CHAPTER – III

PROFILE OF A TRIBAL COMMUNITY IN TRANSITION: THE SONOWAL KACHARIS OF ASSAM

The aim of this chapter is to present a brief profile of the Sonowal Kacharis, an ancient tribal community of Assam vis-a-vis northeast region of India. Racially, they are Mongoloid in origin and the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. It is commonly believed that the Sonowal Kacharis are a branch of the great ‘Bodo’ tribe of Assam. Endles (1911) described the Kacharis as the earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley. According to various available historical accounts they are presently inhabiting scatteredly in various parts of Assam and higher concentration is found in some upper Assam districts.

For a systematic discussion this chapter is divided into certain sections such as -- history and origin, migration and present settlement, demographic structure, village organisation, family and inheritance, religious beliefs and practices, social organisation, occupation and economy, cultural traditions etc.

History and Origin

The available accounts and literature about the origin of the Sonowal Kacharis donot mention that the Sonowal Kacharis, since early times have maintained a distinct and separate tribe as ‘Sonowal Kacharis’. Sources indeed are
varying in nature. A common opinion however, is that the Kacharis are one ancient community in the north and north eastern part of India. Scholars believe that the history of the Kacharis is nothing but the history of the Dimasa Kacharis whose important sites of megalithic culture left in Dimapur of present Nagaland. In fact, the Kacharis being the indigenous tribes of India’s north and northeast, their history is also quite old. The ancient religious scriptures like the *Kalika Puranas* (10th century) and *Yogini Tantras* (16th century) made mention of the kirata people of Kamrupa. Edward Gait described about the origin of the term “Kachari” in a general manner, not specifically mentioning the term “Sonowal Kachari”. To his description, the Kacharis are the aboriginal or earliest inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley. In the Brahmaputra valley, the Kacharis call themselves *Bodo* or *Bodo Fisa* (sons of the Bodos). In the North Cachar Hills they call themselves *Dimasa*, a corrupted version of *Dima Fisa* or “sons of the great river” (Gait 1933:299).

It is alleged that the Sonowal Kacharis have no any authentic written documents of their origin and history of migration but, they possess a rich oral chronicles in the form of legends, myths, folktales and folk songs which have been transmitted down from generation to generation. The elderly generations took them as actual happenings at certain point of time in the unknown past and therefore, moulded their inward mind according to the morale of those tales. Thus, social system of the community rested on the gravity of those stories.

The medieval history and some socio-linguistic descriptions about the ethnic groups of Assam indicated about the Sonowal Kacharis also. The Ahoms
(1228 AD to 1826 AD), a Shan tribe belonging to the ancient kingdom of Mengman of upper Burma (Myanmar) who invaded Assam had to encounter resistance from the local chiefs mainly the Chutiyas and the Kacharis who ruled in the eastern part of the country (Barua 1954:28). There were records of battles fought between the Ahom kings and the Kachari kings. The battles did not last long and finally the local rulers were defeated, but the local kingdoms i.e. the Chutiyas and the Kacharis flourished side by side.

As regards the origin and identity of the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam, some writers from among the Sonowal Kachari community raised the question of authenticity of the historical accounts prepared at various times in Assam. The community scholars were of the view that historians in a narrow and distorted facts tried to identify the Sonowal Kacharis as those people who came in conflict and fought wars against the Ahoms. This leads to localise the Sonowal Kacharis as inhabitants of the geographical areas covering the southern bank of the Brahmaputra starting from the present Nowgong to Sivasagar district of Assam. The community scholars further opined that the term ‘kachari’ implies broader meanings of race, language, religion, culture and also archeology. The Kacharis presently settled in Nepal, West Bengal and Bangladesh and in various parts of Assam and in northeast India are in fact original settlers in the region, not homeless or nomads (Hazarika 1985).

It has been mentioned earlier that there is a lack of proper and authentic source of records to correctly ascertain the history and origin of the Sonowal
Kacharis. However, the ballads and the orally transmitted legends based on the ancient Hindu religious classics like Bhagawata, Puranas and other epics, it is believed that the Kacharis were the descendents of Hiranyakashipura, a great king of the Mahabharata age. The chronicle interpreters were of the view that the term ‘Kachari’ has been a derived version of the later part of the name Hiranyakashipura- (Kashipura → Kachari).

The available narrations with regard to the root and identity of the Kachari community subscribe varied sources of information. The Kacharis were animistic while they first entered to this part of India. They accepted Kirata religion and practised some forms of settled cultivation in the river valleys. In sanskrit language, the riverside areas are called kakshyat. Some scholars again believe that the settlers in such areas are therefore, identified as kachaat and adding suffix ‘ori’ to ‘kacha’ came to be known as kacharis (kakshyat > kachat > + ‘ori’ = kachari). These versions have been authenticated by some descriptions of the historians in the later period (Chatterjee 1958, 1962).

Social and anthropological descriptions in this context also subscribe the view with regard to the early history of the Sonowal Kacharis. In early period, a group of Tibeto-Burman families of Mongoloid linguistic origin once settled in the western part of China. Gradually, a section of them migrated towards west and entered into the provinces of northeast Burma (Myanmar). In due course of time, some of them moved to the foothills of Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal and established their settlements. Lateron, a section of them started moving towards south and
selected river valleys of Brahmaputra, Barak and some other river banks for settlements. They were known as Sonowal Kacharis of Assam.

As stated earlier there are number of interpretation, legends and myths relating to the origin of the Sonowal Kacharis. These myths throw some lights on the origin of the various clans and sub-clans of this community also. These traditions were based on the legends derived from the Hindu classical epics. According to such traditions, the Sonowal Kacharis were the descendents of the king Bali, the grandson of Hiranyakashipur. Again, some others interpreted that the name ‘kachari’ has originated from the name ‘Kumbhabir’, the son of the king ‘Bana’. Bhalukbir was the son of Kumbhabir and Kumbhabir had seven sons. The Sonowal Kachari scholars used to interprete that, the prevalence of existing seven clans among them has been inherited from those seven sons of the king Kumbhabir (Saikia 1981).

As tradition goes, the Sonowal Kacharis since generations have been accepting the legendary interpretation and on the basis of those they from generations established the history, origin, clan organisation, family tradition as well as customs and culture. One such other interpretation goes to the fact that they are the descendents of the great Mahabharata king Bhima and his wife Hirimba. On the basis of this legend, the great ancient Kachari rulers of the region acquired their tradition of heredity, and even today, the entire branches of Kachari families have maintained these legendry background and have been maintaing family and clan identity.
Thus, among the Kacharis there are three broad clans considered to be inherited and they are ----

clans from the king *Bali*

clans from the king *Narakashura*, and

clans from the queen *Hirimba*.

Thus, the accepted tradition indicates that the communities such as Sonowals, the Deoris, the Chutias, the Bailungs, the Morans, the Nirmulias, the Sripurias, the Tipamias, the Bahbarias, the Kapaoris, the Dhadumias, the Kaibarttas etc. living in the northeastern region of India are believed to be the descendents of the kings *Bāli* and *Narakāshura*. On the otherhand, the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Dimasas, the Meches, the Lalungs, the Konches, the Rajbonshi, the Hojais, the Hajongs etc. are believed to be the descendents of the queen *Hirimbā* (Saikia 1981: 2-3).

From the above, we can understand that there are great variety of interpretations of the ancient ballads and stories with regard to the origin, history and present social organisation of the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam.

**Migration and Present Settlements**

The medieval history of Assam reveals that the Kacharis were the great rulers in the then northeastern provinces of India. The Sonowal Kacharis constitute an important branch of those Kacharis. But the scholars from among the community even today are of the opinion that history remained silent about the
origin of the Sonowal Kacharis, their places of earlier settlements, authentic
directions of migration, streams of migration as to how and when the Kacharis
have first entered this region and established their kingdoms. There are some
scattered accounts and illustration of events and narration of wars and about
conflicts that took place with some neighbouring kings and rulers. Those
illustrations however, subscribe an idea that the Kacharis had to spend their earlier
period with several unsettled state and so moved from one place to another seeking
their permanent habitations.

Since there are no authentic historical account, one has to rest on the
descriptions based on various sources. Some of such descriptions were, however
imaginative. Around 2000 B.C. some groups of Mongoloid origin people used to
settle in the Siberian region, and in course of time they were divided into three
major groups. According to the narration of the scholars, one group of them
migrated towards Europe and settled at Turkey and Italy. The other group has
settled in Mexico, some sections of them were in Japan. The third group moved
still south and settled in the Howang-Ho valley of China and in Tibetan plateau.
Gradually, the settlers of Tibetan plateau have migrated towards still south and
started settlements in the low lying areas of the Himalayas. These sections of
people were lateron known as the Kacharis (Saikia 1981, ibid, p.3).

Present Settlement

Histories and linguistic descriptions which were primarily concerned with
ethnic histories, accepted the view that the Sonowal Kacharis have established
their kingdom at Kaundilya in the then Sadiya district of Assam. In Kachari
language this kingdom was known as Halali kingdom. The historians believe that this was an extensive kingdom with its vast geographical boundaries circumscribing Sadiya in the east, Dikhowmukh in the west, the river Buridihing in the north and Kenduguri in its south.

From all available accounts it transpires that after crossing a vast mass of landscapes starting from Siberia, the Kacharis have entered India through Indus river and started permanent settlement. It was also believed that the Halali kingdom was lasting for about 500 years. Classic interpretations were of the view that, this was the period of well established and glorious civilisation of the Kacharis. In Kachari language ‘Ha’ means land or soil, lali’ means glittering, which refers to glittering or glorious land (state) of the Kacharis.

The Haidang songs and dances, a kind of traditional folk songs also depict numerous illustrations about the original habitations of the Sonowal Kacharis in the north eastern region. It is stated that the Halali kingdom covered large areas of the river banks of present Assam like - Dihang, Dibang, Tengapani, Kundil, Subansiri etc. These are the very ancient rivers and tributaries presently flowing over Arunachal Pradesh and upper Assam.

At present, the Sonowal Kacharis have their habitations in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Darrang, Sonitpur in upper and middle Assam. They are also found settling in some areas of neighbouring states like Nagaland (Dimapur) and Arunachal Pradesh also. It is noted that most of the ruins appear at Dimapur to be the contemporaries with the Kachari civilization, established before the Ahom invasion in the 13th century A.D.
There are evidences of a touch of Hindu influence on most of them, though these are predominantly non-Aryan, with elaborate rituals and the cult of fertility. Historical relics of Kachari royal dome still exist in and around Dimapur. There are large tanks (Pukhuri in Assamese language) such as - Padum pukhuri, Bangal pukhuri, Bamun pukhuri, Raj pukhuri, Jor pukhuri and few others still in service at Dimapur to this day (Ao and Ovung 2012:48). In terms of population they occupy the third place among the plains tribes of Assam after the Bodos and the Misings. It is also noted that the Sonowal Kachari villages are widely located in all above mentioned districts and states. Chakradhar Sonowal (2001) stated that there are around 5 lakhs Sonowal Kachari population in the north eastern region of India and the number of villages inhabited by them are 49 in Lakhimpur district, 56 in Dhemaji district, 136 in Dibrugarh district, 95 in Tinsukia district, 14 in Sivasagar district, 33 in Golaghat district, 36 in Jorhat district and 11 villages in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh. Further there are some villages of Sonowal Kachari population located scatteredly in the state of Nagaland.

Recently, three organisations of the Sonowal Kacharis prepared a survey report on the present locations of the villages inhabited by them. Thus, the district-wise number of villages inhabited by the Sonowal Kacharis are as follows - 127 in Tinsukia, 222 in Dibrugarh, 17 in Sivasagar, 33 in Jorhat, 29 in Golaghat, 36 in Lakhimpur and 74 in Dhemaji District.

The foregoing information with regard to the number of villages reveal that there is an increase of 92 villages within the period of 10-11 years. Some important
reasons for such increase are migration from interior rural areas and establishment of new settlements in urban periphery. Educational and occupational upliftment and increasing temptation for city-ward migration, shifting of population from areas of natural disasters like flood erosion etc. and several other historical reasons, there were fragmentation of the old villages and new settlements have come up at various places.

Demographic Description

As stated earlier the Sonowal Kacharis constitute an important population segment of the Assamese population structure. According to 2001 census, there are total 2,35,881 Sonowal Kachari population in Assam constituting 7.1 percent of the total scheduled tribe population of the state. In terms of population size they occupy the fifth position among the major scheduled tribes living in Assam. According to the estimate revealed by their own organisation*, there are about five lakh Sonowal Kachari population in the state and occupying third position among the scheduled tribe population of Assam. (Sonowal 2001 : 103-114). The 2001 census has recorded the literacy rate of the tribal groups of the state and the Sonowal Kacharis occupy the highest rank i.e. 81.4 percent, out of which 88.2 percent are males and 74.4 percent are females. Among the major scheduled tribes in Assam, again in terms of number of school going children in the age group of 8 to 14 years, the Sonowal Kachari population attains the highest position.

*The district-wise number of villages of Sonowal Kachari population (under Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council Area was prepared by the three organisations namely -- All Assam Sonowal Kachari Students’ Union, Sonowal Kachari Jatiya Parishad and All Assam Sonowal Kachari Nari Santha, 2012
Village Organisation

The Sonowal Kacharis are basically agriculturists. They are village inhabitants and unlike other tribal groups of the plains areas of Assam, they organise their villages with permanent cultivation. One can witness some special features of a typical Sonowal Kachari village. Here lies specialities in the patterns of housing and way of arrangement of each individual household. They usually possess a wide space of courtyard and vegetable gardens in each household with sufficient land areas of bamboo and woods cultivation and fish pond. Generally, every Sonowal Kachari household is accorded with large scale cultivation of betelnuts and betel leaves. Traditionally, all Sonowal Kachari villages were not only self sufficient in agricultural and other allied products, at the same time many of them are capable of selling the products and earn substantial family income and maintain economic standard.

Since generations, the Sonowal Kacharis are attached to joint family system. They prefer joint family system and the prevalence of joint family system is still popular in many urban or semi-urban localities also. This makes the average family size in quite large customarily, the married sons and their brothers live together with their parents till the parents are alive and take food from the same kitchen under one roof. Sons and daughters of all married brothers keep a cordial relationship and harmony.

At the time of separation, the individual families usually construct their houses in close adjustment to parents’ family indicating intimate relationship and day-to-day interaction and mutual help and cooperation among them. Thus, the
families of the same descent line reside in close proximity and the villagers identify themselves as residents called persons of ujjani (upper) chowk, major (middle) chowk, namoni chowk (lower corner) etc. of the villages.

For a smooth management of socio-cultural and religious functions, the traditional Sonowal Kachari villages are organised around certain administrative functions. The functions are assigned to the selected village elders. The Gaonburah (village headman) is the above all chief functionary of the village and he looks after village administration and maintains cordial relationship among the villagers. In addition, there are village functionaries like -- barik, pathek, ashirbadia bura, gitghai, medhi, bayon, tamuli and randhani, etc. The Barik is in-charge of the Namghar (Assamese religious congregational Hall) and he looks after the functions held of the Namghar. He also acts as the person of fund maintenance of the public money in the Namghar. The Pathek acts as the reader of the religious scriptures in public or private functions. The Asirbadia bura is usually old person who can shower blessings in the religious ceremonies of both public and private functions. The Gitghai (expert in songs specially Husari) is considered to be the expert person in the occasions of Bihu festivals and other religious ceremonies. On the other hand, the Medhi is regarded to be the chief in all religious nd other familial rituals. The Bayan is a special instructor who possesses the caliberities in imparting training to others in the art of Gayan Bayan (a kind of satriya religious dance sequence propounded by Sankardeva, a great of Vaisanavite religious guru in mediaval Assam). Similarly, the function of the Tamuli is to supply betel-nut to the audience and participants of a religious function. The Randhani (cook) is entrusted with the duties of cooking and distributing the feasts to the persons
gathered at the ritual or religious ceremonies (Sarma Thakur 1972 : 29, Sen, 1999). But these features of traditional village social structure is under significant changes in the Sonowal Kachari villages, because of various reformation activities and due to urban-based occupations of the people.

The functions of the Gaonburah is changing as a result of the impact of panchayati raj institutions. Similarly, the traditionally entrusted functions of the Barik and Medhi are also considerably diffused under the impact of new religious ideals cultivated by some younger generations.

**Family and Inheritance**

We have stated earlier that the traditional family of the Sonowal Kacharis is the joint family system. But a Sonowal Kachari family consists of the nucleus of father and mother with separate units of sons and daughters. The eldest male member of the family runs the house. The system of inheritance is patriarchal. The land property belongs to the family and the eldest male member is the head of the household. This is so in the joint structure of the family. After the death of the father, the land is equally divided among the sons. The house is also considered to be immovable property and after the death of the father generally the eldest male member becomes automatically the possessor of it.

Both males and females customarily accept division of labour without questions. The chief duty of the wife as the female head of the family is to prepare meals for the family members, looks after the domestic animals, serving the guests, take care and look after the children. The female members have to go to the paddy fields for cultivation including harvesting. In addition to her busy times, she has to manage looms and weaves clothes for herself as well as for children.
The Sonowal Kacharis follow monogamy. Traditionally, the Sonowal Kacharis practice four types of marriage—Nowa Dhowa (Bor bia), Hom diya (traditional Hindu Marriage by employing Brahmin priests), Gandharba (Love marriage when couple takes the initiative without the consent of parents and after three days of such marriage information is sent to the parents of the girl) and Sursuria or Rabha Sarakai Diya (marriage by running away where an unceremonious feast is given to some elders for legalisation of the marriage) (Sen, ibid. p. 132).

Bride price is not strictly followed and it varies according to the economic status of the groom.

Religious beliefs and Deities

The religious beliefs and practices of the tribals of northeast India is a subject of much interest among the scholars mostly the social scientists. Like other tribal groups of northeast India, the Sonowal Kacharis also celebrate a number of festivals and perform rites and ceremonies in their life cycle. The festivals are celebrated at different levels - at individual family, village level at Namghar (Assamese religious congregational Hall) and at wider community level. Some of such community festivals are -- Baghdew Puja, Gatigiri Puja, Gajai Puja, Saragdew Puja, Jalkhai Puja, Kulasaman Puja, Rangasamon Puja, Jalkhai Puja, Barsamon Puja, Keshatiya Puja, Minbhanga Puja, Tapsiling Puja, Gukalika Puja, Bura-Buri Puja, Baliaababa Puja, Kesaikhati Puja, Kali Aai Puja etc.

At the household level, they worship and observe some routine rituals such as -- Lakhimi Sabah, Bhur-utua Sabha, Baali Sabha, Chengali Masor Sabha,
Narasiga Sabha, Garakhia Sabha, Falmular (fruits) Sabha, Methoi Bata Sabha, Apeswari Sabha, Bar Sabha etc. In addition to the above, the Sonowal Kacharis perform a number of local socio-religious ceremonies and festivals for the moral and spiritual satisfaction and with the hope of family welfare. Some of such ceremonies are - Bura Puha, Chowt Kherua, Marak Diya, Na-Purukhia Hakam, Aai Hakam, Lakhimi Hakam, Barir Sukar Hakam etc.

These rituals and festivals indicate two vital aspects of socio-religious life of the community. The traditional beliefs, practices and faiths are accompanied with great attachment to superstitions on the one hand, and diversities of religious behaviours by way of beliefs to a number of deities, gods and goddesses on the other.

The Namghar has a place of importance among the Sonowal Kacharis. The ‘Namghar’ is usually constructed at the mid place of the village to make it easy accessible for the villagers from all corners (Chowks).

At present, most of the Sonowal Kacharis are the devout followers of Mahapuriasia Vaisnav Dharma propounded by Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15th century. They are the disciples of the Aumiati Satra. By virtue of religious faith and adherence to Satra, they are divided into two religious sects namely Sarania and Bhajanias. As per prevailing social norms and recognition among them a person above the age of sixteen is accepted as Sarania and those above fifty years of age are known as Bhakats. The Bhakata are again hierarchically categorised into various ranks and the eldest may be placed in the rank of Medhi (Sarma Thakur, 1988). Though they have accepted Vaisnavism, all of them could not give up some
of their traditional socio-religious practices and beliefs. The followers of Vasinavite faith celebrate *Janmastami* (tithi of the birth of Lord Krishna), tithi of *Sankardeva* and *Madhavdev* in he namghar (Assamese religious congregation hall) in the month of same calendar time with the other section of Assamese population (september-october).

It may be noted that Vaisnavism has not stood on their way to the observance of the traditional religious rituals and festivals. Lord Siva has been regarded as the prime god of worship for the Sonowal Kacharis and the ceremony associated with the worship of Lord Siva is known as ‘*Baithow Puja*’ among them. In fact, the celebration of ‘*Baithow Puja*’ (or gajai puja) is deeply involved with the religious tradition of the Sonowal Kacharis. Bathow (Baithow) Puja is celebrated for three continuous days in the Assamese month of ‘Phalguna’ (March/April). The celebration starts on the first Sunday of the Lunar fortnight (Suklapaksha) in the month of *phalguna* and finished on the third day. In contemporary period, this festival has gained mass-based popularity among the Sonowals and celebrated at various places in Assam, and the people of the community take part in it with great enthusiasm and grandeur. The Sonowals also worship the idol of Goddess Kamakhya and observe *ambubachi*, the annual ritual pollution period of mother Goddess Kamakhya.

G. C. Shrma Thakur observed -- The Sonowal Kacharis were mostly assimilated into the fellow Assamese way of life of the plains districts of Assam even before independance. As part of assimilation it was not uncommon to find non-Sonowal titles like Bora, Saikia, Hazarika etc. suffixing their names. They become disciples of famous *Auniati Satra* (Vaisnava Monastery) of Majuli. There
is visible change in the material culture also. Reference of traditional clans was made only in marriage, as clan exogamy was still in the rule. The four types of marriage viz. Nowa Dhowa or Bor biya, Hom diya, Gandharba (elopment) and Churchuriya or Rabha Sarakai diya as the names indicate signify the assimilated trends. However, Gaa Dhan (bride price), a typical tribal tradition, is in vogue especially in the Gandharba form of marriage among the community.

Although Vaisnavism takes deep root among the Sonowals, traditional Baithow Puja (worshiping of Lord Shiva) is observed with sacrifice of animals. Popularity of Haidang Songs on the occasion signifies their unassailable connection with the traditional Kachari culture. Unlike the cognate tribes like the Boro Kacharis and the Dimasa, the Sonowal Kacharis observe Assamese fairs and festivals like other Assamese fellows and neighbours (Sharma Thakur, op. cit. p. 54).

In fact, the festivals among the Sonowal Kacharis are multifarious. Like other counterparts of Assamese population, the Sonowal Kacharis observe the three Bihu festivals (Rongali Bihu, Kati Bihu and Magh Bihu) throughout the Assamese calendar year. As part of community’s cultural life they observe some more festivals all over the year. G.C. Sarma Thakur noted some of such festivals practised by the Sonowal Kacharis as follows --

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Festivals</th>
<th>Venue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. (a) Husori Samora</td>
<td>Namghar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Bihu Urua</td>
<td>Namghar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bator Sabha</td>
<td>End of the village road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Bhur Utua</td>
<td>River</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. *Gati giri*  
5. *Pal nam*  
6. *Gajai Puja*  
7. *Garakhia Sabha*  
8. *Tithi of Mahapurusha*  
   (a) *Sri Sankardeva*  
   (b) *Sri Madhavdeva*  
   (c) *Sri Lilakanta Goswami*  
9. *Janmastami*  
10. *Kheti Utua*  
    (Chengali Masor Sabha)  
11. *Lakhimi Tola Sabha*  
12. *Narasiga Sabha*  
13. *Bahi Sabha*  

In addition to the above mentioned festivals some other religious festivals are also regularly observed by the Sonowal Kacharis in their personal households. These are -- *Nadit Pinda Diya, Ai Mata, Gopini Sabha, Lakhimi Mata, Apsara Sabha, Saragdeo Puja, Marak Puja, Pir Diya, Bura Puha* etc.

But it is also equally important to mention that many of such traditional festivals ceremonies of both household and public, are gradually loosing its place among them. Interestingly, in some villages many of such festivals are gradually unknown to the people. The urbanised and educated families are fast becoming unaccustomed with many of such rituals and festivals particularly in the domestic realms of affairs. Instead, the *Baithow* festival is gaining prominence in the wider spectrum among the community members in its wider collective manifestation and
it is celebrated throughout the state centrally as well as locally in various places where the community youths and leaders take active part.

**Social Organisation**

The Sonowal Kacharis are divided into seven clans (to their day-to-day introduction a clan is identified as *BANSHA*). The prevalent clans are *Bali Khitiari, Chiri Puriya, Amarabamiya, Dhulial, Ujjani Kuchia, Namoni Kuchia* and *Tipomia*. The descriptions found available in the writings of the community scholars mentioned that the prevalence of these seven clans were appeared in their classic *Haidang Geets* (songs). But in reality, in their contemporary social life, it is somewhat difficult to trace out the existence of all those seven clans as appeared in the classic tales. Instead, the Sonowal Kacharis believe that the three *Banshas*, ie. *Ujjani Kuchia, Namoni Kuchia* and *Dhulial* are popularly found prevalent among them. The scholars also opined that those clans (Banshas) of the Sonowal Kacharis primarily indicate the names of their origin of settlements. For examples -- *Ujjani*, means upper and *Namoni* means lower parts of any locational areas of the village. Sometimes these terms indicate the upper and lower areas of some rivers also. Hence, any section of Sonowal Kachari population living in the upper areas of a river were popularly known as *Ujjani Kuchia* and those residing in the lower part of the river were identified as *Namoni Kuchia* (Kachari 2011:48-52).

The seven clans are again sub-divided into fourteen sub-clans or *Khels* namely--- *Hagral, Muktal, Madan, Manikial, Akhmal, Formal, Bor Hajoal, Saru Hajoal, Kumral, Dhekial, Dingial, Lathial, Dangral and Chetial*. There are again still some sub-branches of these sub-clans. These are -- *Makrari, Daphlari, Nezkatorio, Daimari, Khaklari* etc.
According to the description made available by the scholars from the Sonowal Kachari community, the origin and prevalence of these fourteen sub-clans among them are believed to have links with the establishment of their ancient kingdom, at *Halali* near Sadiya the easternmost part of Assam. To maintain the administrative system of the kingdom smoothly, the royal arrangement was organised into fourteen cadre-divisions. And the presently available fourteen sub-clans are believed to be the descendents of those royal hierarchies of the *Halali* kingdom as shown under –

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Halali royal organisation</strong></th>
<th><strong>Present sub-clans of the Kacharis</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mantri (Minister)</td>
<td>Madan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priests</td>
<td>Manikial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King</td>
<td>Hogral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next to king</td>
<td>Muktal sub clan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commandant</td>
<td>Bar Hajual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next to commandant</td>
<td>Saru Hajual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God’s Gate Keeper</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kings’ Gate Keeper</td>
<td>Kumral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army commandant</td>
<td>Ajmal (Ahmal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naval commandant</td>
<td>Dingal (Dingial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal intelligence</td>
<td>Dhekial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External intelligence</td>
<td>Chatial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortune teller</td>
<td>Bormal (Athuwal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War instrument operator</td>
<td>Lathial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belived to be in Present day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

From the above description, we can understand that the Sonowal Kacharis are internally differentiated into a number of groups or divisions. But it is to be mentioned that such manifestations are not found in the contemporary social organisation and so, social differentiation or any sort of such hierarchical order is found to be non-functional among the community members. Rather, they practise clan exogamy.
The information with regard to the prevalence of clan/khel divisions, collected from the 656 respondents spread over six villages gives further details about the internal differentiation among the Sonowal Kachari population. The table 3.1 below indicates about such fact.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clan/Khel</th>
<th>Villages</th>
<th>Clans/Khels</th>
<th>Dainijan</th>
<th>Teporgaon</th>
<th>Mankota</th>
<th>Akonimoria</th>
<th>Sonaligaon</th>
<th>Gobindapur</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N=83</td>
<td>N=90</td>
<td>N=198</td>
<td>N=90</td>
<td>N=45</td>
<td>N=150</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pedari</td>
<td>12.04 (10)</td>
<td>7.77 (07)</td>
<td>8.08 (16)</td>
<td>14.44 (13)</td>
<td>8.88 (04)</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tepari</td>
<td>4.81 (04)</td>
<td>3.33 (03)</td>
<td>4.54 (09)</td>
<td>2.22 (02)</td>
<td>13.33 (06)</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begri</td>
<td>2.40 (02)</td>
<td>5.44 (05)</td>
<td>4.04 (08)</td>
<td>4.44 (04)</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dingral</td>
<td>1.20 (01)</td>
<td>4.44 (04)</td>
<td>10.10 (20)</td>
<td>5.55 (05)</td>
<td>11.11 (05)</td>
<td>10.00 (15)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borhajwal</td>
<td>6.02 (05)</td>
<td>6.66 (06)</td>
<td>8.58 (17)</td>
<td>1.11 (01)</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ujanikusia</td>
<td>13.25 (11)</td>
<td>2.22 (02)</td>
<td>3.03 (06)</td>
<td>14.44 (13)</td>
<td>4.44 (02)</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dholiyal</td>
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<td>7.77 (07)</td>
<td>8.58 (17)</td>
<td>17.77 (16)</td>
<td>4.44 (02)</td>
<td>10.00 (15)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majhiri</td>
<td>10.84 (09)</td>
<td>5.55 (05)</td>
<td>19.19 (38)</td>
<td>10.00 (09)</td>
<td>8.88 (04)</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuhuri</td>
<td>22.40 (02)</td>
<td>3.33 (03)</td>
<td>3.53 (07)</td>
<td>2.22 (02)</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demari</td>
<td>6.02 (05)</td>
<td>2.22 (02)</td>
<td>8.08 (16)</td>
<td>5.55 (05)</td>
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<td>6.00</td>
<td>08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Befari</td>
<td>4.81 (04)</td>
<td>11.11 (10)</td>
<td>6.06 (12)</td>
<td>4.44 (04)</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ka-sari</td>
<td>6.02 (05)</td>
<td>10.00 (09)</td>
<td>8.58 (17)</td>
<td>5.55 (05)</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dekari</td>
<td>4.81 (04)</td>
<td>13.33 (12)</td>
<td>5.55 (11)</td>
<td>1.11 (01)</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nakari</td>
<td>1.20 (01)</td>
<td>11.11 (10)</td>
<td>0.50 (01)</td>
<td>4.44 (04)</td>
<td>11.11 (04)</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Keutari</td>
<td>3.61 (03)</td>
<td>3.33 (03)</td>
<td>0.50 (01)</td>
<td>3.33 (03)</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>10.00 (03)</td>
<td>03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhagajapi</td>
<td>4.81 (04)</td>
<td>2.22 (02)</td>
<td>1.01 (02)</td>
<td>3.33 (03)</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field data
We have found a total of 16 different clans/khels presently prevalent among the community people. The field observation further reveals that such clan/khel divisions are prevalent more in numbers and, according to some older people of the community many more such clans have still remained unidentified or ignored with the passage of time. This is due to increased number of population, migration due to marriage, occupational as well as residential shift and gradual loosing of contact with native population.

The empirical findings (Table 3.1) however, reveal some important points. In the six studied villages, the distribution of families in terms of clans/khels are basically non-uniform. For example, the clans like-Dholiyal, Ujani Kusia, Pedari and Majhiri are substantial in numbers in Dainijan village. Again, the Dekaris, Nakaris, Ka-saris and the Betaris are comparatively large groups in Teporgaon village. The Majhiris and the Dimgrals in Mankota village occupy important group position in terms of numerical strength. Similar is the situation in other three villages studied from Tinsukia districts.

In this context, the important point to be mentioned is that, though internally there are clan/khel divisions, the Sonowal Kacharis in normal course of life donot attribute such differentiation among themselves. Inter-dinning among the clans are common, hence there is no hierarchical gradation among the clan divisions. Few clans combine together and make one Bansha on the basis of blood relations and thus they practise bansha or clan exogamy.

Persons of each clan or sub-clan bears their identity as members of Sonowal Kacharis. As already mentioned, the clans in fact derived its history
around which they were developed. Primarily, a group of families living in a particular locality or in a definite geographical area over generations who maintains specific socio-cultural norms might have developed such a clan groups. The Sonowal Kacharis in their own vocabularies use the term *Hansh* (a family line) and the combination of four *Hansh* usually constitute a *Bansha* (clan). Marriage is prohibited between the families bearing the same name of *Bansh*, since such families are connected by blood relations. Thus, the death of any member of such families is solemnised by collective fasting and ritual purification by all members of the network families.

**Economic Life**

The Sonowal Kacharis are agriculturists and they are hard workers. They are in fact rich agriculturists since the days of their forefathers. In this context, some features of family system among them can be taken into consideration. Traditionally, they are living in joint family system, and the joint structure of family, according to many of them are still considered conducive not only to better economic management within family, but acts as very conducive factor in strengthening solidarity among members. Generally, the male oldest member of the family keeps the possession and authority of the land holding. The other authority of the oldest member is to control the collective labour management of all family members. This according to them finds the family and their descents together. In several references we have witnessed a much stronger sense of village integrity among the villagers when observed the celebration of festivals and rituals centering around common placed of worship (Namghar).
Individually, the families possess a good amount the cultivable land. Paddy is the chief cultivation. They cultivate variety of rabi and kharif crops in all seasons throughout the year. An observable fact is that no land of the family’s possession remain vacant or unused. The womenfolk are equally labourious and sell out the products and strengthen family’s economy. Extending financial assistance by the economically well off families to the needy kin members is considered duty bound and responsibility of the community people.

As rich and labourious agriculturists, the Sonowal Kachari peasants usually practise variety of cultivations. Each Kachari family possesses a wide area of betel nut gardens, variety of fruit trees meant for all seasons. The productions are not only meant for personal consumption, but these are regularly sold and earn money.

**Cultural Tradition**

It has been mentioned earlier that the Sonowal Kacharis of the Brahmaputra valley, belonging to the Bodo group have been tracing their nostalgic relationship hereditarily as well as ethnically. They have been still maintaining their close relationships with the Burmans of Cachar, Dimasas of north Cachar, Bodo Kacharis of west Assam and Hojais of Nowgaon district. Colonel Dalton writes --- “They are, in comparison with the average run of the people of the plains, their neighbours, a fine athletic race, industrious and thriving, of light olive complexion and rather strongly marked Mongolian features. Majority of them identified as ‘Purified Kacharis’ to indicate that they have adopted the customs of Hindus and abstain from forbidden traditional food” (Dalton 1872:18).
This situation of the Sonowal Kacharis as seen by Dalton about hundred fifty years ago has undergone vast changes in respect of the socio-cultural life. Today, the Sonowal Kacharis of the Assam Valley are the followers of Hinduism and the traditional tribal beliefs and practices are undergoing modification and refinement. To many of them, due to the change of socio-political environment and new horizon of identity formation, the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam are in the forefront in the great process of cultural transformation.

However, a look into the traditional cultural life of the community is important and relevent in this context to ascertain the direction of change and to determine the causes behind such changes.

In the context of contemporary greater Assamese society and culture, it is virtually difficult to identify the distinctiveness of a particular tribal culture from one to another. However, it may be noted that the Sonowal Kacharis since time immemorial, have been maintaining and preserving some folk songs, folk dances and ritual institutions which are linked with their history of origin, migration, language, clan and family identity and overall social organisation. The performance of those songs and dances are traditional and these are preserved and practised by the community people bearing its unique characteristics.

Some of such traditional cultural practices are *Haidang* songs and dances, *Hogra* dance, *Bahua* dances, *Kalabuir* dances etc. Some songs (geets) of traditional nature constitute vital elements and they are part and parcel in many rituals and religious activities even today. These are *Aainam, Jandoi Gavarur geet, Husori geet, Haidong geet* etc.
Among all the classics stated above the *Haidong* songs and dances are the oldest form of folk culture those have prevalence among the Sonowal Kacharis. They believe that the *Haidang* songs and dances are the symbols of great philosophy of origin of the universe comprising man, nature, behaviour and ideology.

The foregoing account relating to socio-historical life and change of the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam depicts some vital aspects of sociological interest. This tribal group has been preserving rich tradition of ethnic heritage, culture and social organisation which includes their long stored folk tales, ballads, songs and dances, myths and even language. Over long generations of settlements in a midst of non-tribal environment, particularly in the plains valleys of upper Assam, the population of this community leave undergone a process of change in various aspects of life and culture. Specific of such changes are reflected in a considerable extent in the sphere of education and occupation, the empirical evidences of which are presented in the subsequent chapters.

At present, though the Sonowal Kacharis are essentially a rural population, improved contact and spread of education is reflected clearly in an increasing range. Now-a-days, they are in close touch with the urban settings and exchanges on a socio-economic sphere with various neighbouring communities including castes and cognate tribes is on (Sengupta 2003:352-358).
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