PART TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Till June 30, 1983, the present Darrang district was known as the Mangaldai subdivision, which was the western part of the erstwhile Darrang district. The name 'Darrang' seems to have originated from the Sanskrit word 'Dwaram', meaning a gate or pass. It is believed that in the past, there were some traditional routes or passes, locally known as 'Duars', meaning door in the northern side of the district through which the Bhutanese people could enter the plains from the north for trade and pilgrimage. Some of the passes of the district are still known as Duars, such as, Kalingduar, Burigumaduar and Kariaparaduar. The existence of such passes lend support to the view that the name 'Darrang' originates from the Sanskrit word 'Dwaram'\(^1\).

The name Mangaldai is also said to have originated from the name of Mangala Devi - the daughter of Koch king Parikshit Narayan, who ruled the area in the seventeenth century. But many scholars, however, do not agree with it and opine that the name Mangaldai has been derived from the name of the river Mangala, the mythological name of the Barnadi river, which forms the western border of the present Darrang district.

Being dominated by the Mongoloid people, they affixed the tribal word '-dai' meaning water, to 'Mangala', and thus formed the name Mangaldai.

Darrang district, as one of the plain districts of the Brahmaputra valley, was on the path of many invaders and travelers from the north, northeast and west since time immemorial. From the river Brahmaputra in the south, the district extends northward up to the foothills of the Bhutan Himalayas. Many scholars, including P.C. Choudhury, who carried out extensive research.

work on the ancient history of Assam, assert that the principal races who settled in the study area, in the twilight age of the history, was the Austro-Asiatics, although it is now difficult to trace out the presence of their off-shoots in the region. In reality, the area now covered by the Darrang district, was the abode of various racial elements and the Tibeto-Burmans of Indo-Chinese stock, were predominant in the early part of its history, followed by the Indo-Aryans, who entered the area in the third phase, perhaps from the beginning of the first millennium B.C.

Darrang district was a part of ancient Kamarupa in the past, the boundary of which extended from the Karatoa river in the west to river Dikrang in the east. So far history goes, Mahiranga Danava (C. 1700 B.C.) of Kirata dynasty was the first king of Kamarupa. He was succeeded by Hatakasura, Sambarasura, Ratnasura and Ghatakasura (C. 1600 B.C.). While Mahiranga was called a ‘Danava’, his successors were called the ‘Asuras’, both the terms meaning demon. All those kings were non-Aryans and so were their subjects. Such titles were perhaps used indiscriminately by the Aryans to all the non-Aryan people². In fact, the word Asura or Danava was used by the Aryans in the Puranic literature, to refer to the people of the non-Aryan origin.

Although the area was predominantly inhabited by various racial elements, the speakers of the Tibeto-Burman languages, belonging to the Mongoloid group, were the chief inhabitants in the early part of the history. Even Banasura, the earliest known king of Darrang, was a non-Aryan, who founded his capital at Sonitpur³. According to the late Bishnu Prasad Rabha, the noted tribal leader and artist of Assam, Banasura was a king of Koch-Rabha dynasty of Bodo origin⁴. Except the story of Banasura, reference to Sonitpur in the literary works and epigraphs relating to the early period is very meagre. On the other hand, there is enough evidence to show that this portion of the territory, formed a part of ancient Kamarupa.

As evidenced by the epigraphs, after the fall of Ghatakasura, Kamarupa was administered by king Narasura (C. 1500 B.C.) of Bhauma dynasty. He is said to have been

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killed by Lord Krishna of Dwaraka, and his son Bhagadutta and grandson Bajradutta succeeded him.

According to P.C. Choudhury, Naraka was a dynastic title and Bhagadutta was the son of the last Naraka. Many kings of this Asura dynasty administered Kamarupa for many centuries. Later on, king Pushya Barman (350 - 380 A.D.), the founder king of Barmana dynasty ascended the throne of Kamarupa. Bhaskar Barman (594 - 650 A.D.) was the most illustrious monarch of Barman dynasty in Kamarupa. During his reign, the great Chinese traveler Hieu-en-Tsang came to Kamarupa and wrote a famous and oftquoted account on it.

It is not exactly known, when did the Indo-Aryans begin to settle in Darrang district. But there are enough references in the Hindu scriptures, like Rig-Veda, the Mahabharata, the Bhagawata, the Purans, etc. about various places, even now identifiable within the district. One such example is the Dhalpur, near Kurua hills, southwest of Mangaldai, which is said to be the capital town Dharmapur of King Shribatsha, of the Mahabharata fame. Only few years back, one Sone Dhan Choudhury of Mangaldai locality found in the Dhalpur Hills on excavation, some remains of ‘Jopa’ (bamboo or cane containers with lids meant for keeping cloths) containing silk cloth and other valuable utensils. Similarly, in Atherighat, north of Paneri, there was the shrine of saint Atri, and it was formerly known as Atrighat, or Atrikhat.

Kurua, located on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra, 30 km southwest of Mangaldai, is said to be the camp site of the Mahabharata fame Kauravas, who came to attend the marriage ceremony of Bhanumati, the daughter of king Bhagadutta.

In the northern part of Darrang district, there are some remnants of ancient Buddhist temples. Two such ancient temples, one - the Hayagriv temple near Majuli tea estate in Harisinga mauza and the other, the Mahamuni temple, near Majbat railway station in Orang mauza, are notable among them. Buddhist pilgrims of Bhutan regularly visit these temples during the month of Magha (January - February), even now-a-days. Reference to some other places of

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the study area are found in the records of the chronicle of king Harshavardhana, who reigned 
eastern India in the seventh century.

From the above descriptions, it may be concluded that the Asuras also inhabited in 
this area, along with the Aryans or Indo-Aryans, in the prehistoric days.

After Bhaskar Barman, Avanti Barman became the king of Kamrupa and 
established the Salastambha dynasty. His succeeding kings ruled over Kamrupa till A.D. 1000. As 
indicated by the Harjara Rock Inscriptions, under the Salastambha dynasty, the capital of 
Kamarupa was shifted from Pragjyotishpura to Harupeswar, near the present Tezpur. Several 
kings of Salastambha dynasty ruled over Kamarupa from 650 - 990 A.D.

From about 1000 A.D., Kamarupa including Darrang district was administered by 
the kings of different dynasties like the Palas, Jiteris, Bhuyans, etc. Joy-Pala was the last king of 
Pala dynasty. The famous Joy-Pala Pukhuri, a very large tank, northwest of Mangaldai, is said to 
have been excavated by him.

The Jitary king had a sway over the north bank of the Brahmaputra and left some 
memorable marks in Darrang district. The famous ‘Buhri Nagar Pukhuri’, one of the largest tanks 
of Assam, was excavated by the Jittery king Arimatta to, it is said, satisfy his mother.

After these dynasties, Kamarupa was administered by a few other kings from 1138 
A.D. onwards, when the kingdom had to face the Muslim invasion. Iftikharuddin Bakhtiar Khilji, 
was the first among the Muslim invaders to attack Kamarupa in 1206 A.D. To resist the Muslim 
attack, king Sandhya shifted his capital to Kamatapur in the west. Subsequent to this shifting of 
capital, the administration in the eastern part became weak and the Kachari kings advanced from 
the east.  

In the later period king Gajanka or Arimatta (1356 - 85 A.D.) again shifted his 
capital from Kamatapur to Vaidorgarh, near Rangia in Kamrup district for re-establishing an 
effective control over the eastern part of the kingdom. He attacked and killed Ramachandra, a

petty king, who in defiance of the Kamarupa reign, was then ruling Darrang. The last king Mriganka of Arimatta’s dynasty, died childless and the chiefs of the Bhuyan dynasty came to the power from about 1400 A.D. to about 1600 A.D. The term Bhuyan means land lord. The Bhuyans, perhaps came to this region from the Ganges valley and were of Indo-Aryan stock.

From A.D. 1300 to 1600, when the western part of Kamarupa was administered by the Koch kings and the eastern part by the Ahom kings, Darrang was administered by many feudal lords of Bhuyan dynasty. These Bhuyan chiefs were very popular among their subjects, who undertook a lot of work for social welfare. They excavated many large tanks in the densely populated central built up zone for providing water for domestic and irrigational purposes, many of which still exist. Looked from their location and size, it is clear that those large tanks were also utilised for small scale irrigational purposes. Some such tanks of the Bhuyan period, still in use, are the Barampur tank and the Baghmara tank of Rainakuchi mauza; Baldev tank, Deoraj tank, etc. in Lokrai mauza; Lakhimpur tank and Samleswari tank in Kalaigaon mauza and Dighirpar tank and Jaljali tank in Dahi mauza. In addition to these tanks, there are many other tanks in different parts of Darrang district, which are supposed to be excavated by the Bhuyan feudal lords.

The Bhuyan chiefs not only excavated many tanks, but also undertook many other social welfare activities including construction of temples and shrines in the central built up zone. They also erected some forts and ramparts in the northern part of Kalaigaon mauza, the remnants of which are still discernible at Rantholi, Bhurargarh and Baghorbari. These may be assumed to be the dedicated efforts of the Bhuyan chiefs to protect their subjects from the marauding Bhutanese people, who often plundered this territory adjoining the foot hills in the north.

During the rule of the Bhuyan chiefs, many people from the Ganges valley, came to the present Darrang district and permanently settled here. As these Aryan people knew developed agricultural technology, the agriculture of the area was boosted up to a great extent.

In A.D. 1498, Kamarupa-Kamata kingdom was destroyed by Hussain Shah, the Nawab of Gauda. After his departure, the Koch tribe carved out a principality in the 16th century,
covering parts of the undivided Goalpara district of Assam and Cooch-Behar district of West Bengal.

According to S.K. Chatterjee, the Koches were a Mongoloid race, very closely allied to the Mechis, Garos, etc. They were perhaps Hinduised Bodos, who abandoned their original Tibeto-Burman speech and adopted the dialects of North Bengal and Assam. Some of the Koches converted to Hinduism, are known as Rajbangshi in Goalpara and North Bengal. By 1515, the tract from Karatoa river in the west to Barnadi in the east, came under the control of the Koches. Koch king Naranarayan (1540 - 84) brought the whole of the Darrang district and a part of Sonitpur district, up to the Dikorai river, under his control from the Bhuyans, in 1546, through his brother, general Chilarai. He also constructed a road along the Tarai zone from Cooch-Behar to Lakhimpur, through the Darrang district, under the supervision of his another brother Gohain-Kamal and named the road after the latter. The remains of this road and the temples, shrines, etc. constructed by them along this road in places like Rowta-Chariali, Nalkamara, Bhairabkunda, etc. in Darrang district are still in existence. Historical records show that before his death, king Naranarayan divided his kingdom and allotted the eastern part of his kingdom, covering Darrang, undivided Kamrup and undivided Goalpara districts, to his nephew, Raghu Narayan, the son of Chilarai, and the western part to his son - Lakshmi Narayan.

During the later part of the reign of Raghu Narayan (1583 - 1603), Darrang was annexed by the Mughals. Thus, Darrang district, for the first time, came within the control of the Mughal empire during the reign of Emperor Jahangir. But the Mughals allowed Raghu Narayan to rule over the territory as a vassal king. After Raghu Narayan, his son Parikshit Narayan ruled over Darrang. During his rule, his cousin Lakshinarayan, who ruled Cooch-Behar in the west, sought help of the Nawab of Dhaka, to subdue Parikshit Narayan. Parikshit was defeated and the Mughals occupied his kingdom in 1613. Meanwhile, Parikshit Narayan died and his son Bali Narayan, sought the help of Ahom king, Pratap Singha, for recovering his kingdom from Mughal subjugation. This led to the invasion of the Ahom kingdom by the Mughals. But the combined forces of the Ahom and the Koch kings defeated and drove the Mughals away from the region.

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The Ahom king Pratap Singha then made Bali Narayan his vassal king and allowed to rule over his original kingdom, that is, Darrang. Bali Narayan was renamed as Dharma Narayan on his installation as the king of Darrang, under the patronage of the Ahoms. He established his new capital at Kherkheria, on the foot hills of Bhutan. Thereafter, this dynasty was better known as 'Darrang-Rajas'. Being vulnerable to frequent Bhutanese invasions and being located away from the dense population of the built up zone, Dharma Narayan found it difficult to rule his kingdom from there and shifted his capital from Kherkheria to Howli-Mohanpur, near the present Mangaldai town.

In 1725, Aditya Narayan became the king of Darrang. During his rule, the area of the kingdom of Darrang reduced to a small size, stretching only from Gohain-Kamal road in the north to the Brahmaputra in the south and Barnadi in the west to Jia-Bharali in the east. In 1728, his younger brother, Mod Narayan, captured two-thirds of his lost principality and declared himself as the ‘Buhr-Raja’ (senior king) and ridiculed Aditya Narayan as the ‘Deka-Raja’ (junior king) of Darrang. The Ahom kings also sponsored this system to weaken the power of the kings of Darrang. Since then, a dual government system was introduced by the Ahoms in Darrang kingdom, designating two kings - the Buhr Raja and the Deka Raja, thus reducing the authority of Koch kings to the minimum. It dissatisfied the kings of Darrang. In the later part of the eighteenth century, when the Ahoms were harassed by the Moa-Moria rebels, the Darrang Raja, having found the situation opportune, openly revolted against the Ahom rule. Ahom king Gauri Nath Singha became infuriated at it and during the reign of Aditya Narayan itself, annexed a greater part of the kingdom of Darrang to Ahom kingdom in 1789 and left the portion between the rivers Barnadi and Jia-Dhansiri, which constitutes the present Darrang district, to the Koch kings.

Subsequently, the king of Darrang, Krishna Narayan, openly revolted against the Ahom king Kamaleswar Singha. It is reported that he had behind him almost all his subjects in his rebellion, which was quelled by Captain Welsh of East India Company, at the request of the Ahom king. However, on taking oath of allegiance to Ahom Raja, Krishna Narayan was formally installed as the king of Darrang in 1792. In 1795, Krishna Narayan was succeeded by one Samudra Narayan. Downfall came to the Darrangi dynasty thereafter and different princes started
dividing Darrang district into a number of smaller units, on which they remained as nominal feudal lords. Their lordships were so insignificant that by the time when Assam was annexed by the British in 1826, none of them was recognised with royal honour and no special privilege was offered to them. However, after annexation, the British government recognised the land holdings of the Koch feudal lords as Nisf-Khiraj, requiring only fifty per cent of the usual land revenue to be paid.

Darrang district attained much prosperity during the reign of the Koch kings. With the shifting of capital by Bali Narayan from Bamagar, in the present Barpeta district, first to Kherkheria and then to Howly-Mohanpur, many Koch personnel from the west, associated with his military forces, came to Darrang and permanently settled there. Thus a substantial Koch population grew up in Darrang district.

Since 1206 onwards, many Mughal invasions were encountered by the Kings of Kamrupa and those Mughal infantry and artillery soldiers, who were brought under captivity, were allowed to settle between Hajo and Sipajhar. Thus, the western part of present Darrang district has been supporting a large Muslim population since the early thirteenth century.

It is known from the historical records that during the battle of Saraighat in 1667, Chandra Narayan, the then king of Darrang, assisted the Ahom commander, Lachit Barphukan. The Mughals were defeated in the battle and many of their soldiers were captivated. Many of those captives were brought to Darrang and the king settled them near Howly-Mohanpur and sold many others openly as slaves in the market of Mughal-becha, near present Kalaigaon.

Moreover, many of the Koch kings of Darrang, with their appreciation for Muslim arts and crafts, sponsored some Muslim artisans from the west to come and settle in the district. The descendants of these Muslims have now become an integral part of the indigenous Assamese population of Darrang district.

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It becomes apparent from the above discussion that Darrang district was initially settled by the Tibeto-Burman people, followed by the people of the Indo-Aryan origin. Both the groups settled in the central built up zone and practised agriculture. In the later age, some of them, especially those of the Tibeto-Burman stock, moved northwards, nearing the foot hills of Bhutan. But they could not live there with comfort, as the Bhutanese hillmen plundered them frequently. However, the northern fringe of the central built up zone remained to be predominantly inhabited by the Bodo-Kachari people. In the later age, along with the increasing pressure of the non-tribal population, the Bodo-Kacharis again gradually moved northwards.

In 1826, after the treaty of Yandaboo, Assam, including Darrang district, came under the British rule. Darrang was made a district by the British Commissioner Mr. Robertson in 1832-33, which included the present Darrang and Sonitpur districts. Some British Companies started tea plantation in the district in 1835, along the northern foot hills and subsequently the railway line was extended from Rangia to Tangla, through the tea estates in 1912-13. About ten tea gardens came up by 1874, employing both imported labourers from Chota-Nagpur and a few local labourers.

After 1878, the number of tea gardens began to increase and accordingly more and more tea garden labourers came to settle in the lower Bhabar zone. Thus, the process of population settlement received an impetus in this area, which was so far left extremely sparsely populated.

Mangaldai was an administrative sub-division of the old Darrang district, with its headquarters at Mangaldai town. For a short period the district headquarters of the entire undivided Darrang district were established at Mangaldai and it remained so from 1833 to 1835. But the frequent flooding of the area and the bank erosion of the Brahmaputra threatening to sweep the station entirely away, and the necessity to control the disturbing Daflas along the northeast border compelled the district headquarters to be shifted to Tezpur in 1835.

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The present Darrang district was then divided into two parts - (a) Desh Darrang and (b) Chatgari. While Desh Darrang occupied the central built up zone and the southern flood plains, Chatgari consisted of the northern Bhabar tract and Tarai zone. It has already been mentioned that Chatgari had three duars or passes to Bhutan, known as the Kalingaduar, Burigomaduar and Kariaparaduar. These ‘Duars’ had traditionally dual administration of the kings of Darrang on the one hand and the Bhutan king on the other. In order to check plundering by the Bhutanese, the king of Darrang granted to the king of Bhutan the use of this part of the foot hills by his subjects to grow rice crops, which were not grown in the hills easily. In return, the Bhutanese king had to pay the Darrang Raja, an annual tribute of articles produced in his mountain kingdom, like spices, wollen rugs, lac, etc. As per agreement, the area remained under the jurisdiction of Darrang ruler for four months, from late June to early October, while for the other eight months, it came under Bhutan’s administration. This agreement remained in vogue, even under the British annexation, till 1844, when the area finally ceded to the British territory, through payment of an amount of Rs. 5000/- to the Bhutan chiefs.

The historical record of early nineteenth century shows that while Desh Darrang had non-tribal Hindu population (92.3%), with a small number of Muslims (7.5%), the Chatgari area had the predominance of tribal people, mostly Bodo-Kacharis.

After the annexation of Assam including Darrang district by the British, the people of the district could not easily accept the British rule. Taking the advantage of protesting against increased land revenue, the peasants openly revolted against the British administration in 1894. As a consequence, 140 people were shot dead and over 150 seriously injured by the British Military Police at Patharughat. In fact, it was one of the important peasant rebellions against the British rule in eastern India. Probably, it was for this reason that Darrang district was utterly neglected by the British during the subsequent period, which contributed much towards the general socio-economic backwardness of the district.

13 Robinson, William: A Descriptive Account of Assam, Sanskaran Prakashash, Delhi, 1841. PP.291-293.
The process of peopling of the district reflects an interesting spatial pattern. The central built up zone of the district was mainly inhabited by the indigenous agrarian people, who avoided the forested and infertile soils of the northern Tarai-Bhabar zone. Moreover, the northern border areas were often plundered by the Bhutanese and the extreme southern flood plains were often inundated by the seasonal floods of the Brahmaputra. Therefore, the central built up zone, from Pathorighat towards Kalaigaon area was densely settled by both indigenous non-tribal and tribal population. The record of 1901 population census shows that the density of population of this area, with 81 persons per Km², was the highest, even in undivided Darrang district.

By the end of nineteenth century, many tea gardens started flourishing in the district, requiring more and more labourers to be imported. Moreover, the extension of railway line from Rangia to Tangla in 1912 and then its further extension to Balipara in 1930, through the Bhabar-Tarai zone, demanded the import of a huge labour force from outside the state. Thus, many labourers had to be imported from outside to meet the increasing demand of cheap labourers. Simultaneously, Nepali graziers and Bengali Hindu railway employees also entered the district in large number. Thus, by 1930, the northern Bhabar-tarai zone became a fairly populated area, with a cross section of people of different communities, producing a varied socio-cultural landscape.

In the meantime, the southern flood plain of the Brahmaputra, which was left unpopulated, began to witness the settlement of Muslim immigrant population from the then East Bengal, especially from Maimansingh district, from the first decade of this century. It is to be noted that, the Kala-azar and Cholera epidemics which broke out in 1906 in the northern areas of the district reduced the overall population count by over three thousand during the decade 1901-1911. But even during this period, the population of Mangaldai thana area, which covered the southern flood plains, recorded an increase by 15.16 per cent. This is mainly attributed to the increase of immigrant population. This unabated influx of immigrants was partly responsible for the increase of district’s population by 35.3 per cent during 1931-41 and 24.1 per cent during 1941-51. Dalgaon thana exhibited a growth rate of 48.2 per cent during 1951-61, superceding the district growth rate of 44.75 per cent during the corresponding period. Ultimately, during 1971-91, the growth rate of the district as a whole, increased to 55.63 per cent, against 53.26 of Assam.
At the time of independence, undivided Darrang remained an administrative district as before, with two sub-divisions - Mangaldai and Tezpur. It was on the 1st July, 1983, that the Mangaldai sub-division was upgraded to a full fledged district, with the name of 'Darrang district', which is the area under study of the present work. It is with this broad perspective that the social structure of the tribal and non-tribal population of the district will be discussed in the following chapters.