CHAPTER III

Introduction:

The Nepalese in Assam, who prefer to call themselves as Assamese Nepali, are bound by a linguistic nationalism marked by the culture of a shared past of suffering, exploitation and misfortune. For over a century and a half, this group of people has betrayed a deep understanding of their own history and an assured step towards the future. In the process, they have charted the territory of a common heritage based on memory and tradition as reflected by their folklore material. In the following pages, the common features of the folklore material shall be examined with detailed data collected from the field. What is striking about the folklore and folk life of the Assamese Nepalese is the fact that in spite of difference in caste and ethnic orientation in their racial structure, their community life is marked by democratic and egalitarian principles, features that may not have developed in the life and times in the country that they chose to live behind.

The Nepali World View:

The Vedic Hindu way of life marked by Karma, the Buddhist philosophy of Moksha and the shamanistic reliance on the forces of nature have all steeped into the Nepali worldview of the Assamese Nepali. The caste Hindus among the Nepalis are mainly worshippers of Vishnu with almost each Brahmin household having a shaligram in their abode of worship. For the non-Brahmins, the Brahmin priest carries the shaligram (a precious stone believed to be the most palpable symbol of worship representing Lord Vishnu found on the banks of the Bagmati river in Nepal, according to legend) to the devotee’s house to perform rituals like pujakarma. However, the caste Hindus are also devout worshippers of Shiva. An annual round of Rudripath (portion of the Yajurveda where suktas or hymns devoted to Lord Shiva are recited with ritual act) is a regular phenomenon among the caste Hindus, particularly the Brahmins and Chhetris. What is interesting is that the Nepali caste Hindus of Assam are also worshippers of Goddess Durga. The Dasein (Bijaya Dasami) coupled with the Navaratri is the biggest festival of the Assamese Nepali. In other words, there is a syncretic tradition of following the pantheon of Hindu Gods and Goddesses which may defy surface reading of the religious orientation of the Assamese Nepali.
However, closer scrutiny will reveal that the syncretism in religious belief among the Nepalese is also a syncretism that embraces the Hindu brethren among the Kirati elements in the culture of the Assamese Nepalis. Centuries of living together with the Rai and the Limbu tribes in eastern hills of Nepal also accommodated the worship of Shakti among the otherwise Vaishnav-oriented caste Hindus. The fact that animal sacrifices are made by Brahmins, Chhetris and other occupational castes along with their Kirati or other ethnic brethren during the Saptami, Astami and Navami tithi of the Dasein or Bijaya Dasami is a strong pointer to the deep-seated bonhomie that the Assamese Nepalis share among themselves.

The Buddhists among the Assamese Nepalis believe in a general vision of the world as a ‘maya’ or illusion where the corporeal life is all but a shadow, at best a costume, as beautifully captured by the Domphu Geet:

\textit{Eklei nangei janmekol} This life is born naked
\textit{Mari nangei janu chhal} In death, one has to go naked
\textit{Kohi saathma jadeina} Nobody accompanies you
\textit{Dhanako pokoladeina} Cannot carry the pot of gold
\textit{Devatako jasto yo chola} This costume like that of an angel
\textit{Feri arko paudeina} Cannot be changed again
\textit{Ek chin jahan ruwa baasil} A short life of wailing
\textit{Kharaniko huncha raas} Results in ash

It is customary in the death rites of the Buddhists like the Tamangs to accompany the funeral procession with the beating of the \textit{domphu}, singing the \textit{domphu geet} as a form of rejoice for the departed soul that it has now completed the cycle of \textit{dukh} and broken free of \textit{maya}.

Although the Buddhist way of life is limited to the followers of Buddhism only among the Nepalis, the syncretic nature of their culture has allowed certain traces of Buddhism to seep into the Nepali culture as a whole. Concepts like \textit{mayako khel},
karmako phal, bhagyako lekhan etc. are part of the folk imaginary in the struggle to eke out a living for survival among the Nepalis.

The Nepali worldview is also remarkably informed by a third strand represented by the miniscule population of nature worshippers or animists who fall outside the pale of the Hindu or the Buddhist way of life. The fact that Hindu or Buddhist households also practice some of the rituals of the animists bears testimony to the syncretic nature of the Assamese Nepali culture. The animists allow themselves to be controlled by the elemental forces of nature where air (vayu), water (pani), fire (ago), sky (akash) and earth/soil (mato) play a crucial role in the shaping of the human destiny. These elemental forces are contained through propitiation for the common weal of the individual, the household or the community. Many of the belief systems of the Assamese Nepali are shaped and nurtured by these palpable forces of nature. There are scores of folklore, songs and proverbs and other verbal and ritualistic features that are deeply imbued by the practice of nature worship among the community.

To display forbearance and to carry on with the business of living everyday life against all odds with a cheerful demeanour is a characteristic feature of the Nepali folk mind. This quality can be ascribed to the Nepali worldview in which little nuggets of spiritual and philosophical content can be easily discerned. Since the folk mind is the repository of folk wisdom, it would be instructive to deal with the folk forms which vividly depict the worldview in a palpable form. The most obvious constituents of folklore of the Nepalis are the various forms of folk literature which the lay mind takes recourse to when expressing its emotions with response to the multiple experiences of life. These expressions are as diverse as the experiences of life can get, they can be as moving or stirring or expiating or exasperating as the feelings that account for these expressions can get.

**The Genres of Folk Literature:**

Since the forms of folk expression are extremely diverse, for better manageability of data, they have been classified into the following genres. These genres are as follows:
i) Ballads, ii) legends, iii) folk songs (with and without dance accompaniments), iv) ritual songs or incantations, v) devotional songs, v) songs of plantation and harvesting, vi) wedding and festival songs, vii) songs related to seasonal cycles, viii) workman’s songs, ix) folktales, x) proverbs, xi) riddles, xii) lullabies and xiii) songs related to folk sports.

Ballads: The Nepali word for ballads is katha, literally ‘tale’ and a misnomer but since it is sung with the accompaniment of the sarangi (a four-stringed musical instrument which produces a violin-like melodious music), its point of departure with ‘tale’ is firmly differentiated. Ballads are an integral part of Nepali oral tradition since as a form they encompass almost all aspects of folk life. It is impossible to separate ballads from the traditional institution of the gaine, literally a singer in Nepali, which thrives in singing songs related to the Ramayan and the Mahabharat, important events in Nepali history like the heroism of Amar Singh Thapa during the Anglo-Gorkha war or the coronation of Prithvi Narayan Shah as the King of the House of Gorkhas and so on. But apart from religious fervor, heroism or topical events, ballads also recount tales of ordinary farmers, soldiers and traders marked by pathos and tragedy.

The Institution of the Gaine and the Ballad:

The gaine is central to the tradition of ballad-singing. Formerly from an occupational caste of the untouchable category, the gaine ancestry is claimed to have its roots in the gandharva tradition of Rajasthan but with the Khas rulers moving into the hills of Western Nepal and beyond, the gaines found an occupation as a band of singing minstrels who used to move from house to house singing paeans of kings and potentates to the common folks in a bid to unite them. Many gaines even today use the surname Gandharva and with sarangi and mahadai (a percussion instrument akin to the madal) in hand, sing extremely melodious and heart-touching ballads to an audience of villagers. In the following gaine geet or gaine folk song, the singer tells his own tale:

“Sarangiko taarle mero manko geet gauncha

Lekadekhi besisamma gaine geet gaunchha

Rajei gaine geet gaunchha
Mero swarma jhopdi ra darbarko katha
Sunaidinchhu ladain ra piratiko katha
Phul roye sheet hunchha maile roye geet
Khukuriko khiya matrei Nepaliko jeet”

The strings of the sarangi sing my song
From the hills to the valleys it sings the gaine geet
Oh Rajei! It sings gaine geet
In my tunes is sung the tale of the cottage and the palace
In my words the story of war and love
When flowers weep you have dewdrops when I weep you have songs
The Nepali is victorious when the khukuri is let to rust….

Another gaine geet that has been quite dear to the Nepali hearts is the one in which the conquest of Mt. Everest by Tenzing Sherpa is sung in a moving lyric:

“Hamro Tenzing Sherpale chadyo himal chuchura
Gamkera baje khainjadi jhamkera nache mujura
Chiso himalchuliko tato mutu Tenzingko
Hilerylai bhulyaudei lukeko bato dekhe ho
Hamro Tenzing Sherpale……”

Our Tenzing Sherpa climbed over the Himal top
Cymbals clashed lustily, manjiras danced passionately
The cold Himal top had the warm-hearted Tenzing
How he waylaid Hillary and found the way to the top
Our Tenzing Sherpa…. 
The *gaine* is presently a dying institution as most of the singers of this occupational caste have taken to agriculture and urban professions.

There are numerous ballads that find echoes in the folk mind when sung by the *gaine* or even otherwise, but the most popular among them is the ‘*katha of Muna-Madan*’. This ballad was originally sung by the Newars and in the Newari language it was called ‘Ji Walayla Lachchi Maduni’. This moving narrative depicts the plight of a smalltime trader who sets off for foreign climes to seek fortune but is torn between his love for his wife, his duty as a son and his calling as a trader. He suffers hardship, an illness and is deserted by his friends in the higher Himalayas. When he returns home, he discovers that his wife has passed away. In the 1930s, this ballad was trans-created as ‘Muna Madan’ by Lakhsmi Prasad Devkota, acclaimed to be the greatest poet Nepal has ever produced, and is considered as an all-time classic. The most famous lines from the ballad are those where *Muna* tells her husband about the worthlessness of wealth and the true value of love. Every Nepali heart for their aphoristic altruism remembers these lines:

“Sunako thaila hathako maila ke garnu dhanale
Saga ra sisnu khayeko besa anandi manale”

“Pieces of gold are like the dirt on your palm
What can one do with wealth?
It is better to eat nettles and greens
With happiness in one’s heart...”

**Legends:**

Nepali legends in verse or *Sawai*(also called ‘veergatha’) mostly recount the martial prowess of the Gorkha soldier on march to the German or the Lahore or the Shimla front, or more fairly recent (by folklore standards), the Imphal offensive in which the central character has a heroic role to play. The following snatch from a *sawai* celebrates the heroism of the Gorkha soldier in the Anglo Gorkha War of 1815:
“Chhatre topi jhamkai khukuri chamkai
Lahure pugyo relimei bairisanga ladnulai
Keta keti swasni jammei gharko maya mari
Bhok bhokei ladi hidne bairi chahari chahari
V.C. pai naam kamai kirich ghisari
Dhanya timra mata pita Subadar Lal Bahadur….”

This sawai is about a Subedar named Lal Bahadur who fought valiantly and went on to receive the Victoria Cross, the highest military medal a soldier could ever dream of wearing on his chest in the British Raj. However, the tenor of the ballad is on the more human aspect of the soldier leaving home and wondering on an empty stomach in an alien land. He has left behind his wife and children by completely warding off his emotions to wage a war against the enemy.

The Assamese Nepali have over the time created their own sawai or legend in verse based on important events of history. One such event in the folk life of the Assamese Nepali people was the freedom movement of India and there are numerous sawais which are still sung on occasions by their traditional singers:

“Asom hamro yo kati ramro
Bhanda chhan Bordoloiji
Bordoloi hamra jatika ramra
Bhai sath Chhabilal
Sutera hunna jagahoibhaiho
Chichyauchhan Loharji yehin”

The song is about the support that the Assamese Nepalis gave to Gopinath Bordoloi in his bid to rescue Assam from being clubbed into the Group C as part of the Md. Ali Jinna’s plan. The song respectfully mentions the contribution of Chhabilal
Upadhyay and Dalbir Singh Lohar who came out in support of Bordoloi and exhorted the Nepalis to awake to the imminent crisis.

In another sawai, the folk singer tells us about the participation of the Assamese Nepali in the freedom struggle, this time the specific instance of the Quit India movement called by Gandhiji:

“Kashinath Rangai Gahate Dhami
Bishnulal Belase Jugute Kami
Darrang bhari yineile sikhsabhar linchhan
Ryotko meetingma manjuri dinchhan
Jasle pansaye chandama lauchhan
Jillabharko tamrapatra birtasari pauchhan."

The sawai depicts how Bishnulal Upadhyay inspired common farmers and dairymen like Kashinath, Rangai (possibly a fellow Assamese peasant), Gahate Dhami and Jugute Kami of the erstwhile Darrang district (presently the Biswanath, Sonitpur, Udalguri and Mangaldai districts) to come forward and participate in the Quit India movement. The song also includes an anecdote in which the peasants’ meet decides to appeal for a donation of Rs 500/- from volunteers with a promise that they would be given a Tamra Patra (copper plate) highlighting the donor’s contribution to the freedom struggle. In this way, it can be observed that the sawai as a folk form used to serve as a chronicle of the people in a given period of time in their history.

Folk Songs: The most important genre of Nepali folk song is the jhyaure which has close parallel with folk song genres in other speech communities like the jhumur, jhumura and jhamar. It is believed that the jhyaure may have entered Nepal through the Kumaon-Garhwal route from places like Rajasthan and Haryana. Jhyaure songs express the basic feelings of the peasant community among the Assamese Nepali. One of the features of the jhyaure is that it employs many figures of speech as tools of endearment so that the performance attains a certain degree of intimacy, and these endearing figures of speech act as a motif in the singing of the songs. Examples of
these nonsensical endearments are: Laibori, Relimei, Kusume rumal and Kanchhi matyang tyang among numerous others:

“Theukalijyanko chapleto dhungo kanchhi matyang tyang
Khetala birsyaune – kanchhi matyang tyang
Hamro ta nani khyan garne bani kanchhi matyang tyang
Timi ta risaune kanchhi matyang tyang…”

Most jhyaure songs have a strong body in that the lyrics are laced with a strong narrative that heightens the various emotions expressed – desire, pathos, jealousy and so on. In this simple song, the suitor is placating his beloved with an affected sense of loneliness:

‘Sanuma sanu kusume rumal dhoidine koi chhaina
Biranu desha ma mari jaunla roi dine koi chhaina’
I have this small floral handkerchief but nobody to wash it
I am here in this alien land but nobody to weep for me

To which the beloved replies:

‘Sanuma sanu kusume rumal dhobile dhudeina
Ukalo bato ma kati dhaun bhet kaile hudeina’
The small floral handkerchief- aren’t there any washermen there
This alien land—how can I climb never to meet someone

There are some jhyaure songs which reveal more than the mere words through their aphoristic composition:

“When you beget a girl child

“Chhoripayo arkako chhoralai
Chhora payo jarman ko dhawalai”

“When you beget a girl child
She becomes a wife of someone else’s son

When you beget a son

He becomes a soldier in the German assault..”

The song reflects the tragic plight of the common Nepali peasant who loses his son to the army as he is compulsorily enlisted to fight the German (possibly in World War I) perhaps never to return home again.

*Chutka: Chutka* is quite akin to the *jhyaure* but in *chutka* the composition is short couplets interjected with a refrain which is sung by the accompanying singers who complement the main singer who usually goes solo:

_Euta goru jhale male euta goru kaile/_ one bull is full of colour, the other is brown

_Jane bhaye hida kanchhi udailanchhu maile/_ If you want to go with me, let us go I will take a flight with you

To this the group of accompanying singers sing:

_Ah ah ah nachyo bhale pokhari ko chheu chheu nachyo bhale_

_Ah ah ah ha ha ha_

To this the solo performer sings:

_Bhyagutalai jutta moja chheparolai chasma_

_Ghumaidiula mayalulai jhilimili deshma_

To this the group sings the refrain:

_Ah ah ah nachyo bhale pokhari ko chheu chheu nachyo bhale_

_Ah ah ah ha ha ha_

The singers then break into a lusty dance performance while the singing continues amidst fun and rounds of drinking followed by a feast.
Ritual Songs or Incantations:

One of the enduring features of Nepali folklore is that there is a thin line separating the elements of the sacramental from the elements of folk in the cultural practice of its practitioners. This observation applies more aptly when it comes to the genre of incantations or what the Nepalis call the *mantra sahitya*. Eminent Assamese Nepali writer Khemraj Nepal believes that although seemingly most incantations in Nepali seem to have a shamanistic origin, when closely studied, the chants and invocations to spirits, reptiles or disgruntled graha can be traced back to the Vedas (Nepal, Nepali Lok Sahityako Ruprekha, Sahitya Akademi, 176, 2003). According to him, it is the Atharva Veda which contains the incantations to the spirit gods. Magic spells, charms, and incantations employed to either throw spells or to remove them have all their origin in the Atharva Veda. In later scriptural texts like the Puranas and the Tantra literature incorporated a considerable amount of folk elements in their corpus of incantations. Nepal(2003) cites the example of the Garuda Purana (incidentally, Garuda Purana is the base text on which Nepali death rituals are based) with specific examples of snake bites and so on. Some mantras of the Garuda Purana practiced by the Assamese Nepalis for the remedy of ailments as common as snakebite or spirit possession as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ailment</th>
<th>Incantation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i) Snake bite</td>
<td><em>“Om hring hring hring bhirundayei swaha”</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii) Possession of evil spirits</td>
<td><em>“Om hring sadashivaye namah”</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>iii) Evil planetary spell</td>
<td><em>“Om hring Ganeshaye namah”, “OM hring stambhanadi chakraye namah”</em>, “Om eing Brahmeyeim troilokyadamaraye namah”*</td>
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</tbody>
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Cited from Garuda Purana- Acharkanda Ch 19-20

To this corpus of scriptural texts related to mantra, the elements of tantra and jantra were added in later development of the folk literature of incantation in Nepali folklore. It is possible that Shaivik and Buddhist tantric elements also got incorporated into the incantation literature of the Assamese Nepali.
The following is a classification of the incantation tradition with illustration of some individual texts:

a) Incantations related to *bidhi bidhan*: These incantations are specifically dedicated to the cure of certain ailments and are strikingly similar to the *karati* and *kathani* mantra in Assamese folklore. These incantations are named according to the function for which they are dedicated:

1) **Anga ra than bandhne mantra**

   “Om jal bandhoun that bandhoun asan bandhoun
   Char sur bandhoun char killa bandhoun
   Satghat bandhoun satbata bandhoun
   Agei bandhoun piche bandhoun
   Pau bandhoun kati bandhoun
   Battis Kothari bandhoun..

   Bandh karoun...

   *Om Kroung hring phat swaha*”.

There are numerous mantras dedicated to specific problems and ailments which trouble the folk society. The *ojha* or *dhami* who redresses these problems is frequently consulted and invited over to the house of the person suffering from such problems. One interesting problem in Nepali folklore is called the ‘duluwa vayu’ --- a spirit who is dedicated to wandering. Once smitten by this ‘vayu’ or spirit, the ailing person is bound to stay out of his own house and given to wander around completely lost to himself. The dhami chants the following mantra in order to cure the person of this ‘wander lust’:

**Duluwa Vayu Mantra:**

“*Om akash chamki budhyani jharoun*

*Patal chamki bijuli jharoun*

*Jhar budheni jharoun*

*Tera sat kala jharoun*

*Guruki Shakti mera bhakti*
Akash Indrako vacha

Patal sumeru deviko vacha

Hung phat...”

b) Incantations related to *Abhichar*: Abhichar is a term given to describe the phenomena like bashikaran and sanmohan (casting spells on persons to extract benefits in an evil way). During field study, it was found that the practitioners consider these incantations extremely confidential and are loathe to share with anyone. Nepal (181, 2003) cites one example of such mantra and it is as follows:

“Om u pi phat
Ukhel tuppi sat”

C) The Jogi Incantation:

The Jogis are the disciples of Gorakhnath and they are a folk institution in themselves. For the lay folk, the jogi comes at the dead of night to the village and makes a round of the house of each householder three times, mumbling a mantra inaudibly and then blowing his turahi, a goat-horn, which makes a strange sound. The children of the household are told that it is taboo to even secretly see a jogi when he is making the ‘pheri’ or the customary three rounds of the house. Next day, during daytime, the jogi appears again with his bags full of alms. The ladies of the house offer the jogi rice, pulses, vegetables, turmeric, salt and other condiments after receiving which he vanishes into the thin air. The jogi is dressed in black and his image is shrouded in mystery. According to lore, he was employed by Prithvi Narayan Shah, the ruler of Nepal who wanted his subjects protected from all insecurities and evil. Many believe that the jogi was a secret police or spy given the task of the security of the people. The mantra the Jogi chants is as follows:

“Kal chale kal bhairon
Thengala chale thengala bhairon
Kul chale kul bhairon”
Sheer chale sheer bhairon
Akash chale akashban
Patal chale patalban
Kum chale kumban
Sheer chale sheerban
Pau chale pauban
Uttar chale uttarban
Dakhin chale dakhinban
Purva chale purvaban
Paschim chale paschimban
Siriguru Gorakhnath ki sakti le
Jahan samma pounce wahin samma
Mei gyan se gyan chalaun…”

The description of incantation literature among the Assamese Nepali would be incomplete if one does not mention the Ashirvad mantra that every household gets to chant on the day of the Bada Dasein or Bijaya Dashami. The elders on the younger members of the family bestow the blessing, and what is unique about the blessing is that although it is in Sanskrit, the rich and the poor, the literate and the lay folk alike chant it:

“Ayu Dronasute sreyang Dasharathe shatrukhsayang Raghave
Aishyaryang nahuhshe gatischa pavane manacha Duryodhane
Danang Suryasute balang Haladhare satyancha Kuntisute
Vigyanang Vidure bhavanti bhavatam kirtischa Narayane”
“May you have the ayu (age) of Ashwatthama, the wealth of Dasharatha, the enemy-annihilating power of Raghava, the luxury of Nahush, the speed of Pawan, the god of air, the honour of Duryodhana, the power of sacrifice of Karna, the prowess of Balaram, the truthfulness of Yudhisthira, the wisdom of Vidur. May these things happen to you and may you be as famous as Narayana”.

The present researcher began this section on the literature on ritual incantation with the observation that in Nepali folklore the lines separating the sacramental and the folk are pretty blurred. The *ashirvad mantra*, quoted above, (and many other lores in Assamese Nepali society), is a testimony to the fact that it cuts across castes, ethnicities, race and class when it comes to reciting and offering blessings to the younger folks on the occasion of their biggest festival, i.e. the *dasein*.

**Devotional Songs:**

Nepali folk narratives are replete with the stories of the Ramayan and the Mahabharat. In fact, the oral narratives of the Indian sub-continent are informed by the age-old sway of the various forms of the oral traditions involving the stories of the two epics. The eminent scholar, Kaplila Vatsayan has important comment to make in this regard:

"Like the Ganga or the Himalayas, Rama and Krishna have shaped the contours of the Life and art of the peoples not only of India but also of South-East Asia." (Vatsyayan, 1980:110).

**Balun:**

The oral versions of the story of Rama have been passed on from generation to generation. The Nepali oral tradition on the Ramayana has a rich legacy. There are different varieties of the stories of the Ramayana in Nepali folklore like the Chait, Dhamari, Nachari and Balun. Of these varieties, the most popular and widespread is the Balun. While singing the Balun, the performers break into dance steps and sing the glory of Ram or Krishna:

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“Hei satyeshu kirti Ganapti Brahma – Lambodar aur data
Tumro sharanama khelna ayun agya deu dharti mata
Yo Dasharath charei ra chhora charei bhaya vir vir bhai
Rajaka guru Basistha rhishi guruka gharma gaya…”
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The other forms of the oral tradition involving the stories of Ram and Krishna, like Chait, Dhamari and Nachari, used to be more prevalent in the Western districts of Nepal and are of academic interest only for the Assamese Nepali. Since majority of the Assamese Nepalis’ ancestors hailed from the Eastern districts of Nepal, Balun is the predominant form among them.

Sorathi: It is a devotional oral genre mainly practiced by the Gurungs and Tamangs among the Assamese Nepalis. Regarding the Sorathi, there is a fascinating myth that has passed down from generations to generations. According to the myth, King Jaychandra even after marrying for the fourteenth times could not beget a son. Dejected at this, he decided to take sanyas and head for the jungle. However, he was persuaded by his Mahamantri to marry for the fifteenth time. Accordingly, the king changed his mind and entered into matrimony for the fifteenth time. He left his other queens and began to spend his time with the newly-wed queen. At this, the other fourteen queens became jealous and started to plot the ouster of the youngest queen Haimanti. The youngest queen got wind of the plot and persuaded the king to go for a pilgrimage with her. They returned to the palace after spending five months on pilgrimage. Haimanti by that time had become pregnant. The news that the youngest queen was carrying the child of the king spread like wild fire and everybody in the country was happy except the fourteen queens in the palace. They conspired to bribe the royal astrologer who according to plan would predict that the birth of the expected child would spell doom for the country and the child and the mother be banished from the country.

As the time arrived for the delivery of the baby, the royal astrologer accordingly advised the king to build a chest of gold and throw away the child into the Ganga as the birth spelled malefic effects for the king and his country. The king was heartbroken at the advice of the royal astrologer but he had to abide by his counsel so he ordered the drowning of the new-born. According to the royal order, Minister Sujan put the child inside a golden chest and threw it away into the Ganga.

A fisherman sighted the golden chest and got hold of it. He rescued the child and took up the responsibility of bringing him up. The child grew into a fine, good looking young woman. One day when she was drinking water in a nearby brook, Minister Sujan saw her and went back and reported to the king that a princess-like
young woman was seen in the jungle. The king immediately went into the jungle and spotted the princess frolicking in the woods. He was so impressed by the beauty of the young woman that he decided to marry her. Accordingly he made all arrangements and sent his proposal to the fisherman to marry his daughter. During the wedding, when it was time to put the vermillion mark (sindur) on the forehead of the bride, she spelled out the following lines:

“Babuko hatako sindur
Kunei cheli laudeina
Hamu cheli pani laudeina.”
“The sindur from one’s father’s hands
No daughter wears
I, your daughter, will also not wear..”

The king realized his folly and accepted the forest girl as his daughter.

This myth is said to be at the root of the Sorathi songs. In the performance of the Sorathi, the singers sing the stories of Ram and Krishna:

“Hari lagyo hari lagyo
Ravanya le Sitalai hari lagyo…”

Or

“Gopi bans kati kati murali banaye
Murali banaye Ram murali banaye
A a a a Ram ras murali Gokulma Krishnale bajaye..”

Sorathi is said to have incorporated many traditions of the Nepali folklore and according to experts, this genre of oral tradition even encompasses the pan-Indian oral traditions. According to the eminent folklorist of Nepal, C. M. Bandhu, the Sorathi has many elements of North Indian folk traditions woven around its structures:

“The existence of the story of Sorathi …. in Maithili, Bhojpuri, Magadhi, Nepali and other languages of the region shows that they are the part of thefolk traditions of the north-east India and Nepal…..These performanceswere taken to the ordinary folk by the followers of Gorakhanatha. They werethe people of the Natha sect, an important folk tradition, extended from Kamarup toKandhar. Gorakhanath and his followers not only united the Shaiva-Shakt-BajrayanBuddhist traditions but
also tuned the hearts of the downtrodden people of both Hindu and Muslim societies. Probably a folk tradition like this was never so powerful in this region of South Asia (Raghava, 1963).”

Sorathi songs are performed in accompaniment with a dance form known as the Maruni Nach. On important festivals like the Dasein or Tihar, Maruni dancers are invited for a round of Maruni performance. Now-a-days, Maruni is performed on stage also in a decontextualized form for the urban audience by the Assamese Nepali. Special workshops are organized by cultural experts to give training to willing youths so that the nuances of the dance performance may be captured in their training sessions for a correct presentation before the audience. Traditionally however, a full-length Maruni performance would continue for days on end. “The main performers called guru babu, 'the teacher', recites the text, the Maruni dances with the beats of a two sided drum called madal. In Maruni, the main focus of the audience’s attention is on the cross-dressing in which the male performers act as females in the dance recital. The madal is played by male drum beaters called the Parsunge. In between the dance performances, a clown known as the Labarpande appears as an interlude and entertains the audience while the main performers go through change of costume for the next round of dance.”

**Malashri**: It is basically a hymn to Goddess Durga and is usually sung during the Dasein festival. It is based on the malashri raga and that is how it got its name. Goddess Durga is worshipped as Nava Durga on the ninth day of the Navaratri and special praise is offered to the goddess by singing this song. It is usually sung by women but male singers also sing the hymn to the Goddess particularly when animal sacrifices are made to her. Here is a specimen of the malashri sung by the female singers:

“Jaydevi Bhairavi Gorakhnath Darshan deu Devi Bhavani ye
Pratham Devi utpanna bhai hai janam liye Kailash ye
Jyoti jagmag chahudishi Devi choushasthi Yogini sath ye
Jaidevi Bhavani…..”
**Holi/Hori or Phagu Geet:**

The tithi of Phalgun Shukla Purnima is known among the Assamese Nepali as the Phagu Purnima. Holi is a festival of colours and the common folks celebrate this riot of colour that makes nature resplendent. They pour colour on each other and sing songs in praise of Lord Krishna as in the following lines:

"**Krishna-Gopi jastei holi kheloun**

Ai jauna Gori

**Phagunako mahina yo Rhituraja**

Phul phulyo bagaincha bhari

**Nisthur bani nagare nani**

Ke lanu sansar ma mari hai

**Krishna-Gopi jastei...**

Abirko thali attarei hali

**Nahana pichkari bhari**

Bolauda kheri nabol basne

Ke garnu arkaki chhori-mori hai..

**Krishna-Gopi jastei...."**

**Domphu Geet:**

Domphu song is celebratory in the sense that it recounts the origin myth of the musical instrument of the Tamangs called domphu, a small hand-held percussion instrument. The myth is as follows:

Once Peng Dorje (believed to be Shiva) was roaming around in the slopes of the Himalayas along with his paramour Rungsang (Parvati). While reclining near a brook for a much-needed rest, Peng Dorje saw a deer grazing in the nearby meadow. He put an arrow on his bow and shot the deer in the heart. After reeling in pain for some time, the deer breathed its last. When Rungsang saw the agonising deer, she felt extreme pain herself. She blamed her husband for killing the deer without any fault or provocation. She pleaded her husband to do something as a penance in the memory of the dead deer. Peng Dorje skinned the deer and let its hide dry in the wind. Then he got hold of a koiralo plant (Lat. *Bauhinia varegata*), spliced it and made a round hole inside the branch. Then he made thirty two perforations around the wood. Peng Dorje wrapped the deer skin around the hollow wood and tied it around with thirty two
bamboo nails. He propitiated the gods and goddesses as well as he could do, asking for their forgiveness for the immoral act of killing the deer. The first domphu was thus made and Peng Dorje first made percussion sounds in the name of Sarawati, a ritual act which is followed even today by the practitioners of the domphu. Domphu Geet is an exquisitely melodious and rhythmic song and dance performance among the Tamangs. The domphu beaters are called Domphare or Domphure and they sing and perform as in the following lines:

“Ammaile hoi ammaile
Ammaile hoi ammaile
Rapsi chiva chu domphu
Khalse chengba bilaba
Tor tor jyomo garimi
Chan klangba Peng Dorje
Tangsor boke satsin
Ambur single chyodori
Changbor rala do syangsi
Gyagor donla kathpasing…”

Songs of Plantation and Harvesting:

Nature plays a significant role in the shaping up of the sensibility of the Assamese Nepali. The festivals weddings and important events in the community life are all informed by a close proximity with nature. So when nature changes with the change in the seasonal cycle, the Nepali folk imagination is also fired with creativity and hope. There are a host of folk song genres which are employed by the lay folk and some of these genres are as follows: Asare or Rasiya, Mangsire, Dain Geet, Dhan Nach or Palam and Phawar Geet or Tamang Selo.

Asare/Rasiya:

The rainy season is the season of hope for the farmer. In the rice field, he tills the soil and sings many songs as an expression of his feeling of hope:

“Dharti amoi dharti baboi
yesbata pauchhu anna
pyar ma garchhu samman garchhu
dharti amoi dhanyd’.”
Earth is my father; earth is my mother. From it I get corn. I love you; I honour you. Mother earth thank you.

The Assamese Nepali regard the fifteenth day of Asadh (June-end, beginning of July) as the auspicious day for the plantation of paddy. On this day, the youths in the paddy field rub mud on each other’s body and sing the Asadhe/Asare Geet or Rasiya as they begin paddy plantation:

“Chhupu ma chhupu khetoima ropnu halile hilayeko
kanchhi ra moile maya hai lauda juwari gayeko”.

Do plantation in the muddy field prepared by the peasants.

Kanchhi and I sing songs in our loving moment.

The occasion of plantation could also germinate the seeds of love and desire among the youth of the community. Thus the male suitor casts his net of love over his beloved:

“Asar maina ropeko ropo kun maina pasaunch?
Ek phera auncha allare jouban duniya hasauncha”

Mangsire:

When the paddy crop becomes ripe, it is time to reap the harvest. The male suitor expresses his plight as the son of a poor farmer:

“Ghansei ra katnu lou saryap saryap dhan katnu sepera
Garibko chhoro bhanera malai bolauchhan hepera.”

The young reaper, his beloved reassures him that it is hard work and not wealth which is the true sign of a great man:

“Gothale daile ghansei hei katda hansiya hallio
Dhani ra garib karmale bhanchha karmachha balio.”

Dain Geet:

After a passage of three to four months, the crop is brought to the khalo (threshing ground) and the threshing of the paddy begins:

“Madi khelaun badadai madi khelaun bhai
khuttaile chhutyai deo mero rajai yo paral ra dhari’.

Let’s play the game of threshing paddy from its straw. Let’s extract the paddy corn from the straw with our legs.
**Dhan Nach or Palam:**

Dhan Nach is a popular harvesting song and dance folk form popular among the Limbus but is prevalent among other groups as well among the Assamese Nepali. In this form, after threshing paddy, the young unmarried males and females of the community gather in the evening and by holding hands, dance to the tune of the folk song throughout the night. The song is in a question-and-answer form. One interesting feature of the Palam is that within the song itself it is asked whether the girl who is holding the hand of the boy belongs to the same clan. When it is ascertained that they are not from the same clan, they continue dancing, often falling in love with each other. The boy sings:

- Pahenlo saipatri kya ramro
- Jiban hamro kya ramro
- Motiko dana gani lyauda
- Sailiko boli suni lyauda...

If the two dancers happen to be relatives from the same clan, then they say ‘namaste’ to each other and part their way looking for a right partner in the group of dancers. This tradition bears similarity with the tradition of selection of life’s partner through singing and dancing competition among different tribes/ethnic groups (Bihu/ Baisagu/ Sathar git).

**Phawar or Tamang Selo:**

On the harvest site known as khalo, the young Tamang lovers express their love for each other amidst all the hard work involving threshing and husking paddy, barley and wheat. The folk song is sung with dance rhythms:

“Timro hamro yo maya
Yasei lokama nasakla
Gari rakhoun mat-salla
Timi arko junima
Brindavanma gayera
Phulako janma liyera
Phuli basnu parkhinu
Putali bhayera ma aunla
Phulako mathi chadera
Swargalokama dui jaunla”
The songs related to agricultural seasons among the Assamese Nepali express universal themes of love, union, desire, pain and suffering in simple but hauntingly lyrical and melodious manner and are indeed the treasure of Assamese Nepali folklore.

Apart from the folk songs described above, which can be placed on a larger category of workmen’s songs, there is also a form of folk songs among the Assamese Nepali that reflects the pain and suffering of the labourers and workers employed in the oilfields and coalmines of upper Assam. The oil refinery and coalmines were established in the latter half of the 19th century in Assam where a large number of Nepalis became wage earners. The colliers worked in the coalfields in wretched conditions. The folksongs of the colliers are evocative of the harsh conditions of the coal fields which took a toll on the bodies of the labourers:

“Andra lage chutti khelna tigra lage kamna
saktina maharaj pathar koila thamna.”

“My nerves are weak and feet trembled, as I am too hungry.
O Lord, I cannot shoulder the weight of the coal.”

**Festival Songs:**

The custom of singing *malashri* in the Dasein, the biggest festival of the Assamese Nepali, has already been touched upon. Nepali major festivals like the Dasein and Tihar or Tyohar involve a number of oral traditions, not all of which can be put under the genre of folk songs because of lack of lyrical quality but these forms indicate a creative process and an incorporation of myth into their structures. Examples can be cited of the form of *Deusi*, which cannot be classified as a folk song but it involves group performance in which myths related to Bali and Ram are separately dealt with. On the other hand, an institution like the Bhaili has folk songs within its structure. Other festivals like Teej also have a singing tradition attached to them.

**Bhailo/Bhaili:**

The period between Kartik Krishna Chaturdashi to Kartik Shukla Dwitiya is known as Yam Panchak (five days of King Yama) among the Assamese Nepali. These five days are known as the Tihar festival. The first day of the Tihar is dedicated
to the worship of the crow. Crows in the neighbourhood are garlanded with marigold wreath, if possible, and fed by the Assamese Nepali householders on this day known as Kauri Tihar (festival of crows). On the second day of the Yam Panchak, it is the Tihar of the dog (Kukur Tihar) and dogs are worshipped, garlanded and fed well by the householders. On the third day of the Panchak, it is called the Gai Tihare Aunshi (Amavashya Festival of the Cow) and the actual fun of the festival begins. Householders and children get up early and after taking bath, they worship the cows in the cowshed. Women in the community get together and start singing Tihar songs or Bhaili. They go from door to door, singing and dancing the following song:

    Bhailini ayeun angina
    Badhari kundari rakhana
    Ae…ausibaro gai tiharo bhaili…

    After a long recital of the song that continues for quite some time, the womenfolk offer blessings to the hosts:
    Jasle dinchha muthi
    Usko sunako aunthi
    Jasle dinchha mano
    Usko sunako chhano….

    After the song comes to completion after the exchange of blessings, the Bhailini are offered tea and refreshment and then they proceed towards the next house. The performance thus continues till the little hours of the morning.

**Deusi:**

Deusi is sung on the next day after the Bhaili performance, on the day the Assamese Nepali call the ‘hali tihar’. Deusi is a group performance where there is a lead performer who introduces the story and the other participants join in the performance with a short refrain which goes: ‘Deusire Ram’. Just like Bhaili, which is a female folk form, the male performers of Deusi go from door to door in the village and sing and bless the households. In exchange, they are offered rice, pulses, other condiments as well as money by the host of the household apart from tea and refreshment made of Tihar snacks like sel roti and sesame seed chutney (tilko achar).
The Deusi performance, which is a flat one, with little variations on the notes, goes like this:

*Bhattyaune* or Lead performer: Ei jhilimili

*Sathiharu* or Group performers: Deusire Ram

*Bhattyaune* or Lead performer: Ei ke ko jhilimili

*Sathiharu* or Group performers: Deusire Ram

The deusi performance covers a fairly lengthy text which recounts the myth of King Bali and how he made sacrifices. It also recreates the story of Ram’s return to Ayodhya and how the whole of the city was ignited with lamps and crackers through its narration. The last part of the Deusi is dedicated to blessing the hosts who line up before the Deusi players. The householders’ entire family pays obeisance to the Deusi players who in return bless them profusely. After the customary refreshment offered by the hosts, the Deusi players move on to the next villager’s house and thus the performance continues all throughout the night.

**Maangal/mahal or Mangal Geet:**

Maagal songs are sung on auspicious occasions in the family and the community, hence the appellation ‘mangal’ from which the term maangal has come. At the time of birth of a son in the family, threading ceremony or bratabandha or Upanayan, roofing day of the house, on the occasion of the husband setting out to far-off climes, maagal is sung. Maangal or mangal as a folk form seems to be a North Indian phenomenon because it is sung in its respective local forms in Kumaon, Garhwal and Himachal Pradesh also. The maagal is sung exclusively by the womenfolk and the singers are called maangale. Here is a specimen of a maangal song:

“*Akkasheiki diei jyu ta pattaleiki bunei hai*

*Kaisema hola diei bunei timro hamro bhet*

*Baba ra jyuko aanganeima shubho jagge garchhan re*

*Tyahin hola diei bunei timro hamro bhet...*”
Sangini/Sanginei:

It is a folk form which is sung by friends among women, hence sangini (literally friends). Sangini is a fluid folk form which incorporates various themes related to a woman’s life: from her spiritual orientation in the oral texts of the Ramayan and the Mahabharat, from her involvement in the festivals and rites and rituals which are observed round the year, from her emotional health giving way to expressions of happiness and sadness, from her experiences in her interrelationship with her in-laws and folks from her maitali (mother’s side) and so on. In the following sangini song the singer is expressing her experience in the new house which a young bride has been married into:

“Dandei ra parika bharila jun
Gham jasta hoina po rachhan
Hei Shiva Narayan..
Ghareima jadani sasura rachhan
Baba jasta hoina po rachhan
Hei Shiva Narayan…..”

Wedding Songs: Two distinct oral traditions are prevalent among the Assamese Nepali in the performance of their wedding rites and they are i) silok, and ii) ratteuli. In the performance of these forms, there is considerable audience participation and therefore these can be regarded as the folk performing art as well.

Silok: Silok is a verbal form in which questions and answers are exchanged between the groom’s or Janti ghare and the bride’s party or beuli ghare during the marriage. The silok performance begins once the groom’s party is hosted by the bride’s side with dinner and are allowed to rest for the night. The first part of the silok in the form of a question is thrown to the groom’s side. After the answer is provided, the groom’s party is bombarded with tougher questions. The prestige of the groom depends on the correct set of answers provided by his companions. Here is a specimen question and answer set:

Jantighare: Kata paryo Mahachina kata paryo Lahore?
Kati barshako beulo lyaeu kati akhsarko mahur?
Beulighare: Uttar paryo Chin Mahachin Paschim paryo Lahore
Bees barshako beulo lyaeun battis barshako mahur.
After a lot of teasing and taunting going on between the two parties, as the village folk entertain themselves with their participation, the wedding comes to an end in the little hours of the night.

**Ratteuli:**

As folk song form, ratteuli is similar to the jhyaure discussed above, but ratteuli is not just a genre of songs but a whole new institution integral to a marriage ceremony. After the janti or the groom’s party leaves for the bride’s place, the women of the family, friends and villagers gather for the night for an all-women-wild-party. They assemble on the wedding night at the groom’s place and indulge in merrymaking among themselves. Male members are strictly barred from entering the venue of the ratteuli performance. Women dress up as men, wear moustaches and often break into songs which border on the lewd and the ludicrous. Here is a specimen ratteuli song:

“Surte nadeu ma bidi khanelai
Maya nalau ma hidijanelai
Khaun ki nakhaun lam pate surati
Laun ki nalaun jyan jane pirati .....

**Lullaby:**

The Nepali term for lullaby is *jhullari*. The term comes from the jhula, which is a bamboo cot called *kokro* in Assamese Nepali. There is a rich variety of lullabies in Nepali folklore. The mother of a baby slowly rocks the kokro with the baby inside and sings the lullaby till the baby goes to sleep:

“Chini nini babu chini nini
tare ankhale bolaye
suta suta hamro babu nindrale pukare."

Sleep my child sleep; the stars have invited you to sleep.
Sleep my son sleep; the sleep has invited you to sleep.
Sometimes the baby refuses to eat before going to sleep, so the mother slowly sings the following lullaby and feeds him his food:
“Kukhuri Kan
Basibhat khan
Khoi malai?
Biralale khayo
Khoi biralo
Musa marna gayo
Khoi muso?
Dula bhitra pasyo
Khoi dulo?
Gaile kulchyo
Khoi gai?
Pani khana gayo
Khoi pani?
Satsuttei sukyo.”

Tukka/Ukhan: Nepali Proverbs:

Proverbs are storehouse of folk wisdom. A short, pithy and aphoristic saying may cryptically incorporate a deeply educative message. It could also contain a hard-won insight into the nature of men and things. Assamese Nepali repertoire of proverbs is quite rich. Given below are a few examples of Nepali proverbs:

a) Mare pap, pale punya
   There is virtue in saving/preserving

b) Udyogile Jogi hunu pardeina
   An industrious person never becomes a pauper

c) Ama bhanda chhori janne, khukuri bhanda karda hanne.
   (Daughter knows more than mother, small knife is sharper than bigger khukuri).

d) Ayo gayo maya moh, ayena gayena ko ho ko
   Social relations thrive only when there is active interaction

e) Arkako kam kahile janchhan gham.
   (The sun sets too late for those who work for others).

f) Alu khaï pedako dhak
   To show off when actually there is nothing to show
g) *Chhoro paunu koilekoile, kandani batnu aile.*  
(Getting ready for things to happen without things really happening).

h) *Dui swasniko poi, kuna pasi roi*  
(Husband of two wives always weeps).

i) *Iman bhaneko lakh ho, dhan bhaneko khak ho*  
Integrity is million times better than wealth

j) *Ke nihu paun, konika bokaun*  
A disgruntled person will look for the slightest excuse

k) *Dher khaye mal, thor khaye bal.*  
Eating less is good for health.

l) *Keti nahernu, ketiki ama hernu*  
When looking for a girl to marry, look for the mother

m) *Okhati ra arti ramrod lagdeina*  
Medicine and advice are bitter to swallow

n) *Gerubastra laudeima jogi hudeina*  
Appearance is not reality

o) *Ek ratko nidrale sat din pirchha*  
A sleepless night can ruin seven days

p) *Umliyu pachhi pokhinch*  
Too much of everything is bad

q) *Ghanti heri, haddinilnu*  
Cut your coat according to your cloth.

**Riddles:** Like proverbs, the folklore of the Assamese Nepali is rich in riddles as well. These riddles used to be a good pastime in yester years when there were fewer media of entertainment. Riddles indicate an ingenious mind at work in so far as their creation is concerned. Riddles can challenge the intelligence of the folk mind and the ability to answer a riddle can win appreciation from folks. Here are a few popular riddles:  
a) *Ama bhanda chhori bokshi* -- chilly  
b) *Ama bhanda chhori kupri* -- fern  
c) *Andhyaro odarma seto janti* -- teeth  
d) *Jati thattayo uti ramaune* -- Madal (a percussion instrument)  
e) *Diuso ulto, rati sulto* -- Bat  
f) *Rato chha dhulo, kam garchha thulo* -- Sindur
Rites of Passage in the Assamese Nepali Society:

Rites and rituals associated with birth, marriage and death have an important place in the Assamese Nepali people. The caste Hindus within the community have fairly complex and elaborate rites rooted in Vedic traditions. The observance of these rites involves the consultation of the almanac to determine the exact *tithi* (lunar date) and *ghadi* (time) or *sait* (auspicious time period). Usually, the family priest determines the time of the observance in general accordance with tradition. The ethnic groups have their own ways of determining the conduct of the rites of passage which are reliant on oral traditions contained in the incantations. The caste Hindus have a set of highly codified scriptural texts to help them conduct their rituals.

The caste Hindus among the Nepalis follow Vedic tradition of the rites of passages which involves ‘samskaras’. According to these ‘samsakaras’, human life passes through sixteen different phases of life-force once a life-energy enters into the human form including the passing away of the soul from the human ‘kaya’ or body. These sixteen phases are religiously observed by the high caste Hindus among the Nepalis and these are as follows:

1) **Garbhadaan** or conception of the embryo in the womb, 2) **Punsavana** or protection of foetus, 3) **Simantonayan** or satisfying the wishes of the pregnant mother, 4) **Jaat karma** or childbirth, 5) **Naam karma** or naming ceremony, 6) **Nishkramana** or taking the newborn to the outdoors, 7) **Annaprasana** or feeding the child solid food, 8) **Chudakamra** or Mundan or tonsuring of the baby’s hair, 9) **Karnabhed** or ear piercing, 10) **Yagnopavit** or sacred thread ceremony, 11) **Vedarambha** or the initiation into formal learning, 12) **Samavartana** or convocation of learning, 13) **Vivah** or marriage, 14) **Sarvasanskar** or preparation for the renunciation of the world, 15) **Sanyas** or renunciation and 16) **Antyesthi** or last rites

As far as the Newari people among the ethnic groups among the Nepalis are concerned, the sixteen rites of passage are reformed into ten and these are called dasa samskara. These samskaras exclude the Vedic initiation rites like Yagnopavit, Vedarambha, samavartana etc. but the major rites like Jatakarma, Vivaha and antyesthi are followed based on the caste Hindu traditions. The
Newari priests like the Rajyopadhyaya or Vajracharya perform the traditional rites of the Newari households. Other ethnic communities follow their own traditions in terms of the rites of passage which are performed by their priests and tradition-bearers and village elders.

It may be noted that these strict codes are somewhat relaxed as far as the Assamese Nepalis are concerned and not all of the sixteen rites are observed any more. Except marriage ceremony, the rites associated with birth and death have issues related to impurities and there are strict observances and taboos during the spell of the impurities. The ritual priest presides over the purification rites related to birth and death. The impurities are referred to as ‘sutak’ or ‘jutho’ and the purification involves partaking of gaumutra preceding and following elaborated chanting of mantras.

**Nwaran or Naming Ceremony:**

During birth rites, the mother is kept away from public view and she is allowed to join the family only after the naming ceremony on the eleventh day of childbirth. In naming the child, almanacs are consulted and a horoscope of the newborn is erected depending on the planetary positions of stars at the time of the lagna or muhurta (exact time) of the child’s birth. The rashi and nakshatra of the child is determined by the priest depending on the planetary position and the child is named after the rashi in which she is born.

As far as the ethnic groups are concerned, the impurities associated with birth of the baby are more or less the same. The impurities regarding birth pollution end on the eleventh day of the birth of the baby and on the same day, the naming ceremony is conducted followed by a ritual feast. The only difference in the naming ceremony is that a traditional priest rather than the Vedic priest presides over the ceremony after conducting a round of divination to determine the name of the newborn. There are certain exceptions to this custom of naming. In the Magar ethnic group, the baby is given a name without consulting the ritual priest. When the baby grows older, the parents may feel the need to get a name offered by the ritual priest at their convenience. Traditionally, the sudeni or midwife is engaged in the cleaning and washing work related to the mother and the baby. In certain ethnic groups, the role of
the phupu (baby’s father’s sister) is also important as she oversees the pollution customs during childbirth

**Pasni or Rice Feeding Ceremony:**

After the naming ceremony, the next important rite is the rice feeding ceremony. The Nepali name of the Sanskrit annaprasana is *pasni* which marks the transition from feeding milk to solid food to the baby. In this rite no Vedic rituals are involved but an auspicious day is determined by consulting the family astrologer or ritual priest. It is for the first time that the elders in the family and kin get to bless the baby with gifts. Cheli-betis (female relatives) of the family are specially invited and a feast is organized to mark the occasion.

**Chhewar or Hair Shaving Ceremony:**

The Chhewar marks the transitional phase from infancy to boyhood. It is a male-oriented rite in when the baby attains the age of 3 or 5, his hair is shaven off. The day of performing the rite is decided after duly consulting the almanac or the ritual priest. Among caste Hinus, the Vedic priest performs the shaving off of the hair of the baby. In ethnic communities, it is the bhanja (sister’s son) of the baby’s father who performs it. A feast consummates the rite.

**Biye/Biya or Marriage:**

Marriage marks the transition from boyhood to adulthood in male children and the cutting off of patrilineal ties in female children. In caste Hindu females, the marriage custom is seen as *gotra chudnu* or severing clan ties with the parents’ family. Marriages are not just kinship relations. Neither are they mere social contracts but are also blood relations between the two families involved in a marriage. The purity of blood is maintained by avoiding inter-caste marriages. Among the caste Hindus, a strict code contained in the adage ‘Mawaliko thar, buda mawaliko ghar hernu’ is observed by which it is simply meant that the clan of the maternal side should not be mixed with the suitor of marriage. Maternal uncle’s maternal uncle is also prohibited from marrying the prospective suitor. On the other hand, *sagotra* marriage, just like in societies of high caste Hindus of Haryana and Punjab is strictly prohibited. There are 36 gotras or clans among the caste Hindu Nepalis and out of
these three to four gotras form the *sagotri* group. In order to maintain clan purity, these sagotri groups are not allowed to marry within themselves. So, when a marriage proposal is discussed, the first question that is asked about is the *thar* (lineage) and the *gotra* (clan) of the boy and the girl. In many of the ethnic groups, matrilineal or cross-cousin marriages are the preferred custom. A famous Magar proverb goes as follows: “Mamako chhori, khoji khoji” (maternal uncle’s daughter is the preferred option). Among caste Hindus, it is customary for the bride’s family to seek the hand of the groom. A marriage proposal is considered on the ground of the matching of the horoscope, the matching of the thar and gotra and the decision regarding the auspicious day on which the wedding has to be held. Once the match is determined, the groom’s side despatch a *patra* (letter) in the hands of the family priest along with a family elder. The *patra* contains an invocation to Lord Ganesha and the details of the of the lagna/muhurta along with an estimate of the total number of groom’s party who descend on the bride’s place to solemnize the wedding. Once the patra is accepted by the bride’s side, the wedding proposal is considered sealed. On the previous day of the wedding, a puja is offered to the Lord Ganesha with modak or kasar or rice balls mixed in jaggery and this ceremony is called kasar batarne (making of kasar). On the wedding day, both the groom and the bride are out on a fast followed by a series of worship. The groom’s party leaves for the bride’s place in a procession laced with band party and family, kin and villagers. They are received at the gate of the bride’s place by the family members and the groom is offered warm reception. At the appointed hour, the bride is accosted to the altar or bedi in the front courtyard of the bride’s place. The bride’s family priest conducts the vedic rituals of the marriage by offering homagni (sacred offering to the holy fire) with the chanting of the mantras. The bride and groom are tied a knot and are made to do three rounds of the bedi amid incantations chanted by the priest. There is an exchange of garlands, rings and other ornaments between the bride and the groom. It is the same time that the lagna of the wedding arrives when the groom puts verimilion mark on the forehead of the groom and a garland made of beads around her neck. The priest then asks them to pronounce marriage vows (sankalpa) after which the kanyadaan or gifting the bride away to the groom is accomplished.

Nepali rites of passage have a unique custom of *dhog-bhet* woven around
them. *Dhog* (literally touching the feet of elders and respectable people is a form of seeking blessing) and *bhet* (an offering of gifts to the one who seeks blessings) are consummated by putting a mix of rice, curd and vermilion on the forehead of the seekers or younger people in Nepali traditional custom. In weddings also, at the consummation of the rituals, all the family members and relatives assemble at a corner of the marriage hall and offer blessings to the newly married couple. However, the new couple are considered as a form of Laxmi and Narayan and their feet are ritually washed and the water from the wash is solemnly taken by each one of the practitioners. This custom is called ‘goda dhune’ (feet washing) and it is followed by showering of wedding gifts to the couple. After the custom is over, the newly married couple are given ceremonial farewell known as ‘beuli anbhyune’. When the new bride reaches the groom’s place, she is ceremonially ushered in by the mother and sisters of the groom by making her tread through a series of pots filled with rice grain. She is then welcomed into the groom’s family as the new member. The wedding rituals of the caste Hindu Nepalis do not contain any pollution, however, the groom performs an offering of pinda (rice balls made out of rice, milk and sesame seeds) to the lineage of forefathers as a commemoration. This ritual is called Nandi Mukhi Shraddha and it is performed one day prior to the wedding.

Among the ethnic Nepali ethnic groups, it is the custom for the groom’s party to seek the hand of the bride. The wedding rituals are the same but the incantations in the vernacular are chanted by the ritual priest. Alcohol is used in the ritual offerings and pork, fish and alcohol are profusely offered to the guests of the groom at the bride’s place.

**Death Rituals:**

For the caste Hindu Nepalis, when a person dies, the death pollution remains till the tenth day. The mourning sons are called the *kriya putras* and they are made to tonsure their head immediately after the body is cremated. They are made to wear loin cloth and go through strict code of penance and mourning. On the third day, the spirit of the dead is supposed to leave the habitat and is bound on a journey to the land of the unknown. Every morning, the kriyaputras are made to offer rice balls to the spirit of the dead to assist its spirit to reach heaven. There are three rounds of rice ball
offerings in a cycle of sixteen and these are called sodashi (literally, sixteen). The first round of sodashi is called the malin sodashi (sixteen pindas offered during the ten day-period – malin here implies polluted pinda or rice balls) followed by madhyam sodashi or part polluted, part pure pindas and uttam sodashi or pure pindas. Rice balls offered till the sixth month of the deceased falls within the madhyam sodashi. Beyond six months, the spirit attains a pure pursuit in its journey to Vaikuntha or the promised holy land. On the annual shraddha day, the last of the pindas is offered completing a cycle of 48 pindas to the departed soul. Beyond the annual shraddha, the caste Hindus also offer pindas on two more occasions on an annual basis. One, on the day of the tithi of the deceased, and the second, on the tithi which falls within the preta/pitripaksha on the fortnight prior to Mahalaya in Durga Puja.

On the thirteenth day of the death rites, the purification process gets over. The purification is done by springling gomutra all over followed by an elaborate ritual of daan karma. A series of articles wished for by the deceased are offered as gifts to the priest and his wife. Most important among the gifts are a cow, a piece of land if the family can afford and piece of gold which are offered to the ritual priest. It is believed that in order for the peace of the departed soul, gifts are the surest way to secure the departed soul to attain Vaikuntha. A ritual feast is organized where the mourners in the family are allowed to take rice, lentils, vegetable, salt, oil etc after a thirteen-day long penance or brat.

Death rites among the ethnic groups are performed according to local customs. Once the dead body is taken in a procession, gifts start pouring in at places where the body is taken to rest till it reaches the cremation site. The ethnic groups like Rais and Magars believe that whatever gift is offered during this time gets directly transferred to the soul of the dead. Animal and bird sacrifices are made so that the soul of the dead can receive the souls of the dead birds and animals to keep him company in the land of the dead. Those who can not offer gifts because of financial constraints hope that their sons and daughters would offer the gifts in future. The pollution of death usually remains till the third day. Ritual offerings are made on the third day as a purification rite followed by a ritual feast with offerings of alcohol and meat to the dead spirit. Then the whole village partakes of the feast in honour of the dead. Sprinkling of alcohol around the house of the dead completes the purification rites.
Elder Worship or Chaurashi Brat/Puja:

A ritual which is common to both caste Hindus and ethnic Nepalis is the *Chaurashi ko brat* or puja. When a person attains the age of eighty four years, his eighty fourth birthday is celebrated by the whole village community. The caste Hindus organize either an elaborate yagna employing a number of vedic priests who chant vedic hymns and sacramental fire is lit where yagna ahuti is offered. The elderly incumbent is then considered to attain the virtues of a god. Feasts are organized followed by gifts to the priests, children and daughters of the family and everyone present in the ceremony seeks blessing from the elderly person being celebrated.

The ethnic communities organize the chaurasi without the vedic rites but the friends and family gather and gifts are showered on children and women followed by blessings from the elderly person who is being celebrated.

**Part II**

**MATERIAL CULTURE**

**Traditional Houses of the Assamese Nepali:**

The traditional houses of the Assamese Nepali betray a distinct pattern or type. The folk knowledge base involved in the construction of houses of this group of people is born out of sustained interaction with nature necessitated by the exigencies of living experiences. In fact, the larger ecological framework is at work in the evolution of the pattern or type of houses under discussion. Nature, together with rituals, plays a crucial role in terms of the materials used to erect the structure, the spatial arrangement of the elements of the house or cluster of houses and the utilization of the construction for habitation. Culture intervenes in order to transform a house into a home as humans ultimately lend meaning to the basic necessity of shelter and rest that a house is primarily supposed to stand for.

The traditional house of the Assamese Nepali is made of three materials which are readily available to them from mother nature – thatch, timber and bamboo. The housing area is a semi compact area in which the units of the house are distributed. Before constructing the house, the area is cordoned off with a bamboo picket fence
by way of demarcating the boundary. The main housing area has a front courtyard which is known as the *angan*. The main house is called the *thulo ghar* consisting of either a straight-lined structure of two or more rooms depending on the affordability of the householder. The *thulo ghar* has a main post of timber on which the *kul devata* is placed. The room having the *kul devata* is the most sacred place of the house, apart from the puja ghar where the family *ista devata* (family deity) is placed in the altar of the sanctum.

The *thulo ghar* is separated from the kitchen or the *bhansa ghar* by an inner ward. Most Assamese Nepali households place a *Tulasi Math*, a triangular mound of soil on top of which a *tulashi* plant is grown. A couple of bamboo or wooden sitting arrangements (usually a bench with an arm-rest and a back-rest) are placed on the inner courtyard. Womenfolk perform certain chores in the inner courtyard, chores like stitching *duna-topora* (a traditional bowl shaped contraption made with bamboo sticks and thick leaves of certain plants), clean the rice for the evening and even serve tea to family and guests.

Just beside the inner courtyard, to the side is the *dhikuti* or the granary of the household. It is usually a single or double-roomed structure of thatch and bamboo in which rice is stored for the whole year.

**Bhansa Ghar (Kitchen):**

The *bhansa ghar* or kitchen is a single structured with one room (sometimes two) in it separated from the *thulo ghar* by the inner courtyard. There are two fire units in the *bhansa ghar*: a) *chulo*, which is the main cooking unit on a slightly raised platform from the ground, and b) the *angeno*, which has a three-legged iron contraption used mainly for heating water and cooking side dishes. The area surrounding the *chulo* is considered sacred and there are many taboos associated with the use of the *chulo*. After completion of every meal, the sacred space around the *chulo* is wiped clean with a cow dung mix by the females of the household. The head of the family, the father or the eldest brother in case the father is not present, is given the prime space while serving meal. Other members sit beside him some distance away from the *chulo* in a semi-circular sitting arrangement. In fact, there is a strong patri-local tradition in the sitting position of the members of the family in the kitchen with male members partaking of food first and then the female members following it.
Chuthelnu:

The backyard of the kitchen is called chuthelnu and all washing and cleaning is done in the chuthelnu. Some distance away from the kitchen and by the side of the chuthelnu, there is the nuaneghar (bathroom) and the latrine. In the backyard itself, the Assamese Nepali peasant also has his dauro katero, a storehouse for firewood which is stacked up right to the top. On the roof of the dauro katero, it is customary to keep maize stock for the whole year. Some households store their maize on the bamboo poles in the kitchen roof as well. The cowshed is constructed parallel to the inner court yard, adjacent to the dhikuti where the bulls, cows and their calves are kept for feeding and rest. Except for Bahuns and Chhetris, Nepali farmers rear their chicken and pig in pens (khor) and stys respectively within the semi-compact housing complex itself. Bahuns and Chhetris have their pens for goats and little cubicles for pigeon and duck. Beyond the backyard lies the vegetable garden where the peasants grow their leafy and solid vegetables. Since the primary occupation of the peasant traditionally used to be animal and plant husbandry, the material culture has been rich in implements related to dairy farming and agriculture. Assamese Nepali traditional farmers use implements made of iron, stone, clay and wood etc. to carry out their daily chores. It must also be observed that since the Nepali society has its own traditional occupational castes like Lohar (blacksmith), Sunar (goldsmith), Damai (tailor) and Sarki (cobbler) etc., the material culture has its own unique cultural domain in terms of traditional housing and agricultural iron and wooden implements, ornaments, costume and traditional food and foodways.

Iron Implements: For digging, ploughing, reaping and preparing food and constructing houses etc. there is a large repertoire of iron implements traditionally used by the peasants. These are as follows:

Khunda: It is a weapon used exclusively in ritual sacrifices. It is shaped in the handle side and point and flat and sharp in the front side. In olden times, it was used in combat fights in war. Nowadays, it is kept in the temples and is taken out only when the occasion for ritual sacrifice arises.
**Katti:** It is a huge machete-like weapon used in killing goats and buffaloes. It is used in sacrificial purpose. It is similar to the *khunda* but smaller in size and is kept in households. It is also used for ceremonial purposes but not kept in the temples.

**Taluwar:** Formerly used in wars, *taluwar* now-a-days serves only ceremonial purposes. On the day of the *phulpati*, on the *Astami* tithi of the *Navaratri* in the *dasein* festival, the *taluwar* is taken out, cleaned and kept for worship at the altar of the image of Goddess Durga.

**Bhala:** It is a sharp-pointed, double-edged iron spear used by the Nepali farmers for hunting and fishing.

**Khukuri:** It is a big knife with an inwardly curved blade. The khukuri is an all-purpose machete found in every Nepali household. There are different types of khukuri depending on the size, the width of the blade and the nature of the inward curve. Some of these types are: Lampate (long-leafed), *Sirupate* (thin-bladed), *Kothimoda*, *Bhojpure* and *Chainpure*.

**Bancharo:** It is an iron-made weapon used to cut big trees and logs for firewood. It has a long wooden handle and the other side with its weapon. The actual iron part of the weapon is thick on the base and thin on the blade side.

**Khurpa:** It resembles a sickle. While climbing up a three, it cuts steps to climb up one after another step. It is also used in climbing on mountain. It is useful in mountain area only.

**Hansiya:** It is used to cut down grass from the branches of the tree, fuel etc. It has a variation by the name of ‘Kanchiya’ which is used only for the grass cutting and harvesting paddy used in the season.
**Chuleshi:** This domestic implement is used for cutting vegetables, peeling and dicing vegetables and fruits, making anything into small.

**Karda:** Miniature form of ‘Khukri’ kept with the sheath of a ‘Khukuri’ to whet the ‘Khukuri’ sharp in need. It always remains along with the sheath of the ‘Khukuri’.

**Chhura:** It is mainly used for hair cutting. It is a small weapon with long blades on both sides and having a small wooden handle. Both sides of its pointed parts is very sharp as a secret weapon.

**Sanaaso:** It is a small hand-held weapon used to beat iron when it is heated. It works as a plus.

**Chimta:** It is a pair of tongsthing by which something can be caught to lift it from one place to another or to take out any thing from the fire-place.

**Jhir:** It is also like chimta, but it has a single, sharp handle which can take out the *sel roti* (a kind of rice cake delicacy deep-fried in mustard oil) from the pan. It is made of wood or bamboo, stirred up in the oily pot where the liquid dust of rice flour is put there in a round size.

**Odan:** It is the iron trivet or hob, made of iron, used in the fire place while cooking foodstuff.

**Basuli:** It is used to splice out bark from timber or to make it polished.

**Bahuli:** It is also a joint of two iron-hands by which anything can be taken out from the fire place after cooking on the fire place. Generally, hot pots are caught and taken out after anything cooked there.
**Kuto:** It is a small instrument which is used to dig up soil in the compound and for cleaning and mounting soil on maize plants, seeding of seeds etc.

**Bauso:** It is a kind of spade in small size, used to dig up soil in the compound. It is most important instrument for the agriculturists. It is used in the paddy field to make pillars in the mud to cover some plots for plantation wherein plot by plot, the plantation is completed by women particularly.

**Khanti:** It is an iron-made instrument, used to make hole on the ground, in making a compound boundary, or such other holes where pillars are put there.

**Pharua:** It is a big-sized spade used in the summer season in the muddy field for making pillars or embankments.

**Things made from jute yarn:**

The agro-pastoralist way of life of the Assamese people is characterized by the use of jute yarn to make extensive household implements. These are as follows:

**Naamlo-barior:** It is a kind of rope on one side while the knitted flat part is used on the head to carry the load of baskets like thunse or doko etc. as a backpack. The rope attached to the ‘naamlo’ holds the backside load while covering long distance.

**Damlo:** ‘Damlo’ is a rope knitted with two small threads of jute (poya) one across another. It may be a short one to tie the cows in the shade or to tie them in the grazing field while taking the cattle outside. In its one side, there is knot and the other is closed in twisted knitting.

**Damlo** can be used as jor damlo also to fasten a pair cows to use or tie at their neck at the same time in the grazing field or for ploughing field.
Maal damlo is used to tie bulls to use in thrashing paddy at a place called ‘Khalo’ and ‘dien’ where number of bulls are tied into one series.

Jaabi: It is a kind of small pocket tied around the thigh of women. In remote areas only such small purse is used.

Jhangle: It is bigger than a ‘Jaabi’, It is knitted with a stronger rope where some small pots can be carried in it.

Ghunetro: It is prepared from jute yarn. Small stones are so placed in it as to throw them as projectiles to scare away animals or birds that swarm paddy or maize plantation in the harvest season. Such stones can be thrown to a long distance by aiming to a goal or destination

Sika (sikya): It is a jute and bamboo contraption used as a suspended holder to contain food items like milk, curd, butter and ghee in the kitchen to keep them away from the attack of pests, ants etc.

It must be noted that many of these household implements and items are woven and made by lay peasants. However, there are certain other implements which require specialized skill for which the Nepalese depend on the occupational castes. Below are some such items prepared by the potters and stone smiths – the various stone and terra cotta implements are common in Nepalese households.

Ghatta: It is a wheel circle which is stirred by the water current to grind rice and such other flour from maize, wheat etc. By the water current force, it is stirred up and the things are grinded accordingly.
Janto/Chakki: It comprises of two flat and round slabs of stone. The upper plate is equipped with a wooden handle so that it can be operated in a circular fashion. The grains of rice, maize or millet is put in the middle of the two plates in order to mill flour from the grain by moving the upper plate.

Lohoro and Silanto: It is the commonly available mortar and pestle made from stone found in every Nepalese household. It is mostly placed inside the house to grind all spices, ginger, chilly and other leafy vegetables for preparing pickle or ‘chatney’.

Ghyampi/Ghyampo: It is an earthen pot for preparing curd from milk, or keeping sugar, hukumi (a kind of powdered chutney).

Ghyampa: It is a bigger pot used for keeping rice, pulse, millet etc.

Dhupauro: It is used in the puja ceremony to keep fire in it so that ghee or agaru dust or such other aromatic herbs can be poured on it to create scented smoke in the room or inside the whole house to welcome Gods and Goddesses particularly in the morning or evening.

Pyala: It is an earthen/copper diya, which is used as a ceremonial light by putting cotton wicks over mustard oil at the time of worship. These are used particularly in the Dipawali at present.

Ghainto: It is a big, earthen water pot where water is stoned up for a long time. Water kept in such pot remains cool in the summer season.

Handi: It is an earthen cooking pot used to fry corn, grams, spices or maize, soybean etc. or rice to make ‘bhuja’ or sirowla etc.
**Chilim:** It is an earthen smoking implement used by elderly people to smoke bhang, tambakhu (tobacco) etc.

**Costumes and Ornaments:**

The traditional Nepali costume is characterized by the ubiquitous Nepali topi (cap) and daura suruwal (a tunic and breeches) for males and full sleeve cholo and sari-like lower garment called guneu. In Assamese Nepali community, the traditional costume has ceased to be worn on a day-to-day basis but important occasions, people take pride in dressing themselves up in their traditional costume, thus marking off their cultural distinctiveness.

As far as the male costume is concerned, the topi worn by the Assamese Nepalis is of three types: Bhadgaonle, Dhaka (a kind of embroidered cap) and Kashmir or Khaddar Topi. The topi is worn both with Western-style suits as well as with the traditional daura-suruwal.

**Daura:** This is the Nepali tunic worn by making tight-fitting with the laces to make it suitable in the upper body just above the knee. With this, there is suruwal - a kind of fitting pair trousers below the thigh. With this pair of daura-suruwal, a waistcoat or ascot is worn, and if the weather demands, a coat is worn over it.

Women use Guneu (Sari) tied by a patuka around the waist. Cholo (women wear in the body i.e., half or full blouse suitable to winter season also) and majetro worn to cover the head are very common among the traditional dresses.

**Chaubandi:** It is a special four-angled blouse worn by the women with a ‘Dhaka’ shawl (a colorful shawl).
Apart from these traditional dresses, rural Nepali folks particularly the Brahmins or the priests, also wear ‘Dhoti’. ‘Dhoti’ particularly prevalent in Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Darrang districts as an adopted male dress. Modern Nepali people have adopted ‘Kurta and suruwal’ as their dress particularly in festivals as the popular folk song translated below illustrates:

“Boys are handsome
In their Doura and suruwal,

Girls are beautiful
In their Guneu, choli and shawl”.

In some ethnic groups, distinctive costumes are preferred. These are as follows:

**Kandhyauri**: It is a neck-wear in the form of a comforted in the winter season or in cold climate.

**Jordhung Tugo**: It is worn by Lepcha women. They also wear a turban called *dumapyu. Thyaktak* a kind of cap worn by Lepcha gentlemen. *Bakkhu* a kind of longer coat worn by the Sherpa and Yalmo people in the cold areas in the hills etc.

**Dori** or **Lachha** is a kind of wear used by unmarried girls or married women on their hair as a knot to look beautiful.

**Jale rumal** is a handkerchief carried by males to attract maidens. It is a recurrent motif of youthful love in folksongs and dances.
**Teki** is a dress worn by the Magar and Gurung women. It is around the hips by girls and the front side by married women.

**Panda** is similar to the *Teki* worn by Tamang and Bhutiya women.

Nepalese traditional handloom materials are used by the community which are unique to them. These are as follows:

**Raadi** is used as bed sheet or a mat. It is woven from sheep wool or hill goat called *chyagral*.

**Kamlo** is a kind of blanket which has a soft texture used to generate heat in the winter.

**Galaicha** is also an embroidered sheet made of wool of bhyanglung or a hill sheep. It is almost used in the rich families, being it is very costly in preparation.

**Dolai** is like the cotton quilt used by common folks.

**Dosalla** is similar to the Endi Chadar with embroidered work *Leu* and *Phattu* are two types of wearing cloths like short shirt (*Bhoto*) and chadar.

**Ornaments:**

There is a rich array of ornaments worn by Nepali women which complement their dress. Gold ornaments attract Nepali women the most although, traditionally silver and beads also play an important role in the day-to-day wear as well as festivals and special celebrations. Ornaments made of brass and steel or other brass metals are also in usage and these also have a special value. The various ornaments are as follows:
**Shirphul**: The word shirphul i.e., shir(head), phul (flower), denotes golden ornament is worn on the head. It is studded with precious stones and is 5 to 6 inches long.

**Shirbandi** is another head ornament but one end of it is hidden from view. The exposed part of the ornament has delicate work on *phuli* (floral) motif.

**Phuli** is a nose stud on the one side of the base of the nostril. *Phulis* are of different shapes and sizes but Nepali women wear it on the left side of the nose.

**Muntri or Bulaki** is a kind of nose ring, has three types: plain (*sada*) mundri, embroidered (*jhumke*) mundri or bulaki and that one is decorated with three small leaf (*tin paate bulaki*) seems very decorative in use.

**Ring** is a common ornament worn by both males and females.

‘**Chandra**’ a kind of golden ornament worn on the middle of the head. It is embroidered, and looks like shirphul.

**Kilip** is also made of gold. It is a corrupt form of the English word ‘clip’. It is used as a hair-clip by noble ladies.

**Dhungri** is a cylindrical earring made of gold, 2 inches long in size worn around both ears. It is also called ‘Kandhungri’.

**Gadawari** is also like the ‘Kandhungri’ but it has flat and round shape.

**Marwadi** is another ear adornment made of gold and is worn at the centre of the outer part of the ear.

**Mundra** or ‘Kanmundri’ is worn as a simple ear ornament. Males also wear a gold ear ornament called Kundal.
**Silmundri** is particularly worn by the Newari women on their ear which clearly identifies as Newari women.

**Chepte Sun**, literally flattened gold, is a flat plate like ornament used on the ear flatly decorated with blue stone in the middle. It is adorned by making big hole on the middle of the ear.

Besides these, there are a number of other ornaments which comprise the rich array of Nepali traditional wear. These are as follows:

Hamadari (ear-ring), Karnaphuli (ear-ring tied with a golden chain) and Manjir (worn around the feet).

**Haari** is another kind of ornament used as a garland from the neck which is also called **Kanthahaar**.

**Nougedi** is a neck garland made of nine rotund gold pieces.

**Tilhari** is looks just like the ‘Kanthahaar’, strung like a garland with ‘pote’ or a kind of glass beads, with arranged gold lump in its middle part to decorate it to be called as ‘Soubhagya’ specially provided by the groom to his bride in marriage ceremony.

**Chandrahaar**’ is also a garland to decorate the neck strung with ‘pote’ with gold lumps in its middle part.

**Pote** itself is a particular ornament for the married women. It is a taboo to wear it before marriage for Nepali women.

**Churi** or Kanchaka chura are colourful glass bangles worn by Nepali women.

**Kalli** is a kind of foot-wear wore around the feet made of silver only.

**Golden teeth, dant phuli**: (teeth flower) is also used particularly in the hills area both by man and women.
**Teeki:** It is a small, flat golden plate with artistic decoration in the middle. In size and shape, it resembles the cucumber seed.

**Tuki:** It is another small golden ornament, round in shape and almost peanut-sized. It is worn in the nose by piercing through it.

**Nepali Food:** Food is a significant marker of cultural boundary reflecting a community’s taste, preference, availability of resources, climatic condition and evolution through culture. While the staple diet of the Assamese Nepali is Dal-bhaat-tarkari, similar to most other communities in its proximity, there are unique elements in the Nepali cuisine which make it stand apart from others.

**Bhat (parboiled rice):** Bhat or rice is the ubiquitous staple diet of the Assamese Nepali which which taken together with lintels and assortments of vegetables. Usually rice, which forms the main meal is taken three times a day by the folk people in rural areas thrown in between with snacks and other delicacies. The lay folk who cannot afford lintels or dal on a daily basis make do with vegetable soups and pickles and chutney. On special occasions, celebrations and festivals, the meal of rice could extend to nine or even sixteen vyanjans or curries.

**Chamre:** Chamre is the folk way of preparing the fried rice. The difference between freid rice or pulau and chamre is that the latter is cooked with raw rice. It serves as an important meal for the farmers during sowing and harvesting season.

**Kheer or payas:** Since Assamese Nepalis come from an agro-pastoralist tradition, there is a prevalence of partaking of kheer among them. Thick, creamy milk is added along with sugar and condiments to prepare this delicacy.

**Khichro or Khichidi:** During Magh Sankranti, khichidi is a preferred diet. Boiled rice is mixed with pulses, onion, garlic, turmeric, bay leaf and salt to make this dish.
**Puwa:** Puwa is made out of powdered rice fried in pure ghee and water added to it afterwards.

**Dhakane:** This is a preparation of rice, milk and ghee with added dashes of condiments along with raisins and cashew. It is a must in the celebration of the Teej festival.

**Manabhog:** This is another favourite preparation of the Assamese Nepali, Coarse flour of wheat is fried in ghee and milk and condiments are added to it. It is taken both as a meal as well as prasad during puja.

**Sel Roti:** This celebrated snack is made with powdered rice, sugar abd ghee. A batter of the rice powder is prepared and is fried in ring-shaped cakes which are soft and delicate. This delicacy is essential in all Nepali festivals and special celebrations.

**Kasar or modak:** Ground rice is mixed with jaggery to achieve a consistency so that round balls can be made out of it. In wedding and sacred thread ceremonies, kasar is offered to Lord Ganesha and then partaken by all and sundry.

**Babar:** It is the Nepali pancake in which the flour of millet or rice is used to make round, flat cakes.

**Chiura:** It is the flattened rice prepared as a semi-meal by Nepali households.

**Khatte:** It is the Nepali version of the puffed rice. It comes in two varieties, one which is fully puffed and the other which has a hard crispiness about it.

**Achar:** The Assamese Nepalis prefer to make pickle and chutney from sesame seeds or tilko achar, til-matar achar or til mewa achar. Special chutney made from banana flower or bungoko achar is also a delicacy. Another favourite is the bamboo shoot pickle or tamako achar. Pickle made from raddish is also a all-time favourite. Apart from these, the Nepali palate warms up to the Gundruk and Sinki pickle. Spinach is fermented and dried in the sun to make gundruk. Gundrukis also taken as a soup but
the preferred way is to have a chutney with a touch of mustard oil, green chillies and salt. Sinki is fermented and dried raddish and made into a pickle of oil and spices. It is bottled and used during the winter season.

Since milk is easily available to the Assamese Nepalis, it constitutes a major part in the Nepali diet. Milk and milk products like curd, ghee and butter. One particular dish that is prepared which is unique to the Nepali cuisine is solar (curd soup). Curd is emulsified with water to make lassi or moi. Oil is heated in a deep frying pan and the curd is added to the oil. Onion, garlic, cumin and green chilly is added along with water and the mixture is then brought to a boil. It is usually taken with rice.

The non-vegetarian fare of the Assamese Nepalis is also full of variety. Mutton, pigeon, duck and fish are the preferred non-vegetarian items of the caste Hindus among the Nepalis. Ethnic groups within the Nepalis also partake of buffalo meat, pork and chicken. With the progress of time, the taboos associated with food are, however, slowly getting slackened. There are certain unique delicacies made out of the non-vegetarian cuisine. These are as follows:

**Rakti**: The fresh blood and entrails of goat or lamb is fried in mustard oil with green chillies, onion, salt and turmeric.

Sukuti: also called sukeko masu is a variety of dehydrated meat which is cut into small pieces and strung into wire or thread and hung over the hearth for smoking. During winter, the meat is taken down, soaked in hot water and cooked.

Pakku: Mutton is cut into big pieces to whichonion, garlic, ginger paste and chilly are added along with the condiments. Oil is boiled in a typical Nepali wok called bhaddu and is cooked in a low, simmering fire for hours on end. This delicacy is specially preferred during the Dasien celebrations during the Durga Puja.
Apart from these food items, ethnic groups among the Nepalis also partake of fermented rice beer called Jand as well as the distilled alcoholic beverage known as Raksi. Both these beverages are usually made from rice, millet or maize. These beverages have their own ethnic names in respective communities and these are ‘ayela’, ‘tongba’ and ‘chyang’ to cite a few.

**Conclusion:**

Folklore and folklife of the Assamese Nepalis is marked by a shared community life living close to nature. It is inclusive even within the cultural boundary that defines them in the sense that various castes, creeds, linguistic and ethnic groups have integrated into a cultural mosaic. The data provided above speak volume of the exclusive traits of a traditional society and the folk life and material culture and gives us a fair idea of how the community shaped itself in a country and society which is again further marked by multi-ethnic, pluralistic reality. However, as the inevitable process of social development has swept all traditional societies in the 19th, 20th and the present century, most of the pristine ethnic and cultural traits of the Assamese Nepalis is undergoing tremendous change. Trade, education, technology, democracy and globalization – all these elements of modern life have swept away many of the features of the traditional way of life and material culture of the Assamese Nepalis as these have impacted the Bodo society or any other society for that matter. Urbanization and the resultant migration of the rural population to the urban space have resulted in a certain amount of homogenization of cultural traits that have severely depleted many elements of the cultural ethos ingrained in the traditional way of life and material culture of traditional societies including those of the Assamese Nepalis and the Bodos. While through festivals and traditional celebrations of natural seasonal cycles, these societies seek to hark back to the pristine past through fairs and
festivals, through folksongs and traditional cuisine and so on, the harsh facts of surviving in an increasingly competitive but resource-crunched modern life, these societies are busy grappling with realizing individual and community aspirations. So, in a sense, a new politics of culture is emerging in the life of these societies on an everyday basis. In such a scenario, it is imperative that many of the cultural boundaries are increasingly getting blurred. A Bodo youth pursuing education and migrating out of his habitat to unfamiliar climes like the metro cities or vying for a job is fundamentally no different than a Nepali youth doing the same. So modernity has wiped away many of the ethnic and cultural differences in the traditional societies in the present times.

At the same time, pressure on natural resources and the competition to occupy meaningful space in accessing these resources has paradoxically triggered off fierce redefinition of cultural traits in the modern times. The rise of identity politics in the second half of the 20th century, which continues till today, is a strong pointer to the fact that projection ethnic and cultural difference is the new tool of the politics of the modern nation state which happens to be multi-cultural. BTAD has been witness to one of the fiercely fought theatre of ethnic identity formation in the last three or four decades in the history of independent India. In the next chapter, the present researcher seeks to study this phenomenon and also to posit the thesis point of affinity in the resolution of the conflictual aspects of such ethnic assertions.