1.1. PRELUDE

Fishing to a considerable extent, is determined by the heterogeneous and uncertain conditions of the physical environment. The activities associated with fishing have been discussed widely as a cultural type as that of the pastoralists, horticulturists and so on. Such discussions on fishing have taken into consideration the variety of fishing techniques and technologies ranging from simple traps, spears, arrows etc., among indigenous peoples; to the different kinds of sizes of boats and nets employed in small-scale or industrial fishing; general fishing or maritime cultures, etc. In the small-scale or traditional societies, fishing activities sometime share many of the characteristics of hunting like danger, uncertainty, the use of physical strength and so on. These activities also resemble more closely the gathering of a reliable and easily captured resource. There are examples of regions where the comparative abundance and reliability of aquatic resources permitted a level of social development which is generally associated with agricultural societies.

Fishing activities are undertaken in seas, rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, inland pools and in paddy fields. The conditions of the weather and location of fish cannot be controlled by the fishermen. The uncertainty stems not only from the physical environment but also from the social environment in which fishing is undertaken (Acheson : 1981 : 275). Fishermen operating on a flat, undifferentiated surface are exploiting animals that are difficult to see which leads to uncertainty. One's catches can fluctuate depending on the activities of fellow fishermen, and even fishermen working with relatively primitive technology can affect the sock of aquatic animals.
In many fishing communities of the world, fishing territories are not a common property resource. In some societies rights to fish are controlled and such ownership rights operate to reduce uncertainty. In most societies fishing rights involve control over “fishing space” - not the resource itself. The main object, however, is not to protect or conserve the fish as much as to reserve the fish that are there for one’s self. (McCay, 1978: 399)

Through the development of technology, institutions, and communication, the fishermen can reduce risk and uncertainty. But for a terrestrial animal like man, the sea is still a dangerous and risky environment. Malinowski first suggested that human beings cope with irreducible risk through ritual and magic. He noted that in the Trobriand Islands no magic exists in lagoon fishing, where reliable catches can be obtained without physical danger, “.....While in open sea fishing, full of danger and uncertainty, there is extensive magical ritual to secure safety and good results” (Malinowski, 1948: 274).

One of the most common strategies used by fishermen to adapt to uncertainty is to combine occupations. According to Leap fishing is rarely done exclusively in tribal and peasant societies but is almost always combined with hunting, agriculture, or other occupations (1977: 251). In the context of India, fishing is one of the hereditary occupations of some Hindu Caste which is also one of the important sources of food supply to tribes like the Andamanese.

The Ao Nagas of Nagaland, though primarily dependent on agriculture practice both collective and individual fishing in the rivers as well as in the streams. The Andamanese subsist on hunting, fishing and collecting. They fish in the sea and in the pools using nets, short spears, harpoons, bows and arrows. Traditionally, they are aware of the method of poisoning fishes in the pools by means of certain plants which they crush
and place in the water. The Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh rear fish in the paddy fields. Thus, there are various types of fishermen ranging from sea-based to that of lake-based or part-time fishermen such as the Ao Nagas or the Apatanis who include fishing in addition to their substantive livelihood agriculture.

So, it is found that from the earliest time fishing has emerged as an occupation of human groups. Gradually specialised fisher folk also came into being in certain ecological zones. These people had in them craftsmanship, ingenuity and acumen in the occupation which they acquired from their forefathers and in the course of time, these fisher folk came to be known as fishing community.

Although the exact time of introduction of fishing as an occupation is not known, the evidences found in the Indus Valley, Egyptian and Chinese civilizations indicate the existence of fishing circa 2000 B.C. Excavators in Egypt while digging graves found representation of fishing scenes in the paintings. The Arthasatra of Kautilya, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Bible have mentioned the existence of the fishing community and their social status in those days.

The fishing sectors all over the world is not homogeneous. It varies both in terms of species of fishes, catching devices, fleet composition, production method, market and institutional arrangement. The socio-economic status of the fishing community is also heterogeneous. It varies from nation to nation and even region to region in the same nation.

Now-a-days, fishing is regarded as an important means of income and employment generator as it stimulates the growth of number of subsidiary industries. This is also an exchange earner besides providing balanced protein food to all classes of people. So, the evaluation of the impact of machanisation of fish, fisheries and fishermen communities are of
fundamental importance for resource mobilisation, allocation and employment policy necessary for the development of socio-economic condition of fishermen.

1.2. THE FISHING COMMUNITY OF INDIA

India is rich in respect of human and natural resources. Among the human resources of India, fishermen are also laborious like the other human resources of India. In India there are certain specialized fishing castes. Caste system has confined fishing as a profession strictly to a particular community who are considered very low in the social scale. The social stigma attached to the profession is so pronounced even today that any person engaged in fish trade is looked down upon. Fishing communities in India are living in rural areas scattered along the coasts, rivers, estuaries, creeks, lakes, tanks, ponds, tributaries, reservoirs and channels. As per experts' view -

*In India, rivers are flowing over 17,000 miles and other subsidiary water channels cover more than 70,000 miles, the marine resources including India's ocean and Arabian sea along with a good number of gulf and bays (Dhar: 1996:212).*

Depending on the above resources, fishermen are earning their livelihood. Rightly does observe an expert—

*It is one of the oldest and traditional means of livelihood for about nine million people of India. Along the coast line of 6,500 kms, there are 1,800 marine fishing villages consisting of 5.3 million fishermen / fisher-women. (Sridevi: 1989:6).*

The major fishing communities of India are residing in Kerala, Maharastra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, West
Bengal, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Assam. The fishing communities of India are economically most backward and most of the families live at the subsistence level. They usually live together in thatched houses, often in mono caste villages. History witnesses that most of the fishermen have been contributing to the national heritage of India through folkloric expression, singing, dancing and other ways, although most of them are illiterate and economically backward. Dhar rightly observes—

*Inspite of having a huge fishing population, fishing resources and demand for fish, India produces only 9 percent of total fish production in Asia, whereas Japan contributes about 43 percent and China contributes 18 percent (1996 : 212).*

Srivastava also observes,

*Although India is the seventh largest fish producing country in the world and accounts for 3.3 percent of world fish production, yet most of the fishermen communities are lying below poverty line (1993 : 22).*

In India, the fishery resources are of three types (1) Inland fisheries, (ii) Estuarine and (iii) Marine fisheries. Fish production from inland water is of very considerable significance in India because, it provides largest employment opportunity to the poor section of the society without having sufficient capital.

### 1.3. THE FISHING COMMUNITY OF ASSAM

In Assam, as in other parts of the country, fishing is a caste-based occupation practiced by the Namasudra, the Kaibarta, the Jhalo Malo, the Patni, the Jalkeot and the Hira castes. According to the Government policy of Assam the fishery resources of Assam is categorised under the following heads : (a) River and tributaries (4,500km), (b) Beel fisheries (one lakh
hectares), (c) swamps and low-lying area (20,000 hectares), (d) tanks and ponds (90,000 hectares) and (e) Forest fisheries (5,000 hectares). Although, Assam possesses a vast fishery resources. It has no marine and estuarine fisheries. Fishing is confined to inland water only comprising capture and cultured fisheries.

As attracted by these fishery resources, gradually different classes of fishermen have been migrating to Assam from different parts of India and abroad and have settled alongside the aboriginal fishermen groups as fishermen. Currently in Assam, there are about six castes engaged in fishing and fish trade: All of them are Hindus and belong to scheduled castes except one Muslim group in Cachar district and people of few villages of South Salmara under Dhubri district which is commonly termed as Maimal or Datiar community respectively. Among the sixteen scheduled castes of Assam, six castes, namely, the Namasudra, the Kaibarta, the Jhalo-Malo, the Patni, the Jalkeot and the Hira are the largest traditional fishing communities. They constitute 82.12 percent of the total scheduled caste population of Assam and more or less, they are scattered all over Assam.

The total population of Assam in 2001 Census has been 2,66,55,528. Of them, 18,25,949 persons are Scheduled Castes (SCs), constituting 6.9 percent of the total population of the state. The state has registered 10 percent decadal growth of SC population in 1991-2001. There are sixteen (16) notified SCs, and all have been enumerated in 2001 Census. Kaibarta (31.8 percent) and Namasudra (30.4 percent) are the two major SCs in the state sharing more than half of the total population. Among the districts, Cachar (14.4 percent), Karimganj (13 percent), Marigaon (12.9 percent), Hailakandi (10.9 percent), and Bongaigaon (10.3 percent) are the main SC concentrated districts in Assam, each having more than 10 per cent SC population. According to 2001 Census, 85 percent of the SCs are living in rural areas. Individual SC wise, there is
wide variation with regard to their rural-urban distribution of population. A high of 27.9 percent urban population has been recorded among Dhupi, followed by Brittial Bania with 23.3 percent. On the contrary, Patni has recorded the lowest of 7.3 per cent urban population. Namasudra, Hira, Muchi, and Kaibartta are predominantly residing in rural areas having more than 85 per cent rural population.

1.4. ORIGIN OF THE KAIBARTA COMMUNITY

In the primitive stage of human civilization people used to live inside a cave, near the rivers, canals, seas and ceiling constructed on the tree because of five major reasons namely (i) to make easy convenience to go into the water in order to protect themselves from the attack of the wild animals, (ii) to collect pure drinking water, (iii) to catch fish for livelihood, (iv) to make use of waterways through rivers or seas for business and other purposes and (v) to breathe pure and fresh air. For these purposes, the center of human civilization grew up in and around the rivers and seas. Say for instance, the growth of Hindu civilization took place depending on the great river the Indus. In course of time, the men who lived on water were known as the Doms, the Nadiyals, the Kaibartas, the Jalkeots, the Jalomalos, the Patnis and the Namasudras; who were known as fishermen or fishing communities.

With the growth of human civilization the idea of self-employment and self-dependence grew up among the men so as to meet the increasing demand for goods and services of the increasing people in accordance with their liking or choice, ability and efficiency. As a result, the division of labour came into existence in the society. It led to the creation of four varnas. In the ancient Vedic literature, we find several references regarding the origin of Varnas. The Gita says:
Chatur varnyam maya sristam  
guna karma vibhagasah

It means that the stratification of four varnas was made mainly on the basis of *guna* (temperament) and *karma* (action). So a caste was not by birth but by occupation. A caste or a community is generally defined or given a name according to its occupation. Accordingly the people who belong to the occupation of fishing are known as fishermen.

In the past there was no restriction of changing one's profession. As for example sage Viswamitra was a Kshatriya by birth, but by virtue of his meditation and perseverance, he became a Brahmin of good-reputation. The mother of Vedabyash was the daughter of a fishermen. The great Vidur of the *Mahabharata* was the son of a slave or *dasas*. In due course caste system became gradually hereditary. The son must follow the profession of his ancestors. Since the time of the *Manusamhita*, the caste system became gradually more and more rigid. As a result, Dronacharya, famous and reputed Guru betrayed Eaklabya, the son of a Nisada, mercilessly. The ancient laws of *Manu* gave the four chief varnas such as Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. Each varna is stratified further and the Sudra varna has many strata. As observe by *Krishna* –

*Ideally, the caste is a hereditary, endogamous localised group having traditional association with an occupation, and a particular prestige and position in the local hierarchy of castes (1987 : 18).*

During the Vedic period the *varna* system did not include all the people of the society. A large section of the people who remained outside the *varna* system constituted the fifth *varna* or *panchama*. In Vedic literature we find the reference of the *Panchama* i.e. Ayogava, *Chandala*, Nisada and *Paulkasa*. They comprised of the lower artisans and craftsmen such as skinners, tanners, show-makers, cleaners, fishermen and makers of musical instruments. In the *Puranas*, they were called *Asprashyas*,
Avamas, Chandalas, Svapachas, Antyas and Bhangis. During the British period they came to be called first the depressed classes (Dalit Jatis) or exterior castes, later on Harijans (children or man of God) and finally Scheduled Castes. On the basis of criteria of untouchability, the Kaibartas have been identified as one of the sixteen Scheduled Castes of the State as per Constitutional (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 under the provision of Articles 341 and 342. The national objective of identifying them as Scheduled Castes is to uplift their socio-economic status at par with the general people. Bhakta Das opines—

In different corners of the country they are known by different names like fishermen, Doms, Nadiyals, Kaibartas, jalowas, Keots or jal-Keots, Pani-Keot, Haloi-keot, Jaloi, Jaliya, Jalik, Dasa, Dhibara, Tiyar, Sailor, Mazi, Margava, Mahishya, Nidiputra, Ganga Putra etc. (1986 : 39)

About the etymology of the world Kaibarta there are various opinions. We have found an orthodox derivation of the word Kevarta or Kaibarta from the root ‘ka’ or ‘ke’ meaning water and ‘vrit’ meaning exist as follows:


ii. Ke-Barta-eti (Here the word ‘ke’ or ‘ka’ has different meaning viz. water, Ganga, Peacock, Bishnu, soul, Brahma, Sun : Saral Bangla Abhidhan : 1996 : 259).

iii. Ka+varta (According to Bishnu Prashad Rabha “ka’ means rival or protestant one who protests and ‘varta’ means place or territory where they live. It also means that the Kaibartas had to fight with the Aryans for their survival. According to him to know the Kaibartas, the pronunciation they made is to be noticed. It is because the Kaibartas pronounce not from the throat but from neck : Informant : Katiram Bhakat).

In the Brahman and Samhita age the word 'Kaibarta' is known as 'kimvarta'. Here 'kim' means ugly or awkward and 'varta' means occupation.

On the basis of the derivation of the term 'Kaibarta' we can discern the fact that a Kaibarta is a person following a low or humiliating occupation. So the term 'Kaibarta' is a corruption of the word 'Kimvarta' (Thakur: 1986: 31). In other words the people who live on water or by the side of waters, lakes, seas are called Kaibartas. As a matter of fact, the Kaibartas are one of the fishing communities in Assam who (a) make net and boat, rear fish as well as collect fish tortoise, or other creatures of that species from water; (b) live by selling the collected things; (c) use water-way through rivers, canals, for other professions. In addition to this, they collect other materials like samak, salt, jewels, gold from the bottom of the sea.

The origin of the Kaibarta community can be traced from mythological, historical, anthropological and ethnological point of view.

1.4.1. MYTHOLOGICAL

From mythological point of view an attempt has been made to trace the origin of the Kaibarta Community. The different Dharma Shastras, Samhita, Smrities, Puranas have differently traced out their origin. In accordance with Manu Samhita, Kaibarta is a mixed caste. Manu tells that the inhabitants of Aryavarta employ the name Kaibarta to denote the offsprings of Nisada father by Ayogava women who is called Margava and Dasa and who subsist by plying boat. Risley has also supported it. According to the Bhahmavaibarta Purana, Parasuram Samhita and
Yajnavalkya, the Kaibartas are born by Kshatriya father and Vaishya mother. *The Brahmanda Purana* also says that the sons of the Ganga are the sons of the Kaibartas. *Parasuram Samhita* also states that the children born from the father goldsmith mother Kuberini are the Kaibartas.

According to Sanskrit *Amarkosh Abhidhan* 'Kaivarttodashdhibars'. Here the word 'Kaibarta' is used to mean a fishing community like *dasu, slave or dhibara*. The *Brahmanda Purana* says that in the iron age (i.e. in the *Kaliyuga*), the social position of them came down in the society when they came in touch with the *tibaras* and they were known as fishermen or *dhabara*. According to Bhabadeva Bhatta, the Kaibartas are one of the eight low castes and the food prepared by them is not edible for the Brahmins. *Sri Sri Adijamal* says that the fishermen i.e Kaibartas are born in 'loam'.

The Kaibartas seek to identify themselves with Mahisyas on the ground that according to writers like Gautama (iv) and Yajnavalkya, the union of a Kshatriya male and a Vaishya female produces the Mahisya, while according to authorities like *Brahmanda Purana* the same union produces the Kaibartas, the two castes are therefore, identical. (Dutta : 1986 : 297).

According to P.C. Chaudhury, in inscriptions there is a mention of a class of people called Kaibartas who were engaged in collecting tolls for the state. Medini Mohan Chaudhury opines that the Pani Vaidya of Atharva Veda who belonged to the Mediterranean people, later on came to be known as Kaibartas.

On the basis of the above analysis as to their origin it is certain that the Kaibartas are *varnasankar*, born by a couple of two different castes. It is very difficult to know their past history, origin and birth place of their forefathers in India. In terms of the story of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* an attempt has been made to trace their past history and origin as follows.
In the *Ramayana* a Kaibarta refused to ferry Ramchandra across a river when he went to exile. It was because he heard that the stone statue of Ahalya came to life when Ramchandra touched it with his feet. He carried on his head an apprehension that his boat might take the shape of a human being at the touch of Ramchandra’s feet. Then he would be unable to maintain his family without the boat. He became helpless pondering over such a consequence. At last Ramchandra could convince him that nothing would happen to his boat. So ultimately he sailed across Ramchandra. Being satisfied with the Nadiyal, Ramchandra advised him to throw his net into the river for only one time and to accept gladly whatever he would get remembering only God and left the spot. To prove it the Kaibarta cast his net into the river. He was very surprised to see that instead of fish, it was full of gold, silver, and jewels (*mani, mukta*). Being glad with these he became greedy and cast his net again. As its result, instead of gold and silver, it was full of frogs and snails. The fishermen realised that it was the result of his too much greediness. So he went back home and changed his profession from fishing to agriculture as a means of livelihood. Since then a section of the Kaibartas or the Nadiyals became a Keot and the remaining section who stuck to the occupation of fishing with net as primary means of livelihood came to be known as the Kaibartas or the Jal-Keots.

In the *Mahabharata*, the name of a king of the fisherman known as Dhibara is found. Matsyagandha or Satyavati, the adopted daughter of king Dhibara belonging to the Kaibarta, was mother of Vayashdeva who composed the *Mahabharata*.

From this fact, we can discern that the original inhabitants of India were fishermen. There is a saying that Parasurama wanted to perform a *yajna* after the annihilation of the Kshatriya. He was unable to find out a Brahmin and he put a *lagun* on the neck of the Kaibarta and made him a Brahman. *Chitpaban Brahmin is his decent. Purasuram belonged to Bhrigu*
dynasty and the son of Jamadagni. He made struggle against the Kshatriya.

1.4.2. HISTORICAL

On the basis of the imprint record on the caste left by various races and invasions, institutions and governments of different periods in the history of India, the historical perspective of the Kaibarta Community with respect to their origin, growth and development can be understood.

The Chinese traveller-Fah-Hian, who came in 400 A.D. during the reign of Chandra Gupta II has left an authentic record of the people of this country and he says about the life of the untouchables as follows--

_The Chandalas are named ‘evil men’ and dwell apart from others, if they enter a town or market, they sound a piece of word in order to separate themselves, then men knowing them to be the Chandalas, avoid coming in contact with them. The only profession of the Chandalas was hunting and selling fish (Ambedkar: 1977:194)._  

On the basis of this brief description of the Chandalas, we may have some ideas of the practice of untouchability at the time of Fah-Hian. But there is no indication in this passage as to the Kaibartas.

The next Chinese traveller, Yuan Chwang came to India in 629 A.D. and stayed here for 16 years and wrote about the habitations of Indian and fishermen, as follows--

_Fishermen, Butchers, public performers, executioners and scavengers have their habitations marked by a distinguishing sign. They are forced to live outside the city and they sneak along on the left when going about in the hamlets (Ambedkar: 1977: 203)._
Again,

A point of great importance is that when Yuan Chwang came to India untouchable groups and untouchability had emerged though it did not exist in 200 A.D. (Shyamlal 1997:19).

On the basis of his in-depth study on the civilization on Mohenjodaro, Prof. Rev. H. Heras says that in ancient time, the fisherman community had a vast country on the Indus valley. It was on the western bank of the Indus.

1.4.3. ANTHROPOLOGICAL

In order to find out whether the original groups of the Kaibartas are the ancestors of the present day fishermen i.e. Kaibartas or not, we can apply two tests namely anthropometrical test and ethnological test.

The races of India can be divided into several major groups viz. Negroid, Austrics, Mongoloid and Aryans. B.M. Das shows two divisions of Assamese people namely (i) 'Indid' Assamese (ii) the Mongoloid Assamese (Cantile: 1984: 241). Anthropologists have noticed the strains of caucasic blood in the 'Indid' Assamese represented by the Hindu caste and the Muslims. On the basis of anthropometrical test we can discern two characteristics about the Kaibartas and trace the origin of them. First of all according to scholars like Lakhminath Bezbaroa, Kanak Lal Baruah (1966) Durgeswar Doley (1980), historian Sir Edward Gait (1992); they are the first Dravidian stock. B.C. Allen also supports this. Though the origin of the Kaibartas are still very confusing yet by following their traits, social customs and their language we like to comment that the original Kaibarta inhabitants of Assam are of mixed origin of the Aryans and the non-aryans, while immigrant Kaibartas of Assam of later periods are of dravidian origin.
1.4.4. ETHNOLOGICAL

The scholars of ethnological discipline have made an attempt to trace the origin of the Kaibartas in terms of a study of their gotra names. According to Dr. Ambedkar, both the terms, namely-totem or kul and gotra have immense significance. It means that those who have the same totem must be kindred. If they are kindred, they could not be persons of different races (Shyamlal: 1997: 22). The gotras of the Kaibartas in the Brahmaputra valley are Kashyap, Siva, Matshya, Alamyan and Parasara.

According to Taranath Das, the gotras of the Nagas are Kashyap and Siva. Since the gotras like Kashyap and Siva of both the Nagas and the Kaibartas are same, they are believed to be the same community.

In the very ancient time, the people of the Naga community lived on water or near water or on islands surrounded by water. Boats were used as their dwelling places as they used to stay upon it. Most of them included into the fold of Aryans. The Mahabharata tells us that Arjuna, the son of Pandu, met Ulupi, a Naga girl on water. Her dealings and beauty attracted Arjuna who married her. The kingdom was surrounded by water. History tells us that King Barman defeated Jaynag, king of Bangladesh and the inhabitants of Bangladesh were driven away into the middle as well as to the beach of the sea in the 4th and 5th century A.D. It is also found in the Shastras that Sri Krishna defeated Kaliya Naga in a lake. But he was freed and directed to live in the middle of the sea.

Once Banga or Gaur and Samatat Kingdom were called the Heaven of boats. The word ‘Naga’ is used to mean a caste whose strength is not decreased (Saral Bangla Abhidhan: 1996: 694). In other words it means that the Nagas can sail boat at high speed. The post fitted in the middle of the big tank is also called Naga. Like the Kaibartas, the Nagas were also said to belong to Kayastha, Kaithali or Nadiyal, which means the people who live on water.
The people of the Kaibartas who belong to Parasara and Alamyan gotras are supposed to be of higher castes. If the above mentioned analogies are correct, then again it would be quite logical from ethnological point of view that the Kaibartas at one time did belong to a high social stratum.

1.5. MIGRATION OF THE KAIBARTAS TO ASSAM

Migration takes place because of many factors like the scarcity of food, atmospheric change, recurrence of flood, droughts, earthquakes, avalanches, eruption of volcanoes, thundering down of a large mass of water etc. Besides these there are economic, political, social and religious reasons behind this migration. Migration may take place when a political system is uprooted and a new one is imposed upon by a super power and to avoid the dire consequences of annihilation, people may migrate to another adoptable country. Sometimes, a particular religious group may intend to overpower another religious community slowly and steadily. All these social movements are either purely political or religious in nature.

Regarding the early habitation and migration of the Kaibartas we may present two views of two different groups of thinkers, scholars and historians.

The first group of scholars P.B. Sen states that the Dravidians and Aryans are not immigrant to India; rather they are born out of the great Mahapralaya (i.e. total annihilation of the Universe), when the Himalayas came out of sea (1997 : 155). So the Scheduled Caste Kaibartas along with others are aborigines of India and Assam. But this opinion still remains to be verified and accepted.

According to the second group of scholars like Tara Nath Das the original Kaibartas of Assam who are a mixed Community of the Aryans and
the non-Aryans came to Assam in the 4th century B.C. (1986: 04). He has tried to prove this by quoting a proverb as:

\[ Gurit gariya, agat dom bakisakal lodhom dhom \]

This proverb implies that the first group of immigrants to Assam from Western India is the Dom Community and the last one belonged to Musalman. But the anthropological study could not support this view as the name Pragjyotish suggests that sage Basistha established his ashram near Guwahati in the satyajuga (age of truth) at least 5000 years ago.

In the pre-historic time there was very little provision of land route in each states of India because of enormous forests, ferocious wild animals and for unfavourable climate. There was only water route as use means to use. Under these circumstances only the Kaibartas who were expert in sea route began to come from west to Assam in the prehistoric period for the first time, while the immigrants coming from erstwhile East Bengal and Bangladesh are said to be Dravidian origin. It is generally the common custom of Assamese Dom i.e. Kaibartas to culture fish and trade in fish (but not dried), while the immigrant Dorns use to catch fish and dry fish and trade in the dry fish. According to Surjya Das fishermen including the Kaibartas are aboriginals of Assam as their cultural traits are the same as those of other Assamese people (1989: 11). According to D. Nath, the Kaibartas are the early settlers of ancient Assam (1994: 04).

If we examine the root of the linguistic style and the kinship term, the Kaibartas immigrated to Assam from Odisha and Gaur. Different ancient books like Puranas and history tell that they came to Assam from Western states like Ayodhya, Mithila, Magadh and Gaur etc.

During the Ahom rule, Momai Tamuli Barbarua, the governor of Ahom King at Guwahati had divided and organised the people according to trade like Telis, Dhobis, Kumars, Napits, and Kahars etc. He had also brought some castes from different states of India like Telis, Dhobis,
Kumars, Napits, and Kaibartas to Assam and had given them permanent village settlement. During the Ahom rule the subjects felt secured. Because of the peaceful atmosphere of the time they could be sure of the protection of their lives and property. But during that period the people of the neighbouring countries or states faced lots of problems like battles taking place amongst the Kamrup, Kamata, and other small kingdoms of the west, political ups and downs, heavy taxes, tyranny of the royal officials or local Kings. In order to get rid of these troubles, the affected people immigrated to Assam to settle permanently. Most of the immigrants belonged to Scheduled Caste fishermen like Kaibartas, Namasudras, Patnis etc.

After the invasion of the Manas (People of the Myanmar) and during the reign of the British many Kaibartas immigrated to Assam for want of proper safety and protection.

Just before independence, when in the country, civil war took place amongst the people specially between the Hindus and the Musalman and the law and other was weakened for the greater interest of the Nation, then Kaibartas and Namasudras came to all districts of lower Assam from Bengal.

After independence of the country, the Central Government had imposed the burden of Bengali Migrants belonging to the Kaibartas and others upon states like Tripura and Assam. Even today after the independence of Bangladesh, due to its political instability, natural calamities and economic crisis, there has been a steady influx of fishermen like the Kaibartas into Assam. As a result, the demographic picture of the state of Assam has become very complicated.

The Kaibartas generally reside on the banks of the rivers, beels, ponds and canals, near damp places, or on the flood affected areas. For want of proper communication of these residential areas, the immigrants became the victims of cholera, malaria and other infectious diseases.
At present the number of Scheduled Caste people who came from Bengal is found to be more than that of the original Assamese S.C. people in West Goalpara, Mongoldai, Boko, Jagiroad and Baska.

1.6. SOCIAL MOBILITY AMONG THE KAIBARTAS IN ASSAM

The Kaibartas constitute the predominant Scheduled Caste community in Assam. Due to the process of sanskritisation, there has been an upward mobility among the Dom community of the Brahmaputra valley to the Nadiyals and ultimately to the Kaibartas. There is confusion about the nomenclature of the Kaibartas, because throughout Assam, as is observed by B.C. Allen the names 'Keots' and 'Kaibartas' are used more or less indiscriminately for the same caste on the one hand and the Doms and the Nadiyals prefer to call themselves Kaibartas on the other hand (Dev and Lahari: 1984: 27-28). In the Brahmaputra valley the term 'Kaibarta' has been used to indicate the fishing community like the Doms, the Nadiyals, the Jaluwa Keots except the Kaibarta, the Jhalo-malos, the Patnis and partially the Hiras who are together known as fishermen. By 1931 the term 'Kaibarta' was used as synonymous with Doms, Nadiyals, Jalias to indicate a fishing community (Cantile 1984: 241). According to Barua, the Keots also fall within the fold of the Kaibartas (1884: 179-180).

Although the Doms and the Nadiyals of Assam are categorized as the Kaibartas, yet according to Montgomeria Martin (1976: 676), traditionally there are clear-cut distinctions between the Kaibartas and the Keots on the one hand and the Doms and the Nidiyals on the other. This is so because, though their occupational profession is the same as fishing, yet the four terms viz. Doms, Nadiyals, Keots, and Kaibartas have been used separately in each census of India. As E. Gait (1992: 02) said, whether the Keots are of the same origin as the Kaibartas, or not is an
open question. Risley's view is that they both belong to one and the same caste, but they have gradually become distinct castes (1981: 105-107).

Now we make a historical analysis how the Kaibartas have passed through the evolutionary process particularly in their nomenclature from the Doms and the Nadiyals.

1.6.1. DOMS

The Doms are recognised as the class of people engaged in work relating to pisciculture. Assamese Doms are usually fishermen of Dravidian stock with short and black complexion who are engaged in catching and selling of fish, taming and selling of pigs, cleaning of dirt and sailing people across river by boat, weaving of clothes by their women and selling them. The Doms are the fishermen with jolly physical structure who are individually neat and clean, and keep the houses, courtyard etc quite clean but perform inferior occupations like fishing living in the dirty villages (Dev & Lahiri: 1984: 29).

In accordance with B.C. Allen the Doms of Assam are the same as the Doms of Rangpur and East Bengal. But the Doms of other parts of the country are engaged in clearing dead bodies, making baskets and selling them (Thakur: 1986: 31).

Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan states that they are said to be a rich and literate class of people with their own Brahmins. These Brahmins enter into marital relations with the grown up girls of the fellow Doms (1829: 1962: 89).

CLASSIFICATION OF DOM

As per the census of 1961, the Dom of Kamrup district can be classified into four major groups viz. (i) Halowa Doms (ii) Jalowa or Jaliya
Doms who still follow the fishing trade, (iii) Sauriya Doms and (iv) Kachripuri Doms.

i) HALOWA DOMS

They cultivate with a hala or a plough besides fishing. The social status of them is higher than that of Jalowa Doms. Most of the Doms are the followers of Sri Sri Sankardeva.

ii) JALOWA DOMS

The people who catch fish for sale are called Jalowa Doms or Jaliya Doms. They are generally known by four names viz. a) Patni in Bengal, (b) Dom Patni in Rangpur (c) Ordinary Dom or Nadiyal and (d) Matak Doms in Brahmaputra valley. There is a bit difference between the Matak Doms and Ordinary Doms or the Nadiyals. The Doms of the Brahmaputra Valley are Vaishnav while the disciples of the Moamoria Gosain are called Matak Doms. Matak Doms eat Sal fish but Nadiyls or Ordinary Doms do not touch it. The social status of the Jalowa Doms is higher than that of the Sauriya Doms.

iii) SAURIYA DOMS

Those who remove dead bodies and rear pigs are called Sauriya Doms.

iv) KACHARIPURIA DOMS

The Doms who remove corpse i.e. the dead bodies and do the sweeper’s work are known as Kacharipuria Doms. The other Doms who do not do such work hate them.

1.6.2. DOMS TURNED TO NADIYALS

Upward mobility took place among the Doms of the Brahmaputra Valley so as to raise the social status. Because the present generation of
the caste feel ashamed to identify themselves as Dom as the term Dom has been used as an equivalent to Chandala, as a mark of hatred in a derogatory sense in our society since time immemorial. So the educationally advanced section of them of the erstwhile Kamrup District started a social movement. As per decision of the movement they placed a memorandum before the then government of Assam in December 1900 to identify them as Nadiyals or Patnis in the census of 1901. In response of their application they were identified as Nadiyals. The economic condition of the Nadiyals was in a very bad shape.

1.6.3. NADIYALS TURNED TO KAIBARTAS

Though the government had allowed the Dom people to return either as the Nadiyals or the Patnis, yet the word Nadiyal was not commonly understood in the Brahmaputra valley. Therefore, before the census of 1901, the Nadiyals under the leadership of their caste association, ‘Kamrup Jatia Hitakari Sabha’ wanted to be designated as Kaibartas. Commenting on this move the government officials however saw no reason for its rejection of the title ‘Nadiyals’, a euphemistic term, more accurately describing their source of livelihood. As a result most of the Dorns of Brahmaputra valley had no alternative but to record themselves as Nadiyals in the census of 1911.

Further a real difficulty arose, as there already existed in the Brahmaputra valley a caste known as Keot or Kaibarta, which was then distinct from that of the Nadiyals. However the government felt that if the Doms were allowed to record themselves as the Kaibartas, it would have members of two perfectly distinct castes. The Doms and the Keots recorded under the same name ‘Kaibatra’. But the issue also received support from a section of religious head of the Dehingia Adhikan Gossain of Nagoro Satra of Golaghat. So the government of Assam decided to allow
the Nadiyals to record themselves as Kaibarta in the census of 1921. Thus the Nadiyals advanced their social position not only by getting recorded as 'Kaibarta' in the census of 1921 but also securing sanction from the government to the similar change in the settlement of pattas (Dev. et. al. 1984: 28).

1.6.4. KAIBARTAS TURNED TO JAL-KEOTS AND THEN TO KEOTS:

One section of the Kaibartas turned to Jal-Keots who were fishermen. The Jal-Keot consists of two words viz. Jal, meaning a fishing net, and Keot which is said to be corruption of Kaibarta (Rajguru: 1988: 124), i.e. the term Keot has been derived from the Sanskrit term Kaivarta i.e. a class of fishing community who is seen to catch hold of fish with jal or net. Thus, jal-keot means a class of people who catches hold of fish with jal or net. Though they are originally belonging to the Kaibartas, yet subsequently they have become a distinct caste.

1.6.5. HALOI-KEOTS

The Kaibartas who have given up the occupation of fishing and taken to agriculture as a means of their livelihood are known as cultivators. In course of time of Haloi Keots have become a distinct caste whose social status in rank is high in comparison to the Kaibartas. So they have not been included in the list of Schedule Castes.

1.6.6. KAIBARTAS TURNED TO PATNIS

The patnis and the Kaibartas originally belonged to the same stock. So in the census of 1901 the Patnis were recorded as the Nadiyals and in 1921 census as the Kaibartas. According to N.K. Dutta, the Patnis are a small sub-section of the Kaibarta community and at present stand
intermediate between the Jalika and Chashi Kaibartas (1986 : 302). Now the Patnis combine the professions of a boatman and a cultivator. So they now cannot be called either pure Kaibartas or Chashi Kaibartas. In fact they form a community of their own, distinguished from the larger divisions of the Kaibarta people.

It can be summarised that it is said that the Kaibartas formed a caste distinct from the Doms-turned-Nadiyals. In this process of the evaluation of the Kaibartas, they have made a lot of contributions towards the society from time to time by following the pattern of social mobility as mentioned below:

Doms > Nadiyals > Kaibartas > Jal-Keots > Hailo-Keots > Keots

1.7. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study has both theoretical and practical importance. The study bears a great significance in the sense that it may contribute a lot towards finding out of the root factors lurking behind the allround backwardness of the fishing communities like the Kaibartas of Assam. Again it is quite sincerely anticipated that the findings and conclusions drawn from the study will contribute a lot to the store house of knowledge of the readers engaged in higher study about the origin, social, religious, cultural and economic life of the Kaibartas. Further it may provide immense help for the scientists, economists, planners and policy makers in prescribing measures for solution of their problems and ameliorating their plight.

Folklorists are interested to study fishing communities as they contribute much to the variety and vitality of folk cultures. Moreover, such
studies may prove to be a useful contribution to the larger abstractions involved in the study of whole and complex nations or regions. The study of fishing communities may also contribute to an understanding of the real processes involved in changing human behaviour in a world which for the past two to three centuries, has begun to experience the first culture revolution in human history that promises to be a global phenomenon. A proper understanding of the inter-relations of the multitudinous factors influencing their lives, in the context of their socio-cultural matrix and their genuine needs and aspirations will be a valuable input into the emerging global perspective on the economy and culture of the fishing communities. The primary contribution of the study has been to produce a body of literature and set of concepts on the way people have solved the problems posed by earning a living in the most uncertain and risky environment.

The relevance of the study specially in the context of the present day problematic situation is that the findings and conclusions derived from the study will be employed in verifying the theoretical framework of economics for steady and speedy economic development of the Kaibartas, particularly in the field of socio-economic conflict, consumption function and development strategies.

The Present work is a study of the socio-economic condition and socio-cultural aspects of the Kaibarta community of undivided Kamrup District of Assam. The study may become useful for the anthropologists, economists, folklorists, sociologists, Government and Non-Government Development Agencies for the following reasons:

i) In order to chalkout development plans for any community, first hand knowledge about the community is imperative and only then a pragmatic and need based planning is possible.
ii) An in-depth study of the problems of the backward community like Fishermen is urgently needed in the age of globalisation and standardisation owing to their important role in the primary sector of our economy.

iii) It is high time that the masses of our country should realise the agony and miseries suffered by the traditional communities like Kaibarta fishermen and should put in crusading efforts to abolish inhuman prejudices against this under privileged class of people of the society. So, this study will help the readers to change their attitude and render their services for the uplift of these down trodden people.

iv) This study depicts the picture of folk culture of the traditional Kaibarta community and its relationship with the wider Assamese culture. Interaction within the local castes society have also come into focus.

v) Among the four Varnas, prevalent in the Hindu Societal System, the Sudras are regarded as the most laborious class of people. In simple term they may be called the wheel of the nation. If by chance this wheel of the nation becomes stagnant or motionless, then the state is bound to face disaster. Therefore, the fisher folk, the largest majority of the Sudras, should be encouraged to keep their traditional occupation, which will create employment opportunities, increase production as well as the national income.

vi) A micro-study of a community can give the actual picture for making findings and providing suggestions for the development of
the Kaibarta community and this will also help other similar communities as an example.

Above all, this study will help to focus the relationship in between the society, economy, folklore and folklife of the Kaibarta community and thus finally it is presumed that it will be a substantive contribution to the field of Social Science.

1.8. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The socio-economic conditions and the problems of social and economic development of the Kaibartas have been the subject matter of study undertaken by different institutions and scholars. The Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes (AIRTSC) has published several books on the problems outlined above. For example, the institute has published a book on the socio-economic conditions of the Kaibartas of Assam (Bordoloi 1994). This study analyses data on socio-economic life of the Kaibartas inhabiting 77 villages of the total 770 Kaibarta villages in Assam. The other two publications of the same Institute deal with the socio-economic development of the Scheduled Castes of Assam (Sarma Thakur 1992) and problems of the Scheduled Castes of Assam (Hazarika 1995). Das’s (1986) study deals with the problem of socio-economic development of the Scheduled Castes including the Kaibartas in Assam. Mahanta (1995) has studied change and development in three Kaibarta villages in Assam. Medhi (1995) studies the socio-cultural dimensions of health in a Kaibarta village. The study by Gohain, Goswami and Buragohain (1981) examines the benefits derived by Scheduled Castes
including the Kaibartas under various development programmes in Assam. The socio-economic structure of the Scheduled Castes populations in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam including the Kaibartas has been studied by Barooah (2006). This is an analysis from geographical point of view.

The study of Bhagabati (1968) of one peri-urban Kaibarta village of Guwahati show the extent of social change among the fishermen communities as a result of the impact of growth of Guwahati City. Natural calamities, fish diseases and use of new technology in fishing have resulted changes in the socio-economic conditions of the Kaibartas in many parts of Assam. Ahmed’s (1995) study of the Kaibartas of Barak Valley has put importance in this regard. Bezbaruah (2005) has studies the socio-economic change and dimension of social mobility among the Kaibartas in Assam. C. Sarma (2010), tries to put emphasize on the society of Kaibartas in her book “The Kaibartas” published by Directorate of Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes.

1.9. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to describe the socio-economic and cultural aspects of the Kaibarta Community of the undivided Kamrup district of Assam. In order to achieve this main objective the present study follow the following objectives:

1. To study the origin and growth of the Kaibarta community in Assam, particularly in undivided Kamrup district of Assam by assessing their socio-economical, cultural and historical background.
2. To analyse the structure of social mobility among the Kaibartas of Assam.

3. To analyse the aspects of social organisations of the Kaibartas.

4. To assess the social status of men and women of the Kaibarta community.

5. To describe the folklore and folklife of the community, which consist of the verbal arts, folk customs, material cultures and performing arts.

6. To analyse their economic life by analysing their income, expenditure & occupational pattern and saving & borrowing behaviour.

7. To discuss the changing aspects of socio-economic life of the Kaibartas.

8. To study the challenges and difficulties faced by the Kaibarta Community.

9. To assess the environmental awareness among the Kaibarta community.

10. To suggest measures to the policy makers, economic planners and government for solution of their problems and their overall socio-economic development.
1.10. METHODOLOGY

The present study is mainly based on field work. Besides this, some data collected from secondary sources like various reports, books, journals and newspapers have also been used. The whole research work has been carried out in three stages namely: pre field work, field work and post field work as mention below:

1.10.1. PRE-FIELD WORK

The pre-field work of our study consists of consulting libraries, relevant books, bulletin of various departments, journals, literature and reports to gather theoretical knowledge about the social, economical and cultural aspects of the Kaibarta community. So accordingly we have selected sources of materials from the publications. We have briefly reviewed over a few selected books, articles and papers by eminent Folklorists, Economists, Sociologists, Educationists and others, which we have given in the bibliography. After on close perusal of these we are in a position to formulate the basic concepts related to our study.

1.10.2. FIELD WORK

The study is essentially based on primary data collected from the field. So, in this stage, for collecting primary data, field work was conducted to collect informations regarding society, economy and folk-culture of the Kaibarta community of the district under study. For this purpose, a list of caste-wise fishermen villages were collected from the Sub-Divisional Scheduled Caste Welfare Board.
1.10.2.1. SELECTION OF SAMPLE FROM UNIVERSE

1. UNIVERSE OF THE STUDY

It consists of all the Kaibartas of Assam for general discussion. But for an in-depth study of various parameters related to their socio-economic and cultural aspects, the universe is restricted to the undivided Kamrup Districts including Kamrup Rural and Kamrup Metropolitan Districts of Assam (now onwards both the districts are as a whole considered to be Kamrup District in our entire work) for the constraints of time & means.

The district of Kamrup is a rich repository of folklore, where veritable elements of Kamrupi folk cultures still exist even today. Kamrupi folklore as the nomenclature refers to the folklore of the old Kamrup. Although the erstwhile Kamrup has been bifurcated initially into three districts, namely Barpeta, Nalbari and Kamrup and subsequently the Kamrup again into Kamrup Metropolitan and Kamrup Rural ones and parts of it included into newly formed Baksa, the term Kamrupi still continues to designate in various contexts as the region that almost exactly corresponds to the geographical area covered by the old Kamrup and at the same time stand for distinctive homogeneous cultural pattern. Particularly in the cultural context, Kamrup and Kamrupi (pertaining to Kamrup) are used which have been deeply ingrained in the minds of the people of Assam. So, the folk-culture of the native people of Kamrup district are the appropriate representation of Kamrupi folk-culture.

The rich heritage of Kamrupi folklore and folklife exists not only in the case of the non-fishermen communities but also occurs in abundance among the native fishing community like the Kaibarta. Moreover Kamrup
district has sufficient number of fishery resources with the resume of the Brahmaputra river and its tributaries, namely Puthimari, Digaru, Nona, Kulsi, Pagladiya, Manas, Chaul-khowa, Barnadi, Bharalu, Sesa, Madanpuri, Sutanadi and Tunai Nadi. Besides these rivers, beels like – Deepor beel, Chanddubi beel, Khamranga beel, Sunchali beel, Deegholi beel, Borka beel, Buradoba beel, Donga beel, Changlimari beel, Murjapara beel, Mahal beel, Singimari beel, Bhaka beel, Bautamari beel, Pandaba beel, Jalal beel, Borbila beel etc. and a large number of ponds, tanks and swamps and other water bodies are found in the Kamrup district of Assam.

Considering these aspects, Kamrup district has been selected for the study, where large number of fishermen and fishery resources are in existence. The major fishermen caste of this area is one of six major fishing castes in Assam. They are known as the Kaibartas, an aboriginal inhabitant of this district.

2. SAMPLE VILLAGES AND SAMPLE HOUSEHOLD

Kamrup is a district where huge numbers of villages of the fishing community and fishery resources are in existence. So, before selecting the household of the fishing folk, it will be helpful to us to clarify the question as to who are the fishing folks. Fishing folks are those persons who are born and brought up in a family of the fishing community and the primary income of the family come from fishing and trading of fishes. Thus their economic activity is confined to fishing and trading of fishes. These people are collectively called Machhua / Machhuoi (fishermen) that is fishing community. Although now they are in a state of transition and they are adopting other occupations for the livelihood. Yet they are still known as a
fishing community and the place where they live collectively is known as fishermen villages locally called Machuagaon / Machuapara.

There are 243 Schedule Castes inhabited villages in Kamrup district and out of 243 Scheduled Castes inhabited villages 137 (36.37%) are fishermen inhabited villages and out of 137 fishermen inhabited villages 71 (50.82%) are the Kaibarta inhabited villages. From these 71 villages, 15 (21.12%) villages have been selected for the study from 19 Development Blocks and 9 Town Committees. It is also pointed out that the Kaibarta fishermen villages are not found in exclusive pockets rather these spread in different areas interspersed with the non-Kaibarta villages.

On the basis of Stratified Random Sampling 140 (13.84%) households were selected from 15 sampled Kaibarta fishermen villages where total households were 1011. These 1011 (20.84%) Kaibarta fishermen households represent the total Kaibarta fishermen households 4850 of the district. It is also found that the total scheduled caste fishermen households of the district are 7998 and the Kaibarta fishermen households are 4850 (60.64%). Detailed data have been furnished in Table 1.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number of Kaibarta fishermen villages</th>
<th>Number of selected Kaibarta fishermen villages</th>
<th>Total number of Kaibarta fishermen households</th>
<th>Number of Kaibarta fishermen households from selected villages</th>
<th>Number of sampled Kaibarta fishermen households from the selected villages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4850</td>
<td>1011</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>21.12%</td>
<td>60.64%</td>
<td>20.84%</td>
<td>13.84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.10.2.2. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

No exclusive census data have been so far collected by any government and non-government agencies regarding the fishermen population of Kamrup district except the general census of Scheduled Caste population. Therefore, for getting the actual picture of Scheduled Castes fishermen of Kamrup district, Census Survey Method has been first applied. In the subsequent stage extensive data have been collected by Sample Survey Method.

1. CENSUS SURVEY METHOD

This method has been applied for collecting data in regard to caste, total number of households and total number of population among the Scheduled Caste fishermen households of all the villages under study.

2. SAMPLE SURVEY METHOD

A Sample Survey has been conducted for getting the necessary data on population, education, occupation, employment status, income, expenditure, indebtedness, marriage, kinship, family and folk-culture materials. For this purpose Interview Schedule was prepared and Survey was done with the help of the Interview Schedule. The Schedule consisted of questions covering selected aspects of the subjects to be investigated. The Schedule was canvased in the form of Interview Schedule and was filled up by the investigator.

In order to get the real picture of their socio-economic and socio-cultural life Observation Methods have been applied throughout the field work.
Audio-visual Methods have also been applied for recording interviews, collecting texts and illustrating the real phenomenon on the field under study (with the help of still photographs).

3. TOOLS USED FOR DATA COLLECTION

The main tools used for data collection are:

i) Household Schedule  
ii) Interview  
iii) Observation and  
iv) Documentary evidence.

Among these tools the Households Schedule is the main tool used for data collection.

1.10.3. POST-FIELD WORK

In the post field stage, the data so collected have been analysed and classified systematically both qualitatively and quantitatively with the help of some statistical devices. Information furnished by the informants has been transferred from the interview schedules to data sheets and then, sorted out according to age, sex, religion, caste, income, expenditure and indebtedness of the respondents. Selected quantitative data have been presented in the tabular form and the data, thus, sorted out have been arranged for interpretation.

After that a chapter scheme has been developed with the help of the index of data and the research design which have been followed by determination of major divisions and sub-divisions of each of the chapters.
The final stage consist of writing of the thesis and formulation of analytical statements.

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