Chapter-I

Introduction

Study Area :

Nalbari is one of the smallest districts of Assam, the pivotal province in the North-East of India. It came into being in the year 1985 as a result of the reorganization of the Kamrup district, the district that bears testimony to its ancient mythical, puranic and historical existence and prominence. In the meanwhile the Nalbari district has further shrunken due to ethnic aspirations of the region and consequent new district– Baksa – being carved out of it. Though it originally stretched from the foot hills of Bhutan in the north, to the middle of the mighty Brahmaputra river in the south, now it has lost the northern half to the newly constituted Baska district. It comprises 465 revenue villages, 16 municipal board/town committees and 2 urban centres– Nalbari and Tihu– with a total population of 6,89,053 (Office of the D.C., Nalbari and Census of India Report, 2001).

Nalbari district is a region of diverse ethno-linguistic groups of people, having various religious faiths and ways of life.\(^1\) Considered one of the early settled places in the region, the availability of fertile lowlands has attracted migration to the area over years and generations. "The name of the place ‘Nalbari’ was probably used between 1836 and 1883."\(^2\) Through this area rivers like the Noa Nadi and the Pagladiya, originating in the Bhutan

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2 Ibid. p- 49
Himalayas, have been flowing to the Brahmaputra. Once upon a time the banks of these meandering rivers and the *beels* (swamps, swampy lakes) abounded with reeds called *nal* or *nal khagari* in the local Assamese tongue, and gave birth to the name ‘Nalbari’. Some scholars ascribe the origin and development of the place and its name to the group of people who were displaced by the attack of the Bhutanese in 1846, and who settled in the area after clearing *nal* (reeds) and *khagari* (weeds). Hence, the name became ‘Nalbari’.³ At the same time the etymological root of the name has been traced by some to the word ‘*Nara*’ meaning ‘man’. Thus ‘Nalbari’– a place teeming with people– later became ‘Nalbari’.⁴ But going by the concentration of population in the area, and the existence of *beels* (swamps) conducive to the luxuriant growth of ‘*nal*’ and ‘*khagori*’– both the explanations seem plausible and constitute the truth together. Moreover, the name is significant in the context of the two conjunct terms – *nal* and *bari* because they belong to the common cultural-linguistic treasure of a vast area that stretches across cultural, geographical, political, and historical barriers from parts of present day Bihar, Jharkhand, West-Bengal, Bangladesh and South-Western parts of Assam.

**History of Assam :**

The land known by the name Assam today, was known as *Kamarupa* in pre and early historic times.⁵ In ancient lore it was known as *Pragiyotisha* and

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⁴ Ibid, p-25
Kamarupa with Pragjyotishapura situated in or near Guwahati as the Capital. In the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, these two names were used to refer to the present day Assam. The mythological texts like Harivamsha, Vishnupurana, Brahmandapurana we also come across the use of the same names. The great poet Kalidasa’s work Raghuvamsa bears testimony to the names in the 81st and 83rd slokas of the canto iv. Later on the name Pragjyotisha disappears making way for the dominant use of Kamarupa that finds mention in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta. “Kamarupa is mentioned as pratyant or frontier state outside the Gupta empire but with friendly and subordinate relation to it.” The name Kamarupa is also mentioned by the Chinese scholar-pilgrim Hiuensang who visited in the year 743 AD on the invitation of Kumar Bhaskar Barman, the monarch of Kamolupa. In the texts of medieval period like the Kalikapurana and the Yoginitantra the state is referred to as Kamarupa. The name is also found during the neo-Vaishnavite movement in 15th and 16th centuries referring to the central part of the area sandwiched between the Tai-Ahom kingdom in the north-east and Kamatapura or Koch-Kamata kingdom in the south-west. Kamarupa also figures in the writings of the Arbian historian Alberuni in the 11th century.

The advent of the Ahoms from across the eastern hills in 1228 is a turning-point in the history of Assam. They ruled Assam for nearly six
centuries. During the reign of Jaydhwaj Singha (1648-1663) the westernmost boundary of the Ahom kingdom Assam moved to the river Manas. This shift resulted from the Ahom-Mogal conflict during the time of the Ahom king Pratap Singha. This changed with the invasion of the Burmese and their treaty with the British in 1826 AD (Treaty of Yandaboo) under which Assam became a British protectorate. After this, the history of Assam is a series of annexations and secessions – Cachar annexed in 1832, Jaintia Hills in 1835. In 1874 Assam becomes a separate province with Shillong as its capital. Subsequently Sylhet is merged with East Bengal on partition of India. Dewangiri in north Kamarupa is ceded to Bhutan in 1951. One after another NEFA (North East Frontier Agency (present day Arunachal Pradesh), Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram also get separated to chart their own socio-economic and political courses. Thus Assam has shrunken considerably in terms of geographical and political sweep from the days of Kamarupa of puranic, mythical fame that encompassed the Brahmaputra valley, Bhutan, Cooch Behar, and the Rangpur region in eastern Bengal.

Ancient Assam or Pragjyotishapur/Kamarupa spread from Kanchangiri in Nepal, to the sea into which the Brahmaputra flows and from the Kartoya river to Sadiya. Within such a vast territory fell Cooch Behar and Jalpaigudi of
present day West Bengal, Rangpura, Bogra, Mymensing, Sylhet, Pabna of Bangladesh and some parts of Nepal. On the basis of textual evidence in the *Ramayana* some historians like Kanak Lal Baruah have shown the spread of *Kamarupa* to Purnia, and the Koshi river in modern Bihar province of India.\(^{15}\)

Now Assam is just a fraction of that wide sweep of land and people earlier called *Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa*. It is surrounded on the three sides of the north, the east and the south by hills and plains. To the west, it merges with the plains of West Bengal and Bangladesh.\(^{16}\) It has an area of 78,433 sq. km. representing 2.39 per cent of the total area, and a population of 26,655,528 (Census of India Report, 2001) accounting for 2.59 per cent of the total population of the country.

**Anthropology and Demography:**

“Assam is the homeland of a large number of populations of various ethnic affiliations having disparate socio-cultural heritages and speaking different languages”\(^{17}\) An ideal meeting ground for diverse races, Assam has given shelter to streams of human waves. They have brought with them their distinct cultures and trends of civilization.\(^{18}\) At different points of time the area has been penetrated by human groups belonging to Austro-Asiatic, Negrito, Dravidian, Alpine, Indo-Mongoloid, Tibeto-Burmese and Aryan origins.

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\(^{15}\) Sarma, Sashi. *Asomar Loksahitya*, Students Stores, Guwahati,1993, p- 3-4

\(^{16}\) Deka, Basanta (ed). *Assam: Land and People*, K. C. Das Commerce College, Guwahati,2000, p-1

\(^{17}\) Das, B. M. “Anthropological Identity” in *Assam: Land and People* (ed.) Basanta Deka, K. C. Das Commerce College, Guwahati,2000, p-85

majority of the people of Assam belong to the Tibeto-Burmese stock or the fusion of this stock with other racial groups. “The migration of different human races to the ancient land of Assam began two hundred years before the birth of Christ.”

On the basis of fossil evidences it is conjectured that South China, South-East Asia and North-East India were first inhabited by the Australoids or Austrics. These people were also known by other names such as pre-Dravidians, proto-Australoids and Veddids. The Karbis, being the descendants of the Austric race, are like the Columbus of Assam. The Khasis, Jayantias, Kukies, Lusais (Mizo) – all belong to this race. These people were completely absorbed or dispersed by the Mongoloids who came at a later date. Successive waves of migration from the north, the east and the North-East brought the Mongoloids to Assam. At present several sets of Mongoloid populations like Bodo, Kachari, Deori, Rabha, Sonowal-Kachari, Tiwa, Mising, Karbi, Dimasa, Mech, Garo, Ahom, Chutiya, Moran, Koch-Rajbongshi etc. are distributed in several parts of the state. These Mongoloids or Indo-Mongoloids are referred to as ‘Kirata’ in ancient Sanskrit literature. Each of these ethnic groups of Assam speaks a different language of the Sino-Indian language group – both Tibeto-Burman and Siamese-Chinese branches. The

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20 Das, B. M. “Anthropological Identity” in Assam: Land and People (ed.) Basanta Deka, K. C. Das Commerce College, Guwahati, 2000, p-86
23 Ibid, p-86
other racial type to inhabit Assam is the Caucasoid – their divisions and subdivisions like the Mediterranean, Alpine, Indo-Aryan and Irano-Scythian who come from the west. Assamese caste Hindu population and the Muslims are Caucasian in origin, and now they are mostly confined to the Brahmaputra plains and the Barak valley. The Indo-Aryans, that contributed substantially to the racial and cultural-linguistic intermingling of the region are believed to have migrated from the west to north Bihar by 700 B.C and from there to the then Praggyotisha-Kamarupa (Assam) in smaller groups.

Thus, geography and history have actively paved the way for the mingling of races, languages and cultures in Assam. “The Brahmaputra, flowing from the east to the west, served as a highway linking east with the west, which was in use by different people, during different periods since very ancient times.” The resultant mixing of three racial elements– the Australoids, the Mongoloids and the Caucasoids is a ‘speciality of Assam’. In this ongoing process of mingling and intermingling, the coming of the followers of Islam, and tea garden labourers in different periods mark crucial points in the history of Assam. The Muslims came to Assam from the west much like the Kirat or the Caucasoids over a long period of time. But it is difficult to ascertain the exact time of their inhabitation here. It is learnt from the Kanai Borasi Inscription (North Guwahati) that Bakhtiyar Khilji invaded Assam in

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25 Ibid, p-87
26 Ibid, p-87
the year 1205-06 AD and got defeated in the war. Most probably some of these Turkish invaders became captives and stayed back to lay the substratum of Muslim population in Assam. Such a modest beginning is further strengthened when medieval Assam suffered seventeen Muslim invasions, one after another. And there are enough historical evidences to trace permanent Muslim inhabitation to 1498 at Hajo near Guwahati. “The slow inflow of Muslims into Assam in small numbers over a long period of time as well as conversion of local people has led to the formation of Assamese Muslim population.” On the basis of their ancestors they may be divided into four categories – descendants of the Muslim soldiers taken prisoners by the Ahom kings; the local converts; the Muslim religious preachers who came here from time to time; and the Muslim artisans who came during the Ahom period. They have also caste-like divisions called Syed, Sheikh, and Maria. The Syeds trace their descent from Prophet Muhammad or Hajrat Shah Milan, popularly known as Ajan Fakir, who came to Assam in the middle of the 17th century to promote Islam. The Sheikhs come next in the hierarchy, and constitute the major section of this population. The Marias come at the bottom, and they are the descendants of the war prisoners. The historian Sihabuddin Talish who came with Mirjumla during the latter’s invasion of Assam remarked that the Muslim war-prisoners of earlier times were Muslims in name only, Assamese in all other respects, and liked to have relationship with the Assamese rather than the

27 Sarma, Sashi. Asomar Lokasahiya, Students Stores, Guwahati, 1993, p-7
28 Ibid, 1993, p-7
29 Das, B. M. “Anthropological Identity” in Assam: Land and People (ed.) Basanta Deka, K. C. Das Commerce College, Guwahati, 2000, p-88
Muslims. This process has resulted in a kind of socio-cultural integration unique to Assam. “It is noteworthy that in respect of certain socio-cultural traits, more particularly at the folk-level, the Assamese Muslims show similarities with the Assamese Hindus. Both the communities interact very freely at many socio-cultural activities.”

A large section of the Assamese people is formed by the tea garden population. These are the descendants of the labourers brought from Orissa, Bihar, and central India by the British companies in the middle of the 19th century when they started large scale tea plantations in Assam. The Kols, Mundos, Saontals, Orangs, Sauras, Bhuyans, Parajas, Gonds, Bhils, Savars, Bhumijas, Ghotowals belong to this group or tribe of Assamese population. These people take pride in introducing themselves as Na-Asomiya or New Assamese. “The tea industry has contributed in a greater degree than any other single factor to the increasing variety of the population.” But the current of migration or immigration has not stopped. The number of ‘Na-Asomiyas’ is still on the rise with different socio-political-economic consequences for the state. Before the stream of immigrants to the plantations and urban centres could dry up, a new phase makes its appearance on the scene. The first news of its approach is reported in the Census of 1911. Within a quarter century this current spreads into the remotest corners of the Assam valley from Goalpara to

30 Gait, E. A. The History of Assam, Lawyer’s Book Stall, Guwahati, 1967-p-153
32 Bhagawati, Bijoy Ch. Bharat Bhumi, Asom Prakashan Parisad, Guwahati,1976 p-299
33 Ibid. p-299
Lakhimpur. The Muslim colonists, the agriculturists from East Bengal take up all wasteland they find on their way.34 These people came to Assam forced by the oppressive socio-economic-political conditions prevailing at home – be it Bengal, East Bengal, East-Pakistan or Bangladesh. On the other hand, the incentives offered and invitation accorded by the Britishers also acted as catalytic factors for these people to come over, tame and cultivate wide expanses of waste but fertile land here. Once a trickle, it becomes a mighty stream moving up the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, increasing their number through natural birth and further continued migration and immigration. As a result a numerically strong and hardy community crept into the socio-political-economic-cultural polity of Assam, and their number stands at around 3 millions. Though their number and presence led to agitations and conflicts in recent times, they continue to thrive. This is a significant emerging community and cannot be wished away. Along with the political power they have come to wield, they also carry prominent traces of social, cultural and philosophical current from a vast area that cover Orissa, Bihar, Bengal and Assam of pre-independent India. The district of Nalbari is located on the frontier of this vast area and has experienced the dynamics of this process of socio-cultural intermingling.

Char-chaporis in the Brahmaputra:

The Brahmaputra flows through the state of Assam over a stretch of 860 kms covering almost its middle course in which it is comparatively wider and

34 Bhagawati, Bijoy Ch. Bharat Bhumi, Asom Prakashan Parisad, Guwahati, 1976 p-299
slower. This has led to siltation and formation of innumerable sand bars on its bed from Sadiya to Dhubri. These sand bars come up and get exposed as islets or *chars* slowly. On the other hand, the low-lying areas on the banks caused by erosion, depression over years are called *chaporis*. The Brahmaputra Valley is the main geographical area of Assam. With 56339 sq. km. it occupies 72 per cent of the total area of the state. Citing Leopold and Miller from their *Fluvial Process in Geomorphology*, Bhagabati describes *chars* as sand bars, central and lateral, both cause and effect of braided channels of the Brahmaputra. He also cites a study published in *North Eastern Geographer*, vol. 23, 1991 that explains the phenomenon of braiding and the appearance of *chars*: “Braiding in the case of Brahmaputra in Assam (India) seems to be influenced mainly by its high sediment load and weak band materials… The large number of sand bars and extensive overbank deposits produced in the course of a single flood season suggest the magnitude of transport and deposition of sediment in the river. The channel aggradation which is also found to be high may be another contributing factor.”35 In addition to wider, slower middle course and braiding, deforestation in the basin increases the volume of sediment manifold. The affect of earthquakes, like the ones in 1897 and 1950, have caused the river bed to come up, thereby expediting the formation of sand bars. Most of the *chars* or sand bars in the Brahmaputra are temporary or at best semi-permanent. Even then the Char Area Development Corporation, Assam has identified more than a thousand *chars* that are relatively stable.

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With alluvial soil, hot and humid summer and rain, the *chars* have riparian or riverine forests. These forests combine tropical semi-evergreen and deciduous characteristics. Predominantly covered with tall grass, reeds, shrubs, the *chars* have tall trees like *simalu* (Bomax ceiba), *chichu* (Dalbergia sisoo), *ajar* (Lagerstroemia flosreginae), *karai* (Albizzia procera) and *khaira* (Acacia catechu). Besides, cane, bamboo and *jhaon* (*Hermartheria pratesse*) are also abundantly available in these areas. At one time home to a good number of tigers and deer, crocodiles and tortoises, the ecological degradation has adversely affected both flora and fauna of the *chars*.

Most of the immigrants/migrants of earlier East Bengal origin inhabit these *char-chaporis*, with agriculture and fishing as their main occupations. Sheikh cites eleven reasons at the root of this mass flow of people from East Bengal to the Brahmaputra Valley: oppression of landlords; political unity of East Bengal and Assam till 1911; 1893, 1897, 1898, and 1915 famines in Bengal; 1897 earthquake that devastated the lower Assam and Bengal; abundance of waste land in Assam; unwillingness of the local population to inhabit the *chars* in the Brahmaputra; adverse impact of the attack by Maan; epidemics like cholera, malaria, kalajar on the population of Assam; the Britishers’ desire to raise the production of jute with the help of East Bengal peasants; and the policy of grow more food with more and more migrant farmers and workers.  

The migration was not a noticeable phenomenon in 1885 when the Commissioner of Assam Valley district issued family tickets for

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five rupees to induce the people of Bengal to come to the Brahmaputra Valley. The flow became strong with the division of Bengal, and clubbing of Assam with East Bengal. The result was: the jute cultivation in the Brahmaputra Valley rose from 30,000 acres in 1905-06 to 106,000 acres in 1919-20. As Hiren Gohain has mentioned: these immigrant people raised crop for the first time on 542,000 acres of waste land between 1921-1931; on 843,000 acres between 1931-1941; introduced in Assam the practice of raising crops twice in a year; practiced double cropping on 251,000 acres of land between 1931-1941; and doubled this area by 1950. The agrarian character of the community and its migration/immigration becomes clear from such a slice of history and statistics.

Realizing the inevitability of the process of migration, and the contribution of these people to the socio-economic-cultural matrix of Assam, different names of approbation have been used at different points of time to refer to the community: Jyoti Prasad Agarwala called them Na-Asamiya in the poem ‘Asamiya Dekar Ukti’ in 1943; Bishnu Prasad Rabha gave them the name Pamua Na-Asamiya in 1960; Ambikagiri Raychoudhury addressed them as Natun Asamiya in sixties of the last century; Homen Bargohain popularized the name Na-Asamiya in 1969; in 1995 Hitesh Deka, the President of Asom Sahitya Sabha, Sarthebari Conference, dropped Na and referred to the community as Asomiya.38

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Given different names such as *Pamua Musalman, Na-Asamiya* (Neo-Assamese), *Abhibasi Musalman, Charua Musalman, Bangladeshi, Bideshi* with varying degrees of acceptance, tolerance and rejection, this community now has a strength of about thirty lakh spread over 2,259 *chars* in fourteen districts, 21 sub-divisions, 56 blocks. Wobbling in poverty, illiteracy, this hardy community is engaged in an epic battle against the environment, both natural and human, to survive and prosper. Their journey across the space, often encountering and negotiating different borders, has left imprints on the language they speak, the tales they narrate, the songs they sing, their plays and games, festivals and beliefs. This sizeable body of folklore, oral literature or orature, verbal art bears witness to the distinct identity of the community.

**People of the Chars of Nalbari District:**

Nalbari is one of the fourteen districts of Assam as mentioned above. The southern part of the district stretches into the Brahmaputra, falling under the Barkhetri Block of the district. The *char* area of the district is present about 10 to 12 kms to the south of Mukalmua, the headquarters of the block. It stretches east-west about 25 kms from Hajo revenue circle (Kamrup district) to Chenga revenue circle (Barpeta district), about 5 kms north-south from Brahmaputra river (Nalbari district) to Palashbari and Chayagaon circles (Kamrup district). Though the *chars* were there in nineteenth century, the areas increased after 1897 earthquake. The earliest settlers in the *chars* were some people of the Nepali community in the early thirties of the twentieth century. The first wave of migration from the then East Bengal arrived immediately
afterwards. According to the survey of the Directorate of Char Area Development, Assam, the number of char villages in Nalbari stood at 58 on 32 chars with a total area of 8558.97 hectares, population of 62,892 belonging to 10,482 peasant families in 1993-94.\(^{39}\) Now the population has reached about one lakh. Some of the prominent chars here are Bagan Pata, Rang, Naituli, Faujudi Sarkar, Moslem, Muntas Sarkar, Barbala, Chhapra Para, Bipadar, Khalekmara, Kalar, Bhangnamari, Kuhiramari, Silmari, Sayed Ali, Matikhera, Naidhara, Jailar, Kalakhua, Muyan Ali, Mazipara, Laotali, and Kalputa. The people of these chars form an integral part of the greater charua Musalman community in the state. Professing Sunni Islam, they have flood, erosion as their constant companions. This has taught them how to adapt to a life of shifting, migrating with their hearths and homes, to surviving or emerging chars or chaporis. Though there have been continuous migrations to the low-lying areas on the banks, the chars in the river remain dear to them.

With a very low literacy rate, poor condition of transport and communication, absence of electricity, these people live their lives of constant struggle against the elements of nature and poverty. The uncertainty about its status as a community further compounds the situation for them. They are very candid about their roots in the erstwhile East Bengal and in Hinduism at not so distant a past. The older members of the community are more forthcoming in this regard. This community has its own share of folklore, especially orature or verbal art that forms part of the whole Charua community’s lore in the state. This body of lore, collected through field visits and informants, has been

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studied through the following framework of folkloristics-folklore-identity relationship.

**The Frame of Reference of the Study:**

**Folklore Studies** – The idea of folklore as an academic discipline with a theoretical approach of its own is of recent origin though folklore itself is as old as the folks all over the world. The concept and its methodology developed as part of the nineteenth century ideology of romantic nationalism. In the beginning the study was loaded with overt social bias and political goals. Only in the twentieth century did ethnographers begin to record folklore as objects of study without such slants.

As a new field of learning folklore came into being in the nineteenth century when ‘antiquaries in England and philologists in Germany began to look closely at the ways of the lower classes.’[^40] The German brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, began publishing oral folk narratives and interpretations of Germanic mythology in 1812. They used the word *Volkskunde.* Later, on 22\(^{nd}\) August, 1846, an English antiquarian, William John Thoms sent a letter to the magazine *Athenaeum* in which he suggested the new word ‘Folklore’ in the place of the clumsy ‘popular antiquities’:

“Your pages have so often given evidence of the interest which you take in what we in England designate as Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature (though by-the-bye it is more a lore than a literature, would be most aptly

described by a good Saxon compound, Folklore, - the lore of the people.) – that, I am not without hopes of enlisting your aid in garnering the few ears which are remaining, scattered over that field from which our forefathers might have gathered a goodly crop.

No one who has made the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc. of the older time his study, but must have arrived at two conclusions– the first, how much that is curious and interesting in these matters is now entirely lost– the second, how much may yet be rescued by timely execution.”

This classic statement provides us with two important insights. First, because of the simplicity of the lives of the folk and their level of education and sophistication, the materials gathered from them cannot be termed ‘literature’ in the strict sense of the term. The prejudice Thoms shows in his description of ‘Popular Literature’ as being ‘more a lore than a literature’ governed the field for a long time. This prejudice has been considerably modified since then. Second, Thoms’s statement also establishes the concept of folklore: “manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc.” are roughly its constituents. This brings us to the centre of a conflict of concepts: between the concept of word of mouth or orality and performance or practices. Oral literature– which comprises riddles, tongue-twisters, proverbs, puns, chants, songs, and stories– represents only the verbal aspect of folklore. It has been defined by two East African Scholars, Nandwa and Bukenya, “as

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those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression.” 42 This definition justifies the use of the term ‘literature’. Besides this literary part, folklore includes traditional methods of cooking, architecture, medicine and dressmaking as well as religion or ritual, art, instrumental music, and dance. Hence it would be close to the mark to accept that the folklore of a people consists essentially of two kinds of activity: what these people traditionally say and what they traditionally do. Sometimes the use of the terms oral literature and folklore is overlapping. In many cases, the latter is used when only the former is meant. But this is a case of generalization in which a part is made to represent the whole– a quite frequent practice in literature and hence excusable, thinks Okpewho.

But who are the people? Who constitute the folk? Dundes provides a holistic answer to this question in the chapter “Who Are The Folk?”43

In nineteenth century there existed a critical difficulty for handling the term ‘folk’. It was defined as a dependent rather than an independent entity, in contrast with or opposition to some other population group. The folk as a whole was considered to be a group of people who constituted the lower stratum, the so called *vulgus in populo* in contrast with the upper stratum or elite of that society. They were contrasted with the civilized, on one hand, and with the

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savage or primitive, on the other. “In terms of the assumed unilinear cultural evolutionary sequence of savagery, barbarism and civilization through which all peoples were believed to pass, the folk were more or less considered as barbarians.” Andrew Lang’s essay ‘The Method of Folklore’, which appeared in his *Custom and Myth*, published in 1884, is a representative statement in which “folk is defined as peasants, lower-class and lacking the benefits of education and progress”. Lang’s notion of non-progressive classes in a progressive people “is analogous to the illiterate in a literate society”. According to him the folk possessed a ‘mean term’, the intellectual link between the civilized and primitive. But in the twentieth century this pejorative and exclusive concept of the folk got modified in the direction of inclusiveness and approbation. Representative of such idea is Dundes’s definition of the folk. “The term ‘folk’ can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is– it could be a common occupation, language or religion– but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals. A member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity.”

Thus, there could be many forms of folk based on nation, region, state, city, village, profession, etc. Members of a folk no longer remain ‘limited to a family or a region or a religious, occupational, or ethnic group.’ This exposes

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44 Dundes, Alan. *Interpreting Folklore*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.1980, p- 6-7
the inadequacy of the nineteenth century definition of the ‘folk as the illiterate in a literate society’.

What happens to folklore when science and technology advance? Does it become superfluous and get stamped out? The truth is contrary to popular perception that has been guided for a long time by the wrong tie between illiteracy and folklore. It was erroneously assumed that as literacy increased, folklore would decrease. On the contrary, science and technology has increased the speed of transmission of folklore, and has become the subject of folklore itself. This reminds one of Matthew Arnold who argued that there is a requirement and possibility of literature prospering corresponding to the advance of science.

**Orality and Folklore** – There are two significant sides to the issue of orality in folklore. Is the whole of literature in folklore oral? The most common criterion used to define folklore is the way in which it is transmitted. Emphasizing the means of transmission, the folklorists tend to put folklore in the ‘oral tradition’. But this is not the whole truth—because nonverbal folklore like gestures, games and folk dance cannot be said to be truly in oral tradition. Moreover, there are numerous written forms of folk literature. Examples of such written literature include: autograph book verse, automobile names, fly leaf rhymes, latrinalia, and traditional letters. The other side is the authenticity of orality. Over a long period of time the written text has been privileged over the oral text. This has been due to the inordinate emphasis put on the concrete presence on the one hand, and mistaking such a presence (oral presence) for an absence on the
other. Thus, orality has suffered a double injustice in the hands of the anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists and folklorists. Of late, things have changed by serious attempts at correctly situating the oral. New light on the interaction between the oral and the written has been shed by Brian Stock’s book, the *Implications of Literary: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* in which the author concentrates on explaining the link between the oral and the written. His work helps remove ‘the apparent paradox of oral structures within arguably written works’. As the works by Ong, Kelber, and Stock illustrate, in these few years “more emphasis has been put on both the interface of the oral and the written literature— if in fact these are still viable opposite categories— and the implications of an originative oral tradition for text that have reached us only in manuscript.”

This brings us to Paul Zumthor who succeeds to a great extent in rehabilitating the oral, the voice: “Long ago our passion for the spoken word died out. It was progressively eliminated from our ‘basic personality’, the matrix of our character traits… Criticism during the 1960s and 1970s on the nature and functioning of ‘the text’ failed to take sight of the new horizons but managed to blur the scene all the more by resuscitating the long-standing tendency to sacralize the letter and produced a travesty of our mental processes. It is strange that, among all the institutionalized disciplines, there is not yet a science of voice….. Sound is the most subtle and most malleable element of the concrete world… voice is the desire to say what you mean as much as a desire to

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exist. As the locus of an absence that changes into presence when used, voice modulates cosmic impulses that cut across us, collecting some of their signals: an infinite resonance that makes all matter sing. As prenatal nothingness grows more and more distant and as the sense of the body as instrument takes form, voice for the sake of another freedom eventually serves language. ”

Hence we may say that voice is the thing where we can catch the essence of the Being—the Being of Truth and Reality as expressed in the oral literature of folklore.

**Nature of Folklore**— Folklore has been found culturally coded by both the evolutionists and diffusionists. The members of the former group like E.B. Taylor and J.G. Frazer, following Charles Darwin, explain similarities in the folklore of different communities on the basis of similarities in the phases of their evolution. The diffusionists on the other hand explain the same phenomenon in terms of transmission through contact between cultures, especially from a ‘superior’ culture to an ‘inferior’ one. Members of this group suffering from such bias include Grimm Brothers and Stith Thompson. In the area of studying folklore as culturally coded, two other names come to the forefront: William A. Wilson and William Bascom. Wilson’s “investigation of Mormon missionary folklore illustrates how a culturally oriented analysis of members of a religious and occupational subgroup can reveal broader human process and concerns.”

Bascom presents and supports this position. On the basis of his conviction that “the folklore of a people can be fully understood

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only through knowledge of their culture,” he puts forth four functions of folklore.

First, “folklore enables human beings to escape in fantasy from repressions imposed upon by society… Moreover, folklore also reveals man’s attempts to escape in fantasy from the conditions of his geographical environment and from his own biological limitations as a member of the genus and species Homo Sapiens”. 48

Second, folklore validates culture, “justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them”. 49

Third, “folklore can also serve as pedagogic devices, and hence as means of educating people--- Adults tell children scary stories to discipline them; sing lullabies to put them in a good humour. Fables and proverbs teach and reinforce morals and values, while riddling sharpens the wits of young children.” 50

Further, “folklore fulfils the important but often overlooked function of maintaining conformity to the accepted pattern of behaviour”. 51 These four functions “can be grouped together under the single function of maintaining the stability of culture.” 52 This and the multiple ways in which folklore contributes to the maintenance of cultural stability account for folklore’s durability and pervasiveness, asserts Bascom.

49 Ibid. p-189
50 Ibid. p-189
51 Ibid. p-189
52 Ibid. p-189
Folklore and Society— In the first thirty years of the twentieth century scholarly study of folklore moved from “a more general interest in culture to a more specific interest in society.”53 Scholars like Bronislaw Malinowski, A.R. Radcliffe– Brown and Franz Boas found that general statements about human nature and culture “often ignored certain specific details of life such as language and other habits which make one society different from another.”54 For them the differences are more interesting than the similarities. Such an approach led to the “recognition of the artistic quality of oral texts further resulting in the use of such terms as verbal art and oral art in describing the literature.”55

This trend was first initiated and encouraged by Malinowski who urged ethnographers to record everything related to the social context of folklore texts. Bascom and Ben-Amos agreed and “stressed that any judgment of a folk text must be based on the views of the society from which the text comes.”56 Okpewho appreciates this approach as ‘right and proper’ to a large extent. Such new trends have led us to conclude, in the final analysis, that “all knowledge aims at helping us understand who we are.” 57

Societal situatedness of folklore brings us to ‘cultures of groups in contact.’ The investigations here have demonstrated that “intergroup contacts affect and are reflected in folklore. People living along international boundaries

54 Ibid. p-9
55 Ibid. p-10
56 Ibid. p-11
57 Ibid. p-18
often differentiate themselves and express this distinction through folklore”.58

“Finally, folklore also brings people together by serving as the expressive basis for
communal identity and collective action.”59

So, it can be said that folklore exists because human beings create
stories, songs, proverbs, riddles, games, rituals and perform them repeatedly
telling the same story, singing of the same song, uttering of the same proverb,
posing and answering of the same riddle, playing the same game, enacting the
same ritual. In the process folklore is determined by the identity of the
participants and the settings. Thus, identity, both individual and communal,
gets vitally related to and finds a locus in folklore.

**Folklore as a Prime Locus of Identity**—The discussion so far emphasizes the fact
that identity, both individual and communal, cannot be explained and
understood without taking into account different elements and aspects of the
folklore involved. The society-culture- folklore linkages, and the nature of
folklore make the vital role of folklore unavoidable. But what is identity?
Etymologically identity is grounded in similarities— similar or common
properties or essences as opposed to differences. Over the centuries the
approaches towards the understanding of identity have been mainly two : the
first can be termed as essentialist, foundational or positivist; and the second,
postmodern, post-structural, relativist. The essentialist view is that “the identity
common to members of a social group is stable and more or less unchanging,

58 Georges, Robert A. and Jones, Michael Owen *Folkloristics : An Introduction*, Indiana University Press,
Bloomington, 1995, p-224-225
59 Ibid. p-225
since it is based on the experiences they shared.”\textsuperscript{60} But opponents of essentialism often find this view misleading, because, they think, “it ignores historical changes and glosses over internal differences within a group by privileging only the experiences that are common to everyone. Postmodernists in particular insist that identities are fabricated and constructed rather than self-evidently deduced from experience .... since experience cannot be a source of objective knowledge.”\textsuperscript{61} But of late a new synthesizing approach has emerged and it attempts to show that “the relation between experience and identity is a genuine philosophical or theoretical issue, ... and that there is a better way to think about identity than might be suggested by the alternatives provided by the essentialists and the postmodernists.”\textsuperscript{62} In this approach due importance has been given to both object and subject, existence and essence, and experience and emotions giving rise to a holistic ontology of identity. An optimum balance of matter and mind has been sought to be maintained by accommodating both, privileging none. As a result, culture and folklore become both commonly perceived objectivity and shared subjectivity. Followers of this are aware of the fossilizing propensity of essentialism and mindless, uncontrollable uncertainty of post-structuralism. They, therefore, see identity as both a product and a process. Based on such a view, folklore could be seen as an integral part, and moving spirit of the Being of any community. The living world of man is a world of medium size; here radical extremes do not prevail. There cannot be

\textsuperscript{60} Mohanty, S. P. \textit{Literary Theory and the Claims of History}, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p-202

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid. p-203

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. p-203
uninterrupted flow or total blockade. This makes identity a reality with sufficient durability in the midst of temporal, historical change, and similarities, in the midst of differences. Folklore of any community is the best locus for the statics and dynamics, for the unfolding and sustenance of a broad outline of such an identity. Both the flow and the thaw together constitute it.

In the context of the research project in hand, the Brahmaputra river with appearing-disappearing chars or river islands becomes an apt metaphor for the postpositivist realist identity envisaged by Mohanty et al. Martin Heidegger’s idea of ‘Dasein’ comes the closest to the postpositivist realistic notion of identity. Used in his famous work Being and Time (1927), this German word stands for ‘Thereness’ or ‘Being there’, and refers to the subjective human existence. And this ‘subjective human existence’ combines both flow and thaw, the passage of time and the claims of history.

Within the above framework of folklore and communal identity, the oral literature of the chars of Nalbari district has been collected by meeting the people and through informants, and these items have been subjected to analysis on the basis of their ‘texts, texture and contexts’ to get this ‘Thereness’ of the community.

**Review of Literature:**

Folklore is pervasive. As an integral part of our daily life it touches the language we speak, the beliefs, rituals, and customs that surround important life cycle events like pregnancy, childbirth, marriage and death. ‘Literary works and mass media productions make use of folklore, thereby contributing to its
Writers often use folklore ‘to convey, illustrate, or reinforce a major theme in a literary work’. They often base their plots or structural devices on folklore material. ‘Beliefs, proverbs, narratives, and other examples of folklore may set the tone or alter a mood. Dialect and traditional sayings can convey character and a sense of place. Stories may serve as a way to communicate precepts and values.’

Television shows, films and advertising also draw heavily on folklore for content and style. ‘Authors of printed cartoons and comic strips also assume reader familiarity with folklore examples.’ Our networking sites, cell phones and computers are also deeply immersed in audio-visual folklore material like tunes and graphics. Folklore is as encompassing and vital as the atmosphere, and ecology that surround us. “Whether we live in remote areas or in urban centres, folklore pervades our lives. We all tell stories, celebrate events, take part in rituals, and use figurative language on such occasions. As children we sing jingles, participate in counting out rhymes to determine who will be ‘it’, tell jokes and riddles, and games. At work we learn and use the jargon of our trade, follow custom and tradition to accomplish tasks, and tell stories about job-related experiences. At home, we develop and engage ourselves in rituals such as family outing, holiday observances, or shared meals. Among friends we joke, tell stories about our common experiences, employ slang expressions or dialect terms, and offer advice in the form of beliefs and practices. If we watch

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64 Ibid. p-6
65 Ibid. p-9
television, go to the movies, or look at ads, we see and hear examples of folklore that have been removed from the international setting and incorporated into another context.”

Such pervasiveness is matched by the diversity of folklore material - a diversity that results from the spatio-temporal, ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural, social variations. Moreover, “because we express what we know, think, believe, and feel in wide-ranging and varied ways, those expressive forms, processes, and behaviours that are traditional and hence identifiable as folklore are also diverse.”

At different points of time, scholars all over the world have paid attention to this pervasive and varied nature of folklore, and produced a huge corpus of material forming and informing this area or discipline called folkloristics, folklore studies or folklife research. This discipline is “devoted to the identification, documentation, characterization, and analysis of traditional expressive forms, processes and behaviours’ and those ‘who pursue its objectives in their work are folklorists.”

"The Indian subcontinent is vast and various containing many Indias represented by over 100 living languages, each with its social and territorial dialects, its cultural niches, attendant traditions (oral or otherwise), ten writing systems and over a dozen literary languages. All these have dwelled together

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67 Ibid. p-10
68 Ibid. p-1
for several millennia in what we call India today.\footnote{Ramanujan, A. K. “Foreword” in 
*Folktales of India* (ed.) Beck, Brenda E. F. et. al, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, p- xi.} Often referred to ‘as a mixing bowl’ or ‘curry pot’, this vast area has been a large, diverse, and continuing repository of cultural tradition over the past 5,000 years or more. “Over this long period of cultural history India continued reciprocal exchange with an ever-increasing circle of surrounding territories extending from Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Asia to the Middle East and Western Europe.”\footnote{Clements, William M. and Green, Thomas A. *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of World Folklore and Folklife*, Vol-2, 2006, Greenwood Press, Westport, p-1.} A very important and living element of this tradition has been the folklore of India. Different factors have shaped this huge body of lore: different languages and cultures belonging to four families like the Dravidian, the Indo-European, the Sino-Tibetan and Munda (Austro-Asiatic); different religions like Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Sikhism; topography, climate and history; urban-rural, *marga-desi* continuum; alignment and realignment of political units as socio-cultural entities. All these factors have produced a unique corpus known for abundance and variety of elements, social and intellectual significance, unity in diversity and long chronological continuity.\footnote{Datta Birendranath Viswakos, Vol. v, (ed.) Datta, Birendranath and Sarma Madan, Asom Sahitya Sabha, Guwahati, 2003, p- 249 (Kha)}

In modern times folklore studies in India began in the 19th century, with contribution from three distinct groups- the European Orientalists, the Christian missionaries and the colonial administrators. The works of scholars like Max Muller on Pali and Sanskrit written texts belong to the contributions of the first
group. These works theorized on the Indian and solar origins of lores, and paved the way for the missionaries to follow. These missionaries, while preaching their religion, collected material relating to language, customs, beliefs and lores of different communities to prepare handbooks. This further strengthened the collection and study of Indian folklore. The most prominent of such contributors is Verrier Elwin (1902-1964) who came to India in 1927.

Indian folkloristics enters the contemporary phase with *Indian Animal Tales* (Bodker, 1952), *The Oral Tales of India* (Stith Thompson and Jonas Balys, 1958), *Types of Indic Oral Tales* (Stith Thompson and Warren Roberts, 1960). Since then there has been a proliferation of scholarship on different facets of Indian folklore studies by such scholars as Beck, Blackburn Ramanujan, Claus, Handoo, Goswami, Emenau, Feldhaus, Mair, Marglin, Singer, Vatsyayan, Wadley and others. This list could be greatly extended if contributions in linguistic states as folklore areas, and in regional languages are taken into account.

In the Brahmaputra Valley local scholars have also contributed substantially in the forms of Bhadrasen Bora's *Ramcharit* (1899), a collection of riddles; *Phulkowar* (1903) and *Manikkowar* (1903), both ballad texts; Gopal Chandra Das's *Asamiya Patantarmala* (1900), a collection of proverbs; Laksminath Bezbaroa's *Burhi Air Sadhu* (1911), and *Kakadeuta Aru Natilora* (1912), collections of tales; Jogesh Chandra Tamuli's *Nichukani* (1916), a collection of folksongs; Hem Chandra Barua's *Marriage Customs of the*
Peoples of Assam (1892); Benudhar Rajkhoa's Assamese Demonology (1905) and Assamese Popular Superstitions (1920).

In the early part of the twentieth century quite a few ethnographic monographs appeared on a number of northeastern communities. Some of these monographs throwing light on oral literature, especially of the narrative genre, are P. R.T. Gurdon's The Khasis (1907), Lyall and Stack's The Mikirs (1908), T. C. Hodson's The Meitheis (1908) and The Naga Tribes of Manipur (1912), Major A. Playfair's The Garos (1909), Rev. Sidney Endle’s The Kacharis (1911); J. Shakespeare's Lushei-Kuki Clans (1912); J. H. Hutton's The Angami Nagas (1921) and The Seema Nagas (1931); J. P. Mill’s The Ao Nagas (1922), The Lhota Nagas (1931) and The Rengma Nagas (1937). In neighbouring Arunachal Pradesh, formerly known as NEFA, Elwin's Myths of the North-East Frontier of India (1958) and The Art of the North-East Frontiers of India (1959) stand out as they “are based on sustained field-work and marked by a judicious mixture of intimacy and erudition.”

In Assam there has been a steady flow of contributions to the field of folkloristics starting with Suryya Kumar Bhuyan's Barphukanar Geet (1924); Biranchi Kumar Barua's A Cultural History of Assam (1951); Praphulladatta Goswami's Folk Literature of Assam (1954), Ballads and Tales of Assam (1960), Tales of Assam (1980), Essays on the Culture and Folklore of North East India (1982), Bohag Bihu of Assam and Bihu Songs (1988) and Festivals of Assam (1995); Birendranath Datta's Folk Toys of Assam (1986), Assam, the Emerald Treasure Land (1990),

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72 Datta, Birendranath. Folkloric Foragings in India's North-East, Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art and Culture (A BILAC), North Guwahati, 1999, p-4

Dilip Kalita, Kishore Chandra Bhattacharyya, Basanta Kumar Bhattacharyya, Bimal Mazumdar, Kanak Chandra Saharia may be added.

This representative, if not an exhaustive overview, does not include any work or reference to the people of the char-chaporis of Assam, let alone their life and lore. The paucity may be explained in terms of socio-political and religious factors. Though these people form a sizable section of the total population of Assam, most of them are migrants/immigrants of East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh origin with Islam as their religion, and a language that is neither Bengali nor Assamese. The threat perceived by the insiders, the dominant communities of the state, to their socio-political -cultural space from this emerging community has created an atmosphere of anxiety, fear, suspicion in the minds of the Assamese about their own demographic dominance, political clout, religious security and socio-linguistic stability. This has created a general sense of denial that has affected the scholars active in the field of folkloristics. As if making a survey of their life and folklore or even throwing a cursory glance their way, would be a concession to the subversion of the Assamese identity at different levels. But things have gradually changed. Because of steadily, though slowly, growing socio-economic contacts there is now greater mutual understanding. Prompted by the views and writings of progressive people like Sarat Ch. Sinha, Amalendu Guha, Hiren Gohain, Homen Borgohain, Anil Raychoudhury and others there have been attempts to explore the similarities, the convergences beyond the differences, the divergences between 'we' and 'they'. This welcome change in attitude has
started paying dividends in the form of scholarly attention to the folklore and language of the community inhabiting the *char-chaporis* of Assam. Among the handful of works in the field the publication of *Char-Chaporir Jiban Charyya: A Collection of Articles in Assamese*, edited and published by Ismail Hussain (sr.) and Anowar Hussain on behalf of Natun Sahitya Parishad, Guwahati in 2000 may be considered a of immense value and significance. This is a collection of lectures delivered by different scholars drawn from outside and within the community in a conference in 1998 on the topic “Char-Chaporir Adhibasi Sakalar Artha-Samajik Jiban, Samanway Aru Sanghat” (Socio-Economic Life of the Inhabitants of Char-Chaporis: Harmony and Conflict). In his foreword to the collection Anil Raychoudhury writes: probably this attempt is first of its kind in Assam. The publication has fifteen sections (essays) on as many aspects contributed by Abani Kumar Bhagawati, Samsuddin Ahmed, Ahijuddin Sheikh, Amalendu Guha, Medini Choudhury, Atul Chandra Goswami, Ismail Hussain (sr.), Jyotirmoy Jana, Kasema Khatun, Sohrab Ahmed, Ismail Hossain and Hafiz Ahmed. Among these, the pieces by Ismail Hossain, Kasema Khatun and Sohrab Ahmed have thrown light on the folklore of the community.

So far, the contribution of Ismail Hossain has been pioneering and substantial to the field. Hossain's *Asomor Jateeya Jivon Aru Abhibasi Asomiya Musalman* (National Life of Assam And Immigrant Assamese Muslim, 1997) could claim credit for being the first such work. In eight chapters, he has discussed issues like the arrival of migrant Muslims in Assam; their
nomenclature as *Mian/Miyan, Pomua and Na-Asomiya*; contribution of immigrant Muslims to the economy of Assam; immigrant Muslims and Assamese traditional culture; national life of Assam and Muslims of the *chars*; Moulana Bhasani, Ambikagiri Roychoudhury and immigrant Muslims; and ULFA vs. immigrant Musalman. In 2001 Hossain edited *Char-Chaporir Samaj-Sameeksha*, a collection of Assamese articles on *char-chaporis* of Assam. In this publication Sheikh Samser Ali, Rejaul Karim, Ismail Hossain, Fazzal Ali Ahmed, Marsia Khondkar, Delowara Khondkar have tried to explore socio-cultural life of the community in the context of greater Assamese culture and life. The fact that it has been published by Asam Sahitya Sabha, the apex Assamese literary body and a flag bearer of Assamese nationalism, and socio-cultural-linguistic identity over decades, shows to what extent the antithetical intercommunity relationship has thawed giving rise to a new phase - a phase of mutual understanding, acceptance, accommodation and dialogue. Hossain carries his exploration further in *Asamar Char-Chaporir Jiban Aru Samaj* (2008) published notably by Publication Board of Assam. Moreover, in the pages of *Char-Chaporir* (2001, 2002), a journal edited by Hossain we come across such names as Toseswar Chetiya, Rejaul Karim, Prakalpa Ranjan Bhagabati, Bhabenra Nath Mohan and others discussing different facets of this community.

Another name that stands out in this area is Fazal Ali Ahmed who published *Abhibashi Asomia Musalmanar Samaj Aru Sanskriti* (The Society and Culture of Immigrant Assamese Muslims of Assam) in 1998. It is among
the first few works on the subject, and attempts to appreciate the marriage songs, riddles, festivals, games and sports, social customs of the immigrant Muslim community of Assam. Two other books that have enriched the field are Rejaul Karim's *Char-Chaporir Samaj Aru Asamor Musalman* (2000) and M. S. Sheikh's *Miah Muslims of Assam: Tradition and Culture* (2003).

ed. Kayastha). In the former Md. Jahirul Haque writes about the place of bamboo in the Charua culture of Assam in an essay entitled “Char-Chaporir Musalman Sampradayar Banh Sanskriti”, and in the latter, Md. Abdul Gofur discusses the marriage customs of the community in “Char Anchalar Musalmanar Bibah Podhoti”.

But scholarly focus on the culture of the char-chapori community of Assam is noticed a decade earlier in the form of linguistic survey and analysis. A path breaking study of the community’s language, called ‘charua language’ by Nagendra Narayana Dewan, an M. Phil. scholar of Gauhati University, is undertaken in 1989 as “Nagarbera Car Ancalar Kathita Axamiya Bhasa- Eti Adhyan”, an audacious, but much needed attempt, the work has reference to substantial material of oral literature like proverbs, riddles, songs, tales (fokara-jojana, santhar, geet, sadhu katha), and concludes with a reasoned justification for considering Charua Bhasa as a dialect of Assamese much like Goalpara's Desi Bhasa or Goalpariya Bhasa. Similarly Jyotis Chandra Barman in his research report on “Char Anchalar Charia Bhasa” has discussed some elements of the oral literature of the community while examining their local language and come to the conclusion that the level of affinities among Charia Bhasa, Goalpariya Deshi Bhasa and Kamrupiya Bhasa is quite high. Two other published works in this category are Asamiya Aru Asamar Bhasa-Upabhasa (2009) by Upen Rabha Hakacham, and Axamiya Aru Axamar Bhasa (ed.2010) by Biswajit Das and Phukan Chandra Basumatary. Hakacham has put together a good number folklore items like proverbs, riddles, songs to demonstrate the
nature of the language spoken by the immigrant community dwelling in the 
*chars* and *chaporis* of Assam, and referred to the similarities of their language 
with Assamese, Kamrupiya and Goalpariya languages and dialects. It has also 
come to his notice how this emerging community has embarked upon a process 
of accommodation and adaptation by adopting more and more Assamese words 
and phrases. In the latter publication, Hasinus Sultan’s entry “Asamar 
Charanchalar Musalman Sakalor Bhasa” focuses on a brief linguistic study that 
highlights both difference and similarity between Assamese and *Charia* or 
*Charua* language.

**Plan of Study:**

The study has been carried to its logical conclusion through the 
following five chapters in addition to this one:

Chapter-II – **Problematics of Identity** – discusses different theoretical 
positions and issues touching the idea of identity and also tries to link 
language with identity. Here the notions, briefly mentioned earlier, are 
treated in some detail so as to acquire a clear perspective from which 
*Charua* language and oral literature could be seen.

Chapter-III– **Languages and Charua Language** – puts the language of the 
community under study in the broader South Asia and North-East India 
context, and narrows it down to the area of contact that touches 
language/dialect forms such as Assamese, Kamrupiya, Goalpariya or 
Rajbongshi, Bengali, even Odia, from one fringe to the other.
Chapter-IV – Verbal Art of the Charua Community of Assam – deals with the songs, rhymes, sayings (proverbs, riddles), myths and tales of the greater Charua community already in published form, to prepare the ground for the next chapter.

Chapter-V – Verbal Art of the Charua Community of Nalbari – analyzes the oral texts collected from the study area, and attempts an understanding of the community’s identity always keeping in mind the framework presented in the introduction and concepts elaborated in chapter-II.

Chapter-VI – Conclusion – in a sense a continuation of the preceding chapter, it harks back to the framework of the study, and conceptual ideas in chapter-II. At the same time it tries to link the community’s present to its past to grasp the nature of its identity.