APPENDIX D

Extracts from Folk Customs and Folklore of the Sylhet District in India written by Padmanath Bhattacharjee.

(This paper was published originally in two consecutive issues of Man in India in 1930 (Vol. X, pp. 116-149 and 244-267). It was written in reply to a questionnaire sent to the author by William Crooke, the author of the Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India. Bhattacharjee's paper is perhaps the first published work on the folk culture of the Surma Valley. A number of folk customs, beliefs and rites are common to the people of both Sylhet and Cachar. Relevant extracts from this pioneer work are given below. Naturally only those customs and notions are quoted here which have been shared equally by the people of Cachar along with their counterparts of Sylhet. In cases of some rites, there are some local variations as to their functional aspects. Present thesis does not include a number of rites and notions already discussed in Bhattacharjee's paper to avoid repetition.)

Sun worship: (p. 116-117)

On Sundays in the month of Magh, the worship of the Sun is performed with great pomp. At that time the devotees remain standing the whole day and enjoy neither
meal nor protection from sunshine. In days of yore the devotees would take a lamp in hand, plunge themselves into water at sunrise, and standing in water naval deep, they would look towards the Sun, shifting the direction of their faces from east to west as the sun would move in its diurnal course till it set down when the devotees would come out of the water to take their food. Only very lately the custom was to remain standing on land at a spot, looking towards the Sun with a lamp in hand. Now-a-days, however, the worshipper only abstain from sitting down and enjoying their meals and taking shelter in the house, and those who feel difficulty even in this much, observe fasting only. But even now the position of the wick-end of the lamp is shifted from east to south-east, south-south-west and west according to the course of the Sun in winter. The lamp is not now kept in the hands but is placed near the pond in the yard dug for the puja purposes. Formerly both males and females would observe the solemn rite, but now-a-days the males seldom do it. The sun is believed to have no teeth, hence his meal consists only of rice and milk. After sunset the females walk round the pond and sing songs till it is dark when they go and break their fast.

(The procedure varies a bit in Cachar. See p. 112-114)
Phirals or village sorcerers: (p. 126)

There is a class of village sorcerers called "Phirals" (lit. Turners), also called Hirals. By mantras and medicines they are believed to be able to stop or avert storm and hails and they are so called (phirals or turners) because they can turn away storms and hails. They are appointed by cultivators to protect the boro crop, mustard or sesame from hail storm, and are remunerated either in cash or in kind. If however the harvest is damaged, the people do not pay the phiral or pay him less. If it hails copiously in the village and not in the field, the inference is to the credit of the phiral who is supposed to have turned the course of the hail from the field. If the reverse of the above takes place, people infer that the phiral of the neighbouring village has directed the course of the hail-storm to their fields, - or take the calamity to be the result of the wrath of their own phiral if he was paid less in the previous year.

Rain-charms: (p. 127)

Women perform the following rites to invoke rains:
(a) They set a sisterless spinster to get a quantity of salt by begging from three (for 2½) houses, have it
buried in one breath underground where eaves-drops fall.

(b) A boy is asked to get the nest of a crow or of a pheonkana bird and bury it in one breath underneath water.

(c) Tur frogs are caught; one is supposed to be male and the other a female; their mock-marriage is then celebrated by moving the female frog round the male one seven times; the women sing, dance and cry u lu lu at that time.

(d) They made circular holes in the ground with their heels. The throwing of the Sivalinga or Salgram stone into water is also supposed to draw rains. With the same object, people sometimes throw papers or leaves into water after writing on it the name of the goddess "Durga" several times.

Hindus as well as Musalmans bury leeches below the ground if the rains be incessant.

Rites observed for prevention from epidemics (p. 135-136)

Raksha Kali and Sasan Kali are worshipped on the occasion of an outbreak of Cholera. Raksha Kali's form differs from that of the Kali par excellence, in that the former's complexion is white and heads three and hands six. Sasan Kali is so called perhaps because after worship the statue is placed on the cremation ground. Sitala is worshipped on the occasion of a small pox epidemic. The above worships are conducted by the
whole villagers in the manner prescribed in the Tantras.

No particular worship is made at the time of a fever epidemic but in any case of hopelessness of recovery the people of the patient take a vow of worship of Kali or Durga or Vishnu or Hanadurga (Rupeswari) or any other deity at their choice; females also perform a Brata called Jara-Jari on such occasions.

Epidemics themselves are looked upon as evil spirits and to drive them away religious performances mentioned in the last paragraph are performed. In order to prevent them from entering the village, earthen cups with symbolic mantras (incantations), and in the case of Musalmans with verses from the Koran written on them are placed on bamboo posts at the corners of the village.

Driving away diseases: (p. 136-p. 137)

It is the custom to drive away trifling diseases, such as headache, stomach-ache, etc. by charmed water, salt, ginger etc. Threads yellow or blue, called Kama, and white mustard, are necessary in some cases of exorcism of diseases. On bhurja leaves are written mantras and then the leaf is folded and wound fast with the ropes (called Kachh) made of the blue or yellow thread and worn on the person in an amulet. The village sorcerer cures hysteria by throwing a handful of white mustard on
the person of the deceased, with muttering of mantras.

To cure tertian fever, the deceased is required to carry on the head a load of unclean and trifling things such as a broken winnower (Kula), tattered wooden or leather shoes, skull of a dead cattle, etc., and throw them on at the tri-junction of paths. The disease is believed to be transferred to any one who treads on these trivial articles.

The village ojhas (p. 138)

The village ojhas are generally men of low caste, yet they are held in regard by villagers because of their powers. Their services are sought whenever a person is bitten by a snake or attacked by a spirit, or smitten with a malady of doubtful diagnosis. Their method of treatment consists of uttering mantras, rubbing the body of the deceased, giving charmed amulets etc. Their pharmacopoeia contains no list of costly materials but only of things like white mustard, blue and yellow thread roofs, common plants etc. They do not generally accept any remuneration for their labour and those who do, are satisfied with anything (say a piece of cloth) given them. It is binding on the ojhas to come at once to the house of the patient whenever called for.
Belief in malevolent spirits (bhuts) : (p.143-p.144)

The Hindus believe that the atmosphere is full of spirits—most of which are malevolent. People look for protection from them to the favour of the deity they worship. It is therefore that some sort of deity there is in every village. The chief function of the bhut therefore is to undo the favourable works of the local deities. There are stories heard enough,—not much now a days, of the contest between the local deity and the bhut trying to get possession of a locality, and for the same purpose one bhut is believed to fall in with one another and in the latter case, as in human warfare, different sorts of bhuts come and take sides with either of the contending parties. But malevolent though they generally are, the bhuts can be propitiated by various sorts of offerings at the place where they are supposed to haunt. These offerings are called dalis, and whether or not a dali is accepted can be divined by auguries, e.g., the breaking of a twig, some unaccounted for noise etc. Like Hindu deities, the bhuts are subjected to mantras; and in the Tantra there are instructions how bhuts can be tamed, and made serviceable to man. One who can attain such power can heal others affected with evil spirits and can also do mischief to his enemies through
these imaginary agencies.

Classification of spirits: (p.147-148)

There are innumerable species of imaginary spirits named in the Tantras. Those that are commonly heard of in Sylhet are the following besides bhuts or spirits par excellence:—

Prets:—the departed souls, so styled till the first anniversary of the death,—haunt about their near relatives and feed on the oblations made to them by their progeny or near relatives.

Brahmadaityas:—they are the pretas of Brahmans who were heirless and sinful on earth. They hanker after a pinda (oblation) in their name at Gaya, and for this reason would possess a rich man and realize what they want before leaving him. They haunt big trees. They can be propitiated by man and made serviceable to him. He has to utter certain mantras and the daitya comes.

Pisachas generally haunt burial grounds and other unclean places.

Yakshas: these spirits guard buried treasures. If any one can propitiate them he is rewarded with riches.

A spirit without a head is called a Kabandha. Any one who happens to see such a spirit dies.
All classes of evil spirits infest mountain, jungles and trees. Brahmadaityas live only in trees.

All sorts of bhuts may attack a new born child and its mother. But Takra Takri, also called Lalsa-Bisweswara are the pair of deities that possess most commonly a new born baby. They are worshipped according to Tantra.

The evil eye (p. 244)

There is belief in the evil eye. If anybody believed to have an evil eye, admires a fat and plump child, or a tree with a good number of fruits, or a cow giving a good quantity of milk, belonging to some other person, that other person would collect three handfuls of straw from three corners of his house and with it would wipe the body of the child, root of the tree, and udders of the cow and burn it. One would also throw away a sweet thing, which was eyed on with greediness, or else anyone eating it would catch a bowel-complaint — the remedy thereof, however, consists of rubbing oil with plaintain-leaf over the navel of the eater and throwing the same afterwards into fire.

When a child goes out of the house, it is the custom with mothers to mix her saliva with earth and taking the mixture with her little finger of the left hand, to put
a drop between the eye-brows of the child in order to protect it from the evil eye. It is a custom also to place a used pot painted black and white on a bamboo post near a flourishing garden to prevent the harmful effect of malicious eyes.

Protection from evil: (p.247)

Magic circles which are called gandi are used not only to protect people from the evil spirits, but also to protect the whole village from all sorts of evils. The sorcerer would walk round the village and plant dhwajas (= flag posts) at each side, and mount on each dhwaja an earthen cup with charms written on it. If a person accidentally comes across a cobra which when provoked is sure to take revenge some time at night, he is protected by a circle of charmed dust round his bed. When a sorcerer treats a person possessed by evil spirit he draws a circle round the patient and cuts on opening out of this circle when the spirit is commanded to go out of the body.

Ascertaining good and evil: (p.248)

There is a lot of things and phenomena from which good and evils are divined:

1) Involuntary shaking of certain parts of the body.
2) Sneezing; and ticking of lizards.

3) Direction of the sight of birds (e.g. swallow), beasts (e.g. jackal) and snakes.

4) The direction at which and the manner in which a crow caws.

5) Sight of certain animals, things, persons in certain states, etc., at the commencement of a work (e.g. journey is stopped when an empty vessel is seen).

6) Good and bad dreams and the hour at which they occur.

7) Days with peculiar conjunction of stars and the moon and the sun and planets (as laid down in books of astrology).

8) When, of unnumbered things, even or odd number of things are set apart at haphazard (even=bad; odd=good).

Disposal of dead: (p.248-p.249)

Children under two years of age and persons who have renounced the world and people of the jugi (weaver) caste are buried underground after death; otherwise all the Hindus are burnt after death.

The process of burning is this: - A person after death is bathed and given a new cloth; the corpse is
then carried on a *machan* (bier) on the shoulder of the relatives to the place of cremation. There, a chulli is dug — generally cross lines with depth enough to give faggots in. The body then is placed upside down with head northwards, and, then the son or a near relative applies fire in the mouth with mantras. The body is then burnt with ghee, sandal wood, agar etc. supplemented by common wood. When the body is completely consumed by the fire, the funnel is extinguished by water and stray bones are collected for being thrown into the Ganges. After completely clearing the funnel, a pillow, a mat, a pitcher and a piece of cloth is placed in it and a bamboo twig is pitched there with a piece of rag tied on it, as a flag.

The process of burial with the Hindus is very simple: only a hole is dug and made wide enough to contain the corpse which is then put into the same and earth is given on the dead body to cover the hole.

**Sacred Trees: (p. 252)**

Jeora (Sanskrit Sakhota) tree is generally connected with Rupeswari, Siy (Sanskrit Siyuhi) with Manasa, the serpent deity, Kadamba with Srikrishna, Vilwa with Siva, Tulsi with Vishnu. Lata, Aswattha, Nimba, Tamala and Amiaki are other trees that are shown respect to, as gods are said to be fond of haunting them.
Every tree of the above description has a legend which is of this shape: A person went near the tree, heard a sound from it, saw the form of the deity or Demon; thenceforth the tree became an object of awe and reverence; or, such and such deity appeared to one in a dream and ordered him to give him offerings at the root of a particular tree and the tree became sacred; or in course of an ojas treatment the spirit in a possessed person declared that it resided in such and such tree and the tree got notoriety thenceforth.

Tiger worship: (p.259)

There is a folk ceremony called Tiger's brata (offering to tiger). The young folks go from door to door and get rice and pice by which they purchase eatables and feast together — giving a dali, containing all sorts of eatables to the tiger near a wood, which however is not really meant for a defects tiger, but is eaten by one of party in a tiger's dress or by a dog supposed to be a tiger.

Witches or Jains: (p.260)

Witches are called Jains and the belief of their existence and power prevail greatly among the populace. One Jaloo Mia or Selbarash
in Sunangaj subdivision is reported to have been killed by a Pain. The witches might appear in any form they like, anywhere and at any moment. They generally haunt woods and mountains, mostly the latter. The Tipperahs of the hills sometimes become Pains by learning face shifting.

There is no test or ordeal for the recognition of the Pains. They prove baneful in the following way: they measure the body of their victim by a thread and as soon as they burn the thread, the person dies; so the people believe that protection from them consists in not standing erect or sitting, so as not to give the Pains facility to take measurement by thread.

Agricultural rites : (p.361)

Before commencing ploughing, sowing or reaping and harvesting, an auspicious day for the purpose is found out, and the following rural ceremonies are observed on each occasion:

Ploughing : - When a husbandman goes to plough for the first time, he brings the yoke and ropes into the house and worships them with paddy and grass, and salutes them. The plough — cattle are garlanded with flowers.

Sowing : - On the sowing day, the Goddess of wealth (Lakshmi) is worshiped; and the relatives and cultivating servants are fed with cakes and other good things. The
floor of the house is painted with the solution of water and rice powder, and a little of the solution is sprinkled over the yoke and ropes.

Reaping and harvesting: When the sickle is just taken to the field, a ploughman hatches and gathers, with his face towards East, only seven stalks of paddy from the field and covering them and the sickle with a cloth brings them home on his head and fastens them at the central post of the house. The man must not speak all the while and, when he enters the house, the women cry u lu lu and honour him by putting some paddy and grass on his head.

Protection of cattle: (p.261-p.262)

For the protection of cattle, people worship Siva or give Sirni (offering) to the Pir. Siva is worshipped in the cattle house. These processes are adopted by individuals for the protection of their cattle. But when there is an epidemic among the cattle of the village or villages, all the villagers join together and perform what is called "Gostha-bihar" in the following manner: The males of the village go to the pasture grounds in the morning with all their cattle and with an idol of Vishnu, and sing songs alluding to
the tending of cattle by Srikrishna in Brindavan. In the field they worship the idol and offer to it rice-cooked with milk, and other things. By the evening they would return home with their cattle singing similar songs as in the morning.

There are other rural ceremonials that are practised for the protection of cattle. On the last day of the month of Kartika, when the cattle are returning from the pasture field at evening, fire is made with straws at seven places on their way so that the cattle might pass through these places and the smoke of the fire might get to every part of their body. The cowherds at that time sweep the body of each head of the cattle with a plaintain leaf and utter mantras at the same time. The villagers believe that by so doing the weakness and uncleanliness of the cattle are removed and they are invigorated, at least the mantras mean so. Again on the seventh day of the waxing moon in the month of Magh the hair of the tail of the cattle is clipped and they are washed well. The cattle are then garlanded with flower and painted with the solution of water and powdered rice. This also is intended for the welfare of the cattle, and like other ceremonials, is practised every year.
The house-wives do the following things to ensure sunshine and fair-weather:

(a) A body is directed to besmear the roof of the house of his maternal uncle, with mud and in one breath.

(b) A stone for squeezing spices is placed on the earthen lamp-cup and this is put in the yard with seven Kachu-leaves one upon another.

(c) At evening some boys and girls are called and an offering is made to a deity named Hasyanath (Lord of Laughter). The children are asked to laugh as much as they can and partake of the offering to their full.

This is observed for the welfare of a child by its mother. The mother with two female associates abstains from food till midday when, after bathing, the mother goes to a Kamini flower-tree with singing, bearing a dali (offering) to the deity. At this opportunity, the two associates go to the mother's house, take meal there and go swiftly away. That day, they are never to meet the mother who is not also to know that they have eaten in her house.