 1995 : 28-45)

The population of the study area is a heterogenous one in terms of religion and language. The extent of heterogeneity has further been augmented by migration of people to this area. It has already been indicated that the study area experienced large scale immigration in the early part of this century. But at present less than one quarter of the total population of the mouza have their place of birth outside the mouza. More than 50 per cent of the population of the mouza both in the rural as well as in the urban areas, have their duration of residence
for more than 50 years. The percentage of population found to be directly related to the duration of residence both in rural and urban areas. However, among the immigrant groups, there is a deviation of this trend. Among them the highest percentage of population have their duration of residence between 30 to 50 years. This indicates that the magnitude of immigration was the highest in the 1940s.

The literacy rate of the mouza is much higher than that of the district and the state of Assam. The literacy rate in the urban area is much higher than that of the rural area. The male literacy is also much higher than that of the female literacy. There is an identifiable difference in the literacy rate among different communities of the study area. In the rural areas, the Assamese Muslims show the highest and the people under 'others' category, show the lowest literacy. The Assamese Hindus show more or less the same literacy rate with the Assamese Muslims in the rural context. However, they show the highest literacy in the urban area.

The diversity in the way of life of the different communities inhabiting the study area may be illustrated in almost all the spheres of their life. Of these, religion and language are the two most significant ones. The overwhelming majority of the people of the study area live in thatched houses. The preponderance of thatched houses is partly due to the availability of raw materials locally, and partly, to the poor economic condition of the people. Though there are rural-urban differences, intercommunity variation is hardly observed among the indigenous groups in respects of types of houses. The houses among the immigrant Muslims, however, are easily distinguishable for having a hump at the centre of the roof. This type of houses was the necessity in the ecological
condition of the cyclone prone areas wherefrom these people have migrated. But in the present setting, that type has no relevance and hence many immigrant Muslims have now started constructing houses like the indigenous people. Moreover, this may also be viewed as a clear case of culture contact resulting in transmission of material cultural items. Rice being the staple food of the overwhelming majority of the people of the mouza, one hardly finds any significant difference in the food habit of the different communities. In respect of dress, the tribals of the mouza stand apart from the rest of the communities. The dress pattern of the indigenous Hindus and the Muslims does not show any significant variation. The green lungi of the males and the green sarees of the females make the immigrant Muslims distinguishable from the rest.

The medical and public health facilities in the mouza, more particularly in the rural areas, are not adequate. As a result, people in many interior villages are still following traditional medical practices. Whatever medical facilities available in Mangaldai town are beyond the reach of many villagers primarily because of physical distance and their poor economic condition. The sanitary condition in the rural areas of the mouza is extremely poor and water supply system is also not at all properly developed. The insufficient medical and public health facilities in the mouza to a considerable extent reflect the unfavourable socio-economic condition of the people.

Aspects of economic life of the people of the study area have been discussed in Chapter VI. Agriculture is the principal basis of subsistence among majority of the people of Chapai mouza. In this predominantly agricultural setting, the economic resources consist mainly of the land and other resources like livestock,
agricultural tools and implements, labour, capital, etc. The temporal change in the land use pattern in the *mouza*, is also worth mentioning. There is considerable extension of agriculture in the area since the beginning of the present century. As a result, an identifiable decrease of unclassed land from 1901 to 1995, is noticed. The area of land under water, has also changed largely to arable land following construction of embankments. The pressure of increasing population on land is manifested in different ways. For example, with the increase of residential areas there has been corresponding decrease of areas of the land used as seedbed and for horticulture. It has already been pointed out that a trend of breaking up of joint families into nuclear families is observed in the study area. This has resulted in the extension of residential area and in the fragmentation of land. Consequently, the land holding size of the families has decreased from large to small. There are variations in land holding among different communities. But no clear cut pattern of land holding is discernible communitywise.

Most of the people of the *mouza* follow traditional methods of cultivation. The irrigation facilities in the area is also inadequate. The majority of the agricultural area is under paddy crops (both local and high yielding varieties) followed by cash crops like mustard, jute, wheat, pulses, etc. An analysis of the crop pattern of the *mouza* on the basis of the physiographic divisions reveals that while paddy is the major crop grown in the built-up area, the areas under vegetables are more than the areas under paddy in the flood plain. This is because, the flood plain remains under water during the most part of the summer.

The area under double-cropping has increased significantly since 1901.
It appears that previously one crop a year was sufficient to maintain the subsistent families. But with the increase of population, land became scarce compelling some people to go for double cropping. The immigrant Muslims have contributed a lot in increasing the area under double cropping. The areas under ahu paddy and jute have also increased considerably from 1901. The increase of areas under these crops is directly the contribution of the Muslim immigrants.

The traditional occupation of majority of the people of the mouza is agriculture. Many of the people are also found in various wage earning occupations and salaried jobs. Thus, significant occupational change has taken place among the people inhabiting the study area. Less than 50 per cent of the total population of the mouza are workers. The percentage of non-workers gradually decreases with the increase of age. From 50 years onwards, there is again a gradual rise of the non-working population. Though persons below 15 years and above 64 years are considered as dependants, many individuals in the age group of 10-14 years and above 64 years in the study area are found to engage in different occupations. This indicates that not all the persons below 15 years and above 64 years are fully dependants.

An analysis of the communitywise occupational pattern of the people of the mouza reveals that the occupational mobility is the highest among the Assamese Hindus both in rural and urban areas. In the urban area, the extent of occupational mobility among the Bengali Hindus is next to the Assamese Hindus. The urban Assamese Muslims come next to the Bengali Hindus in respect of occupational mobility. It may be noted here that in the urban area,
the indigenous Hindus and the Muslims have dominated the professional categories and the Bengali Hindus have become a predominant group in business.

The poor economic condition of the people of the mouza is also reflected in their income pattern. In the rural areas, more than 70 per cent families are found in the low income group and only a little above 2 per cent, belong to high income group. In the urban area, however, more than 50 per cent of the families belong to middle income group and little below 20 per cent of the families belong to low income group. Of all the communities in the rural areas, all the ex-tea garden labourer families belong to low income group. The percentage of low income group families is the lowest among the Assamese Muslims. The percentage of the middle income group and the high income group families are also the highest among the Assamese Muslims. However, it should be emphasised here that broadly speaking the economic condition of the indigenous Hindus and the Muslims is by and large the same. In the urban area, the situation is somewhat different. The number of low income group families is the highest among the Assamese Muslims and lowest among the Bengali Hindus. Among the Assamese Hindus, the middle income group families are the highest. The highest number of high income group families is found among the Bengali Hindus.

Compared to the rural people of the built-up area, the economic condition of their counterparts in the flood plain is bad. The majority of the area in the flood plain remains under water during summer as a result of which, people inhabiting this area cannot utilize the land during this period. The immigrant Muslims are the only inhabitants of the flood plain. When the economic condition of the immigrant Muslims, living in the built-up and the flood
plain areas are taken into consideration, certain interesting features are noticed. Despite some natural constraints, the economic condition of the immigrant Muslims of the flood plain area is relatively better than that of the immigrant Muslims of the built-up area. The flood plain is attached to the south-east boundary of Mangaldai town. As a result of this, the immigrant Muslims inhabiting the flood plain have been able to take advantage of all the urban amenities offered by the town. Further, Mangaldai town has provided them the opportunities of taking up various wage earning occupations and petty trades. The physical proximity has also facilitated the spread of education among these immigrant Muslims. On the otherhand, the villages of the built-up area inhabited by the immigrant Muslims are situated nearly 15 km. away from Mangaldai town for which they have not been able to take advantage of the amenities offered by Mangaldai town.

The importance of rural areas in the context of Chapai mouza can not be ignored. This is because of the fact that, as in parts of North East India and in Assam, a vast majority of the people in the study area are ruralites who attach great importance to their ways of living, language, dialects, culture and habitat.

Mangaldai town is the only urban area in the whole of the mouza. This town, like most of the other towns of this part of the country lives in its rural surroundings. As a result of this, it is difficult to demarcate its boundary from the surrounding rural areas. After formation of the Darrang district in 1983 with its headquarters at Mangaldai there has been several infrastructural expansions, however unplanned, coupled with increase of population in the town without extension of the town boundary. This has happened because of the absence
of proper planning of the township. If this kind of expansions are allowed to continue, Mangaldai town will be converted into a congested, unhygienic urban settlement having all pollutant urban problems in the near future leaving little room for remedial planning and development. Hence, proper planning of Mangaldai town should be urgently undertaken. Planning of Mangaldai town is necessary not only for the town itself, but also for making the town a centre for disseminating developmental pulses to the neighbouring villages which fall within Chapai mouza. It is often seen that the development of a region is brought about by an efficient growth point. We can take Mangaldai town as a growth point or service centre for the mouza under study and hence it is believed that a coherent and well planned development of Mangaldai town is a *conditio sine qua non* for the development of the mouza.

In the agrarian economy of Chapai mouza, the people are still following conventional method of cultivation in the existing ecological condition. The mode of livelihood of the people have several linkages with their socio-cultural life, beliefs and practices and habits. Irrigation facilities in the study area are insufficient as a result of which the villagers had primarily to depend on climogenic supply of water. Agricultural output cannot be increased without assured irrigation. Further, mechanization of cultivation, use of high yielding varieties of seeds, mixed cropping, application of fertilizers, and pest management are some of the steps which urgently need to be undertaken in the study area for increasing the agricultural production and for improving the economic condition of the people. In this regard, attempts should also be made to motivate the people for the acceptance of new innovations.

It appears that there is ample scope for the improvement of the cottage
industries particularly, cane industry, busketry and handloom in the study area. The productions of cane industry of the locality are of high demand. But the industry is facing acute problems of raw materials in recent years. The concerned authorities should come forward to help the growth of the industry by supplying raw materials providing and financial assistance. Necessary steps should also be taken by the concerned authorities for gainful marketing of the products of busketry and handloom. This will generate a sense of security in the minds of the people engaged at present in those crafts. This will also inspire confidence among the people to produce more in accordance with the growing demand.

For the development of the present study area, which is overwhelmingly rural in character, there should be a thrust on identifying the felt need of the villagers and on empathetic introduction of developmental programmes with the participation of the villagers. The empirical reality of the area should have a bearing on the development strategies.