INTRODUCTION

I. Scope of the Study:

a) The Brahmaputra Valley: The Brahmaputra is one of the major rivers of the Indian subcontinent. Born in the glacial womb of the Kailash range of the Himalayas, south of Rake Kaggyen Tso (Gunkyed) lake in the south-west of Tibet at an elevation of 5300 meters, it transverses the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, passes through the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, before cutting across the length of Bangladesh to meet the Ganges and finally plunge into the Bay of Bengal. Inside Assam the major portion of the river flows from east to west through the plains of the state. Therefore, basically the plains of Assam are referred to as the Brahmaputra valley. It may be noted that the plains and foothills of neighbouring states contiguous to Assam also come under the Brahmaputra valley although they are not politically within the boundary of Assam. Thus the plains of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Meghalaya bordering on this valley also form its parts. Entering into Assam, the Brahmaputra meets two other major rivers, the Lohit and the Dibong and they together take on an incredibly wide, braided, westerly course through the Brahmaputra valley, turn southward around the Garo Hills below Dhubri in Assam and make its journey to the sea across Bangladesh.

b) A Demographic Melting Pot with Focus on the Tribal Population: According to R.C. Majumder, the Brahmaputra was a highway of migration,
leading to potentialities of a high civilization. On one side of the river lay western China, which anthropologists call the great repository of Mongoloid races, from where people fanned out in prehistoric eras to claim the Himalayas, the plateaus, the slopes and South-East Asia as their own. On the other side lay the Indian sub-continent with its own pattern of ethnic conflicts and assimilation, cultural synthesis, and evolution. The Brahmaputra valley was the corridor and the river itself was the highway linking the two, allowing religious and cultural transference. The river, too, facilitated waves of migration into this region from all directions, enabling the people to move in and out along with their respective cultural traits (See Dutta 2001:87-88).

Broadly speaking, the Caucasoid elements entered into the region through the west and the Mongoloid through the east, north and to some extent through south. In the process, the hills and the plains of what today is called the north-east India constitute a melting pot of different ethnic groups, cultures and religions. That brewed up a mechanism for identity formation having a resulting set of ethos scarcely to be encountered anywhere else in the country.

If the North-East is an ethnographic warehouse, the contribution of Assam, particularly of the Brahmaputra valley, towards adding colour to the spectrum is by any standard marvelous, considering the plethora of tribes and groups which inhabit the land and who have contributed to make the Assamese identity a pluri-cultural reality. Anthropologists broadly divide the population living in the Brahmaputra valley and surrounding hills into two constituents – the tribal and the non-tribal. The tribal population by and large belongs to the Indo-Mongoloid racial stock. Linguistically they can be
divided into Tibeto-Burman, Sino-Tibetan and Austro speaking groups. The largest among the tribal segment, are the Bodos. The other important tribes are the Mising (Miri), the Karbi (Mikir), the Tiwa (Lalung), the Deuri, the Rabha, the Sonowal, the Dimasa, the Hajong, the Chutiya, etc. belonging to Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. The tribes like the Tai-Phake, the Tai-Khamti, the Tai-Aiton, the Tai-Turong etc. belong to the Sino-Tibetan linguistic group and they are the followers of the Hinayana Buddhism.

The non-tribal Assamese communities mainly comprise of the Hindu castes as well as Muslims. The Hindu castes can be broadly divided into Brahmins and non-Brahmins (*sudras*). The non-Brahmins are sub-divided into several castes such as Kayastha, Kalita, Ganak, Kaibarta, Hira, Kumar, Jogi, Keot, etc. The socio-cultural fabric of the valley has also been enriched by the presence of a sizable Muslim community. This population has been founded by four different ways – a) Muslim soldiers captured in war, b) artisans brought by ruling houses, c) Muslim proselytizers and d) local converts.

The annexation of Assam by the British brought in its wake another groups of people to this region. The Bengalis were brought in large number by the imperialists to man the clerical stratum of the administration. The British also resorted to large scale importation of tribal from other parts of India to work in their tea-plantations, creating a well-defined tea-worker community. These workers are recruited from different areas of the country such as West Bengal, Orissa, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh.

Along with the British also came the Marowari community of traders who not only contributed to the economic life of the Brahmaputra
valley but also to its socio-cultural vitality. Nepalis also constitute a substantial portion of the population, who made their entry after arrival of the British.

Apart from the entry of people from other parts of India, the post-independence decades have witnessed large-scale migration from erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh (See Dutta, 2001).

c) The Tribals and the Non-Tribals in the Context of the Assamese Society:

From the cultural point of view, the population of the valley could be divided into two categories –

i) Those tribal groups, both in the hills and the plains, who have retained their tribal identity but who have been acculturated in various degrees as a result of living in close proximity to or contact with the non-tribal Sanskritized majority, or through the impact of Buddhism, Christianity or Islam.

ii) Those societies which are more or less fully Sanskritized, where the population is substantially made up of erstwhile Indo-Mongoloid stocks. Local Muslims of this region, although not Sanskritized from the religious point of view, culturally form a part of this milieu.

In the process of Sanskritization of the latest category of the population, two agencies have been at work: the Hindu religion and an Indo-Aryan language, i.e., Assamese. In the present-day Assam valley, almost all the tribes are bilingual as they have accepted Assamese as their second language. In some cases, the tribal language has been given up altogether.
and Assamese has replaced the same as the mother-tongue. Even the Sanskritized Hindu communities of this region retain elements which, according to orthodox Hindu standard, are patently tribal. For example, the caste-system in the Assamese society is flexible and fairly liberal. While Brahmins do occupy a high position in the society, they do not dominate the scene. All the non-Brahmins are lumped together as *śudras* (shudras), among whom there is considerable inter-caste mobility; and there are practically no untouchables. Castes are not profession oriented and caste based disabilities are few. In the Assamese society, weaving is a most honoured and desired skill for women of all categories, unlike in any other part of India. Similarly, in the matter of food, not to speak of non Brahmins and non-Vaishavas, even the purest Assamese Brahmins have no scruples about eating fish and meat.

In the field of religion, side by side with the Brahminical gods and goddesses of pan-Indian affiliation, hosts of pre-Brahminic deities continue to receive veneration and propitiation. Often in the Assamese society belief in and worship of such deities are more or less confined to the Sanskritized peripheral communities.

Again, although neo-Vaishnavism has deeply touched the Assamese society, Saktism, and more particularly Saivism, continue to prevail in different forms. Apart from Bathou-Barai and Mouthansri of the Bodos, Gira-Girasi of the Deuris, Pha-Mahadeu and his consort of the Tiwas, and so on, which are original tribal versions of Siva-Parvati, the influence of Siva-Parvati on Assamese society is evidenced by the innumerable Siva temples and shrines scattered all over the land. Thus Hinduism has assumed in this region some peculiar features through the processes of syncretism.
In the field of material culture, there are certain distinctive peculiarities. Much of the traditional pattern of life in the hills center round jhuming (or shifting cultivation) which at best makes for a bare subsistence economy, gradually giving over to settled cultivation in the plains, even where the indigenous economy is hardly above subsistence level, professionalism and trade mindedness not being the strong points of the local population. Weaving exquisitely coloured and designed textiles by the womenfolk in their indigenous looms is a distinctive feature common to the lives of all the communities of the region including those who have been Sanskritized. What is more, even the dress worn by women of different group has a basic similarity land are practically variations of the same traditional format.

All this – and many other traits – make the distinction between the tribal and the non-tribal lose much of its relevance in the context of the socio-cultural milieu of this region. Here we have something which can be called tribe-caste continuum rather than tribe caste polarity. (See Datta et.al. 1994: Chapter-I).

d) Choice of the Topic:
Since our childhood, even in the vicinity of the growing city of Guwahati, we have been meeting people of different tribal communities and enjoying the privilege to learn about their cultures, often observing the so-called tribal and non-tribal peculiarities. In our own family, I grew up in an atmosphere where such matters were freely discussed. My father, a folklorist, always encouraged us to learn about different groups of people, their cultures and folk heritages. My elder brother and sister-in-law also studied Anthropology with specialization in Cultural Anthropology for their
post-graduation. As a young student of Anthropology, I became more and more involved with the implications of the cultural dynamics of the tribal - non-tribal relationship in the Assamese society. When we started doing fieldwork, I got further direct exposure to the realities of the situation. My first fieldwork for Part-I graduation course was in a plains Karbi village of Kamrup district. That experience was so exciting and enlightening that I became deeply interested in such kind of work. For our Part-II graduation course we had to do our fieldwork in a Bodo village of South Kamrup. Again, for our M.A. Previous course we studied the Garos of Assam and Meghalaya border, who live in the plains and are surrounded by the Rabhas. For the M.A. Final dissertation, I worked among the Misings of Central Assam and tried to understand their mechanism for cultural adaptation. All these experiences have given me the opportunity to learn about these plains tribal groups and their changing trends, especially due to contact with the neighbouring groups - in most of the cases, with the caste Hindu Assamese populations. After studying the cultural adaptation among the Mising of Baligaon village of Sonitpur district, I became seriously interested about the trends of culture change among different tribal groups of the Brahmaputra valley. The exposure I so far had provided me with an adequate background and emboldened me to involve myself in the present study.

For this present project I have selected five tribal groups from different areas representing the whole of the Brahmaputra valley. The geographical distribution of the five tribes is given below:

- Eastern Assam – Mising and Deuri
- Central Assam – Mising and Plains Tiwa
- Western Assam – Plains Tiwa, Plains Karbi and Rabha.
Through this study an attempt has been made to inquire into the details of the processes of culture change that are in progress among the selected groups. It was presumed that more or less identical processes could be observed among all of them. The parameters that have been considered for our study are of the following nature:

a. In the field of socio-economic life
b. In the field of social institutions
c. In the field of socio-religious life.
d. In the field of socio-political life.
e. In the field of material culture and language.

A period of fifty years, that is, form the time of Independence upto the turn of the century has been taken as the time-frame of the study. Most of the data belong to this particular period although some of the information relate back to much earlier periods. The data have been collected from persons belonging to three generations-- the elderly people above sixty years, the middle aged persons between thirty to fifty years, and the younger generation upto twenty years of age. These three generations represent the experiences and perspectives relevant to their respective age groups.

II. Methodology:

In the preparation of the study two kinds of work were involved deskwork and fieldwork. For the study of this nature, fieldwork is the most essential way of data collection, and we have done that extensively. However, prior to fieldwork, desk work is also equally important. According to Donald A. Mac Donald – "systematic field work usually begins at the desk, in the library and in the archive. If the chosen area has been studied in the past,
one must make oneself as familiar as possible with the results. Useful background information can also be gleaned from histories and guidebooks. Reading should be of course include general theory and practice" (Macdonald in Dorson 1972 : 407-408). I followed the prescription. For desk-work, a number of libraries, both public and personal, had been used. Different books, journals and other documents had been consulted to acquire the theoretical concept of culture change and also the ethnography of the tribes under study as well as of other tribes of the region..

For collecting field-data, the following methods had been used depending on their applicability and expediency: Interview method: and observation method. In support of these two methods, we had also taken the help of case study and genealogical methods. For general guidance in the matter of research methodology, I mostly depended on the famous work of P.V. Young (Young 1984).

We are now giving some details regarding the methods used by us.

The interview method had been used throughout the study. In most of the cases, open interview method had been adopted, where the interviewer and the informant both are free to talk irrespective of time and topic. This method was found to be most useful. Through this method, while collecting information on any area, much further relevant information belonging to other areas of interest could also be obtained. On the other hand, for collecting in-depth data over a particular topic or area, the focus-interview method had been used.
Observation is another important method that has been used. Though the non-participant observation method had been used most of the time, in a small number of cases we had also taken recourse to the participant observation method, particularly in the cases of festivals, ceremonies and rituals.

Apart from these two methods, which we had used constantly, genealogical and case-study methods were also used in a limited number of cases. For example, to establish particular pieces of information, case studies became very useful. Changes in many aspects could be visualized with the help of case-studies involving different age-groups. Similarly, by drawing genealogical charts, changes in different aspects of life through a number of generations could be visualized.

At least ten villages were chosen from each of the five selected communities on the basis of the following criteria:

a) Representation of different divisions within the same community
b) Accessibility and availability of contact-persons and reliable informants
c) A minimum acquaintance with the prevailing situation acquired through pre-field preparation

Visual Documentation: I used to carry a camera with me during my field visits. Most of the photographs incorporated in the thesis were taken by me. I have also taken the help of maps for locating selected villages.
References:


