CHAPTER II

THE SETTING AND ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE STUDY GROUPS

ASSAM

Assam, the one of the eight states of North East India is situated within 24 degree and 28 degree North latitudes and 49.8 degree and 96 degree east longitudes. Assam is bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh on the north, Meghalaya and Tripura on the south, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh on the east and Meghalaya and West Bengal and Bangladesh on the west.

Assam covers 78,523 sq km of territory, roughly a fourth of it comprising rocky hills and the rest green and fertile plains out of which 78,088 sq km is occupied by rural and 485 sq km is occupied by urban areas.

As per the 2011 census, the total population of Assam is 3.12 (male- 15,939,443 and female-15,266,133) crores having the literacy rate of 72.19 while in 2001 it was 2.67 crores (total population). According to 1991 census, the total population of this state was 22,414,322 out of which 11.09 per cent are urban and 88.89 per cent are rural inhabitants. Assam is divided into 23 districts and among these 23 districts there are two hill districts namely- Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts.

Assam topographically can be divided into three district zones: the Brahmaputra valley or the Brahmaputra plains in the north; the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills in the middle; and the Barak valley or the Barak plain in the south. The
LOCATION OF GOALPARA DISTRICT IN ASSAM

MAP - 2
Brahmaputra valley which is about 500 km in length and 60 km in breadth is the most expansive plain area of the three zones. The low gradient and tends to form river islands. The largest of them, Majuli (929 sq kms) is said to be the world's largest.

The soils are mostly alluvial in the valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Barak while the acidic and red soils are present in the hilly areas of Assam. The plain area’s climatic condition is suitable for the cultivation of variety of crops etc and the cultivation for the certain crops like- rubber, the hilly area’s climatic condition is the best.

In Assam more than 70 percent of the total populations depend on agriculture as their primary source of livelihood. Rice is the main crop cultivated by the cultivators of Assam. In some of the hill areas, the tribal people use to practice the where they raise mixed crops along with paddy.

Racially, there are a number of ethnic groups in Assam including the indigenous tribal communities professing different religious faiths and beliefs and speaking their own different languages and dialects.

Assamese is the principal language of the people of Assam and is regarded as the *lingua franca* of entire North East India.

In Assam there are as many as 23 tribal communities which constitute 12.82 percent of the total population, which may broadly be divided into two categories: plain tribes, inhabiting in the plain areas and hill tribes who are mainly inhabiting in the hilly areas.
All the tribes and communities are exhibit their own unique identities in respect of religious, social, cultural, economical and so on.

THE DISTRICT SETTING

GOALPARA DISTRICT

Goalpara is one of the districts of Assam (MAP 2), covering 1,824 km, located on the foothills of Meghalaya and on the bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra is endowed with its scenic beauty. Previously ruled by the Koch Rajbanshi Kings Goalpara is culturally very rich surrounded mainly by the Hindu, Christian, Islam and Jain religious people. The Bodo-Kachari, Rabha, Hajong, Garo, the caste Assamese, Bengali Muslim, Bengali Hindu and etc are scattered in Goalpara district areas with their own culture, language, tradition and so on. According to the census of 2011 the total population of Goalpara is 1,008,959 with the density of the population which is 550/km.

ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE STUDY GROUPS

THE BODO-KACHARIS

The Bodo-Kacharis were the earliest tribe who entered and settled in Assam, constitute the largest tribal group with an account of 38 per cent of the total tribal population in Assam. In the pre-Christ era from western China and Tibet this tribe had migrated to Assam. At present they are mainly concentrated in the districts of Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Sonitpur and Darrang of Assam.
The Bodo-Kacharis of Assam is a branch of the great Indo-Mongoloid family falling within the Assam Burmese linguistic section. Different names are used to designate them like- Meches (in Bengal and in lower ranges of the Himalayas coming within the territory of Nepal), as Sonowal-Kachari and Thengal-Kachari (in upper Assam) while in Western Assam they are known as Bodo or Boro and Bodo-Kachari respectively, as Dimasa-Kachari and Barman (in the southern district of North-Cachar and Cachar) Basumatary, Narzary, Khakhlary, Goyari, Mushahari, Daimary, etc are the Bodo-Kachari groups.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Bodo-Kacharis are numerically the largest plains tribe of this region. The word 'Bodo' has been derived from the word 'Bod' which means Tibet. Most probably, the people of this region entered this region through Bhutan passes. They are called Kachari because they lived in the 'Kassar' or below the Himalayan range.

LANGUAGE

Originally, the Bodos were a linguistic group and the word 'Bodo' is used in ethnic sense also. The Bodos had no script of their own. Therefore, their language remained as a dialect but since 1930 their language has been developing fast. The Government of Assam introduces Bodo M.I.L. in the Higher Secondary level in 1930.

SOCIETY

The Bodo-Kacharis follow the patriarchal family system. They property belonging to father after his death is inherited by his sons. The Bodo-Kacharis have 23
ares (clans) These clans are totemic having their origin from plants and animals. These clans are exogamous.

Moreover, as the Bodo-Kacharis of this region have been living along with the non-tribals generation after generation, they have been influenced by the non-tribals and vice-versa. The non-tribals have accepted many ingredients of the Bodo culture.

RELIGION AND CULTURE

Lord Shiva is the supreme god for the Bodo-Kachari people. Today due to the influence of the other religious people they also use to worship the God and Goddesses of the Hindu religion. Bathou puja, is celebrated in the name of Lord Shiva, Bwisagu festival is their main festival, which is observed to be performed in April-May. A sizeable population among them has adapted Christianity.

The Bodo-Kacharis have the very beautiful folk dance forms like Baguroumba, Bwisagu etc which are performed in festivals, occasion and the like. They have many colourful dress patterns like- Dokhna (female dress) which are adorned with traditional design and vivid colours.

Originally, the Bodo-Kachari marriage continued for seven days and seven nights and so soon as the marriage ended the family had to face abject poverty. They overspent money for eating and drinking. Their marriage is simple where the Bodo priest performs the marriage ceremony reciting mantras written on their own language. Like the caste-Hindu people they also arrange feast for the invited guests and the groom along with groom’s party.
FOOD HABIT

Rice is the main food of the Bood-Kachari people. They are Omabedot (Pork) lover. They also like to eat Shukan Na (dry fish), Daobedot (chicken) etc food. They generally love to eat the non-vegetable items. The home made rice beer is their favourite beverage, it is their weakness. Almost all the village women prepare rice beer at their homes. They serve it when the guests come. In the festivals- Bwisagu, at the time of planting and harvesting of the paddies they serve rice beer in each household. They also take 'Phatika' or distilled rice beer.

ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

The economy of the Bodo-Kacharis is basically agrarian. Most of them are wet cultivators. There are some people who are involved in service, business, and daily wage too. They use to cultivate paddy, crops, vegetables and sale it in the market place. The Bodo women are expert weavers and good spinners. They use to weave Dokhna, Aronai etc. in their looms so weaving is one of their sources of economy. They also use to domesticate fowls, goats and pig at their houses and time to time they sale these at the market and it is also one of their sources of economy. They also sale the seasonal vegetables, fruits and earn money.

The Bodo-Kachari society is both the traditional as well as modern. Maintaining their own culture, tradition they also lead the modern ways of life style. The literacy rates of the people of Bodo-Kachari are increasing in the recent year.
THE RABHAS

Rabha is one also one of the plains scheduled tribes of Assam who also use to live in the forest areas. The language and dialect spoken by the Rabha people is also of the same name. They are mainly distributed in the districts of Goalpara, Dhubri, Barpeta, Kamrup, Sonitpur, Darrang and Lakhimpur of Assam.

The Rabhas are divided into 9 divisions. These are- Rongdania, Pati, Maïtori, Bitalia, Hanna, Songa, Totla, Dukuri and Tintrika. Each of the 9 divisions of the Rabha is divided into some exogamous clans called Barai or Bar.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LANGUAGE

The Rabhas belong to Indo-Mongoloid group of people and have similarities with other groups such as Garos, Bodo-Kachari, Koch, Hajong and others. Most of the Rabhas of refer to themselves as Rabha, but some of them often declare themselves as Kocha Rabha.

The Rabhas of Assam generally speak the local Assamese dialects. Apart from the Pati Rabhas the other divisions of the Rabhas use to speak their own original Rabha dialect to a great extent. The Rabha dialect, as stated by George Abraham Grierson, belongs to Bodo group of languages of Assam-Burmese branch.

ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

The traditional economy of the Rabhas in general, is based on agriculture and weaving. In the past, the Rabhas used to practice shifting cultivation. Gradually they took up the job of settled cultivation and started cultivation with plough. Besides cultivation, hunting was also an old practice of Rabha people. Weaving is a traditional
occupation of the Rabha women. They weave beautiful clothes for day-to-day uses and these clothes are also worn in the dance, singing performances.

The Rabhas follow patriarchal family system. Nevertheless, their children are not inducted to the clans of their fathers but are inducted to the clans of their mothers. The line of descent is traced through the father only. The influence of Hinduism is clearly discernible among the Rabhas

RELIGION AND CULTURE

Rabha people traditionally practice a few animistic rituals. However, today they more often follow a faith, which is a blend of some Hindu and a few animistic rituals. There are considerable differences in ritual practices among the Rabhas, still living in the forest areas and practiced traditional animistic practices tinged with some rituals of mainstream Hinduism and the plains Rabha who are following with the local Hindus as far as their religious practices are concerned.

Rabha people's religious world is pervaded with various spirits and natural objects. The main deity of the Rabhas is called Rishi. Rishi, for the forest Rabhas as well as village Rabhas, is a male deity, also known as Mahakal. Forest Rabhas worship him in all important social and religious ceremonies.

In addition are the deities Rungtuk and Basek, the household deities of welath, considered as the daughters of Rishi or Mahakal, The Rungtuk and basek, are inherited by the heiress of the family. Their traditional priest deori, counts the auspicious day for the foundation of these deities. The influence of Christianity is very much visible among the Rabhas.
Since ritual sacrifice is an integral part of Rabha religious practices, they still have practices of ritual sacrifice of certain birds and animals. They consider blood as an essential element to appease their Gods. Usually they sacrifice pigeons and fowls (sometimes a fowl and sometimes more than one) for their deities. At times they sacrifice pigs too.

Alike the other tribes and communities of Assam the Rabha also have many beautiful numbers of folk dance forms and folk songs. Some of the dance forms like- Hamjar are connected to some daily agrarian activity while some are related to death ceremony, which is Farkanti. Both the Rabha male and female folks take part in the dances, songs whole-heartedly.

THE VILLAGES VISITED

In the course of field work I have visited 21 villages of Goalpara dist. All these villages belong to different blocks, these blocks are- Balijana, Kuchdhowa, Matia and Rangjuli.

I have collected various field data pertaining to my study from the following informants from the 21 villages.

1. Village- Kachubari
   P.O.- Dhupdhara
   Dist- Goalpara
   Total Rabha families- 42 households (220 heads)
   Village Chief- Ratnakar Patgiri, Age- 52
   Educational Qualification- Upto Class VI
   Occupation- Cultivation
2. Village - Jyoti Gaon
P.O.- Dhupdhara
Dist- Goalpara
Total families- 135 (Bodo) and 35 (Rabha)

3. Village - Bakhrapara Sekuari
P.O.- Dhupdhara
Dist- Goalpara
Total families- 58 (Part-I Bakhrapara)
48 (Part- II Bakhrapara) and 09 (Part-III Bakhrapara)
Total nos. of population- 350 heads.

4. Village - Rampur
P.O.- Dhupdhara
Dist- Goalpara
Total families- 200
Village Chief- Putu Ram Rabha, Age- 70+
Education Qualification- Nill
Occupation- Cultivation

5. Village - Mejengpara
P.O. - Kuchdhua,
Dist- Goalpara
Village Chief- Shoshodhar Daimary, Age- 45
Occupation- Ex-army

6. Village - Tangabari
P.O. - Dudhnoi,  
Dist- Goalpara  
Total Families- 42 Bodo Households  
Village Chief- Dhananjay Khakhlary, Age- 50  
Occupation- Cultivation

7. Village - Dorokh  
P.O. - Dudhnoi  
Dist- Goalpara  
Total Families- 72 Bodo households (365 heads)  
Village Chief- Robin Musahari, Age- 42  
Occupation- Cultivation

8. Village - Navagram  
P.O.- Dudhnoi  
Dist- Goalpara  
Total Families- 45 Rabhas  
and 75 Bodo households (650 heads)  
Village Chief- Ghanshyam Basumatary,  
Age- 52  
Occupation- Cultivation

9. Village - Amjonga  
P.O.- Munupara  
Dist- Goalpara  
Total Families- 340  
Population- 1672
Ajit boro. Rtd pilot, 50.

10. Village - Chotomatia
P.O. – Dudhnoi
Dist- Goalpara
Total families- 199, Population- 596
Female- 282
Male- 314

11. Village - Dighali
P.O. – Dudhnoi
Dist- Goalpara
Total Families- 40 Rabha households (303 heads)
Village Chief- Bhabesh Chandra Rabha, Age- 55
Occupation- Business

12. Village - Topolakhua
P.O. – Dudhnoi
Dist- Goalpara
Total Families- 59 Rabha households
Village Chief- Rahin Rabha, Age- 50
Occupation- Business

13. Village - Bargum
P.O. – Dudhnoi
Dist- Goalpara
Total families- 41 Rabha households
Village Chief- Modon Rabha, Age- 52
14. Village - Balasara
P.O. – Dudhnoi
Dist- Goalpara
Total Families- 180 Bodo families
and 52 other families (1162 heads)
Village Chief- Prabhat Daimary, Age- 55
Occupation- Cultivation

15. Village - Siluk Bakrapara
P.O. – Dudhnoi
Dist- Goalpara
Total Families- 55 Rabha households
Village Chief- Bijoy Rabha, Age- 55
Occupation- Cultivation

16. Village - Barjuli
P.O. – Paikan
Dist- Goalpara
Total Families- 30 Rabha households
Village Chief- Ubil Rabha, Age- 57
Occupation- Cultivation
17. Village - Jonaimari
P.O. - Dohela
Dist- Goalpara
Total Families- 31 Bodo households
and 18 Rajbangshi households
Village Chief- Khagen Basumatary, Age- 80

18. Village - Kharalalpara
P.O. - Dudhnoi
Dist- Goalpara
Total Families- 180
Village Chief- Prabin Khakhlary, Age- 55
Occupation- Cultivation

19. Village - Khialmari
P.O. - Dudhnoi
Dist- Goalpara
Total Families- 235
Village Chief- Mushin Khakhlary, Age- 57
Occupation- Cultivation
20. Village - Kalpani
   P.O. – Dudhnoi
   Dist- Goalpara
   Total Families- 67 Rabha households
   Village Chief- Gobordhan Rabha, Age- 65
   Education Qualification- Matriculate
   Occupation- Cultivation

21. Village - Salpara
   P.O. – Dudhnoi
   Dist- Goalpara
   Total households- 1200
   Village Chief- Entrance Rabha, Age - 63
   Educational Qualification- H.S.
   Occupation- Voluntary Retirement from Navy

THE STUDY VILLAGES

The villages inhabited by the study groups are situated on the plains and in layout resemble ordinary non-tribal Assamese villages of lower Assam. The villages cover a large area as each family owns a very big compound. The villages are inhabited homogenously by the Bodo-Kachari and the Rabha people and surrounded by a number of other villages. Barring one or two most of these villages are inhabited by Assamese
Hindu caste population. So, the influence of these caste populations is very much noticed on the life and culture of both these groups. The villagers follow their traditional religion, but now-a-days they worship certain Hindu Gods and Goddesses. This is definitely due to the influence of neighbouring Hindu population. The villagers are neat and clean, and houses are arranged in a planned manner leaving spaces for lanes and bye-lanes.

OCCUPATION

Agriculture is the main occupation of the people of both these study groups. During the off-seasons, some serve as day-labourer also. They undertake cultivation of both Ahu and Sali rice along with some amount of pulses, mustard seeds and jute. Vegetable gardens are raised by both these groups. Those who reside on the bordering areas near to Meghalaya resort to shifting cultivation to a certain extent. These groups though basically agriculturist and practice wet paddy cultivation, only a few numbers of cultivations have taken to improved methods of cultivation leaving a large majority with their traditional system.

Goats, cattle, pigs, hens etc are the major domestic animals. Economic hardship has compelled many people to earn their livelihood by different professions other than agriculture.

College and school education is another factor directing many of these people to leave their home. The educated sections do not like to go back to village to till the soil. They prefer jobs rather than ploughing. The well qualified persons get good job in Government establishment as well as in private concerns. Some have become school teachers in their own localities. A few become college teachers. Others, earn their bread
by motor driving, or by working as military man, policeman, chowkiders or by doing similar menial work.

**FOOD HABIT**

Rice form the staple food of the groups with an inherent liking for dried and powdered fish, pork and rice-beer, which is their favourite drink and is prepared on festive occasions. Vegetables, pulses etc. are also taken as an important part of diet. Feasting and drinking play an important role in their social and religious lives. But the traditional likes and dislikes have now tended to disappear under economic pressure brought about by many factors. The consumption of rice-beer is also gradually coming down due to strict enforcement of the excise law which is a healthy sign for the socio-economic growth of the society. Further, those members of both the groups who got themselves initiated into the Mahapurusiya sect of the Vaishnavite school no longer indulge in eating non-vegetable items and drinking rice-beer.

The social change occurring to both these societies appears to be multidimensional in character as we see them through their socio-religious, social, cultural and socio-economic perspectives. The adaptation to the Hindu ways of life and assimilation to its culture more particularly by those section of the tribe is a distinct phenomenon of social change noticed during the recent past.

The conversion of a sizable section of the tribes to Christianity is another phenomenon reacting sharply to the continuation of old traditional socio-religious rituals or the socio-cultural traits of much ethnic importance. Even what have been left out have undergone curtailment with the passing of times due to various factors including economic factor.