CHAPTER 8
ASSIMILATION WITH INDIGENOUS ASSAMESE COMMUNITY
AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGES
8.1 Introduction

'Assimilation is a term referring to another part of the adaptation process initially proposed by Jean Piaget. Through assimilation, we take in new information or experiences and incorporate them into our existing ideas. The process is somewhat subjective, because we tend to modify experience or information somewhat to fit in with our pre-existing beliefs.' (Wikipedia)

Assimilation is a form of social adjustment. In this process the individual or groups begins to absorb slowly and gradually, somewhat unconsciously, to the new circumstances in which it finds itself. It results in the modification of social attitudes. Assimilation is both a process and a state. When different cultures come into contact, originally it is the sentiment of mutual conflicts that is most prominent but when they gradually assimilate elements from each other, they develop a more tolerant approach towards each other. This is the process of assimilation. When different cultures get the opportunity to combining with each other promoted by feelings of kindness and tolerance of each other, each absorbs many features of the other within itself. In this, the process of assimilation is set into motion. Society is a dynamic organization. Different societies exist in different geographical environment and undergo different historical incidents with the result that their culture differs from that of other societies. According to Mac Iver and Page, 'Culture is the expression of our nature, is our modes of living and our thinking, intercourse, in our literature, in religion in recreation and enjoyment.' (Iver and Page, 1967, p. 499) In the words of E.B. Taylor, 'Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals,
law, custom and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society." (Taylor, 1913, p. 1) But there is a saying, 'change is most unchangeable thing of culture. Therefore it is very difficult to draw a boundary line around a culture. Culture is communicative, it has the characteristic of adaptation and culture has the quality to becoming integrated. It is the socially transmitted system of idealized way of knowledge, practice and belief along with artifact that knowledge and practice produce and maintain as they change in time.

In terms of culture, assimilation denotes conformity and uniformity. 'It is a process of inter penetration and fusion of memories, sentiments and attitudes of persons or group by sharing each others experience and history.' (Sarma R.N., 1980, p. 110) By the process of assimilation the dissimilar individuals or groups become similar. Cultural assimilation takes place when the individual comes into contact with other cultures outside his own family. It is a social and psychological process which results in the promotion of cultural unity. Cultural assimilation may also define as a 'socio-political response to demographic multi-ethnicity that supports or promotes the assimilation of ethnic minorities into the dominant culture.' (Sarma, 1990, p. 458) The term assimilation is often used with regard to immigrants and various ethnic groups who have settled in a new land. Cultural assimilation may take place either spontaneously or forcibly. A culture can spontaneously adopt a different culture or sometimes the older and richer culture forcibly integrates other weak cultures. Generally, relatively tenuou culture gets to be united to the mighty culture. Assimilation usually involves a gradual change and takes place in varying degrees. Full assimilation occurs when new members of a society become in distinguishable from older members. It is possible only through the process of social interaction. Because the vary root of society and culture are the products of social interaction. According to Dawson and Gettys, 'social interaction is a process whereby men
interpenetrate the minds of each other.' (Dawson and Gery, 1948, p. 479)

Usually, it takes place in the form of co-operation, conflict, competition, accommodation and assimilation. There are some important factors which promotes the process of assimilation. Firstly, if two cultures resemble each other in some vital respect, then the interaction between their members for each other is of a higher order. Secondly, intimacy and close proximity helps in the progress of assimilation to a great extent. Thirdly, although intimate and close social relations are essential for assimilation to occur, it is impossible if there is no tolerance. It is only when people who believe in one culture are prepared to tolerate the proximate existence of people who uphold the cause of a different culture that they can be influenced by the culture that the other upholds. Fourthly, if people get the same opportunities for economic progress as their neighbours, social intimacy increases and assimilation progress. Lastly, assimilation is encouraged by amalgamation. For example, amalgamation of East Bengal and Assam in 1905 develops the degree of assimilation between the Assamese and Bengali people to a great extent.

The Bengali community of Assam who had migrated since nineteenth century has also their own cultural identity. But due to the above mentioned factors, specially the very close proximity with the Assamese community where they have been living for a long time, their culture is greatly influenced by the Assamese society. This process has been observed in different walk of their lives as follows in Chamaria and Nagarbera Mouza.

8.1.1 Language

The language is such a powerful and dominant factor which acts as means of understanding and communicating man to man and society to society. This can also work as a powerful agent of integration and interaction amongst various groups of people speaking the same language. Language gives separate identities to distinct linguistic groups. It is also an element of culture. Although Bengali is the mother tongue of the Bengali community of
Chamaria and Nagarbera Mouza, almost all this group of this community can speak Assamese language very fluently. It is because, in comparison to the Assamese community, they are living in a very small numbers surrounded by the Assamese community. So, they are to interact with the local people with Assamese language in any kind of social, economic or cultural activities in their lives. Moreover, the present generation of this society is getting their education in Assamese medium in different schools and colleges located in different parts of the area. It is observed by the author that, the medium of instruction in the Primary and High School located in the vicinity of the Bengali community are also Assamese. Therefore the percentage of Bengali people who speak Assamese is gradually increasing.

The people of Chamaria and Nagarbera Mouza are taking up Assamese language not only in spoken form, but in writings also. It is seen that publications of magazine, souvenir various invitation cards etc. are also found written in Assamese. For example, ‘Jagaran’ a souvenir which was published by the Namasudra community is published in Assamese language. It is also observed that, the literate people of the Bengali community take the advantage of Assamese books, magazines, journals, news papers etc. and almost all the people enjoy the programmes of Assamese T.V. Channels and Radio Programmes etc. Interestingly, they use Assamese language within their community in some formal occasion like meetings, conferences etc. During field study the researcher observed that there are still some men and women who do not know how to speak Assamese or other language except their own mother tongue but they understand the Assamese language very clearly. In interview made with Biren Biswash, Suresh Mandal and Biren Sarkar of Chamaria village, said, ‘We are now Assamese, though our forefathers belonged to erstwhile East Bengal. Such type of feelings helped to develop social and communal harmony amongst the two communities. Moreover, Bengali community who are living in Chamaria and Nagarbera
Mouza were socio-economically very backward at the time of migration. The literate persons were almost nil amongst this group of people. But, presently they are developing in their socio-economic conditions with the different scheme of local governments. Such social transformations have helped them to mix up with the local society and therefore they have been influenced by the local culture. Such process has been able to crate a good social atmosphere of both the community in the area.

8.1.1 Social Interactions

The Bengali community is interacting with the local people in various social fronts. It is because, at the time of migration, they had to depend on the local people in their social and economic life. As a result of this dependence this community was influenced by the Assamese social and cultural milieu. The authors in her field study observed that, both the community take part each other in some social and cultural activities. An illustration of such activities is given below.

8.1.3 Participation in Religious Festivals

Durga Puja is a religious festival of the Hindus. But it is observe for a long time by the author that in Chamaria and Nagarbera Mouza both the community take part in this festival in such a vigorous way that it becomes difficult to demarcate the communal line. In the same way the Charak puja festival of Lakhanpur village of Nagarbera Mouza observed by the Bengali scheduled castes has the amalgamation of good numbers of Assamese people. On the other hand, in the Mahapurisia Satra in Chamaria, a festival is observed in every year in the second day of luner as 'Bar Bishnu Atar Tirobhav Tithi' or 'Chamaria Sabha'. In this Mahapurisia Sabha, the Bengali people also come from the surrounding villages in a large number and take part in it. Even they offer 'Sidhar Chaul' or 'Sukhyar Chaul' to the Satra. The offering of 'Sukhyar Chaul' is a traditional Mahapurisia culture of the Assamese society. But this culture is acquired by the Bengali people of
Chamaria Mouza from the indigenous Assamese people. Besides this Sabha, they also take part in some other religious functions celebrated in the Satra. Such as, birth and death anniversary of Sri Sri Sankar Dev and Madhav Dev, Doul Yatra etc. Similarly, in Malibari Satra of Nagarbera Mouza, people of the Bengali community take part in the annual Mahapurusia Sabha which is observed in the month Aswin of and some other festivals like, janmastami, dol yatra etc, along with the Assamese community. Interestingly it is found that some Bengali people of this locality are appointed in some important posts like President, Secretary etc. in the organizing committee of this Mahapurusia Sabha. Tulsi Das, a teacher from Malibari village told that, he was the president of this Sabha for two years continuously. Such types of social activities are not only helpful for social harmony, but also help for cultural exchange.

8.1.4 Cultural Festival

Bihu is a cultural festival of the Assamese community. In this festival the Assamese household prepares sira, pitha, laddu etc. In the same way, it is seen that in the Bengali household also, these items are found to be very common during Bihu festival. The Bengali community also observes the Rangali Bihu festival with the Assamese society with full co-operation. Recently it is observed that, in Chamaria the young Bengali boys have started to organize Bihu functions with the help of public donation of this locality. They also celebrate Bhogali Bihu and Kati Bihu like Assamese community. In Rongali Bihu, the small boys and girls makes different groups and move from one house to another performing Bihu dance and Bihu songs. It indicates the cultural assimilation between Assamese and Bengali community.

8.1.5 Marriage

Marriage is an important social institution. Its forms and functions changes according to change in culture. Hindu marriage is a religious sacrament in which a man and a woman are bond in permanent relationship
for the physical, social and spiritual purpose of sexual pleasure, procreation and observance of dharma. The Bengali community is living very closely with the Assamese society for a long time and therefore the family bond and family relationship is also developing in between different Assamese and Bengali family. It is observed that, last two years, five social marriages have taken place in between five Bengali and five Assamese families. Out of which two Assamese girls are given to the Bengali family and three Bengali girls are married to the Assamese family in Nagarbera area. In the same way, in Chamaria also such types of several social activities have taken place which has found in the field study. Such activities will definitely help in a cultural exchange.

8.1.6 Food

Rice is the staple food for both the community. But, the preparation of different cuisines of the Bengali community was quite different from that of Assamese society. But, presently it is found that this difference is getting minimized in course of time. In most of the Bengali family, the different food items are prepared which are very similar to that of Assamese community. For example, the different types of pithas are prepared in the Bengali families which are very much similar to the Assamese society during Bihu festival. Moreover, ‘Labra’ the mixed vegetable, an Assamese cuisine has become very common almost all the Bengali household. Different ‘tenga’ with fish like, ow tenga, Bilahi tenga, Amara tenga etc. which are purely Assamese cuisine can be found almost in every Bengali family of the study area. Moreover, ‘Khar’ is the most popular dish of Assamese society. Different types of curries prepared by using Khar are, ‘Komora Khar’, ‘Tiyahar Khar’, etc. has become favourite dish among the Bengali community also. The environmental conditions of the locality may have also helped them to adopt such things. Definitely these types of adaptation have helped these people to assimilate with the Assamese society.
8.1.7 Dress

In case of clothing the author has observed some change amongst the Bengali community. For example, ‘Gamocha’ which is used by the Assamese society can be seen in every Bengali household. Sari is the traditional dress of the Bengali women, ‘Mekhela-Chadar’ is the traditional dress of the women folk of Assam. But it has now gained tremendous attraction amongst the Bengali girls and women. The Bengali girls goes to schools and colleges wearing ‘Mekhela-Chadar’ some Bengali female wear the ‘Pat or Muga’ Mekhela-Chadar which is purely a product of Assam Silk. During some Puja festivals like, Durga Puja, Saraswati Puja, Lakhmi Puja, Khuti Puja, Dewali etc. the Bengali girls and women wear Mekhela-Chadar very nicely. They wear Mekhela-Chadar as a dress or as a costume. Undoubtedly, these are the symbols of the cultural assimilation.

8.1.8 Songs

The Bengali boys and girls perform different Assamese songs, dance and drama in different cultural functions. During school and college festival, cultural programmes of Ras Puja, Durga Puja, Bihu festival etc. the Bengali boys and girls take part in different Assamese singing competitions like, modern song, Jyoti Sangit, Rabha Sangit, Bhupendra Sangit, Bar Git, Loka Git, Bihu Git etc. They also take part in Bihu dance, Assamese modern dance, Assamese recitation etc. The Bengali people, specially the young generation has become very much influenced by the Assamese audio and video cassettes. They also have adopted different kinds of Assamese festival songs. A traditional Assamese Moh-Kheda song collected from a group of Bengali children is given below:

Oh re giri gharia
Ami haishu Bheluparia,
Bhelu pariar ghare
Mom bati jwale
Bara mahat tera kami
Bachare bachare mago ami.
Bacharar khela, nakariba hela....
(This is a song of driving away mosquitos)

All the above mentioned socio-cultural activities adopted by the people of the Bengali community of Chamaria and Nagarbera Mouza will definitely help in the assimilation process with the indigenous Assamese society.

References: