Chapter-VI

Conclusion

The discussion of the Charua language that the people of Nalbari chars speak, the oral literature in that language, treasured by the people in particular, and the whole community in general, gives us an understanding of a sense of distinct cultural identity of the community. From the political-historical and geographical points of view, they are migrants/immigrants, and from the religious angle they are followers of the Sunni sect of Islam. They have their own festivals and customs, clothes, games and sports, beliefs and superstitions, above all, their own orature or verbal art. They have their own terrain— the chars in the Brahmaputra. Put together, the naksi ketha of their identity comes to life.

Yes, naksi ketha— the patchwork quilt with different designs and colours. It is made of used, old, worn out clothes, saris et al, in rectangular, sewing layer on layer. Charua women are quite adept at the art of making this ketha. These they use as spreads to make the beds cozy, and as covers or wrappers to beat off cold. These kethas have traces of different generations, different items belonging to different members of the family, and hence each piece is a unique product having no second. The same is true of their identity— social, cultural or philosophical.

On the basis of customs, festivals, games, social institutions, beliefs and above all, verbal art or oral literature, the people of the chars of Nalbari district stand out as a riparian and agrarian community. This is in conformity with the
Indian scenario that is dominated by plains or low plateaus, watered by big rivers. Plenty of water and sunshine make the Indian scene as a whole, and the char areas in particular, suitable for agriculture. A big perennial river like the Brahmaputra also adds an important dimension to the being of the community: it serves as the main or only channel of transport and communication among the chars, and between the chars and the banks. So fishing, boating and farming constitute the important pillars on which the community stands. Consequently, references to these activities or professions abound in folk belief and verbal art of the community.

The community’s involvement with fishing is further substantiated by the scores of implements they use to catch fish – penti jal, beri jal, jhaki jal, nera jal, jhait jal, mosari jal, khora jal, chatka jal, thala jal (all nets), pal, darki (bamboo devices to catch fish in shallow water), gharua borosi, sip borosi, doun borosi, polati bagari borosi, koi borosi (all fishing devices with hook), chepa and khaloi, the last one made of bamboo to keep fish in it.

Fish and fishing connection of the people may be rounded off with some of their folk beliefs. They believe that persons, who go for fishing on Fridays instead of praying in mosques, turn into monkeys. They also do not take gajar fish because it was the disciple of a pir (Sufi saint) in earlier life. One of the many ghosts or spirits they believe in is maichha deo, an evil spirit that may deceive them assuming the shape of a friend and leading them into deep water where they will be drowned.
Though fishing is an important vocation of the Charua people of Nalbari district, farming, especially agriculture, is much more vital to their socio-cultural life. It is considered more productive and profitable. But as it involves hard, sustained labour in sun and rain, some habitual shirkers turn to angling for hours without much catch. Such members of the society are dissuaded from killing time in such idle ventures. Hence the lines –

\[ 	ext{\textit{kam thaiya mare machh \quad bidhi lage tar pachh}} \]

This turns the focus on their real and most important kam or work that is agriculture. A hardy community, they spend most of their time to cultivate the land, and raise crops like rice, jute and different vegetables. While engaged in the activities in the fields, they keep singing Dhua gaan in chorus to forget the tedium of labour and enjoy themselves. In these songs, we find flights from the level of the physical to the height of the mysterious and the metaphysical.

The emphasis in these songs is on otherworldliness that is so characteristic of Sufism and Bhaktism. There are also quite a few folk beliefs about agricultural activity that is mostly dependent on rain. When there is not enough rain in the months of March-April, they believe in invoking the blessing of Allah or Megh devata (the deity of clouds or rain) to bring rains. Such invocation takes the form of performance accompanied by songs. In one performance they solemnize a marriage between two beng (frogs).

The other performance is a game called Japputi in which boys and girls aged between eight and twelve gather in the court yard of a house, fix a banana plant on the ground, pour water and dance holding one another’s hand. They
also spray mud on each other while the elderly keep the supply of water steady. This they do singing plaintively, invoking the blessing of hari chander gopal.

Boat and boating occupy a crucial role in the life and culture of these people. Boats of different shapes and sizes are used to move from place to place in the streams, especially when they are in spate during rains. In addition to this hugely practical utility without which Charua life is inconceivable, boats are used as means of entertainment by way of naokhel or boat races. When the river is full in June and July, the high time of monsoon, the people feel passionate and spirited in the midst of nature, and give expression to their joys participating in boat races. Those who sit in the boat and drive the oars are called baisal because in the Charua language oar is called baisa. These baisal or oarsmen sing songs while rowing briskly to the applause of spectators who also join them in singing.

The Charua people treat their boats with utmost respect. For them a boat is no less than a mother; so they see to it that an elderly and respectable person blesses the boat before the race commences. Other folk beliefs or superstitions entertained by this community pertain to marriage, birth, journey, animals, birds and insects, conjugal life, death etc.

One belief that affects the life in these char areas is that Kati (Oct–Nov) and Chat (Mar–Apr) are not auspicious for solemnizing marriage. This may be explained by the fact that both these months are not conducive to marriage for different reasons. While Chat is the time of sand storms and hail storms, Kati is the time of scarcity and suffering. People always hope for overcoming the
constraints of Kati, and entering a new phase of plenty through harvesting. Hence the saying –

\textit{judi gel kati, taile ek basar bachhi}

Such beliefs also dictate the choice of the girls to be bride on certain conditions: she should not be with a big forehead, thick haired, should not have big nostrils, should not have gaps between teeth, and should be soft-footed like a dove or pigeon. Otherwise, the husband and his family will be harmed in different ways. Such beliefs are not confined to the girls. Even the mothers and the grandmothers are subjected such superstitious scrutiny. It is interesting to note that boys are not screened in such ways. This is in keeping with the patriarchal nature of the society.

Beliefs about childbirth are also plenty among these people. The expectant mother is required to avoid certain food like onion because of the belief that it gives a running nose to the child. The woman in labour also takes the water washing the big toe of her husband so that it would be less painful to deliver. With the same objective they feed a dog in the courtyard. This is called \textit{kuta biyani}, and is believed to ease labour pain. The room of confinement is protected from the evil influence of spirits, ghosts by keeping a match box, a piece of iron inside and fire, cow dung and some thorny twigs of \textit{barai} at the entrance of the room. If the new-born child is a boy, they have the practice of performing \textit{ajan}, (the religious prayer invoking the blessings of Allah) immediately at the threshold of the room having the mother and the child. The girl child is not accorded such a welcome. It is also believed that piercing the
ears of the infant with a fish bone will save him/her from untimely death. They also perform marriages between infants to ward off the specter of death. Keeping a net or katari (a traditional knife) at the bed of the infant, and putting a big black mark on the forehead are believed to give protection against evil eyes.

Similarly these people have beliefs about journeys. They believe that the itching soles predict walking over a long distance, sighting of egg or empty pitcher is not good omen for undertaking a journey. A call from behind when one is about to commence a journey is considered equally ominous. Hence every care should be taken to meet or call the person from the front side. But there is an interesting exception to this belief; it is a good or better omen if the mother calls from behind, and hence the saying –

*age thaki pachhe bhalo jyodi dakai mayae*

Different creatures crowd their folk beliefs in different ways: a cat licking its paw predicts the arrival of guests; the crow cawing on the house top or nearby tree is a harbinger of misfortune, a dog whining in the evening is a warning of famine to come, a cock sitting on the thatch or the leaping of darkina fish warns of high floods.

In the construction of house they follow certain beliefs. Tuesdays and Saturdays are avoided for the commencement of construction. Otherwise, the family will descend into the abyss of poverty. The first and main pillar or pole of the house is sanctified with mustard oil, rice (paddy), bent grass and turmeric powder, wrapped with a red piece of cloth before it is set in the
ground. A few coins are offered at the pit to help the foot of the pillar ward off possible misfortune in future. During this auspicious ceremony, persons present are required not to make noise because of the belief that such indulgence would subject the house to the menace of mosquitoes. Believing that a south facing house leads to the health and wealth of the household, the Charua people do their construction accordingly.

The people of the area have many superstitious beliefs in the conjugal and domestic spheres. Almost all of these beliefs have demands on the women folk – the wife should not take food before the husband, she should not make noise while walking, she should not bathe or tie the hair when the husband is suffering, she should not tread on the shadow of her husband, she should not take the names of father-in-law. Otherwise, it will bring misfortune to the house including the death of the husband. But the absence of any such superstitions demand on the men folk only corroborates and reinforces the presence of a social reality heavily manipulated in favour of men, in favour of a patriarchal society.

The children in these chars avoid taking the names of their mothers. They believe that their mother would die if they commit this lapse. Viewing the mirror at night and using a broken mirror are also considered inauspicious. Sweeping the house with a broom at night and throwing out the garbage is avoided because it is akin to throwing out Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. The mention of the Hindu goddess here is not an isolated occurrence. It is in sync with the routine reference to other godheads from the Hindu pantheon like
Gopal (Krishna), Radha, Narayana, Niranjan, Kali, in the songs. Moreover, they have many beliefs about dream—dreaming of drowning, construction of building, erosion of river bank, snake biting, falling in a deep hole, falling of teeth or hairs brings death to the family. Most of these beliefs are not exclusive to these people—they are shared by other communities from Odisha to Assam with the whole of undivided Bengal in between. Belief in such evil omens as vulture sitting on the roof of one’s house, crowing of a cock at noon, calling from behind at the start of a journey, a cat crossing the path—is common to a wide swathe of land from Mahanadi to the Brahmaputra.

In the Charua society and culture, bas or bamboo occupies a prime place. In the absence of big trees, the people make use of bamboo to construct houses, make household goods and agricultural implements. The fertile and loamy soil of these riverine islets or sand bars are conducive to the cultivation of bamboo that does not take much time to grow and mature. The importance of bamboo may be gauged from their folk belief that cutting of bamboo on Tuesdays and Saturdays is a sin. For some people though, the days are Sundays and Thursdays. This, again, is not an exclusive belief and cannot be dismissed as mere superstition. It may be intended to reduce some pressure on the bamboo grove so that there is a sustainable relation between the needs of men and nature.

Like any other community, the people of the study area observe quite a few festivals at different points of time and play different games. Some of these festivals are—Muharam, Id, Sabebarat, Garshi, Pussura and others. They
observe two Ids in a year– Id-ul-Fitre and Id-uz-Zoha. While the former celebrates joy, the latter highlights sacrifice. They also celebrate Muharam by roja (fasting) in the name of Allah in memory of Hazrat Mohammad’s grandson who became a martyr in the war with Ezid at Karbala. Reading the Holy Koran and Hadis they offer namaz. On this occasion they also sing songs remembering Hussain.

But they do not take out taziyah (a replica of majar) in a procession singing such songs and indulging in self-flagellation, giving out mourning cries– ‘hai hussain, hai hussain!’ This is a compromise between Sunni and Siha practices. But young men show different skills with a lathi (bamboo sticks). This is called lathikhel. The significance of this festival in these chars is magnified when we consider the fact that this festival is mainly dear to the Sihas of the world, and here the Sunnis observe it with equal elan. This is an instance of intra-religious adjustment and accommodation that has been shaped by their history and geography. The Murshidi or Fakriranti gaan, Dhua gaan closely associated with ideas and ways of Sufism and Bhaktism are both a cause and effect of this spirit of flexibility.

Garshi and Pussura, on the other hand, are festivals having no religious tinge. These are related to different seasons and schedules of agriculture. Garshi coincides with Kati Bihu, in October-November. There is offering of vegetables, fruits and flowers in the name of standing crops in the fields. Unlike in Kati Bihu, they offer these things in some part of their courtyard, not in the fields. This is a thin difference because the objective is the same: seeking
divine grace for a good yield, for all the ears of rice to be laden with grains. A predominantly Islamic community going for such offerings makes a point: in the spheres of nature and agriculture, rigidity of religion recedes to the background. To put it in another way, nature and agriculture become the first order of religion.

Pussura is observed in the months of December-January. It is a celebration of plenty with new grains after harvesting of the year. The young boys, especially cowherds, called rakhal or rahal in Charua language, make a beginning of the festival by begging for gifts from households in the evening. They move around in groups singing songs called magan tola or pussura tola gaan that have references and descriptions of social customs, agricultural activities, mythological stories and feminine beauty. These wandering groups are rewarded with rice, pulses, coins which they put together to make a feast on the last day of Pus. They enjoy themselves with different eatables prepared from new rice, especially cakes called pitha. Another aspect of this end of Pus and beginning of Magh festival is bull fighting and lathi khel. They bring their bulls already trained for the purpose, for fighting with rival bulls and derive a thorough enjoyment from it. Lathi khel or play with sticks is equally attractive and entertaining. Young men get a chance to show off their agility and skills in both defensive and offensive modes to the appreciation of onlookers. This martial art could be linked to the need for self-defence in the course migration, expansion, and taming of the wilderness for habitation and agriculture that is an integral part of the history of the community.
Barring cosmetic differences, these festivals are akin to *Kati Bihu* and *Magh Bihu* as celebrated by the Assamese community, in spirit and enthusiasm. If preparation and prayer for a bumper harvest make *Garshi* or *Kati Bihu*, *pitha*, play and pleasure make the ambience of *Pussura* or *Magh Bihu*. This is because of the secular and universal core of the festival is linked to agricultural activities. As the patterns of seasons and related farm activities are quite similar from Mahanadi to the Brahmaputra, from Odisha to Bengal (undivided) and Assam, such agrarian festivals are common to this big stretch of land, though there are differences in minor details. In Odisha they call it *Kartika Sankranti* or *Khadaputa Sankranti*, and *Magha* or *Makara Sankranti*.

The people of these *chars* also play different traditional games at different times of the year like *tankibari* or *tunkibari khel*, *gola chhot khel*, *lathibari* or *sardarbari khel*, *chhi* or *chhi chhata khel*, *gutu gutu khel*, *khud khud khel*, *nal khel*, *jamai-boukhel*, *pasha* or *pachra guti khel*, *chok-banda khel*, *gamocha khel*, *palan palan khel*, *putala khel*. Children and young men usually play these games without many props. In *tankibari* only two sticks are used and it is played between two boys. First one throws the smaller stick with the help of the longer one. The other boy tries to catch it in the air, and if he succeeds then the first boy gets out. Otherwise, the distance covered by the shorter stick is measured and it goes to the credit of the player. This continues as long as one is not ‘out’ or ‘dead’. Then the other player tries to collect as many *kuri* (scores) as possible in the same way. In the end, one who
accumulates more *kuris* becomes victorious. This is very much like the *dang-guti khel* played in Assam and *kau-dabal* played in Odisha.

*Gutu gutu khel* is played between two groups, and is much like *kabadi*. It is so named because the player keeps repeating the sound ‘*gutu-gutu*’ so that others can know if he has retained his breath or not while in active play and trying to touch rival players and ‘kill’ them, and at the same time save himself. In Odisha they call it *bagudi* and the accepted sound pattern is ‘*ti-ti*’ or ‘*kiti-kiti*’. No props needed; clean, sandy, soft patches on river banks, bamboo groves are enough.

Similarly, *palanci* or *palan-palan* khel is like hide and seek. In Odisha it is called *luchakali* and another version in Assam is *lukabhaku/kukbha/lukachuri*.

In *sardarbari* or *lathibari khel*, the players fight with *lathis* or bamboo poles. Usually it is a one-to-one fight and the players sport decorative gears like trinkets around ankles, red headscarves that add colour to the intensity of the games. The *sardar* (leader or referee) conducts it according to norms because there is the danger of accidents if rules are not followed.

The *Charua* people play all these games with the simplest rules and minimum props like bamboo sticks, poles, potshards, balls of cloth. These games have accompanying rhymes that multiply their entertainment and increase participation.

In these rhymes, we have a glimpse the self-other entanglement that is at the core of the *Charua* identity. While reference to Layala, Majnu, Mecca,
Mohammad emphasizes the Islamic part of their identity, it is destabilized by reference to Sham or Krishna somewhere else. At the same time, the linguistic overlapping and interstices are apparent in the language of these lines. For example the line— ‘bainer niga anachh ki ?’ (Charua)

bainer legi ki ainchhah ? (Nalbaria)

bhauni pain/lagi k’n anichhu ? (Standard Odia)

bhauni nagi kisa anichhu ? (Bhdrakhi Odia)

With such degree of affinities, identity gets displaced from its etymological mooring in authenticity, purity. The ‘niga, legi, lagi, nagi’ elements, literally and metaphorically, blur the boundary between the self and the other, and the stereotype is undermined.

Thus, with a locus of their own in the chars, a unique riparian system, fishing, boating and agriculture as principal occupations, a language of their own, Sunni Islam as practiced religion, lungis and saris as dominant clothes for men and women respectively, ‘bhat, dail, machh and tarkari’ as staple food, and above all, the history of migration/immigration from Bengal/Bangladesh, own festivals, games– the people of the chars of Nalbari district constitute an identical community. They have their own oral literature or verbal art that constitutes and preserves such an identity. But as lore of any community is integral to its life story, that is history, it reveals subtle and significant facts and truths that escape the notice of those who believe in frozen, exclusive identities based on binary oppositions. On this side the verbal art of the community discussed so far, point to its dynamic and opening out character in the form of
practices quite akin to Sufism, Bhaktism, and references to Hindu deities, Pir, Fakirs and Murshids in addition to Nabis, Allah and Muhammad. This has been possible because of a particular philosophy or attitude of life born of a particular history and geography. Without knowing this history it is not possible to surmount boundaries or border and we remain ‘we’ and they remain ‘they’ in a framework of opposition and conflict.

Richard M. Eaton, in *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, has delved into a slice of history that is eminently relevant for the understanding of our present subject. The book, with interesting and exhaustive details, establishes the link between the rise of Islam and agrarian expansion through deforestation in pre-modern Bengal. In the late sixteenth century agriculture became highly monetized because of the economic boom in the province. “The importance of ready cash in this process is suggested in Mukundram’s Chandi Mangala, composed around 1590. In it, the goddess Chandi gives the poem’s hero, Kalaketu, a valuable ring and tells him to exchange it for cash: with the money thus obtained – seventy million tankas–Kalaketu is to clear the forest and establish a city and temple in honour of the goddess. Once the land is ready for agricultural operations, Kalaketu promises to advance Kayastha landlords as much cash as they need for their own thousands of laborers to come and settle on the newly settled lands.”\(^1\) This provides evidence of the agricultural expansion in the then province of Bengal that coincided with the eastward movement of Bengal’s rivers forming an

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active delta, political and commercial integration with Mughal India and the growth in the money supply. “Although people of the delta had been transforming forested lands to rice fields long before the coming of Muslims, what was new from at least the sixteenth century on was the association of Muslim holy men (pir), or charismatic persons popularly identified as such, with forest clearing and land reclamation. In popular memory, some of these men swelled into vivid mythico-historical figures, saints whose lives served as metaphors for the expansion of both religion and agriculture. These have endured precisely because, in the collective folk memory, their careers captured and telescoped a complex historical socio-religious process whereby a land originally forested and non-Muslim became arable and predominantly Muslim.”

Thus, the collective folk memory is replete with the achievements and contributions of these pirs who came from the west- in India or outside. The most famous of these pirs was ‘Murbarra Ghazi, a legendary pir identified with clearing the sundarban forests’. These pirs affected a gradual cultural shift from a Bengali Hindu world to a Bengali Muslim world presenting the new in the guise of the familiar as evidenced in the following episode: “Even as Shaikh Tabrizi established what was initially an alien cult, he did so within a Hindu conceptual framework: his person shone with the glow of penance, or tapahprabhāb, which in classical Indian thought refers to the power acquired through a practice of ascetic austerities; the ‘grace’ he gave to the king was prasad, the food that a Hindu deity gives a devotee; the Shaikh’s consecration

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of the mosque followed a ritual program consistent with the consecration of a Hindu temple; and the Shaikh’s patron deity, Allah, although not identified with a Hindu deity, was given the generic and hence portable name *pradhan purusa*, ‘Great Person’.”  

This is a narrative of mutual accommodation, not holy war. The mangala literature of Bengal is full of references to such compromises. In the epic poem Ray-Mangala, composed by Krishnaram Das in 1686, the theme is the conflict between a tiger god named Daksin Ray and a Muslim named Badi Ghazi Khan. “As the former name means ‘king of the south’, or lower Bengal, the tiger god was evidently understood as sovereign deity of the sundarban forest generally, whereas Badi Ghazi Khan likely represents a personified memory of the penetration of these same forests by Muslim pioneers. Although the encounter between these two was initially hostile, the conflict was ultimately resolved in compromise: the tiger god would continue to exercise authority over the whole of lower Bengal, yet people would show respect to Badi Ghazi Khan by worshiping his burial spot, marked by a symbol of the tiger good’s head.”

“In the eastern delta, where settled agrarian life was far less advanced than in the west in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Islam more than other culture systems became identified with a developing agrarian social order. As state-supported pioneers established Islamic institutions in formerly forested area, three different kinds of frontier— the economic frontier separating field and forest, the political frontier separating Mughal from non-Mughal administration, and the religious

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4 Ibid. p-212
frontier separating Islam and non-Islam – fused into one.\textsuperscript{5} The Charua people of Assam and the study area still carry the residue of this fusion and compromise as a core ingredient of their identity as we have seen in their verbal art or lore.

Eaton also refers to the amalgamation and fusion of Islamic and Bengali world views through three different processes: inclusion, identification, and displacement. “By inclusion is meant the process by which Islamic superhuman agencies became accepted in local Bengali cosmologies along side local divinities already embedded there in. By identification is meant the process by which Islamic superhuman agencies ceased merely to coexist along side Bengali agencies, but actually merged with them, as when the Arabic name Allah was used interchangeably with the Sanskrit Niranjan. And finally, by displacement is meant the process by which the names of Islamic superhuman agencies replaced those of other divinities in local cosmologies.”\textsuperscript{6} As a result, in the eastern delta’s expanding rice frontier, the rural masses, both Hindu and Muslim, were familiar with the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the folk deities like Manasa and Chandi. This led to the retelling of purely Islamic stories with Hindu flavour. Thus, the “popular Iranian story of Joseph and Zulaikha employees imagery clearly recalling Radha’s passionate love far Krishna, the central motif of the Bengali vaishnav devotional movement.”\textsuperscript{7}

This resulted in belief systems that were not static, closed or mutually

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid. p-269
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid. p-277
exclusive, each with its own community and its own superhuman beings. Rather, religious beliefs and practices at the folk level became strikingly porous and fluid, bounded by no clear conceptual frontier. “In fact, it was precisely the fluidity of folk Bengali cosmology that allowed Bengal to interact creatively with exogenous ideas and agencies.”

The eastern zone of Bengal was not only an agrarian and political frontier, but also a cultural one. Islam adapted itself to the local situation, and became ‘a civilization building ideology’ and ‘a religion of the plow’. For these peasants cultivating the earth became the supreme mission of life, as commanded by Allah or Niranjan. Wedded to axe and plow these people lived not in ‘culture-boxes’ of religions, but in a fluid context in which ‘seepage’ was norm, not an exception. “This ‘seepage’ occurred over such a long period of time that one can at no point identify a specific moment of ‘conversion’, or any single moment when people saw themselves as having made a dramatic break with the past.” This led to slow changes that gave ample time for mutual understanding and adjustment. The people of the chars of Nalbari district, like their counterparts in other areas of Assam, are linked to this process and perception as part of their historical, cultural being. This heritage is a vital part of their history, and present life, because they are living out their past in more or less similar fashion through reclamation of land, deforestation, agricultural expansion. For them agriculture is not just a way of life, but a religious belief.

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9 Ibid. p-310
If their ancestors in East Bengal frowned upon the *ashrafs* who were not cultivators but confined to towns and courts as government servants and businessmen, they look askance at *karigars* who are engaged in petty trading. In *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1206-1760*, Eaton notices how norms of religion and the realities of local socio-cultural system ultimately accommodate one another.

The above digression, in space and time, serves a purpose: it gives perspective to the whole question of the community’s identity that accommodates diverse, often contradictory practices in its socio-cultural and philosophical spheres as already mentioned and as evidences in their verbal art suggest. Having thus provided a historical background for the mosaic nature of their identity, it is now imperative to look at it from the different theoretical frameworks already touched upon in Chapters –I & II.

Do the people of the *chars* of Nalbari district have a community identity? The answer to this question has been hinted at in different ways in preceding pages. But to sum up, it would be ideal to go back to the different modes of looking at the question of identity. In the conventional, classical mode identity is considered as an unchanging core premised upon differences with others. This calls for purity and authenticity, and hence stability. Here identity becomes absolute, exclusive. This puts the emphasis on the essence of a community that separates it from others. Called ‘essentialist’ or ‘foundational’, identity in this view leads to insularity, indifference and conflict. Huntington’s idea of clash of civilizations follows from such a view.
that is blind to the commonalities and bridges across boundaries. Here identity is treated as something given, a priori, the authenticity of which is an existential necessity. Moreover, authenticity cannot be partial, it must be whole; otherwise authenticity evaporates, so also the concept identity built on this foundation. As a result identity becomes a captive space that marks out the radical other, and marks in the radical self. This is taking the concept to the extreme where every community is considered self-contained, and akin to only itself, nothing else. While such a perspective falters on the reality of psychosomatic homogeneity of human beings across communities on the one hand, its imagination or conceptualization militates against socio-cultural values on which the very notions of humanity, community, and identity stand, namely empathy, sympathy, fellow feeling, and cooperation. Hooked to such an idea of identity some people get tempted to indulge in aggressive posturing towards the other community, as if the disappearance of the other is a precondition of one’s self, individual or community. However, as Husserl and Mohanty have argued, the self and the other are not so completely antagonistic as to be capable of annihilating each other. So, exclusive community identity is a realistic, epistemological impossibility, a lie. This fact is attested by the multilevel and multipoint ‘seepage’ in the boundaries—Islam-Hindu, outsider-insider, abhibasi-adhibasi, Assamese-Charua, Sunni-Siha, Mymensingia-Bogra-Pabnaya-Dhakaya-Kamrupiya-Goalpatriya-Nalbaria, noticed in the study of their lore and language. Hence, this community identity as something monolithic does not hold good and we are required to assess the alternative
model or framework in which everything has some trace of the other; nothing is only itself. Therefore, it becomes a chain of seepages, slippages and the true, the authentic, remains a mirage, only posited not reached. This is Derrida’s post-structural, deconstructive approach to truth claims, authenticity, meaning, and identity. Though post-structural and deconstructive method and model help us overcome problems of stereotyping, bias, relativism and conflict born of an essentialist view of identity, it also creates its own problems. Where do we stand if it is a veritable carnival of slippages, seepages, moving from aporia to aporia, only a journey of subversion from within? Is there no waiting, no resting or pause on the way? If it is so, the identity of the Charua people, any identity for that matter, finds no opportunity to gel; a flesh and blood community simply becomes amorphous. This engenders cynicism and supreme indifference towards the community, towards the other. Here we reach the other extreme, the end aporia of Derridean deconstructive project. Where essentialist or foundational discourse or concept gives rise to antipathy and conflict, here we become positively indifferent and callous. As values, beliefs, socio-cultural systems tend to crumble into a rubble of nothingness, it becomes at least handy to affect a kind of ascetic disinterestedness.

So the reservations against the second extreme and alternative are clear. Many people have dubbed it as a fad or fetish. But they are not willing to move on the rebound to the prison of essentialism, and go for a golden mean by reconciling the opposites. Even a committed leftist intellectual like Hiren Gohain, who does not believe in exclusive essentialism, accepts identity as a
real category. Hence he is not with those who assert that there is nothing called Assamese community. Might be the community was not there about a thousand years ago, and it may not be there after ten to twelve thousand years. But its existence now cannot be denied.\footnote{Gohain, Hiren. “Asamar Buranjir Rachanar Ketbor Samasya” in \textit{Nirbachit Samalochana}, Publication Board, Assam, 2007. p-267} This ‘now’ in the life of a community is not as unstable and fleeting as the electron of the uncertainty principle. It resonates in the directions of both past and future, and this resonance is given play, not captured, in the expressive forms of its culture like language and verbal art. This is a very dynamic concept of identity, much like Eliot’s idea of tradition he puts forth in the essay, ‘Tradition and the individual talent’\footnote{Eliot, T.S. “Tradition and the individual talent” in \textit{20th Century Literary Criticism}, (ed.) David Lodge, Longman, London, 1972. p-71-77}. This dynamics of the \textit{Charua} community under study is evident in the elements retained from a distance in space and time, gathered from the immediate spatio-temporal contact like the Pir-Fakir, Sufi, Hindu, Mymensingia, Pabnaya, Bogra, Dhakaya, Padma, Meghna, Alipurduar, Cooch Behar past to Brahmaputra, Mukalmua, Rampur, Guwahati, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Bharat, mobile phone present. Put together, seen together, it yields a better and practical sense of their identity as against the two alternatives– one too rigid and restrictive, and the other, too liberating.

This necessitates a third view that accommodates differences and similarities to see identity as a function of thaw and flow, stasis and dynamics. Here exactitude and authenticity are downplayed to locate a fallibilistic objectivity. Mohanty and Moya who subscribe to this position, claim the tag of
realists for themselves. Viewed from their perspective, identity with both differences and similarities is feasible. This should not be looked down upon as illusion or inauthentic, hence no identity. They try to rescue identity from the inundation of flux, to reinstate it, as the title of their book *Reclaiming Identity* suggests. For them ‘embodiment’ of the individual or the community is a fact. When embodiment is a reality, identity cannot be unreal. So “the solution to essentialism is not rejection of identity but a more robust formulation of identity.”

Such a formulation takes into account the mobility of culture and migration of people as facts. In the community under study, these two facts have merged into one dynamic whole that has kept sailing, since at least the late seventeenth century, up the Meghna-Padma-Brahmaputra basin. It has not come to an end even today. The process is on– from south to north, *char* to *char*, *char* to *chapori*, from dense Sundarban forests to sandbars with only grass and reeds as ‘plants’. But *banraja*, *banbibi* and *bagh* continue to crowd and grace the folk memory and lore. In this gradual shifting the community has not been ‘uprooted’ at any point of time and space. The metaphor of ‘transplantation’ explains this continuity with change or change with continuity called identity. Nation states, national boundaries appear rather arbitrary and superficial political impositions that fail in the face of the socio-cultural identity of a community in this sense. Instead of separate political units, the vast space becomes a socio-cultural continuum with affinities at multiple

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levels. This undermines the rigidity of nationalism and internationalism, and attests the reality of transnationalism. So it is always a trans, a ‘web of transes’ for a community in active migration like the people of these chars. This ‘trans’ is a ‘hyphen’ that, separates and joins at the same time. For them, the aspects of life ‘here’ and life ‘there’—whether perceived from the migrants’ starting point or destination point—are perceived as complementary. This creates a kind of openness towards difference and otherness. The char-chapori people of Assam and Nalbari district, mostly of East Bengal (undivided India) ‘origin’ have internalized this attitude or philosophy as their lore retains and reveals. As Harzig and Hoerder put it, “Migrants’ ways of life are not deposable ‘cultural baggage’ but are socialized into their bodies and minds. Within this frame they negotiate in new society in a secondary socialization.” Secondary it is, but not secluded or severed. Moreover, it is not a one point adaptation or change; it is a chain. Moving from different points in the vast Gangetic delta – Mymensing, Rangpur, Bogra, Pabna, Dhaka, and slowly into the relatively narrow Brahmaputra basin, edges among themselves and with the ‘other’ here get smoothened off, as shared socio-cultural elements and history become apparent. The evidence of this commonality abounds in their lore. One example here will be to the point— the use of Lanka and Raban as references:

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\begin{align*}
lanka \text{ ji jay si raban hay} & \quad \text{(distan)} \\
bale \text{ lanka, bale lanka} & \quad \text{(naokhelar gaan)} \\
dhek \text{ lanka} & \quad \text{(tunkibari khelar gaan)}
\end{align*}
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Here *lanka* is used as a metaphor to mean a far off place, a place outside *desh*, alongside its mythical, Ramayani association. ‘Raban’ stands for a despotic king, an incarnation of evil. This harks back to a time when Islam was not even born. Today the devout followers of Islam using *lanka* in their songs while rowing their boats in the Brahmaputra or playing *tunkibari khel*, set their target at *lanka*, the metaphorical, generic name for the far off destination. They don’t bother, they don’t care if it puts them, by implication, on the side of Ram, one of the ten incarnations of God in Hinduism. Another example of self-other, here-there accommodation or adjustment may be seen in the use of *gang* as the generic name for any *nadi* (river). Ganga or the Ganges is considered the holiest of the rivers in India, especially by the Hindus. They believe in the presence of the Ganga in every stream and river in India. The *Charua* people have preserved this belief by using the class name *gang* or *ganga* for rivers. This could be because of their experience in the Gangetic basin of Bengal where every stream is a part of the Ganges river network. Such examples may be multiplied from the oral literature of the community.

This is the narrative of the community, and the narrative should be best understood as a process, an ongoing dialogue. Such an understanding discounts the possibility of conflict, and creates a conducive atmosphere for both—the self and the other. After all, as Ricoeur stresses, “every identity is mingled with that of others in such a way as to engender second order stories which are themselves intersections between numerous stories…we are literally entangled
Vatsyayan has put the same thing in a different way. In India, according to her, “multiple streams have flowed, multiple forests have germinated. These multiple streams flowed but never in isolation: they formed great pools, what we call prayag in the Sanskrit language.” She also concurs with Ashis Nandy on the point that Indians have multiple identities. The Pamua, Bangladeshi, Na-Asomiya, Luhitya Sampraday, Abhibasi Musalman, Miah or Charua community has learnt this truth the hard way in the midst of nature, negotiating obstacles and engaging the ‘other’. This has not been understood by those who see them as the odious, inimical other, the radical alien out to devour the self, but also by those who are sympathetic towards their cause. One instance of the latter position comes from Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya who writes in *North Eastern Research Bulletin*, Dibrugarh University, vol. 4, 1973, (as quoted by Hossain): “Geographical and occupational factors will compel or are compelling the Bengalis or other immigrants to adjust themselves to the new cultural environment, an environment that has affected and shaped the growth of Assamese. The compulsions of political and economic mobilization will also compel different classes of Bengalis in Assam to practice bilingualism in such a manner that the antagonism between the two languages will finally fade away.”

Bhattacharyya misses the points that adjustment or accommodation is an integral part of this community’s life and world view inherited from their

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agrarian-riparian history; that the Assamese identity is not a pre-given, self-contained one, completely insulated from the ‘other’, migrating towards it from an alien space (not only political, geographical, but also socio-cultural); that Assamese, and ‘their’ language which he considers Bengali, are not antithetical to each other by linguistic nature. All his assumptions stand exposed in the light of the discussion so far. Looking at the community through the prison of an exclusive Assamese identity and language premised on purity and authenticity, puts forth the demand on the ‘other’ to assimilate itself into the Assamese society. Shorn of political rhetoric and posturing, such assimilation or merging is ‘processual’ that is orchestrated by environment and history. As the scrutiny of the lore and language of the community shows, they have their advance arrivals already in the markers of Assamese identity.

To sum up, it would be appropriate to remember the metaphor of ketha or patchwork quilt again. As it has many layers of saris and lungis, their identity is multilayered, past and present jostling for space in their joint journey into future. As the degree of convergences or affinities far outweighs the divergences and the differences, the Charua community and the Assamese community are already in an engagement that is bound to be more and more intimate in course of time.

By way of conclusion Mohanty’s view appears relevant: “… any identity of culture, on the one hand, dissipates into endless internal differences, and on the other, may be exemplified, at least in some of its features, in other supposedly foreign identities. Thus, every claim to uniqueness of a culture is
provisional, every identity can maintain itself by suppressing internal differences (as well as external repetitions). Cultural uniqueness is a claim that is not sustainable by empirical research. It is an ideology, sometimes amounting to nationalism, chauvinism, and religious enthusiasm. As Wolfgang Welsch has been pressing, the more appropriate concept should be transculturality instead of inter-culturality.”18 This ketha of transculturality has been sewn into the body and psyche of Charua identity as evidenced in its oral literature or verbal art. This may be partly ascribed to what Abid Hussain says: “Even in the last thousand years when two religions so entirely different as Hinduism and Islam, were brought together on the soil of India, her Saints and Sufis created an atmosphere of not mere toleration but of harmony, so that while Hindu and Muslim princes were struggling for power, the common people of both religions could live amicably together.” 19 Equally pertinent are Eaton’s concluding words in The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: “the norms of religion and the realities of local socio-cultural systems ultimately accommodate one another. Although theorists, theologians, or reformers may resist this point, it seems nonetheless to be grasped by common folk.”20

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