CHAPTER 1

Introduction
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The state of Assam, the largest of North East Indian States, can be roughly divided into two valleys. The larger of them is the Brahmaputra Valley and the other is known as the Barak Valley. The Barak Valley now consists of 3 districts, namely Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Before the advent of the British rule, the Cachar and the Hailakandi districts formed a part of the Kachari Kingdom. At the time of Partition and Independence and for some years afterwards, the present district of Hailakandi formed a sub-division of the district of Cachar. The Barmans, who form the subject matter of the present study, mostly are inhabitants of the present district of Cachar. They belong to the same tribe and community as the Kachari Kings. Today, they form only 0.06 percent of the total population of Cachar. But, they have their distinct ethnic, cultural and social features, which identify them from other communities. The community deserves attention of scholars; and the changes that occurred in the post-Independence decades need to be studied thoroughly to establish their situation in the social and political environment in which they live now.

They seemingly began to lose their importance with the end of the Kachari rule. It may not be out of place to mention here that the 19th-century dramatist, Dinabandhu Mitra, the author of the famous "Nil Darpan" or "Indigo Mirror" wrote a drama under the title of "Kamale Kamini".¹

¹: Mitra, S. C., Saral Bangla Abhidan, P-1391.
The drama is set in Cachar under the Manipuri rule and we see in it the important characters that are all Manipuri or Burmese. But we do not come across a Barman or Kachari character anywhere in the text of the drama. This shows how speedily their influence diminished after they lost the status of the ruling race. But they did not give up their identity, which they still retain, admittedly, of course, with the inevitable changes, they had to undergo with the passage of time.

The Barmans, inhabiting the Barak plains, like their hill brethren; the Dimasas have always been mainly a rural people till today. Their social structure and political system have always been village-based. Every Barman village was a tiny republic, self-dependent and self-sufficient. They have not given up their systems. It is, of course, now difficult for them and for their own political system to function as they did before. The reasons are not far to seek. Exclusive Barman villages are rare things today. There are about 116 Barman inhabited villages in the Barak Valley. A village is not now, a homogeneous entity, having other communities living in it as well. The percentage of the Barman inhabitants varies from village to village. So, the socio-political environment also varies from place to place. Only in a few villages, their own institutions can function without any hindrance. However, the Barmans living in villages have their Kunangs or Headman who can only deal with their community affairs. They can adhere to their system and the way of life in predominantly Barman villages and the mixed villages, where they are not a majority but form a
sizable section, free from outside interference only in their internal matters.

Thus, in spite of their reluctance to accept the outside influences, they are subjected to these influences that keep affecting them. But, they have not given up their characteristic features, systems and the way of life. These keep them a distinct people against the heavy odds.

But no serious study has been made of the present state of the Barman political system and culture. The people have now among themselves many members who are educated or being educated and a considerable number of them are government servants etc. So, some changes in their life style and the way of thinking are inevitable. But these are mainly outward changes. They are still a well-knit community bound by their age-old features, social systems that necessitate the study of them as a separate people.

Though, there has not been much work on the Barmans’ political and social system, there are considerable number of written works on them in general. In this study, relevant facts contained in these works have been used. A list of them can be seen in the Bibliography.

Beside the aforesaid works, selected people were interviewed and facts known from them were recorded and made use of in the present study. Some sample field visits were undertaken in the villages and the data and other facts collected during the visits in the selected Barman villages were analysed, then analyses and conclusions drawn from them have been shown in the work in proper places.
This work aims at pointing out that the Kacharis of the Barak Valley, i.e. the Barmans, have always felt the necessity of retaining their identity from which their traditional internal political system is quite inseparable. Their political system may not have the legal force in the territory where they live, but they apply and abide by these laws wherever it is possible for them without violating the laws in force in the country. There are still the institutions and offices functioning in the Barman villages and also in the villages where they are not the predominant people. They have not even given up the worship of their village deity and observances of their traditional festivals in which they now invite even non-Barmans to take part. In their villages, the elderly men and women still wear their traditional garments. Their food habits in spite of the influences of their neighbours have not totally changed. They send their children to schools and colleges and they later enter mostly government and semi government services. Very recently, they have begun to accept jobs under private ownership. But there are a few changes that have been occurring very slowly because they are still reluctant to give up their traditional way of life and thinking.

It is this reluctance of theirs that has enabled them to retain much of their age-old political system, which is still functioning, in however, reduced a form. It is the continuance of the existence of the village-based political system and administration that has made it possible for the institutions to continue to exist till today. Efforts have been made in this study to find out how much of the
traditional political system of the Barmans is still in existence and how much of it is lost and what future has in store for it.

**Scope of the study**

1. The present study aims at discussing the extent of the survival of the Barmans tribal institutions, especially the internal political and social institutions. It will also involve the study of the extent of the influences the institution's exercises in the predominantly Barman and partially Barman villages, as villages, inhabited only by the Barmans, have become almost extinct.

2. Change is inevitable in any tribal or non-tribal society. Changes occur in economic life, social life and also political situation. The study will also aim at determination of the extent and nature of changes in these institutions effected by these factors.

3. The extent of the spread of literacy and education among the Barmans and the effects they produce on their tendency to preserve their rural character and institutions.

4. Comparative extent of influences exercised by general politics of their country and their internal political institutions.
Objectives of the study

1. To understand the process through which the Barmans have come to the present state.

2. To find out the extent to which the transformations have taken place in their life.

3. To determine the nature of changes those have come about and are coming about.

Methodology & collection of data

The study depended on both primary and secondary sources of data analysis that are used:

(a) The primary data came from field visits and interviews with knowledgeable Barman villagers and changes perceived by them. The sample respondent has drawn from the selected villages through purposive random sampling methods. In accordance with the stated delimitation, the geographical area of the study is limited to Cachar, the Barmans' home district. There are 116 Barman-inhabited villages. Of them 15 are selected surveyed villages. These villages are classified into mixed tribal and non-tribal majority categories, where they each form not less than 40 percent of the population. In each village about 1 in
every three households was randomly selected by lottery method. A schedule was developed to collect the information from each family about the name of the head of the family, type of the family, nuclear or extended, name of each member, sex, age, relationship with the head, marital status, educational status, occupation, type of house, religion practice, land holding, political participation and views, monthly income, relation with non-Barman neighbours, views on continued existence of the traditional institutions.

(b) The sources of secondary data are articles, books, documents and seminar papers published on the Barmans or containing facts about them from time to time. Apart from the published governmental and non-governmental reports, published local newspaper reports and unpublished documents are also used as the secondary sources of data for this purpose. The documents include, census report of 1961, 1971 Statistical Hand Book of Assam, 1991-2000. They also include, a treaty, official papers available from the Integrated Tribal Development Office and those from the office of the Deputy Director, Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, Silchar.

The Newspaper’s reports are clippings from Silchar Bengali dailies the Sonar Cachar, the Jugashankha and the Guwahati edition of the Telegraph.
Hypothesis

Since the study is explorative in nature, no hypothesis is proposed.

Delimitations

The scope of the study is limited to the Barak Valley though occasional references to the North Cachar Hills have to be made where necessary.

Survey of Literature

The Barmans are originally a sub-branch of the Dimasa branch of the Kachari race, whose members are believed to be the earliest settlers of the Brahmaputra Valley. They are believed to have ruled over that region and parts of North Bengal in a distant past. But there are no records available relating to the period earlier than the 13th century when the Ahoms, who had a tradition of recording, or getting recorded important events and deeds in what are known as Ahom Burunjis, in which the Kacharis first emerge into history therefore, we have to look to the Ahom Burunjis for the early history of the Dimasas and the Barmans.

A considerable number of facts about the Barmans and the Dimasas are available in "History of the relations of the government with the Hill tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal" by A. Mackenzie, first published in 1884 and it is
now in its 1999 edition re-entitled "The North East Frontier of India".

We come across the Dimasas in the "Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam" by Major John Butler of the 55th Regiment, Bengal Native Army, and the Principal Assistant Agent to the Governor General for N. E. Frontier. The book had been written in the form of a travelogue and published in 1855, gives us a short glimpse of the situation the Dimasas lived in, in the North Cacher Hills.

"The Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal" by E.T. Dalton, first published in 1878 and now available in its 1978 edition under the title of "Tribal History of Eastern India" not only contains a chapter on the Kacharis but also shows the differences growing up between the Damasas and the Barmans in the matters of physique and temperament.

"The Statistical Account of Assam", Vol-I, a publication by W.W. Hunter, contains valuable facts about the Cachar and the Barmans. It was first published in 1879 from London.

"An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Kachari Tribes" by C. A. Soppitt, the first Sub-divisional officer of North Cachar Hills, published in 1855, throws much light on the social, religious, economic and cultural life of the Dimasas in the hills.

Sir Edward Gait includes a chapter on the Kacharis in his famous "History of Assam" first published in 1905. The chapter gives us a comparatively clear picture of Kachari history i.e. the history of the Barmans and the Dimasas. In 1905, the 1st volume of Assam District Gazetteers dealing
with the territory and people of the Cachar district was also published.


The events leading to annexation of Cachar to the British dominion in 1830 is narrated in "The British Paramountcy and Indian Renaissance" part-I edited by R.C. Mazumdar and published in 1970 (2nd edition). "Bangla O Bangaleer Bibartan" by Atul Sur, first published in 1986, makes mention of Bengalee migration from Bengal to the forests of Cachar, Kamrup and Assam in the 15th century.

India" edited by Farida Ahmed Das and Indira Barua, first published in 1996 contains an article under the title "A Woman in the Dimasa Society" by Suparna Barua, "Wonder that is Culture" edited by T.Subba is a collection of on ethno-cultural topics related mainly to different tribes. "Sociology of the Karbis" by Tanmay Bhattachajee is a book on the Karbis who are close neighbours of the Dimasas, the Barmans hill brethren.

"Queens of the Damasas" by Mr. N. K. Barman, deserves serious attention because he was both a member of the community and the scholar of the subject. The first edition of the book was published in 1885 and its second edition, published in 1993 is available now. The author narrates the role played by the two important queens in the periods immediately preceding the end of the Kachari Kingdom. But more importance has to be given to “Tribals in Transition” by P. J. Goswami published in 1995 because it deals exclusively with the changes that have occurred in the Socio-Economic life of the Barman community in the Barak Valley.

"The Demographic Profile of North East India” by S.C. Srivastave is a collection, compilation and the analyses of valuable demographic data.

Operational definition of Modernisation:

Modernisation, “does not denote any philosophy or movement, but it only symbolises a process of change. Infact, ‘Modernisation’ is understood as a process which indicates the adoption of the modern ways of life and values.”
Today, Modernisation is understood as an attempt, on the part of the people, particularly those who are custom-bound, to adopt themselves to the present time, conditions, styles and ways in general. It indicates a change in people's food habits, dress habits, speaking styles etc. It is also described as "social change involving the elements of science and technology." The scientific and technological inventions have modernised societies in various countries.

According to M. N. Srinivas, "Modernisation is normally used in the sense that it is good. He, therefore, prefers to use the term 'Westernisation' which characterises the changes brought about in Indian society and culture as result of 150 years of British rule."

Therefore, "Modernisation is the current term for an old process of social change whereby less developed societies acquired the characteristics common to more developed societies."

**Theoretical framework of Modernisation:**

The end of the Second World War was followed by the attainments of Independents of former colonies and dependencies, leading to the birth of many nation states.

The new nations were in a hurry to achieve rapid progress in education, economic condition, industrialisation and technology. These all required change in the social systems. Western social science came forward to aid and assist the International effort at co-operation in the change. Their efforts resulted in the formulation of what is now known as 'Modernisation'.

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Modernity is historically associated with the urban, industrial, literate and participant societies of Western Europe and North America. These societies have registered the impressive economic growth and continued to do so. Japan is the first Asian countries to join the race for industrialisation. Now many other countries have joined the race.

Three assumptions are the basic to the concept of modernisation:
1. Inanimate sources of power must be increasingly tapped and an acceptable standard of living ensured.
2. There must be both individual and collective efforts, latter being very important because, associational capability is to operate complex organisations.
3. To create and run complex organisations, radical personality change and attendant changes in the social structure and values are necessary.

The most essential feature of modernisation is 'rationality' which transforms thought, processes at the level of individual and in the process permeates the entire institutional framework of society.

Modernisation lays emphasis on the ever-increasing use of science and technology through complex organisations. The more advantaged sections of the society have easier access to both and can manipulate the organisations to gain maximum benefits, though the intention of their existence may be to benefit all sections of the society. The special needs of the weak and the vulnerable in the context of modernisation process are not specifically mentioned.
The results of the investigation have been organised into six integrated chapters. For the sake of the methodical description of the theme, the dissertation begins with the introduction and ends with the conclusion.