CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM AND THE STATEMENT

This study presents an ethnographic profile of the Assamese Sikhs who are distributed throughout the Brahmaputra valley of the state of Assam in North-East India. This dissertation concentrates on the current pattern of living of the Assamese Sikhs - the focus of this study.

North-East India comprises seven states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. This is a region of wide ethnic diversity. This vast region (83,578 sq.km.) has a total population\(^1\) of 19,582,296 distributed through a large number of tribal and non-tribal ethnic groups. The migrations of peoples to this region from

\(^1\) All population figures for the states of North-East India, including Assam, relate to 1971 census. No census enumeration was held in Assam in 1981 owing to the situation prevailing in the state during that period.
the ancient to the present time have significantly contributed towards the growth of ethnic diversity in this region. Migrations of peoples to this region have also resulted in spectacular social transformation. Further, a few ethnic groups have come into existence as a consequence of prolonged interaction between the cultures of the migrants and those of the autochthones. The Assamese Sikhs constitute one such ethnic group. The Assamese Sikhs identify themselves with Assam, their homeland, and Assamese, their language. These Sikhs identify with the common culture they share with the Assamese people.

On historical, linguistic and certain socio-cultural considerations, the Sikhs of North-East India, and for that matter of Assam, may broadly be divided into two distinct categories:

(a) The Assamese Sikhs: The mother tongue of the indigenous Sikh inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley districts is Assamese. They are the descendants of different groups of Sikh migrants like the disciples of Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621 - 1675) who came to Assam in the seventeenth century; the Sikh soldiers who were brought by the Ahom kings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and those Sikhs who migrated to Assam from Punjab during the 1830s for trade and commerce and
gradually immersed themselves in the indigenous culture.

The Assamese call themselves Asamlya and the Assamese Sikhs are referred to as 'Asamlya Sikh' which denotes that they are indigenous to Assam. Besides Assamese language, they share many other elements of culture with the Assamese. Thus, there are many points of socio-cultural identity between the Assamese Sikhs and the Assamese people.

It is difficult to estimate the numerical strength of the Assamese Sikhs since language is not a criterion along which different religious groups are enumerated in the census. Nevertheless, it might be mentioned that of the total 11,920 Sikhs in Assam, according to an unofficial estimate the total population of Assamese Sikh is approximately 3,000.

(b) The Migrant Sikhs: Of the total Sikhs (16,897) of North-East India, the overwhelming majority are non-Assamese migrant Sikhs who are largely urban inhabitants. These Sikhs have migrated from Punjab to parts of northeastern India, including Assam and they are engaged in transport and related activities in the urban areas.

The Sikhs are a religious community of India who follow Sikhism founded by Guru Nanak (1469 - 1539). They claim Punjab as their homeland. The Sikhs comprise only 1.96 percent of India's population, which is less than the percentage
of the Christians (2.43). They have played a significant role not only in the history of Punjab but also South Asia. The Sikhs, who in demographic terms constitute a minority group in the Indian context, also occupy a distinctive position in the national society due to various historical, religious, socio-political and ethno-demographic factors. They are readily noticeable and they appear to be more numerous because of their turbans and other traditional garb. Many of them never cut their hair and all are supposed to be teetotallers and non-smokers.

This dissertation is concerned with the first group, i.e., the Assamese Sikhs. Like other Assamese people, they are also predominantly rural inhabitants and are agriculturists.

During the last two decades, I have had the occasion to meet a number of Assamese Sikhs both in my home town of Mangaldai and in Guwahati where I had my education and later started my career as a teacher. I had noticed some of the characteristics which the Assamese Sikhs possess and was fascinated by them. Despite their belonging to Sikhism they have been able to merge themselves in the local culture by adopting the indigenous norms and values. Contact and communication between Assamese Sikhs and their non-Assamese counterparts are conspicuously thin. This is due primarily
to the fact that none of these two groups understands each other's language. In addition to this, both the groups exhibit immense cultural contrasts. The Sikhs in general have tremendous communal pride. But it is of significantly different nature with regard to the Assamese Sikhs. They tend to keep their 'Assamese Sikh' identity within the framework of wider Assamese identity. The two identities in this context appear to be complementary. Various reports and articles published in local newspapers and magazines often relate their historical background, social and cultural life and the activities of their institutions and organizations. My casual observations, news items and the articles which give some general idea about these Sikhs raised in my mind a number of questions about the nature and functioning of the socio-cultural life of this group of people. The present study is the outcome of my long cherished temptation to arrive at an understanding of this problem.

This study is intended as a contribution to our understanding of the nature and content of socio-cultural life of the Assamese Sikhs. This study also examines the historical process through which the Assamese Sikh community has come into existence.

2 Such articles on the Assamese Sikhs have been indicated by asterisk marks in the bibliography.
Like many other ethnic minorities, the Assamese Sikhs have preserved their identity largely through various exclusive community institutions and organizations. At the same time, they maintain a fair degree of contact and communication with the wider Assamese society through their participation in different socio-cultural milieus. This indicates that an inquiry into the social relations within the community and also between the Sikhs and their immediate neighbours and the wider society can help in the understanding of the nature and content of Assamese Sikh social life. The expansion of social horizon of the Assamese Sikhs through their participation in different spheres in the wider society has resulted in the widening of inter and intra-community networks of social relations which in many ways have contributed to the functioning of Assamese Sikh social life. In order to obtain a comprehensive picture, Sikh social relations and their socio-cultural life are examined in the context of the community and that of the wider society.

The indigenous Sikh social situation obtaining in Assam indicates that the Assamese Sikhs do not share many of the 'Sikh characteristics' of the non-Assamese Sikhs. For example, the non-Assamese Sikhs claim Punjab as their homeland. They share with other Sikhs a common language
(Punjabi)\textsuperscript{3}, religion (Sikhism), homeland (Punjab), distinctive dress (turban for men and salwar-kameez for women) and other traditional garb, history, familial life, biradari (fraternity), art and culture and value system. On the other hand, the Assamese Sikhs possess certain characteristics which they do not share with the non-Assamese Sikhs.

The processes through which the different ethnic groups in this part of the country have come into existence vary in their form and content. In this regard the Assamese Sikhs stand apart from many other cognate groups which, like the Assamese Sikhs, have come into existence as a result of prolonged interaction between different ethnic groups. The plains tribals of Assam have played a significant role in the formation of the Assamese people, especially the Assamese Hindus. These tribals "........ provided the main source of Hindu population through conversion and subsequent induction, into the caste hierarchy as well as peasant mode of production and economic organization" (Bhargabati 1988: 20). Thus several plains tribal groups, for centuries, provided the main source of indigenous Hindu population through a process of conversion and subsequent Sanskritization. The

\textsuperscript{3} This term refers to one of the Indo-Aryan languages as well as to the people (Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims and others) who belong to the geographical area of Punjab.
process of conversion of the tribals into Hinduism can still be seen in many a case. Again, the indigenous Muslims (who are referred to as 'Asamiya Musalman') are the descendants of the early Muslim migrants to Assam between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries who married locally as well as of the converts who belonged to various indigenous populations. The spread of Christianity in this region has been primarily effected through the process of proselytization and conversion of mainly indigenous tribal populations since the early part of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, there have not been any evidence, historical or otherwise, to suggest that conversion of indigenous populations into Sikhism has ever occurred in this region. The Assamese Sikh population has reached its present stage of growth entirely through connubial relations established between the Sikhs and the indigenous Hindus for nearly the last three hundred years.

The migrant Sikhs who live forming communities in different parts of India and abroad exhibit the 'Sikh characteristics' which are discernible in their homeland, Punjab. Sikh cultural notions like jijat or meh (honour) - shame and some other related notions like mubabbat (brotherly love), khidmat (hospitality), seva (service to others), caste, robh (power), jaidad (wealth), jamidari
(land ownership) and pirhi (generation) influence Sikh behaviour. It is in the context of these precepts that Sikhs evaluate their own behaviour and actions of outsiders. Helweg (1979 : 10-19) observes that these Sikh cultural precepts have been a guiding principle for maintaining group identity and individual behaviour among the rural Sikhs who have emigrated from Punjab to England.

Conversely, the indigenous cultural ethos tend to guide the Assamese Sikh social life. As a result, they have been able to maintain a fair degree of interaction with the wider Assamese society. Their social life operates within a wider composite socio-cultural framework.

The present study is exploratory in nature. As pointed out earlier, this study is set out to examine the Assamese Sikh social life. Certain broad questions were kept in view while undertaking this study: (a) The extent to which the fact of being a minority and a part of an 'indigenous religion' (Sikhism) of India, is a determining factor in bringing together all the Assamese and non-Assamese Sikhs to form a homogeneous group irrespective of language, economy and habitat; (b) The extent to which the Assamese Sikhs are organised into a distinct category in the local and regional contexts; (c) Whether the overall identity
of being Sikh is more dominant in organizing social relations among the Assamese Sikhs and, (d) The ways in which the ethos of the Assamese Sikhs operate and determine their efforts in preserving their own identity as well as their efforts to identify themselves with the wider Assamese society. In the present study attempt is being made to examine the nature of social relations and community life of the Assamese Sikhs in order to find out some answers to the questions outlined above.

In a social situation like this, where the Sikhs and the Assamese share many common areas of life (like language, economy, habitat, folk beliefs and customs), the indigenous social, cultural and economic factors are likely to be significant determinants in the functioning of community life of the Assamese Sikhs. The scope of the present study may broadly be stated as follows: It is intended to examine the relative importance of Sikh norms and values and the indigenous social, cultural and economic factors in determining the overall character of Assamese Sikh social life.

To understand the various aspects of social relations among the Assamese Sikhs, instead of concentrating on specific areas of their social life, attempt is being made in this dissertation to study the nature of Sikh social
life by way of collecting data on a wide variety of topics.

In a developing and multiethnic country like India, there is obvious need for scientific exploration of the nature of various ethnic groups and their inter-relationships in order to understand the cooperation, competition and conflict among different ethnic groups. Inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts often erupt in parts of the country involving various groups, including the Sikhs. It can be stated that empirical studies delineating the characters of intra and inter-group relations in specific communities can provide us with facts for a better understanding of the situation rather than what could be obtained through generalised studies. The present study reveals some aspects on Sikh-non-Sikh relations in this part of the country. To this extent, the study may be said to have a representative value for this region.

STUDIES ON SIKHS AND SIKHISM

Empirical studies embodying different aspects of Sikh socio-religious life, especially in parts of Punjab, have been made by a number of scholars. A few empirical studies delineating the problem of migration and adaptation have also been made by some scholars among the migrant
Sikhs living abroad.

There is a wealth of basic ethnographic material on the Sikhs (e.g., Bingley 1899; Gordon 1904; Ibbetson 1916; Macauliffe 1909; Mandelbaum 1972: 539-543). One comes across studies on family, kinship and marriage in different Punjabi communities, including the Sikhs, undertaken by social anthropologists and sociologists. Jammu's (1974) study on changing social structure in rural Punjab has indicated that changes have occurred in the ceremonial aspects of Sikh marriage. Rajagopalan et al. (1967) have shown that various aspects of Sikh marriage are changing in a number of ways. These changes include disappearance of inter-religious marriages; broadening of caste as a factor in endogamy; observance of endogamous restrictions more than exogamous ones; late age at marriage; increasing age difference of marital partners, etc. Singh (1968: 224-230; 1969: 18-29) has also studied the changing ceremonies in Sikh marriage and its transition. Bedi (1971: 52-60) has described various rites and ceremonies performed during marriage in Punjab. Sandhu's (1981: 311-316) study of the rites of passage brings out how ritual observations of some scheduled castes vary from those of the Sikh Jats and how these variations are linked with ritual and social

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4 A peasant caste dominant in Punjab.
status of these groups of people.

Karve (1953 : 93-136) has studied kinship terminology and kinship usages of various north Indian communities including the Punjabis. Murray (1971 : 545-554) has analysed the Punjabi kinship terminology as a semantic system. On the basis of the findings, Murray has offered a simple reformulation of the relationship among structure, terminology and biology. Smith's (1960 : 161-179) study of social structure in Punjab reveals that there is a country-wide marital network in rural Punjab. Smith observes that pattis (internal sub-divisions of a village) play a dominant role in marriage exogamy in rural Punjab. Both among the rural and urban Sikhs in Punjab, patrilocal/neolocal nuclear family forms the dominant pattern and joint families are few and far between (Singh 1987 : 3).

Another field of interest for the scholars has been caste among the Sikhs. Like the Hindus, the Sikhs are also divided into a number of castes. Helweg (1979 : 13) states: "The Sikh bond with Hinduism has never been severed in spite of the Sikh Gurus rejecting castes". Singh (1967 : 69-86) has studied caste and inter-caste relations in a Sikh village, called Daleke, situated at a distance of nearly 8 km. from Tarna Taran in Amritsar district in Punjab. Singh (1977) has studied caste among non-Hindus
including the Sikhs in India.

There are very few ethnographic studies on Sikhism. Singh (1958: 479-503; 1961: 191-219) has studied religion in the Sikh village (Daleke) already referred to. These studies have revealed that the Sikh villagers, besides believing in Sikh religious practices, also retain their faith in ancestral spirits, Muslim faqirs and Hindu demons and deities although they are given a place of secondary importance and there is variation with regard to belief in Sikhism among various castes in the village (Singh 1961: 218). Uberoi (1967: 87-100) has studied the ideological meaning of Sikhism and its social function in the context of Sikh social system.

The aspirations for occupying positions of leadership are widespread among the Sikhs. A few study have been undertaken by different scholars to understand the leadership phenomena among the Sikhs. Izmirlian (1979) has shown that contemporary Sikh leadership is based upon factionalism. Singh (1976) studies, in a comparative framework, the leadership pattern in two medium-sized Sikh villages in Ludhiana district. This study reveals that the leaders in the two Sikh villages influence decision-making in a number of spheres. Singh (1968: 321-351) has studied the leadership in Daleke, the Sikh village, where he has
also studied its religion. This study examines Sikh leadership in the village, including the role of women, religious leaders and scoundrel leaders. Singh et al. (1983: 181-202) in their study of leadership in a Punjabi village observe that factionalism acts as a decisive factor at the local level, simultaneously facilitating interdependence between various levels.

There are a few studies by different scholars to understand the process of migration, adaptation, ethnic identity and ethnic relations among immigrant Sikh communities in multiethnic overseas societies. Chadney (1977: 187-204) has studied immigrant Sikhs living in Vancouver in British Columbia. This study examines the relationship between demography, ethnic identity and decision-making and reveals that demographic concentration rather than dispersal is most apparent and that it is one of the key variables influencing identity. The community decision-making bodies through various processes heightened a sense of identity within the ethnic community. Holweg (1979) has examined the way of life of the immigrant community of Sikhs in Gravesend, England. The author has analysed the problems of adjustment that the immigrants face in their 'new home'. Krausz (1971) has studied coloured minority groups which have settled in Britain since the middle of
1950s. Krausz has examined the cultural background of the immigrants, motivations for migration and employment and housing situations of a number of ethnic minorities including the Sikhs.

There are several studies on Sikhism. These studies include the historical background of Sikhism and the Sikhs, teachings of the Sikh Gurus (spiritual preceptors), Sikh scriptures and Sikh religious institutions and organizations, doctrines, etc. In this regard, mention may be made of Cunningham (1960); Field (1914); Macauliffe (1909); McLeod (1976) and Singh (1953, 1963, 1966, 1967, 1983). The study on the Sikhs and their religion by Cole et al. (1978: xv-xvii; 196-204) has listed the primary and secondary sources and additional bibliography on Sikhism. This list gives an idea of the number of books already published embodying various aspects of Sikhism. Sikhism and the Sikhs in the context of Indian society is the major theme of a book edited by Ray (1967). This book contains a large number of papers written by various scholars. The seven papers presented in the last section of this book have clearly shown the impact of Hinduism and Islam on Sikhism and the relationship of these three religions.
In so far as the Assamese Sikhs are concerned, ethnographic studies are practically non-existent. There are a few articles published in Assamese and English dealing with various social and cultural aspects of the Assamese Sikhs. But these are not objective anthropological or sociological studies. The study by Neog (1984) on the formal religions of northeastern India falling within the categories of Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism in their historical perspective may be mentioned here.

FIELD WORK

This dissertation describes the nature of social relations and certain other associated aspects of the contemporary Assamese Sikh social life. The basic ethnographic material on which the study is based were collected in an Assamese village, Barkola. The Assamese Sikhs of Barkola make up the largest Sikh community of Assam. Five different Assamese Hindu caste groups, a tribal group and six households of Chamars, who have migrated

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5 For details, see bibliography.

6 A caste of leather-worker. The Chamars of Barkola are agriculturists.
from Bihar, also live in the same village side by side with the Sikhs. The locale thus provide the Sikhs with a framework for both intra and inter-community interactions.

This thesis reports the results of nearly three years of field work, from mid-1984 to mid-1987, among the Assamese Sikhs of Barkola village (Fig. 1). Social relations observed in a specific situation are not likely to be similar in every detail among other Sikhs living in different rural and urban situations. Variations in the indigenous culture, coupled with different local forces and factors, are bound to exert varying influences on different local communities. On the other hand, the village selected for the present study is not an isolated and independent entity. It bears many features of the wider society. It can be considered as a localized expression of the wider society. To this extent, the variations among different local Assamese Sikh communities do not affect the representative value of the present study.

It was felt that field work undertaken in one locality was not likely to generate data to provide answers to the questions kept in view. Though the overwhelming majority of the Assamese Sikhs are rural inhabitants and agriculturists by occupation, in the towns of Assam there are a few concentrations of Assamese Sikhs who pursue
ASSAM SHOWING THE DISTRICTS AND THE PLACES OF FIELD WORK

FIELD WORK UNDERTAKEN IN:
1. BARHOLA
2. CHAPARNUKH
3. DHUBRI
4. GUWAHATI
5. NAGAON TOWN

LOCATION OF ASSAM IN INDIA

BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER

REFERENCES

NAGALAND

BURMA

BANGLA DESH

MEGHALAYA

N.C. HILLS

ANGIMING

KAMRUPT

GOALPARA

BHUTAN

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

DIBRUGARH

LAMJUMG

FIG. 1
various non-agricultural vocations. To have a fair idea about the rural and urban Assamese Sikhs living in parts of Assam besides Barkola, and the networks of social relations which the Barkola Sikhs maintain with their counterparts living elsewhere, I undertook short-term field studies in the villages of Chaparmukh, Hatipara and Lanka. In the same fashion, short-term field work was undertaken in the towns of Dhubri, Nagaon and in Guwahati city. At Barkola, basic quantitative information on Sikh households were collected with the help of a cyclostyled schedule.** Besides the Sikhs, a large number of non-Sikh villagers of Barkola were interviewed to collect relevant information. In addition to the structured schedule, qualitative data have been collected through usual field techniques, viz., direct observation, participant observation, genealogical method and concrete case studies. I lived in Barkola for more than seven months split into several field trips. I was able to establish friendship with the villagers — both Sikhs and non-Sikhs. I visited their homes, attended village and household-level ceremonies and festivals, took part in formal and informal meetings and had ample opportunities to gather information in informal chats with the people.

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7 See Appendix I.
During my short field trips to the towns and other villages already referred to, I collected information pertaining to the problem of study through observations and interviews. Much of the information on institutions and organizations of the Assamese Sikhs beyond Barkola were collected through participation in formal gatherings of the Sikhs and also interviewing those Sikhs who held important positions in the wider community forums and were prominent persons of the community.

This is a study on a group of people with whom I myself, like other Assamese, share many elements of Assamese culture in common. There are certain advantages as well as disadvantages for a local ethnographer. Establishing rapport with the people for collecting data might be easy for a local ethnographer, but at the same time people might be reluctant to reveal certain facts considering that these might be passed on by the researcher to their fellow community members. I have experienced both the advantages and the disadvantages. One of the important problems faced by a local ethnographer is that he is regarded by his informants to know as much as of the 'things' as the informants themselves. There is also a possibility of ignoring or taking for granted relevant facts which might appear to be too obvious to a local ethnographer. These
circumstances might affect the objectivity of an ethnographic study. I have constantly tried to keep these points in mind throughout the field work and in writing this dissertation. Every effort has been made to present in this study objective and authentic data. Like many other ethnographic accounts, the descriptions in this study are also presented in the 'ethnographic present'. The names of the persons used in the case studies are fictitious. This is done to disguise the actual identities of the individuals.

PRESENTATION OF THE MATERIAL

In formulating the plan for the present study, right from the field work to writing down the description, it has been found convenient to maintain a wide approach.

The following chapter, Chapter II, provides a general outline of Sikhism and the Sikhs. Some aspects of the Sikh way of life have also been described in this chapter. The chapter is intended to give an idea about the historical background of Sikhism and the Sikhs and certain

8 ".......... that is to say we shall write in the present tense, with the remainder that this applies to the time at which the ethnographic observations were made and not to the conditions existing in the present time" (Piddington 1957 : 685).
In Chapters III, IV, V, VI, VII and VIII, I have presented the core material on the Assamese Sikhs. Chapter III presents a historical and demographic outline of the Sikhs of Assam. In this chapter particular attention is paid to examine the process through which the Assamese Sikh community has come into existence.

The fourth chapter profiles the village of Barkola as a setting. This chapter describes the village community and the background of the Assamese Sikhs of Barkola. In addition to some demographic aspects of the Sikhs of Barkola, this chapter also describes briefly the dress and ornaments used by the Assamese Sikhs. In Chapter V, the economic life of Barkola Sikhs has been described.

After describing the historical background of the Assamese Sikhs, the village setting of Barkola, and the economic life of the Barkola Sikhs, we move on to Chapter VI which contains descriptions of various aspects of religious life of the Assamese Sikhs. The description in this chapter has been made in terms of actual social practices rather than the formal precepts of Sikhism. The formal principles of Sikhism is not the primary concern of this chapter. But
some such principles have been referred to as analytical bases.

Chapter VII is an account of community relations of the Barkola Sikhs in the contexts of household, kinship and marriage. In this chapter, an attempt is made to examine the importance of household, kinship and marriage as the bases of social relations among the rural Sikhs.

The descriptions of social relations among the Sikhs themselves and between the Sikhs and their neighbours alone can hardly provide a comprehensive picture of the field of social relations of the Assamese Sikhs. The expansion of social relations of the Sikh has taken place through the extension of their religious, economic and social ties with the wider society. Such networks have in many ways contributed to the functioning of Assamese Sikhs' social life. Chapter VIII is mainly concerned with the social relations of the Barkola Sikh with their neighbours and their involvement in the wider social situation.

The concluding chapter (Chapter IX) contains discussion on the findings of the preceding chapters. In this chapter, I have examined the relative importance of Sikh mores—against the indigenous socio-cultural factors—in determining the nature and functioning of Assamese Sikh social life.