CHAPTER – 2
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF THE TRIBES OF THE REGION

I. India’s North-East and Its Tribes:

Though the term North-East India refers to a geographic location, it has got a unique cultural distinction which can not be found elsewhere in India. Mention had been made in the introductory chapter about the uniqueness of north-east India and its culture. Though there are considerable diversities within the region, there remains a basic unity characterizing the seven units making up North-East India – Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Mizoram.

The socio-cultural milieu of this region holds up in the present day, as it has done in the past, a picture that somehow distinguishes it from the rest of India. The socio-cultural pattern of the north-eastern region should be studied in a frame of reference which is specific for this region and which, although not being in full conformity with the all-India frame of reference, need not be considered non-Indian or even less-Indian than the other one. There is so much here that is obviously of all-India affiliation and perhaps somewhat more that is peculiarly North-East Indian.(Datta et al 1994).

The geographical area of North-East India is 255,083 sq.km., and mountains, hills and plateaus cover 70% of the region. There are more
than 80 main tribes with numerous subdivisions who often claim separate identity. Racially the tribes of N.E. India belong to the Indo-Mongoloid stock and with the exception of the Austric-speaking Khasi-Jaintia tribes, speak Sino-Tibetan languages of Tibeto-Burman and Siamese-Chinese branches. Tibeto-Burman speaking people belong to Boro, Garo, Naga, Kuki-Chin and North-Assam groups, whereas a small Tai-speaking group belongs to Siamese-Chinese branch. Tribal populations vary from a few hundreds to one hundred thousand, except in the case of six tribes, each with more than a quarter million population. Percentages of tribal populations in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are around 80% or more; in Manipur and Tripura around 30%, and in Assam between 10%, and 15%. On the basis of linguistic, ethnographic and administrative considerations, these tribes are divided into generic groups such as Bodo, Naga, Kuki, Mizo, Khasi-Jaintia, etc. Bodo tribes mainly live in Assam and Tripura; Naga tribes in Nagaland, Manipur and Assam; Kuki tribes in Manipur, Mizoram and Assam; Mizo tribes in Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura; and matrilineal Khasi-Jaintia and Garo tribes in Meghalaya and Assam.

We are giving below the state-wise distribution of different tribes except in Assam (as we have given detail account of the tribes of Assam in the later part of this chapter).

**Manipur:**

Bounded by Nagaland on the north, Mizoram on the south, Assam on the west and Burma on the east, the state has a land surface of 22,327 sq. km.

Manipur has a population of 1,826,714 (1991 Census) of which two-thirds live in the valley and the rest in the hills. The valley is inhabited
almost entirely by the Meities, the non-tribals, while the hills are the abode of as many as 29 tribes, mostly of Naga and Kuki stocks. Some of tribes shift their alignments with the broader groups. Some prefer to identify themselves separately. The major tribes are – Thadou, Tangkhul, Kabui, Mao and Paite. The language of this valley is *Meitei-lol*, which belongs to the Kuki-Chin group of the Tibeto-Burman family. This language also serves the tribal groups of the state who speak different languages. The Naga tribes of Manipur are the following – the Tangkhul, the Rongmei (Kabui), the Mao, the Kacha Naga (Liangmai), the Lamgang, the Maring, the Anal, the Monsong, the Moyou, the Zemi, the Thangal, the Angami and the Sema Naga. The main communities of non-Naga groups are Aimol, the Chothe, the Paite, the Ralte and any other Mizo-Lushai groups.

**Tripura:**

The geographic location of the state is as follows – Bangladesh on the north, west and south-west, Assam and Mizoram on the east. A narrow strip through Assam (Barak Valley) and Mizoram links it with the rest of India. Covering an area of 10,486 square k.m. Tripura can be geographically divided into three broad zones – the hill region, the flat plains, and the river basin. The population figure in the 1991 census is 2,744,827.

The original inhabitants of Tripura have been tribal groups like the Tipras, the Rheangs and the Hrangkhols, most of whom belong to the Bodo group of Indo-Mongoloid family. Of the indigenous population, the Tipras or Tripuris constitute the most prominent group. They are supposed to be the oldest inhabitants having links with some of the Bodo groups of Assam.
Arunachal Pradesh:

Bounded by Tibet in the north, Assam and Nagaland in the south and south-west Burma in the east and Bhutan in the west, Arunachal Pradesh, formerly known as North East Frontier Agencies or NEFA, covers an area of 83,743 sq.km. and thus has the largest territory among the seven units of the North-East.

The population of Arunachal Pradesh, 858,392 according to the 1991 census, is made up of over 82 tribes and sub-tribes of Indo-Mongoloid origin. All these groups have their distinctive social and cultural identities, speaking different languages and dialects of Tibeto-Burman family and following different beliefs and customs. The territory can be conveniently divided into three main cultural zones – the first zone belongs to the Buddhist or near-Buddhist groups of the westernmost parts, other small tribes along the northern frontier and the Khamtis and the Singhphos in the foothills of the eastern parts. These Buddhist and near-Buddhist groups have elements of civilization considerably influenced by Tibet and Burma. The Monpas and the Sherdukpons are followers of Tibetan Buddhism while the Khamptis and Singphos, who are Buddhist of Burmese affiliation, have migrated from the Irrawady valley in relatively recent times and lived in close proximity to the plains of Assam. The Buguns (Khowas) the Hrussos (Akas) and the Dhammeis (Mijis), though not Buddhist themselves, have imbibed many cultural elements from their Buddhistic neighbours.

In the great central area live a large number of tribal groups who have been divided by the difficulty of communications and by the state of war in which they lived before they were brought under a common administration. The chief groups among these are the Adis (divided into
several groups), the Nishis (Daflas, Bangris), the Apatanis, the Hill Miris, the Tagins and the three groups of Mishmis.

The third area comprising the south eastern parts of the territory bordering on Burma, is inhabited chiefly by the Wanchos, the Noctes (who had adopted Assam Vaishnavism) and various small groups collectively known as Tangsa, and a small population of Singhphos and Khamptis.

Although all these groups have many traits in common, particularly in the three cultural zones, there are also certain others that distinguish them from one another.

Again, there have been contacts with the plains of Assam at various levels and a kind of patois of the Assamese language – sometimes designated as Nefamese – has served as lingua franca for communication among different groups.

Meghalaya:

It covers an area of 22,429 sq. km. And has Assam on its east and north, and Bangladesh on its west and south. The population of the state according to the 1991 census is 1,760,626.

The bulk of the inhabitants belong to three major tribal groups – the Garos, the Khasis and the Syntengs or Pnars who are more popularly known as Jaintias. While another section of the population is made up of such other tribal groups as the Rabhas, the Hajongs, the Tiwas and the Koches, there is also a sizable number of non-tribals scattered in different parts of the state.

The societies of the Khasis, the Jaintias and to a great extent of the Garos, are matrilineal in character, which distinguishes them from
other societies of the region. While the language of the Garos, who call themselves Achik, belong to the Bodo group of the Tibeto-Burman family, the Khasis and the Jaintias speak languages that belong to the Monkhmer family of Austric affiliation.

Christianity has made considerable impact on the major tribes of Meghalaya, particularly among the Garos and the Khasis. However, there are some sections among them who still follow the traditional religions. The non-Christian Garos call themselves “Sangsarik”. The Jaintias had once come very close to Hinduism, particularly the Sakti cult.

Nagaland:

It is a land of rugged hills with small plains tracts, the total area being 16,579 sq.km. The state is bounded by Assam in the north and North-West, Manipur in the south, Arunachal Pradesh in the north-east and Burma in the east. The population according to 1991 census is 1,215,573.

The bulk of the inhabitants of Nagaland are known as Nagas who are believed to be among the earliest migrants from south-east Asia to North-East India across the Assam plains.

There are more than twenty Naga tribes and sub-tribes, the more well-known among them being the Angamis, the Aos, the Semas, the Lothas, the Konyaks, the Chakesangs, the Sangtams, the Changs, the Yimchungers, the Zeliangs and the Rengmas. All of them speak different dialects unintelligible to one another. For mutual communication they use a kind of pidgin Assamese, which has been named as Nagamese – i.e., Assamese as adopted by the Nagas. Incidentally, contacts with the people of the plains have been regular and abiding.
Sturdy and [A]rile, the Nagas have been invenerate lovers of freedom. Inter-clan and inter-village feuds have been very common in the past and head-hunting was once very much a part of the Naga way of life. Much of the Naga character of independence and alertness had been built up through the institution of the morungs or bachelor's dormitories.

Today, the majority of the Nagas have adopted Christianity. Along with it, rapid spread of western education and the impact of modern western standards have made deep inroads into traditional Naga beliefs and customs. However, the Nagas are a tradition-loving people, and a more or less distinctive Naga way of life is still being maintained.

Mizoram:

With an area of 21,081 sq kms Mizoram has a population of 686,217 according to the 1991 census.

The term Mizo, which means high lenders, refers to a composite group of allied tribes. These tribes started moving into their present abode in India from Chin hill tracts of Burma towards the beginning of the 18th century. The Lushai migration comprised the Hmars, the Pawis, the Raltes, the Paites, and the Thadous etc. The Lakhers came somewhat later, and the Chakmas were the last to enter from the Chittagong tract. Initially each tribe or clan was eager to maintain its distinctive identity in respect of dialect, religious beliefs and social customs. But subsequently a process of integration and assimilation came in to play, and there has now developed among them a common identity as Mizos. Although some of the major sub-tribes have retained their separate dialects within themselves, the minor ones have given up theirs in favour of the Lushai dialect called Dujlien. The Lushai hegemony has been accepted in other socio-cultural fronts as well.
The Mizos are a sturdy people. Certain distinctive features have characterized their traditional society and culture –

a) There was little distinction between high and low. Although the chief had full political authority over his subjects, in social life he was as such a commoner as others. The land belonged to the community, not to individuals; the crops have to be shared.

b) There was an elaborate code of chivalry called plawanghmaina, according to which one's conduct was to be led by consideration for others and the spirit of mutual help.

c) Zawlbuks or bachelors' dormitory constituted a most vital institution in the society. In the zawlbuks adolescent boys not only to slept but also got trained in discipline and service to the community.

d) An inherent spirit of self-help was nurtured. Wide spread acceptance of Christianity and a high percentage of literacy have caused the Mizo society to move pretty fast along the path of modernity. But there are many indications to show that they are also not in favour of fully giving up traditional ways.

II. About the Tribes of Assam (Other Than the Five Selected Tribes):

In Assam the tribal population is found both in the hills and the plains. There are two hill districts Karbi Anglong and North Cachar. The major among the hill tribes are the Dimasa Kacharis, the Hill Karbis, and the Hill Tiwas. Some other tribes are the Zemi Nagas, the Rengma Nagas, the Kukis, Hmars and the few others. On the other hand, the major plains tribes are the Bodos, the Misings, the Deuris, the Plains Karbis, the Plains Tiwas, the Rabhas, the Sonowals and some other tribes like the Hajongs,
the Garos, the Jaintias, the Khasis, the Barmans, and a number of Buddhistic tribes etc. Majority of these tribes are racially Indo-Mongoloid and linguistically Tibeto-Burman speakers.

In the introductory chapter mention had been made of different tribal groups of the Assam plains and their characteristic features in brief. Now we propose to elaborate our discussion of the tribes of hills and plains of Assam. Of course the five tribes under study – about whom we will discuss in detail in the later part of this chapter - are not included in this section.

In this context it would be important to keep in mind the following points –

a) Some of the tribes mentioned in the above list have their major populations in the contiguous hill states of this region; for example, the Garos, the Khasi and Jaintias are basically tribes of Meghalaya. Similarly the Singhphos and the Tangsas of Arunachal Pradesh and although small Naga settlements are found in the plains of Assam they are basically Nagaland tribes.

b) Two of the major tribes viz. the Tiwas and the Karbis are found in substantial numbers in both Hills and the plains having distinct cultural features. Although originally they might have shared a common culture, in the course of time their respective populations living in the hills and the plains developed distinctive cultural patterns.

c) We have taken up for some detailed description, here each of the tribes (except the tribes under special focus of the study) while in the case of the others only a brief introduction has been
The Bodos:

The Bodos or the Bodo-Kacharis of Assam in a branch of the great Bodo group of the Indo-Mongoloid family falling within the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. The Bodos are the earliest known settlers of Assam. From time immemorial they had been maintaining their sovereignty till their last king died in the year 1845 A.D. Remnants of their political and cultural domination may still be found throughout the length and breadth of Assam. The Bodo-Kocharis who belong to the Indo-Chinese race of the Mongoloid stock originally inhabited the land somewhere between the Yangtse-kiang and the Hoang-Ho. It is believed that they gradually immigrated in successive waves and settled over a considerable portion of the Brahmaputra valley. They entered into Assam through a land-locked areas of Tibet which in ancient times was known as "Bod". According to the famous scholar S.K. Chatterji, the Bodo-Kacharis, as a Mongoloid tribe, appear to have formed at one time a solid block of a Mongoloid people throughout the while of North Bihar, North Bengal, East Bengal and the Brahmaputra valley, with extensions in the Cachar Hills, the Garo Hills and in the Tripura Hills. In his Kirata-jana Krti he calls them as the Indo-Mongloids (Kirata).

The Bodo-Kacharis live in compact villages, putting barriers all around the homestead. Their house is a simple two roofed one erected on the ground with scanty or no ventilation. Even the smallest unit should consist of a main dwelling house, a cowshed and a granary built on raised platform. Each dwelling house consists of two rooms, small and low in size. The domestic birds they keep in a cubby-hole type projection attached to
their main dwelling house. The verandahs are generally missed to 2 to 3 feet high. The family looms are generally placed on the back-yard facing the orchards. A Kachari house is seldom distinguishable from other Assamese houses. Of course, the distinctive feature of a Bodo household is to plant a *siju* tree on the north-east corner of their main inner courtyard.

Agriculture is the mainstay of these people. They practice both *ahu* (broadcasting) and *sali* (transplanting) paddy and very prone to adoption of improved techniques in production processes. Their indigenous levies for preserving seeds and digging canals are widely acclaimed. They are especially skillful in the construction of irrigation canals and embankments for diverting water to fields. Apart from agriculture, the womenfolk supplement their economy by fishing, rearing pigs and fowls, and also silk worms, weaving etc. They also help in the fields besides their household chores.

During the early part of the 20th century the social life of the Bodo-Kachari tribe was blessed by such virtues like honesty, truthfulness, straight-forwardness and a general trustworthiness. But with the passage of time, things have somewhat changed bringing new complexities unknown or unheard before. To meet these changing situations of life, necessity has arisen to frame some local laws on the basis of customs and traditions as prevailing in the society. Thus the locally codified customary usages of practices of the Bodo societies came to be followed after approval from the zonal council composed of adjacent villages. These local laws are known as *pandulipi* as they are in manuscript and hardly printed. Such laws differ in context and application from ara to area.
According to these customary laws the line of descent is traced through the father who is the head of the family. The eldest male member assumes the charge of the household on the death of the father and discharges his responsibilities consultation with his mother. Usually he gets a preferential share of the family property in view of his assumption of family liability and other social responsibility.

The Bodo society prescribes atonement proceedings for purification of misdeeds. The deuri, an assistant to the village priest oja, usually conducts the atonement proceedings. He is elected on the general consensus of all the villagers on the basis of his character and ability to guide socio-religious rites. The deuri and the gaonbura the village headman have a distinct place of honour in the estimation of the Bodo-Kachari people. The clan is known as ari. There are as many as 23 aris, such as Basumatary, Doimari, Narzari and so on.

The religious philosophy of the Bodo-Kachari tribe centers round the super power of Bathou Barai or Khoria Barai Maharaja which is analogous to Siva of the Hindu Trinity. The siju plant is regarded as representing the Bathou – The supreme deity of adoration. Next to Bathou, Mainao is worshipped as the goddess of wealth. Besides these two primary deities, the Bodo-Kacharis worship many other gods and goddesses comprising Agrang, Khoila Khaji, Rajkhaudra, Rajputhur, Bura Ali, Asu Mainao, Sali Mainao, Bagraja and so on. Some of these deities are believed to be benevolent and others malevolent. The malevolent deities are regarded as the originator of all ills including natural calamities and for their propitiation sacrifices and offering of rice beer are invariably necessary. The propitiation
to benevolent deities like \textit{asu mainao} and \textit{sali mainao} is done for higher yields of crops as well as endowment of prosperity.

A section of the Bodo-Kachari population practice Vedic rites like other Hindus and don’t resort to appeasement of gods and goddesses by sacrificing pigs and fowls and also by offering rice-beer. They are known as “Brahmas” and performs hom-yojna before the sacred fire in all socio-religious rituals. However, culturally both the sections do not differ from each other.

The rites of passages have great significance in the life of the Bod-Kacharis. In regard to birth, there are no elaborate celebrations or rites and rituals to perform. However, the family makes an offering to the household deities by sacrificing a cock or hen on the occasion. It is also a prevailing custom among the Bodo-Kacharis to entertain midwives in a feast within a reasonable time who attended the mother during her confinement.

In case of marriage different types are found. The usual practice of conducting a marriage is by negotiation (\textit{hathachumi}). But marriages by servitude (\textit{chawdung-tagarnay}) and widow remarriage (\textit{dhuka}) do often take place. Another type of marriage is found which is known as kharchanai marriage. The Bodo-Kachari society is primarily monogamous. However, junior levirate and junior sorrorate are allowed in this society. Unlike most of the tribes Bodos do not allow cross-cousin marriage. But the practice of parallel cousin marriage is not obsolete altogether.

Now-a-days the idea of procuring a bride either by servitude or by elopement has come to be regarded as contemptuous. Therefore, negotiation marriage (hathachumi) has become the normal social custom. The
system of demanding bride-price is still prevalent but in the higher echelon of the society, it is practically non-existent.

For the disposal of death the Bodo-Kacharis practice both cremation and burial. The cremation has come to be the normal practice in these days.

It is customary for the members attending funeral procession to take bath on their return home and drink *santijal* followed by mastication of a little amount of *sokota* (a bitter tasting dried leafy substance) ostensibly to carry the idea that from that day onwards the relationship with the dead is finally severed. This is followed by rice-beer drinking in honour of the dead. On the tenth day from the day on which the death occurs, the first phase of the funeral rites begins, which is termed as dasa or dahar. The final shraddha ceremony is held either on the 12th or 13th day.

Apart from these rites of passage, there are other occasions of merry-making in the social life of the Bodo-Kacharis. They celebrate three Bihus like other Assamese people. However, Baisagu (or the Bohag Bihu) is celebrated with great enthusiasm. Community worshipping, singing and dancing and merry making continues for seven days.

Kherai is the other important community festival of the Bodo-Kacharis when the entire atmosphere is agog with much enthusiasm. It is intended to propitiate Bathou or Sibrai – the chief deity of adoration of the Bodo-Kacharis is along with Mainao (the goddess of harvest). The propitiatory rituals begin with different dance rituals along with singing of ballads in tune with the traditional musical instruments like *kham* (drum) *siphung* (flute) etc.
Dimasa Kachari:

The Dimasa Kacharis belong to the Bodo group of people of Assam. Linguistically the Dimasas belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. The original homeland of the Dimasas was in the Western China who migrated in subsequent waves and entered the Brahmaputra valley as well as in the remote hills adjacent to these valleys. The present abode of the Dimasa-Kacharis is confined mainly into the North Cachar Hills District. They are, however, found in small scattered groups in the Karbi Anglong and Cachar districts also. Although the Bodo-Kacharis and the Dimasa-Kacharis refer to the same stock of people there are much differences in their language and customs.

The Dimasas follow the patriarchal system of family structure and as such the father is the head of the family. A Dimasa family generally consists of the head of the family, his wife, unmarried sons and daughters and also his unmarried brothers and sisters. Thus a Dimasa family is unitary in character.

The most outstanding characteristics of the Dimasa social life is the existence of female clans almost parallel to male clans. They have forty male clans and forty two female clans, called sengphong and zuluk respectively. Both the clans are exogamous. Secondly one can marry in his or her father's clan or mother's clan. While the son belongs to the father's clan, the daughter belongs to the mother's clan.

Marriage by negotiation is the prevailing practice although marriage by capture is also found to be prevalent. The bride price is called kalti. Now-a-days this custom is disfavoured by the literate sections of the
Dimasa society. Monogamy is the prevailing practice among the Dimasas. Divorce can be obtained if the kunang, the village headman, approves the dissolution of marriage. Widow remarriage is allowed. Levirate and sororate are practiced according to the needs of the occasion.

The birth of a child is an occasion of rejoice. The mother and the baby are segregated from the family member an other villagers till the naval chord of the new born falls off. Two elderly women help the woman at the time of delivery. The purifying ceremony of the women takes place on the day of falling off the navel chord. On this day the two midwives are to be entertained with feasts and other presents.

Death in the family is an occasion of mourning for the family members and the relatives. The Dimasas believe in life hereafter and as such, the performance of the death ceremony for the eternal bliss of the deceased is a must. The dead body is cremated on the bank of a river or stream. During the performance of the death ceremony, the villagers and the relatives are to be entertained with a grand feast.

The existence of parallel male and female clans in the Dimasa society has great impact on the law of inheritance. The sons inherit the paternal property, which generally consists of real estates, weapons, cash money and the cattle. The daughters inherit the maternal property, which consists of jewellery, clothes and looms with their accessories need by the mother, only. The sons and daughters share the common property of the household, which consists of cooking utensils, bras metal dishes and bowls and other household equipments, equally.

The daughters have no right to inherit the paternal property even if there is no son in the family and similarly maternal property even if there
is no daughter in the family. In such cases the maternal property is inherited by the nearest female relative belonging to the same clan. In the same way, the paternal property is inherited by nearest male relative of the head of the family belonging to the same clan.

The village system is called *nabla* by the Dimasas, which means a cluster of houses. The entire village with its population is called *paji*. As the Dimasas have a tendency to live on the banks of the river and streams, thus almost all the Dimasa villages are found to be situated on the hill slope with river or a stream running by.

The houses have timber superstructure, mud plastered bamboo walls and thatched roofs. The houses are built on ground. In order to protect houses from constantly blowing strong winds, protective bamboo walls, usually almost equal to the heights of the roof tops are erected all round the houses. Erection of protective fencing all round the village boundary with two gates – one at the top and the other at the bottom is a common practice.

Kunang, the traditional headman of the Dimasa village, still wields considerable authority in the village affairs though his authority is threatened by the *Gaobura*, the village headman appointed by the Government. In the discharge of his duties Kunang is assisted by an assistant headman called Dilo. The Kunang assisted by Dilo and the other village elders settles disputes and quarrels, tries cases of thefts, incest’s, elopements, etc. and the judgments delivered are binding on the concerned parties. Inter village disputes are settled by the Kunangs and village elders of several villages. When women are involved, the elderly women of the village are also invited to participate in the trial. It may also be mentioned that no community
function in the village can be performed without the approval of the Kunang.

The Dimasas have bachelor's dormitory for unmarried young boys and it is called *nodrang*. The nodrang is constructed generally in an accessible place of the village. It is rather a big hall without any partition.

The unmarried young boys sleep inside the nodrang at night. Protection of the village from outside attack and also from the attack of wild animals, learning of dance and music, accommodation of guests not belonging to the Dimasa community, learning of traditional arts and crafts are the primary purposes of the institution of nodrang. But the functional aspects of nodrang have almost lost their significance as the institution itself is at a dying stage.

The religion, at present followed by the Dimasa Kacharis, is rather a mixture of their traditional religion and Hinduism. Six benevolent ancestral gods, namely, Sibrai, Doo Rajo, Naikhu Raja, Waa Raja, Ganying Braiyung and Hamiadao, who are called *madai*, are still worshipped by the Dimasas with great reverence. Of course, Sibrai (Hindu Siva) occupies the highest place and His name is to be uttered first in every worship. They believe that their disease, calamities and sufferings are caused by evil spirits. Before opening up of new *jhum* sites, the evil spirits are to be worshipped so that they might not create any troubles in future by way of scanty rainfall, pest-infection etc. and allow the people to reap a good harvest.

Formerly the entire Dimasa Kingdom was divided into 12 divisions on the basis of the abodes of gods and deities. Each division was called *daikho* and there is still a Dimasa priest called zonthai in each daikho.

The kunang, traditional headman, also plays a very important role in the religious life of Dimasas. He is to worship the clan deity of
the village, which is the ancestral god of the semphong (male clan) who had first established the village. The clan deity is to be propitiated with worship every year without fail.

The Dimasa king Krishna Chandra and his brother Gobinda Chandra formally accepted Hinduism in the year 1790 at Khashpur. But the process of Hinduisation had taken place much earlier. This is evident from the numerous temples and archaeological remains found in their former capitals at Dimapur and Maibong. Anyway, the Dimasas, by and large, had adopted Hinduism. Nevertheless, the Hindu Dimasas still maintain their old religious beliefs and practices and perform the traditional religious rites till today.

Agriculture is the principal occupation and main source of livelihood of the Dimasa Kacharis. The Dimasas living in the North Cachar Hills practice shifting cultivation commonly known as jhum. They also practice wet-land cultivation subject to availability of low lying land. Those living in the plains practice wet cultivation only.

Jhum sites are selected by different families during the months of October and November. Jungles at the jhum sites are felled early in the month of February. The jungles thus felled are burnt to ashes after about a month when they dry up completely. Just before the onset of the monsoon seeds are broadcast on the ashes. In the jhum men and women work equally from the morning till sunset. After raising crops for two to three years, plots are left for growth of vegetation and new plots are again chosen and prepared for jhum.

They raise mixed crops in their jhums. Besides paddy, which is the principal item, they cultivate maize, sesame, cotton, chilli; pumpkins,
gourd, ginger, brinjal, castor etc. They also cultivate mustard to a limited extent. Many Dimasa families cultivate pineapple and oranges by terracing the gentle hill slopes.

However, changes have come to the cultivation, method and concept of agriculture due to various recent developments. The frequent demonstrations organized by the Development Block officials and officials from the Agriculture Department have greatly helped the Dimasas to adopt new and improved methods of cultivation.

The Dimasas are in the habit of rearing buffaloes, pigs, goats, fowls and ducks and not cows. Each family is in the possession of 5 to 12 buffaloes and majority of them are she-buffaloes. The buffaloes are reared only for business purpose in the sense that young calves are sold to the traders hailing from the Cachar District. Pigs, goats and birds are reared mainly for domestic consumption and for sacrificing to the deities.

Weaving is an important cottage industry among the Dimasas. In fact every Dimasa girl and woman an expert weaver. A girl without the know-how of weaving can hardly be given in marriage.

Most of the domestic requirement of clothes are met from the family looms. The cloths woven by them are of high artistic design. Rearing of endi is another important cottage industry. Endi silk is spun and worn at home. Cloths fund surplus to the requirement of family are sold locally.

Manufacturing of bamboo and cane goods is also one of the major cottage industries of the Dimasas. Although in the past the Dimasas had carpenters, blacksmiths and goldsmiths among themselves, now-a-days except carpentry artisans practicing the other trades are practically nil among the Dimasas.
The Dimasas have a very interesting economic institution called hangsao based on the principles of co-operation and mutual help. The membership is confined to the youths of the villages. The members of hangsao help the villagers in the jhum field, in harvesting and many other occasions.

Dimasa economy which is primarily dependent on agriculture is at the subsistence level only and the economic conditions of the people are far from satisfactory the percentage of literacy is very low. Lack of entrepreneurship for self-supporting and self-generating economy has slowed down the pace of economic development.

The Dimasa Kacharis are a culturally rich tribe and they can be rightly proud of their cultural heritage. The remains and relics of the palatial buildings, gateways, ramparts, pillars and numerous temples at Dimapur, Maibang, and Khaspur and also at Kasamari Pathar slow cleanly the state of cultural development of the Dimasa Kacharis when they were a ruling tribe.

The Dimasa Kacharis are a gay and colourful tribe. Dance and music play an important role in their day-to-day life. They have only five indigenous musical instruments, namely, khram (drum), muri, muri wathisa and suphin. They have numerous items of oral folklores and folktales. The songs are generally not sung during dances.

The youths, both boys and girls, perform dances in the accompaniment of Khram and Muni playing from might fall only to welcome distinguished visitors to their village. This is done to pay their respect to the honoured guests. Dances are performed during the celebration of community festivals Busu, Rajini Gabra and Harni Gabra. The celebration
of the socio-religious festivals Rajini Gabra and Harni Gabra is held once annually before the starting of new cultivation. The former is celebrated during day time only. The kunang, the traditional headman, propitiates his family deity by closing the village gate on the day of the performance of Rajini Gabra. In the same night the function called Harni Gabra is also celebrated. Here the deity Harni is worshipped for the protection and welfare of the people during the coming year. But the celebration of Busu is the gayest and most important of all. Prior to celebration of Busu a specially decorated and artistically designed gate called fangsla is erected at the main entrance to the village.

The Dimasa Kacharis have their traditional dresses and ornaments. For day-to-day use a Dimasa man uses Pisa which is generally of deep green colour and about a metre in breadth. Besides a shirt, he also uses an artistically designed scarf called rinsao. When he goes out of the village he uses a cotton or endi silk turban which is about 19 metres in length. Now-a-days, except rings, a Dimasa man does not wear any ornaments. In the past, of course, they put on silver earrings called kharch and silver armlets called youcher.

A Dimasa woman puts on a skirt called rigu made of cotton or endi-silk. It may be white or coloured. An artistically designed scarf called rijamphai is used by them to cover the upper part of the body. Another kind of very highly decorative scarf called rikhaosa is used by the young girls in dancing.

The Dimasa women are very fond of ornaments. Among the important ornaments they use are necklaces, made of silver pieces and costly sea-shells, earrings made of gold, necklaces made of silver, necklaces made
of silver coins, heavy silver bracelets, nose ring made of silver earrings made of silver and necklaces made of different kinds of beads.

Rice is the staple food of the Dimasas. Rice from the *bora* paddy (a kind of sticky rice) is used for tiffin purpose. Vegetables grown in the jhums as well as in the Kitchen gardens and very often wild roots and leaves are produced from the nearby forest to supplement their food. Rice with vegetables, chilies and occasionally with fish and meat are taken thrice daily in the morning, at noon and in the evening. They drink tea without milk.

The Dimasas hunt wild animals in the forests for different occasions. Deer's meat is a delicacy for them. They eat fowls, pigs, ducks, goats and sometimes buffaloes meat. They take fresh water fish but dried fish is another delicacy of the Dimasas.

The most favourite beverage of the Dimasas is rice bear which they call *zou*. *Zou* is a must for the celebration of all community and religious festivals. Sufficient quantity of *zou* is required for daily domestic consumption of the family members and also to entertain guests.

**Sonowal Kacharis:**

Demographically the Sonowal Kacharis form the third largest plains tribal group of Assam. They are chiefly found in the district of Dibrugarh. A few Sonowal Kachair villages are found in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Jorhat districts also. They belong to the great Bodo group and they trace their close relationship with the Barmans of Cachar district, Boro Kacharis of Lower Assam districts and Dimasas of North Cachar Hills district. In fact it is difficult to draw exclusive ethnic line between the Boro Kacharis and Sonowal Kacharis as both these sections originally came from the same
stock. It is believed that the prefix Sonowal in the name of the tribe came to be used during the reign of the Ahom kings when the Kacharis of Upper Assam took to the trade of gold washers and collectors of gold particles.

The origin of the Kacharis and for that matter the Sonowal Kacharis is shrouded in uncertainties. Even Endle, who spent some years with the Kacharis and published a monograph entitled *The Kacharis* as early as 1911, could not give an exact information in this regard. Opinions differ regarding the origin of the term Sonowal. Some authors opine that the Kacharis who worked with gold (*son*) were known as Sonowals. Sonowals were experts in collecting gold particles from the sands of the river Suwansiri. According to the Reports on the Administration of Assam 1892-93 and 1901-1902, the rivers of Assam which yielded gold were those of the old Darrang and Lakhimpur districts. Gold washing was done by a guild known as Sonowal khel.

There are many myths and legends regarding the conversion of the Kacharis into Sarania. As a result today very few tribal traits are noticed in the community. Dalton’s description of the Kacharis (Saranias) fit well with that of the Sonowal Kacharis.

By and large, the social structure of the Sonowal Kacharis has marked similarities with that of any other non-tribal communities of the neighbouring villages. The Goanbura or the village headman is the keyman of the village who is entrusted with the day to day village administration. Besides the Gaonbura there are other office bearers, namely Barik, Pathek, Asirbadia bura, Gitghai, Medhi, Tamuli and Randhani. There is specific assignment for each office bearer. The Bayan is a special instructor who imparts training to others in the art of religious dance sequences. The
Namghar is also the center of solving disputes of the villagers. Complaints regarding anything social or religious are brought before the village elders who deliver judgment and punish the offenders. Ex-communication is considered to be the severest form of punishment the village elders can inflict upon any villager for a serious crime.

Agriculture is the sole means of their livelihood. They are wet cultivators and sali and ahu paddy are grown in their fields. Besides paddy, they grow mustard, potatoes, sweet potatoes, different kinds of pulses and vegetables mainly for local consumption.

Rice is the staple food of the Sonowals. They take all kinds of vegetables and pulses. Their great delicacies are fish, mutton and chicken. They do not take pork nor they rear pigs. Rice beer is locally prepared by a few families and the people take it occasionally now-a-days, however, the consumption of rice beer is restricted and educated sections prefer tea to rice beer. They use special variety of rices called komal chaol and bora chaol as snacks (which are used by other non-tribal people also).

The dresses of the Sonowal Kacharis of both male and female are similar to those worn by other non-tribal caste-Hindu Assamese men and women. Almost every house possesses a loom.

A typical Sonowal Kachari house has much similarity with that of the non-tribal house in rural areas of Assam. They construct separate shades for cattle, ducks and poultries. The granary is constructed toward eastern direction and in a corner in front of the house. Every household must possess a specious courtyard for thrashing and processing paddy and the campus is neatly maintained. Almost all the families have their basti lands. The houses have apartments and the first room is used as a drawing room to which outsiders have easy access.
Co-operation is the salient feature of their social life. Whether harvesting paddy or constructing or renovating a house of an individual family, all the villagers co-operate. Both male and female are very laborious. Just as men folk are experts not only in agriculture but also in other household chores like house building, gardening etc., similarly the womenfolk are also experts in their own fields. The womenfolk help their men in the fields, weave clothes and prepare meals for all the members of the family. Unity is scrupulously maintained and inter family dispute are amicably settled in the village. The youths play active role in the smooth running of the individual or community festive or religious occasions. Though women don’t take active part in the village council or mel, she doesn’t hesitate in making her voice heard or her opinion felt.

A Sonowal Kachari family consist of a nucleus of father and mother with their children. Both nuclear and joint family systems are prevalent. The eldest male member of a family runs the house. He is highly regarded and his orders are not violated. The division of labour between the sexes is scrupulously observed and both the man and woman accept the traditional pattern without any question.

The system of inheritance is matrilineal. The land belongs to the family and the head of the family is the owner of the lands. After the death of the father the land is divided equally among the sons. The house is considered as immovable property and after the death of the father generally the eldest son becomes the owner of the house.

The Sonowal Kacharis are divided into seven exogamous clans (Bangshas) viz – Bali Khitiari, Chiri Puoiya, Amarabamiya, Dhulial, Ujani Kuchiya, Namani Kuchiya and Tipamilya. These clans are again subdivided
into fourteen sub-clans or *khels*. Except on marriage occasions, reference to clans is hardly made.

The Sonowal Kacharis feel that an unmarried man is socially incomplete and therefore marriage is considered as indispensable for the adult boys and girls. Marriage within the same clan is strictly prohibited. Monogamy is the general rule and the second wife is taken only after the death of the first wife. Having more than one wife is accepted by the society if one can afford to maintain a big family. Polyandry is quite unknown although divorce, widow remarriage can be made effective if the parties so desire.

The Sonowal Kacharis, have four distinct forms of marriage viz. (a) *nowa dhowa* or *bor biya* (ii) *hom biya* (iii) *gandharba biya* and (iv) *churchuria* or *rabha sarakai diya*. The widely prevalent form of marriage is Gandharba Biya where the couple concerned takes the initiative. Bride price was present in all the types of marriage in the past. But nowadays it is charged only in the gandharba form of marriage. There is no fixed rate for the bride price.

The Sonowal Kacharis are devout followers of 'Mahapurushiya Baisnav Dharma' (Vaishnavism of the Mahapurushiya sect). All the Sonowals are the disciples of Aunianti Satra with the only exception of a few Sonowal Kacharis of Lakhimpur district who owe allegiance to the Sesa Satra. Among the tribe there are mainly two religious divisions – Saraniya and Bhajania.

Although Vaisnavism has taken its roots deep into the heart of the Sonowal Kacharis, yet the people maintain much of their traditional religious beliefs and practices. Like other Kacharis, the Sonowals, also worship Lord Shiva in the form of bathou. Bathou puja is observed in the month of *Phagun* or *Chot*. A kind of religious song called haidang is sung
during the puja which contains historical significance about the Sonowal Kachari community. They also worship household deities such as Bura Poha, Saragdeo puja, Pir Diya, Morak Diya and Lakhimi Diya.

The village namghar (prayer hall) is the place for observing various kinds of religious ceremonies like Janmastami, titus of Sri Sankaradeva and Sri Madhavadeva, Lakhimi Sabah, Norasiga Sabah etc. The womenfolk observe Ai Sabah, Apeswara Sabah at the namghar to appease the female deities.

The most important festival of the Sonowal Kacharis is the Rongali Bihu which starts on the sankranti of the month of Chot and continues for a fortnight. It is considered as the traditional community festival. Singing and dancing of the young boys and girls in separate groups and merry making is the essence of this festival.

Magh Bihu and Kati Bihu, the two other bihus, are also observed by the Sonowal Kacharis.

The Barmans of Cachar:

The Barmans are one of the plains tribes of Assam inhabiting the Barak Valley. Regarding the origin of the Barmans there are different views. However the widely accepted view is that the Barmans are originally Dimasas. In all probability when the Dimasas, who on shifting the capital from Maibong in the N.C. Hills migrated to the plains of Cachar, had come into contact with the Hindu people and the Brahminical priests. This ultimately led to accept Hinduism and to declare themselves to be Khatriyas. At this stage perhaps, the Dimasas started calling themselves Barmans to distinguish them from other section of the Cachar is living in the hills and following their traditional religion. Though they had the same origin at
present from the point of view of their material culture and religion, the Barmans have much differences with the Dimasas of N.C. Hills and Karbi Anglong. Linguistically thus the Barmans of Cachar belong to the Tibeto-Burman group.

The Barmans of Cachar follow the patriarchal system of family structure. The father is the head of the family and the line of descent is traced through the father only. Barmans of Cachar, on the other hand prefer the joint family structure. Like Dimasas, the Barmans also have 40 male clans called Semphong and 42 female clan called Julu. These clans, both male and female, are exogamous.

Marriage by negotiation is the prevailing practice although marriage by capture is not totally absent. But such marriages have to be regularized at a sooner or later period.

The Barmans barring one or two customs have completely given up the traditional Dimasa system of marriage and have accepted the Brahminical Hindu system. They follow monogamy. Divorce is rather rare. Another important thing that is observed in case of the Barmans of Cachar is the absence of widow remarriage, while it is possible among the Dimasas.

The birth of a child, be it a male or female is an occasion of joy for the family. The mother and the baby are separated from the other family members till the naval chord falls and the purification ceremony is performed.

The Barmans cremate the dead, bodies who die without arriving at the teething age, are only buried. The Barmans believe is life hereafter and rebirth of the deceased in the same family. Among them the death rituals must be performed on the 13th day from the date of death in the Hindu way
where the services of the Brahmin priest are required. Again at the end of
the year the annual sradha ceremony is to be performed.

The customary law of inheritance of the Barmans is somewhat pecu-
liar in nature because of the existence of two parallel clans - i.e., the
male and female clans. Thus they have two types of properties - father's
property - inherited only by the sons and mothers property inherited only
by the daughters. It a person leaves no male or female issues behind, the
property will be inherited by the nearest male or female member of the
clan respectively.

The village system of a community depends to a considerable extent
on the ecology and environment, which also include the habitat of
the neighbouring people. The habitats of the Barmans are just like the habitat
of the neighbouring Bengali people. Their houses are quite big and spacious
and the front side of each house is found either towards east or towards
the south. Every family has a kitchen garden also. The wells to do families
have ponds also for drinking water purpose.

The houses are built with timber posts and thatch is used for
roofing. The main houses have three to four chambers with provisions for
kitchen. Granaries for storing paddy, cowsheds, goat sheds and duck sheds
are constructed separately.

The traditional village leadership headed by Kunang (headman)
and assisted by Diko has now been replaced by modern leaders. The Barmans
don't have the bachelor's dormitory system.

The Barmans of Cachar are Hindus. All the gods and goddesses
of the Sakta sect that are worshipped by the other Hindus are also worshipped
by them. The services of the Brahmins are indispensable. But at the same
time, it is also hardly possible on the part of a people who had been following their traditional religion from time immemorial to give up completely some of the traditional religions rituals and beliefs in ghosts, evil spirits, etc. Moreover Lord Siva or Sibrai who is their principal deity in the traditional religion still plays an important role in their religious life.

The primary occupation of the Barmans of Cachar is agriculture. Since they have been living in the plains area, they are settled cultivators. Besides vice they also cultivate crops like cotton, mustard, sugarcane, sweet potatoes and vegetables.

Among the subsidiary occupations mention may be made of employment in government offices, schools, both primary and secondary, in police and defense services, weaving, sericulture, poultry farming, animal husbandry, manufacturing of cane and bamboo mats and other articles. Rearing endi is a common sight among the Barmans and it is rather one of the major sources of income.

The Barmans brew rice been for domestic consumption. They also brew distilled liquor for sale and is one of the major sources of their income.

Like the Dimasas of N.C. Hills, the Barmans of Cachar also have a very interesting system of mutual help and co-operation which is called hedari or biba. When a particular family finds it difficult to cultivate its land, transplant paddy seedlings or to harvest paddy in the field in time due to some unavoidable reasons, the head of the family concerned approaches the village headman for help to be extended through the youths of the village to do the job. The concerned family, of course, has to entertain the youths with food and drink.
Although the mother-tongue of the Barmans is Dimasa, nevertheless, due to the influence of the Bengali people, the present language spoken by them is Dimasa with frequent inclusion of Bengali words.

The Barmans of Cachar have almost given up their traditional dance and music. In the case of dresses and ornaments the Barmans uses the traditional one. Rice is the staple food. Fish constitutes an important food item.

The Tai-Buddhistic Tribal Groups of Assam:

There are five Tai-Buddhistic tribal communities living in small pockets scattered in various upper Assam districts and some contiguous areas of Karbi Anglong. They are – the Tai Khamtis (the majority of them live in Arunachal Pradesh), the Tai-Khamyangs, the Tai-Phakes, the Tai Turungs and the Tai Aitons. Although they are late comers in the sense they came here much after the Ahoms, they have become an integral part of the socio-cultural make-up of the state. Most of them still speak the Tai language among themselves while, some have adapted Assamese as their mother tongue. Even the Tai speakers are bi-lingual, they not only speak fluent Assamese but also received their education through the Assamese medium. They practice the Hinayana sect of Buddhism and still have links with the religious centers of that faith situated in Myanmar. They practice wet rice cultivation and are good at weaving and other crafts. They live in houses with raised platforms resting on bamboo or wooden piles. Their social life is very much guided by their religion which has given them a distinctive kind of refinement. Each village has a vihara (locally called bapusang) to which very family and individual is attached while images of the Buddha are placed on the main alter, the walls and posts of the vihara structure are adorned with various
hangings, festoons etc. Buddhistic manuscripts, written in the Pali and Tai languages (some of them with paintings and illustrations) are preserved in vihara premises. Various festivals and ceremonies connected with the faith are observed throughout the year. Although they are literate in the sense that they have their own script only a trained section know how to read and write. They have a rich body of verbal folklore much of which is influenced by the moral teachings of the Jatakas and other Buddhistic holy books.

The Naga Tribal Groups:

Rengma Nagas: Though originally migrated from Nagaland, the Rengmas of Assam has now settled in the Karbi Anglong of Assam. J.P. Mills classified Rengma Nagas into three different groups – (1) the southern section of the western Rengmas, (2) the northern section of the western Rengmas and (3) the eastern Rengmas. These three groups speak three different dialects. According to the experts the Rengmas of Karbi Anglong belonged to the southern section of the western Rengmas because of their dialectical similarity.

According to J.P. Mill's view, formerly there were severe type of feuds among the different Naga tribes. There were frequent raids, head-hunting etc. The Rengma Nagas, being a smaller groups, probably were subjected to all sorts of harassment. This might induce the Rengma chiefs to migrate into Karbi Anglong along chiefs to migrate into Karbi Anglong along with their friends and followers.

The Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong are divided into eight exogamous clans as follows: Kenpuvnu, Kanrjnyu, Resobinyu, Tisenbinyu, Sabinyu, Nyenthnyu, Nangdunyu and Henbunyu. These eight clans are exogamous.
Although marriage by capture was a more or less common practice, at present it is practically obsolete. At present almost all marriages are performed through negotiations. As soon the marriage is settled, the youth has to serve in the farms of the would be parents-in-laws for one year. But if he happens to belong to a rich family, he can avoid this free physical labour to his would be parents-in-law by offering animals like pigs, fowls and cows ass bride-price to them. Earlier mithuns used to play a great role in the fixing of bride-price.

The Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong follow monogamy. Of course there is no bar to polygamy in their society. Divorce, although permissible under the customary rules, is very rare. Widow remarriage is allowed provided they persue the rule of exogamy in fact. At the death of the elder brother, the younger brother can marry the widowed sister-in-law. But under no circumstances the widow of the younger brother can be married by the elder brother.

Another significant thing of the Rengma Nagas is the absence of cross-cousin marriage, which is very much preferred by many tribal societies of this region.

A Rengma Naga family consists of the husband and wife their unmarried sons and daughters unmarried brothers and sisters of the head of the family also generally live in the same house and regarded as the members of the same family. After marriage, the male members whether a brother or son starts living in a separate house.

The Rengma Nagas follow the patriarchal system of residence and their line of descent is traced through the male line. The father is the head of the family. Next to him in terms of authority comes the eldest son.
According to the law of inheritance, the eldest son inherits the paternal property at the death of his father and has to share the property equally among all his brothers. If the deceased leaves no male issue his property is inherited by the nearest male relative of his clan.

After the birth of a child the parents of the new-born have to observe *genna* for nine days continuously. During this period they are completely segregated from the whole community. On the tenth day a small feast has to be offered to the villagers and relatives. If the baby is male, a cock is sacrificed, and in case of female a hen is sacrificed and the people pray for the health and prosperity of the child.

Like birth, in case of death also nine days *genna* has to be observed by the family members. The body is buried at the burial place of the village by digging a grave led by the oldest man of the clan to which the deceased belonged. During the nine days of *genna*, the deceased has to be offered the due share of the principal food and every day his share has to keep in a bundle wrapped with plantain leaf. On the tenth day these bundles have to be offered to the deceased at his/her grave. After this offering a number of stone slabs will be laid over the grave. On this day, a feast has to be offered to the villagers and who attended the burial ceremony. The offering feast marks the closing of death ceremony.

The Rengma Nagas of Assam who reside within the jurisdiction of Kari Anglong have embraced Christianity. Before conversion they believed in a number of gods and goddesses. Among them *Terumyu* was the highest god and worshipped once in a year by sacrificing pigs, fowls and oxen. Among the household gods and goddesses, *Nichagyu* (god of wealth) and *Nichagyvi* (goddess of wealth) were worshipped by each family. The Rengma Nagas
don’t have any priest among them. The observance of *genna* is a very important factor in the religious life of the Rengma Nagas.

Like many other tribes, the Rangma Nagas of Karbi Anglong also have their bachelors’ dormitory. In Rengma dialect it is called *rensi*.

Here the boys are trained and taught their duties for future life. The senior most and most experienced boy is the leader of the *rensi*. It is his duty to impart training on the junior ones. The juniors have to serve him by fetching water, making his bed etc. Besides rendering joint labour they also organize feasts, picnics, fishing and hunting expeditions etc. There is no such dormitory for the young unmarried girls of the Rengmas of Karbi Anglong.

Agriculture is the main-stay. Like all other hill, tribes they also practice jhumming. In their *jhum* fields they produce rice, maize, cotton, chilies, ginger, castor, gourds, pumpkins etc. They are good horticulturists also.

The women are expert spinners and weavers. The family loom serves most of the domestic requirements of cloths. Women also share strenuous jobs with their males.

The Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong perform a number of ceremonies that are connected with their cultivation. Those are –

1. *Nyada* – celebrated to mark the end of the agricultural year.
2. *Pipe* – to perform to get rid of all the evils of the preceding year.
3. *Lotsung Nga* – it is connected with the clearing of burnt woods from *jhum* land.
4. *Khong Kepang Kennyu* – to mark the first harvesting of paddy.
The elderly people still use nzanyan – the loin cloth, a head gear called pihu and a scarf called phehong (used by the young people) and tadu (used by the elderly people). Women put on ginhu and pherhe just like skirts. To cover the upper part of the body the women put on decorated phehong. Of course now-a-days both men women use modern dresses.

Various ornaments made of cane, silver, sea shells, various kinds of beads, zinc, brass etc. are used by the Rengma Nagas.

In Rengma dialect phen means a village and kalo means a house. The houses are built on raised platforms. The houses in a Rengma village are constructed in the rows facing each other. A village may have number of houses. The village headman is called Songpegyu. Songpegyu and Peninyu (medicine-man) are the most important and respected persons of the village. The law and order in the village rests with these two persons.

The Rengma villages of the Karbi Anglong district are situated more or less in isolated pockets. Now-a-days they are linked with motorable roads.

The Zeme Nagas:

The villages inhabited by Zeme Nagas in the North Cachar hills district in the Barail ranges starting from the boundaries of Nagaland and Manipur to Maibong and the river Kapili. Sometimes the Zemes are equated with the term Zeliangrong which is only partially true Zeliangrong is rather a common term which is used to denote three kinds of tribes viz., Zeme, or Zomei, Lvangmei and Rongmei.

The migration of a section of the Zemes to the North Cachar Hills is not so old. In the 18th century, they migrated to the North Cachar
Hills via Manipur and settled down in the North-eastern part, the present
North Cachar Hills district. The Zemes inhabiting the N.C. Hills district has
a peculiar system of migration, which can be regarded as cycle migration.
Perhaps topography of the Barail range is itself responsible for it. Land
suitable for jhumming is found in scattered patches only. When in course
of time a stretch becomes exhausted, the entire village or a part of the village
is shifted to one of its pre-selected sites.

The Zemes of N.C. Hills follow the patriarchal system of
family structure. As such father is the head of the family and the line of
descent is traced through the male line only. They have the nuclear type
of family. However, the joint family system is also not totally absent. In
a Zeme family, next to the father, the eldest son exercises his power.

The Zemes of the N.C. Hills have six clans of equal status.
They are Npame, Nkuame, Heneume, Nriame, Sogame and Panme. These
clans are exogamous.

Marriage by negotiation is the prevailing practice among the
Zeme Nagas. The parents of the boys are required to take initiative in case
of negotiated marriage. Payment of bride price is a must. It may, however,
be paid either in cash or in kind or in both.

On the day of marriage the bridegroom takes an oath before
the village priest and the other villagers present to the effect that he would
keep the bride as his wife during his life in this world. Divorce called kalak
sakbe is permissible with the approval of the village council presided over
by the village headman. Cross-cousin marriage is a preferential one.

At the time of delivery, the elderly and experienced women
of the village help the mother. On the sixth day the baby is taken out of
the four walls of the house and shown to the sun. Shaving of head is also done on this day. The purification ceremony of the mother and the newborn baby takes place on the 11th day by sacrificing a cock in case of a male child and a hen in case of a female child in presence of the village elders. It is expected that such a sacrifice would ensure a better life of the child in this world.

In the Zeme society death is regarded as a natural process from which none can escape. They believe in life hereafter. The dead body is bathed and new cloths are put and offer food and drink – and then buried in a grave in front of the house along with the articles used by the deceased while he/she was alive. A flat stone slab with some marking is then placed on the grave as a symbol of identification of the grave of the deceased. The death ceremony is performed with the help of the village priest at the completion of one year by offer in a feast to the villagers.

The Zeme Nagas have the patriarchal system of family structure. According to the customary law prevailing among the Zemes, only the eldest son inherits the father’s property and in return has to look after his younger brothers and sisters till they come of age and get themselves married.

The Zeme Naga villages are found to be located in the breezy hilltops. Due to frequent village raids by other Naga groups, the villages situated at the hilltops provided a better deface strategy. The houses are constructed on the ground with timbers and bamboo with thatched roofs in two rows keeping sufficient open space between the rows. While constructing their houses, the direction in which the wind blows constantly is always taken into account. The technology used in the construction of the Zeme houses is simply marvelous.
The each Zeme village within the jurisdiction of the N.C. Hills, there is a village council which is entrusted with various important works like the maintenance of law and order, trial of cases and disputes observance of community and village festivals, selection of jhum sites and so on. The village council is headed by the village headman called matai.

The murong or youth dormitory of the Zeme Nagas of the N.C. Hills by itself is unique in nature and perhaps it is the outstanding aspect of their social life. In Zeme dialect the boys' dormitory is called hangseukia and the girls' dormitory is called leoseuki. Each Zeme village in the N.C. Hills district has two or three morungs for the boys and girls respectively. As soon as a child is born it becomes a member of one of the morung depending on the sex and the acceptance of an egg offered by the parents by the members of one of the morungs.

The boys morungs present a very spectacular sight and they are the most beautiful and gorgeous buildings in the village.

There is an owner-cum-care-taker for each of the boys morungs who lives with his family at end of the morung in a spacious room, must be an experienced and capable man who can command the members of a hangseuki on all occasions. This ownership is hereditary and the youngest son succeeds the father. He has a high social status and is held in high esteem by the entire people of the village.

The leoseukis, or girls' dormitories are not constructed like the boys' ones. The girls may select any house of any person for this purpose. The girls work in their respective fields during the day time and use the dormitory for sleeping at night. The owner of the house and his wife act as their guardians at night only. The girls' morung is also a training ground for singing, dancing, spinning and weaving.
As a corporate body the morung of the boys serve many public work. Thus as a traditional tribal institution, the morung system of the Zeme Nagas of the N.C. Hills district is unique in character.

The Zeme Nagas believe in one supreme God whom they call tingwang. It is this God who guides the other deities benevolent as well as malevolent. Therefore, tingwang is worshipped in order to protect them selves from all kinds of epidemics and evil spirits. They also worship suhprai the god of crops. On the day of full moon the Zeme Nagas following traditional religion observe genna. A section of the Zeme Nagas of N.C. Hills has already embraced Christianity.

Agriculture, based on shifting cultivation is the livelihood of the Zeme Nagas of the N.C. Hills. Besides paddy, they raise maize, millets, ginger, brinjals, sweet gourds, oil seeds and vegetables also. Cotton is also grown by them in the hill slopes. The Zemcs of N.C. Hills have three types of land, the land owned by the kadepeo, the land-lord, land owned by the six clans and land owned by the community.

Weaving in loin looms with yarns from home grown cotton is a very important cottage industry, among the Zeme Nagas. Their cloths are ful of intricate designs and are very beautiful. The Zemes rear mithuns, cows, pigs, goats and birds. These are reared mostly for the purpose of meeting requirements for domestic consumption.

The Zeme Nagas of the N.C. Hills observe a number of community festivals which are more or less connected with their primary occupation of agriculture. Two of the important festivals celebrated by them are – meleibambe and siami. Singing and dancing are a part and parcel of the Zeme life. They have only a few musical instruments of their own.
Kuki and Hmar:

Kukis and Hmar who are now found in the two hill districts of Assam are comparatively recent settlers. Their concentration is to be found in Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura. In respect of social organization, religious beliefs and practices, language and folklore, dresses and performances they have much in common with the Mizo group of tribes. At one time they were treated as integrally related to the Lushais who are today known as Mizos. For instance the famous Monograph of T. Shakespear published in 1912 bears the title *The Lushia Kuki Clans*. However, both the Kukis and the Hmars to day claim to be separate and distinct ethnic groups.

Hajongs:

An Indo Mongoloid tribe belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family, the Hajongs have lost much of their original tribal characteristics in terms of religion language and other aspects of social and cultural life. They have been deeply influenced by Chatanya Vaishnavism and speak a language that is basically Indo-Aryan and is akin to the west Goalpara dialect of Assamese.

Tribes Basically Belonging to Neighbouring Hill States:

As indicated earlier tribal people basically belonging to adjoining hill states of Arunachal and Meghalaya are found in pockets along the borders of Assam with the concerned states. We are giving below certain basic information in respect of them.

The Khasi-Jaintias:

The Khasi-Jaintias were formerly treated as one single community. But over the years the Jaintias have established an identity distinct from that of the Khasis. Known also as sintengs, they now identify-
themselves as pnars. Indo Mongoloid in physical features both of them speak a language of the Austro affiliation of the Mon-Khmer family, both the societies are Matrilineal, inheritance passing through the female line. However, in respect religious beliefs and practices there are clear differences between the two communities. The pnars or Jaintias have been influenced by Hinduism to a considerable extent while among the Khasis, although some evidences of contract with Hinduism are discernable, Christianity has been a more potent force.

Their traditional houses are bamboo, timber and thatch structure with raised platform. They are good craftsman in bamboo and wood. However, the art of weaving is hardly practiced. Both of the groups have a rich bodies of folklore material. The biggest festival of the Khasis is nongkhrem while in the case of the pnars it is behdiemkhlam. Agriculture is the mainstay and jhumming is practiced by both of them.

**The Garos:**

The Garos have their concentration in the Garo hills area of Meghalaya but there are some Garo villages in the foothill areas within Assam. They belong to the great Bodo family and speak a Tibeto-Burman language akin to Bodo and Rabha. They also depend on jhumming for the production of rice and other crops including pineapple, maize, cotton, some oil seeds etc. They follow a matrilineal system of social structure and inheritance. Although a sizeable proportion of the Garos have been Christised traditional religious believes and practices are still followed by a large section. The traditional Garo houses are normally of the platform type. The institution of youth dormitory known as nokphante has an important position in the society. Garo folklore is considerably rich particularly in epic lore.
Wangala is the biggest Garo festival which comes after the harvest.

Some tribal populations is small numbers basically belonging to Arunachal Pradesh are also found in some of the bordering districts of Assam. Such as the Tangsas, Singhaphous and the Nishis are found within the territory of Assam.

References:

Note: The works from which the information given in this chapter has been collected are listed below:

Bordoloi, B.N. et al. (eds) 1987 : *Tribes of Assam Part-I*. Tribal Research Institute, Assam, Guwahati.


