PART I

THE INTRODUCTION
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1.1 The Problem

The term folklore and folklife is related with the whole panorama of traditional culture including folk custom, material culture, performing art and oral folk literature. It is the means of expression of a group’s own attitudes and cultural life. Almost each and every community or societies have their own folklore and folklife. They are also rich in their own way. In the North Eastern Region of India in general and Assam in particular there are various groups of people both tribal and non-tribal have a very rich heritage of folklore and folklife.

Since the last parts of the nineteenth century and early part of twentieth century a very large number of Hindu Bengali and Muslim Bengali people entered into Assam from erstwhile East Bengal and East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) and settled here permanently. There is a vast difference in folklore and folklife of this Hindu Bengali and the Muslim people of Assam.

Chamaria and Nagarbera are two adjacent Mouzas of Kamrup district of Assam. The Hindu Bengali and the Muslim Bengali people in this area are well-known by two different names. The Hindu Bengali people who have migrated from different parts of East Pakistan and East Bengal are locally called Bengali or Bangali. But on the other hand, the Muslim Bengali people who have migrated from the same places, in same time and same reason are called Bangal, Charua, Bhaithal or Miya. Both of them have different socio-cultural activities of their own. In this present work the researcher has taken up the study of folklore and folklife of the Bengali community of Chamaria and Nagarbera Mouza of Kamrup District of Assam.
There is a very high concentration of scheduled caste Bengali population (27%) in Chamaria and Nagarbera Mouza. Although the percentage of Bengali scheduled caste people is very high, the general caste Bengali people are also living their side by side. The scheduled caste Bengali belongs to Jalos, Malos, Namasudras, Pal etc. and other belongs to Sahas and only a few Brahmin families are there in the study area. Socio-economically these groups of people are very backward which is reflected in their folklore and folklife in day to day life. Their folklore and folklife is related with rituals, agriculture, fishing, house making, death, religion, dance, drama, music, speech and so on.

Educationally this community in the area is found to be backward having the literacy rate is just 40 percent. It is because, a high percentage of scheduled caste people of the Bengali community is living here. Thus the percentage of literacy rate is very low than the other communities. The villages which have good infrastructure including road communication and education are found to be developed. Due to the modernization, a rapid change in their traditional life is also taking place amongst themselves and they have started to assimilate with the main stream Assamese Culture.

Thus, the present study of folklore and folklife of the Bengali community of Chamaria and Nagarbera Mouza is based on its own identity of there different social life. An endeavor has been made to find out the role of education on the folklore and folklife of the community along with their economic condition. Although the study area consists of two revenue Mouzas, it can be delineated with distinct socio-cultural characteristics of its own which is worthy for investigation. The study also aims to find out the changes of their traditional life with the development of education and at the same time process of assimilation with the main stream Assamese society. With this rational in mind, the present problem to study “The Folklore and Folklife of

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the Bengali Community of Chamaria and Nagarbera Mouza of Kamrup District of Assam" is taken up.

1.2 Significance of the Study

It is observed that the life of the Bengali community of Chamaria and Nagarbera Mouza is in a traditional state. But with the development of education and modernization, the folklore and folklife of some of the villages are changing very rapidly. Although a very large percentage of the Bengali people belong to fishing community in the area, a good number of them are engaged in agriculture and other economic activities also. As a result, change of the traditional life and culture is also taking place amongst them.

In Assam, the systematic study of folklore and folklife was initiated by Dr. Banikanta Kakati in his book "Mother Goddess Kamakhya", "Visnuita Myths and Legends" (Kakati: 1948). Till then different scholars have studied folklore and folklife of different communities in Assam in different times. But, the folklore and folklife of the Bengali community of Assam, who are comparatively a new migrants from erstwhile East Bengal and East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) is yet to be taken up. The life of this community in Assam is somewhat different from that of general Bengali community. Living in close proximity with the Assamese society for a long time, a sense of assimilation process has started very slowly but steadily. Therefore, it is felt that, the study will have significance to understand the transformation of the traditional life system of the Bengali community and the process of assimilation with the indigenous Assamese society.

1.3 Scope of the Study

A very little work has been done to investigate the folklore and folklife of the Bengali community in Assam in general and in the study area in particular. Although Chamaria and Nagarbera is a micro regional unit in Kamrup district of Assam, it has a very high concentration (27%) of Bengali population, out of which a sizable number of them belong to scheduled caste.
Socio-economically this group of peoples are found to be very poor and backward having rate of literacy is about 40 percent. Therefore, their folklore and folklife is still in an intact state to a great extent. The area has still remained virgin in respect of exploration of the folklore and folklife of these group of people. But in course of time a change in their traditional life and process of assimilation has started. It is in this context, the present work has been taken up with systematic and scientific approach to examine the problem. The study will be immensely helpful in understanding the life and culture of this group of people.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To understand the concentration and the distributional pattern of the community in the area in respect of their historical perspectives and their socio-economic and cultural life.

2. To understand the folklore and folklife of this community.

3. To understand the socio-economic condition and its impact on the traditional life of the community.

4. To study the influence of education on folklore and folklife of this community.

5. To examine the degree and trends of assimilation with the indigenous Assamese people.

1.5 Methodology

The study is based on field work. To collect the primary data the researcher had extensively visited different parts of the study area in different times in the year round. While collecting different data and information of folklore and folklife of the Bengali community in the field, the researcher had used both observation and interview method. For this purpose she had made some conversation with the village folk specially with the singers, storytellers, cultivators, fisherman, social workers etc. in different localities. For the
purpose of collecting socio-economic data and information, as many as seven villages in different localities were selected, so as to represent the study area. Data of these seven representative villages were collected through household schedules and questionnaires. For this purpose, a simple questionnaires was also prepared. To collect secondary data, some published and non-published government records were consulted and analyzed with suitable methods. At the beginning while formulating the problem and establishing a sound base of the work, a number of printed sources like journals, books, magazines, monographs, conference proceedings, governmental records etc. were consulted in various libraries. To add to this, the researcher had taken full advantage of her personal observations and experience for the last fifteen years as a resident in the locality. To capture some important photographs a digital camera and a video camera were used. To collect some oral literature and musical performances the researcher had used a tap recorder tactfully. To identify the study area in their regional surroundings and location, a cartographical map was used. Besides these, the computed data have been represented by tables. Finally, the report was prepared in the form of a thesis.

1.6 A Review of the Relevant Works

The systematic study of folklore and folklife was started in 1962 in Indiana University in USA and the scholars like Degh, Dorson, Glassie, List, Oinas, Richmond and Roberts and others contributed in this department. But, before and after that also different scholars contributed a lot in the field of folklore and folklife in different parts of the world.

William W. Newell's (1883), "Games and Songs of American Children" is the pioneering work on American children’s songs and games. He stated the historical development of many of play activities of British Isles and continental Europe. "The Golden Bough" a famous classic of comparative religion. This grandiose work contains in its twelve volumes a wealth of data on classical and modern civilized religious and on folk and
primitive religions. This classic book of J.G. Frazar (1907) is much criticized by social scientists today for its outmoded evolutionary theories and its dependence on often questionable source materials. Leach, Mac Edward (1955) had presented an excellent introduction to the genre. It is a one volume edition of ballads selected from Great Britain, North America and Scandinavia. Rudin Paul (1956), an American made a psychoanalytical approach to folklore by combining Freudian and Jungin concepts. Vladimir Propp (1958) had presented a structural analysis of folktales rather than content. It is a guide book for the folklorists for classifying folktales on the basis of structure. Robert A. Georges and Alan Dundes (1963) made an important study of narration among the Limba, a group of 200,000 people in Northern Sierra Leone. Lind De geh (1969) had made a complex study of narrators, performance and audience participation based on the example of relocated Hungarian community. The book edited by R.M. Dorson "Folklore and Folklife" has given the various dimensions of folklore and folklife studies by eighteen different scholars. This book contains an inspiring and spirited mixture of essays, theoretical contributions, practical instructions and pure encyclopedia articles. A wide range of scholars made tremendous contribution of folklore and folklife in different parts of Europe and America. Henry F. Dobbyns (1960) made an extensive over view of the main feast days of many of the world's religions, giving essential information on the liturgical norms around which folk practices tend to the cluster.

In India, the study of folklore and folklife in regional level is not very less in number. The study of folklore and folklife in India was going on since ancient times even from vedic period. Some of the contributors who made good contribution in this field are mentioned below.

H. Whitehead (1921) had attempted to delineate the village gods of South India. A case study has done by Narayan Tripathi (1935) on the festivals and observances in Orissa. J. Ph. Vogel (1972) and N.N.
Bhattacharya (1965) had studied on similar field. They have made their study on serpent and serpentlore.

B. Chaityanya Deva (1975) has studied on musical instruments of India, “Traditions of Indian Folk Dance” is a classic work of Kapila Vatsyayan (1976). William Crooke (1978) had made an extensive study on popular religion and folklore in Northern India. The study of R.W. Frazier (1987) dealt with the literary history of India. K. Chottopadhyay (1978) made his study on tribalism in India. Balwant Gargi (1966) had made her study on folk theatre of India. This is a solid study of diverse popular and classical theatrical traditions in India. J. Mishra (1951) made an attempt to study on folk literature of Mithila. Deva Indra (1976), who had contributed a lot through his famous book “Mythological Perspective of the Study of Society”.

Like other parts of India, in Assam and other regions of North East, a huge contribution has been made in the field of folklore and folklife. To mention some of them are:

G.C. Das (1900) had collected a large number of Assamese proverbs and has given an analysis on it. L.A. Waddell (1900) had made a critical analysis of the tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley. B. Rajkhowa (1905) had contributed a lot through his study on the Assamese popular superstitions. L. Bezbarua (1911) had collected a large number of folk tales from different sources of Assam and presented in his famous book “Burhiar Sadhu”. R.C.M. Thompson (1948) had studied on beliefs and customs of the Assamese Hindu of Assam valley. “Mother Goddess Kamakhya” is a unique contribution in the folklore research made by B.K. Kakati (1968). Bareh (1969) had made his extensive study on the history and culture of the Khashi people of Meghalaya. H. Baruah (1985), N. Bordoloi (2004) and A. Gogoi (2001) has made their contributions in the field of Assamese Loka Sanskriti. A vast study has made by B.N. Dutta (1973) in the folk culture of the Goalpara District of Assam. A.C. Choudhury (1992) had analyzed the history

In Bengal a large number of scholars have contributed in the field of folklore and folklife of the Bengali community. A few of them are mentioned below.


The above mentioned reviews are only a tip of iceberg in the field of folklore and folklife studies. But, the study of folklore and folklife of the Bengali community in Assam is not yet considerable.

1.7 Chapterisation

The whole work is divided into three major parts. Part-I is divided into two chapters. Chapter-I deals with the introduction of the problem, its significance, scope, objectives, methodology, review of some related works and special terms and terminology. In chapter two, attempt is made to introduce the study area with geographical location and the historical background of the Bengali community. Part-III deals with some surveyed work which has been divided into six chapters. The first four chapters of this part deals with four major areas of folklore and folklife, viz. chapter-III oral folk literature, chapter-IV folk custom, chapter-V Material culture and chapter
VI performing art. Chapter VII deals with literacy and socio-economic condition of the Bengali community in the study area. In chapter VIII, an attempt has been made to assess the process of assimilation of the Bengali people with the indigenous Assamese people and its effects on their socio-cultural life. Part-III includes the synthesis where summary and conclusion are incorporated. The thesis ends with the Bibliography and Appendix.