AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF THE THENGAL KACHARIS OF ASSAM

The Thengal Kacharis constitute an ethnic group settled in the State of Assam, north east part of India. It is one of the small ethnic community of the State having a rich cultural history of its own. They are a scheduled tribe\(^1\) community of Assam. However, they are not shown as a separate scheduled tribe group in the scheduled tribe list of Assam by the government of India till date. The early ethnographic account of the group is not found in any of the literatures of the region. The surnames of the community are general caste Hindu surnames as Bora, Saikia, Hazarika etc. However, there are members who have the surnames as Thengal. There are some members who write Kachari as their surname. The Thengal Kachari is one of the subgroup of the Kachari group. They live very close to another Kachari group known as the Sonowal Kacharis. These two groups are very close to each other in the ethnic line. The Kacharis belongs to the Mongolian race. The Kacharis are also known as the Bodo-Kachāris or Boro-Kachāris in the Brahmaputra valley, particularly of some district like Kamrup, Sonitpur, Mongoldoi, Barpeta and Jalpaiguri of West Bengal. However, in general they are popularly known as Bodos (Brahma 1992:2). This Bodo people of eastern part of Assam who settled themselves in the Cachar District (specially North Cachar) of Assam call themselves Kachāris(Ibid :1).

\(^1\) Indian population groupings recognised by constitution of India (en.wikipedia.org.)
The Kacharis are also known as Kiratas. According to S.K Chatterji, "It is the consensus of opinion among indologist that in Sanskrit the term kirāta indicated the wild non-Aryan tribes living in the mountains, particularly the Himalayas and in the North-eastern areas of India, who were Mongoloid in origin. These Kirātas were connected with the Cinas or Chinese, the Bhotas or the Tibetans, and other Mongoloid peoples" (1974:26). The first use of the term can be found in Yajurvedā (Ibid:27). Racially, Thengal Kacharis belong to the Kachari group.

About the Kacharis, Sydney Endle writes:

They are certainly not a tall or handsome race, and in general appearance bear some resemblance to the Nepāli, being as a rule shorter and stouter than the people of North-west India, though well fitted to bear up against physical fatigue and hardship. In face and figure they show a distinct approximation to what is known as the Mongolian type, i.e., they have square set faces, projecting cheek bones, with almond shapes eyes, and scanty beard and moustache, the last-mentioned being often wanting altogether (Endle 2007:1).

Regarding the physical feature of the Thengal Kacharis of Assam, S. Sen Gupta writes in the book, *People of India, Assam*:

The Thengal males are of medium stature (161'-49 cm), Brachycephalic (82.24), head occurs predominantly Hypsicephalic (72.04) and acrocephalic (87.89) head are also predominant. They have mesoprosopic (84.91) faces and are characterized by mesorrhine (70.67) nose. In respect of ABO blood group phenotype A (33.00) is more frequent then (26.00) (Sengupta 2003:830-831).

In the census of India, 1961, it was written as follows:

In the eastern portion of the Brahmaputra valley there are two functional subtribes of Kacharis, which are reported to be endogamous. These are the Sonowals, otherwise called
sadiolas, from their residence at Sadia, who were gold-washers in the time of Ahom Rajas, and the Thengal Kacharis who were formerly silver-washers. The latter derive their name from an ancestor, who is said have ascended to heaven leg foremost. The Sonowals are normally Hindus and disciples of the Auniati Gosain, who is vaishnava. Notwithstanding this, they worship the idol Kamakhya, and kill animals in sacrifice. Most of them still eat swine's flesh and fowls and drink strong liquor. They engage no Brahman at marriage, but have priests of their own called Deoris (1964:58).

Further, it was mentioned:

The Thengal Kacharis are more advanced Hindus, although they too indulge in forbidden food and drink. They do not worship or sacrifice to idols, they engage a Brahmin at marriage, and perform the Hom ceremony like ordinary Hindus (Ibid).

Thus, it can be concluded that the Thengal Kacharis are Hinduised to large extent. They have adopted the life and culture of the caste Hindus due to assimilation. The impact of neo-vaishnavism is very distinct among them.

Sydney Endle (2007:5) has divided the Kachari race into two groups:

1) Northern and
2) a southern group, the Brahmaputra being taken roughly as the dividing line.

Dr. Jogeswar Borah (2008:157) and Nanda Bora (2000:6) concludes about the position of the Thengal Kacharis of Assam by following Rev Sydney Endle and Dr. Bhuban Mohan Das's classification. They observe:
Regarding the earliest rule or settlement of Thengal Kacharis, it is very difficult to arrive in any conclusion. Various scholars' opinion can be considered in this regard.

Dr. Jogeswar Borah writes:

There were two kingdoms of Kacharis in upper Assam according to the Deudhai Axam Buranji and Kachari Buranji. They were established by the two Kachari group called as Sadiyal Kachari and Herambiyal Kachari. The first king of Sadiyal Kachari was Manik. According to Lila Gogoi, the time of king Manik was 11th-12th century. The boundary of the king Manik was, Sadia in the east, Dikhowmukh in the west, in north there was the south bank of river Dihing, Dilihar(Dihing?) up to Kenduguri. According to historian Benudhar Sharma, the city of Koundilya or Kundil city was called as Halali in Kachari language. King Manik had
no son. There is no historical evidence of what happened to Sadiyaliya Kacharis or the king Manik, after he handed over his kingdom to his daughter in law Mukuta (Borah 1999:21).

According to Lakshmi Devi, "There are no written records of Kachari rule. There are however, several traditions on the accuracy of which it is impossible to rely as history and legends are mixed up in these traditions. According to these traditions, there were two branches of Kacharis, one ruling at Sadiya and the other, the southern branch, who established themselves with capitals at Dimapur, Maibong and Khaspur. The southern branch of the Kacharis claimed their descent from Ghatotkacha, son of Bhima on Heramba Rakshashi" (1992:91). The Thengal Kacharis considered themselves to be the descent of Ghatotkacha. From this point, the group can be positioned in the southern branch of Kacharis. A great detail of the southern Kacharis can be found from the Ahom Buranjis. The relation of the Ahoms with this branch of Kacharis can be found in details. Various wars and the other relationship of the Ahom and the tribals give us some details about the southern Kacharis. Sir Edward Gait also writes that in 13th century, from Dikhow to some extent of Kalang river, in the valley of Dhansiri and present North Cachar subdivision and in the vast land of the Southern Bank of river Brahmaputra were under the rule of the Kachari king (Gait 2005:217). The Ahom king Sukapha in 1228 A.D. pushed the Kacharis of Sadia area to west. He made them to move beyond the river Dikhow. Due to this, this Sadiyal Kachari came and met the Herambial group of the Kacharis. It can be taken for granted that from that time, the degradation of the Halali Kingdom took place. From that time both the group expanded the Kachari kingdom in the Dhansiri valley together (Borah 1999:21). From the Ahom Buranjis and other historical sources, we come to know about the relationship of this Kacharis with the Ahoms. There are details about the war between the Kachari and the
Ahoms in 1490 A.D and the subsequent wars. In 1526 A.D. in the month of Aghon (Nov-Dec), the Kacharis raid Ahom territory and defeated them (Devi 1992:81).

William Robinson writes:

In the 13th century it appears the Kachari kingdom extended along the South Bank of Brahmaputra from the Dikhaw to the Kalang including the valleys of the Dhansiri and the Doyang. Buranjis refer that Sukapha on his way to Charaideo came across a large concentration of Kachari population on the Namdang, a tributary of the Dikhaw, which he tactfully avoided (Robinson 1975:56).

Basu observes:

The Kachari kingdom was along the South Bank of the Brahmaputra extending from the Dikha to the Kallang in the 13th century. It also includes the valley of Dhansiri and what was later came to be known as the North-Cachar sub-Divison (Basu 1970:13)

Thus, from the historical writings of Assam, some informations regarding the Kacharis during the reign of the Ahom Kings can be derived.

Dr. Jogeswar Borah observes and writes:

There is a saying that in the war of 1526 A.D. when the Kachari king Khunkhura won the war against the Ahom king Suhungmung Dihingia, two Kachari youth who were brave and expert in magic and bow, called Jangbahadur and Chakradhawaj decided to establish two separate kachari kingdom. They came with some Kachari family and established a Kachari kingdom with its capital at Kachamari field. JangBahadur became the first king and then the Chkradhawaj. Their soldiers used to wear thenga (pantaloon) in fighting wars. They even used to wear thenga (pantaloon) even in the time of peace. Due to this, other groups used to call king Jangbahadur
and his people of his country Thengal Kacharis. Actually, the group of Kachari who inhabited in the area of the valley of Dhansiri and Doiyang rivers and from the time they established their kingdom in the Kachamari area were came to be known as the Thengal Kacharis (Borah 1999:22).

Besides these few historical accounts mixed with myth and legends, no other authentic evidence can be found about the Thengal Kacharis of Assam. Hiteswar Borboruah in his book Ahomar Din mentions that some Sonowal used to earn silver in the Dhansiri river and they were called as Thengal. But this is to be noted that the word Sonowal does not mean only the Sonowal Kacharis (1997:454).

The Thengal Kacharis were also known as rupiya thakur or rupowal as they used to do the silver (rup) work (Ibid:455). The Thengal Kacharis use to earn silver as the Sonowals use to earn the gold. The rules were same. In the sands of the Dhansiri river, there could be found long narrow piece of silver and lots of silver were earn there only (Ibid:460).

Actually, the branch of Herambiyal Kachari, who were the inhabitants of the Dhansiri and Doiyang valley and established their kingdom at Kachamari and ruled their kingdom, became famous as the Thengal Kacharis (Borah 1999:22).

**ORIGIN AND MIGRATION**

Regarding the origin of the Thengal Kacharis, nothing can be said to be in certainty. The Thengal Kacharis belongs to the Kachari group. There is even no authentic evidence of the origin of this Kachari group. What Sydney Endle says about the origin of Bodo-Kacharis appears to be relevant in case of the Thengal Kacharis.
Endle Writes:

The origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference, in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history. As remarked above, in feature and general appearance they approximate very closely to the Mongolian type; and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race (Endle 2007:3).

Based on S.K Chatterjee’s opinion, Anil Boro concludes that the original homeland of the Boros should be North Western china or between the head waters of the Hoang Ho and the Yang tsze Kiang. He further concludes based on Rev Sydney Endle remark that there is a folk belief among the Garos that their ancestors including those of Boros, Dimasas came down from the Northern mountains. Birinchi kumar Barua also mentions the original home of the people speaking Tibeto- Burman languages to be western China near the Yang-tse-kiang and the Hwang –ho rivers (Boro 2003:6). The origin of the Thengal Kacharis can be thought in this line as they belong to the Kachari group.

According to S.K. Chatterji, “Certain Tibeto-Burman and other Sino-Tibetan- speaking tribes ("Mongoloids") have formed parts of the settled population of Assam since time immemorial, and they have come within the orbit of Indian civilization at a fairly early age, and now they form part of the Indian body politic. Although remotedly connected with the Mongoloid peoples of Burma, Tibet and China, they have acquired their special niches in the hall of Indian penplades and have been long separated from Tibet, China and Burma.” (Chatterji 1991:5-6).

S.K. Chatterji even mentions that the Mongoloid people were very well known from the vedic times. He writes:

The Kirāta or Mongoloid people were certainly very well known to the Vedic Aryans, and we find mention of them in the Yajur
and Atharva Vedas. They appear to have started to come within the Hindu pale from the late Vedic period, and Bhagadatta with his Kirāta and Cina or Chinese hosts participated in the Mahābhārata battle as an ally of the Kauravas (Chatterji 1991:16).

Regarding the Migration of the Mongoloid tribe, S.K. Chatterji writes:

The Mongoloid tribes speaking dialects of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan speech – family would appear to have found a centre of dispersion in some tract to the east of Tibet and north-east of Assam, from where they began to spread into India and Tibet; and the movement may have started, as suggested before, prior to 100 B.C. at least. The route taken by the first arrivals into India is not known. Whether it was from Tibet, and then south by crossing the Himalayas, or whether it was from East Assam, along the Bharali, the Banga, the Subansiri, the Brahmaputra, the Sesiri, the Dibang, the Luhit and the Noa Dihing and other rivers, and down the Brahmaputra in Assam. The Garos, a Bodo people isolated from their brother Bodo tribes, have a tradition that they came to their present home in the Garo Hills from Tibet in the North; but how far this tradition is ancient, genuine and trustworthy we do not know (Chatterji 1974:41).

Sydney Endle writes:

It is possible that there were at least two great immigrations from the north and north-east into the rich valley of Brahmaputra, i.e., one entering North-east Bengal and western Assam through the valley of the valley of the Tista, Dharla, Sankosh, & c., and founding what was formerly the powerful kingdom of Kāmārupa; and the other making its way through the Subansiri, Dibong and Dihong valleys into eastern Assam, where a branch of the widespread Kachāri race, known as Chutiyās undoubtedly held sway for a lengthened period (Endle 2007:4).
S.K. Chatterji also concludes:

Different branches of the great Sino-Tibetan speaking people which had their *nidus* near the head waters of the Yang-tsze Kiang and the Hoang-Ho rivers, to the West of China, pushed south and west, probably from 2000 B.C. onwards, and tribes of these infiltrated into India mostly along the western course of the Brahmaputra. The great Bodo tribe would appear to have been established over the valley of the Brahmaputra fairly early, and to have extended into North and East Bengal and into North Bihar (Chatterji 1991:9).

From the above opinions, the origin and migration of the Thengal Kachris have to be ascertained.

**PRESENT POPULATION AND SETTLEMENT**

The present population of the Thengal Kacharis cannot be given in exact figure. Till date, no separate census of the community is available. From the independence of India, the community has never been separately enumerated in any of the five census operations (1951, 1961, 1971, 1991 and 2001) conducted in Assam (Goswami 2007:15). In the Scheduled tribe and caste list published in *The Assam Gazette* on 12 April, 1961, there is the government notice which includes a group as Kachari including Sonowal (Sarania, Thengal). The community was getting the benefits of the caste in that name. However, from 1976 the Thengal and Sarania were omitted from the list of Scheduled tribe and Caste from 1976 and the group is named as Kachari Sonowal (Borah 2006:1).

According to Dr. Jogeswar Borah, Chief advisor of the "All Assam Thengal Kachari Organization", the present population of the Thengal Kachari is estimated to be 3 lakhs.² The ‘All Assam Thengal Kachari women organization’ also informs the population of the community to be about 2.4 - 3 lakhs.³

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2. Dr. Jogeswar Borah, Kachari Gaon, Titabar, Jorhat, Assam
3. Informed by Kabita Saikia, Secretary, Jorhat District Thengal Kachari Women Organisation.
Uddipana Goswami observes:

...According to Dr. B.K. Gohain, the State’s Home Commissioner who is closely engaged in the issue, the estimated population of Thengal Kachari is ‘about 3.5 lakhs’, a figure that is also cited as the estimated ‘total population of the council area’ which of course will also include many people who are not Thengal Kachari....According to Mohammed Taher, the highly regarded geographer and demographer of the State, the total population of the Thengal Kachari is unlikely to be very much over 10,000... (Goswami 2007 :15)

The census operation started by the ‘Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council’ is being not completed till date. In the voter list of the first election of the “Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council” notified by the government, also includes the non Thengal population. Thus, it is difficult to arrive at a exact figure of the population.

The present settlement of the Thengal Kachari villages are in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. The major concentration of the population are in the Jorhat, Golaghat and Lakhimpur Districts of Assam. There are few Thengal Kachari villages in the Dibrugarh, Dhemaji and Karbi Anglong Districts of Assam. A small Thengal Kachari population also lives in the Sivasagar, Tinsukia and Sonitpur Districts of Assam.

FAMILY AND INHERITANCE

The Thengal Kacharis are patriarchal community. In general, father is the head of the family. All the major decisions of the family is being taken by the eldest member of the family. In running the house, both the husband and the wife has the equal responsibility. There is however a clear division of work
among the male and the female members. Although the society is a male dominated one, still the females are not disrespected in a family. Both the joint and single family system is prevalent among them. Nanda Bora writes:

Generally, the Thengal Kacharis live under the joint family system. The father is the main person of the family. After him, there is the position of the elder son. Husband wife, the father and mother of the husband, the brother and sister of the husband, son and daughters, daughter in law, cousins, all makes a big joint family. Husband wife and their children look like a small family in appearance. Some sons when started to live separately, this type of small families are formed (Bora 2000:17-18)

In recent time, the small family is being seen as most common due to the economic and other problems. Nuclear family is the basic unit among the Thengal Kachais and the prevalence of joint family system is less apparent (Sen Gupta 2003: 831). Still, the joint family is seen in the rural areas.

The inheritance of the property of the Thengal Kacharis is patrilineal. The son inherits the property of the father. In the absence of son, the daughter gets the property. Sen Gupta writes about the inheritance of Thengal Kacharis:

It is a patriarchal tribe and it follows patrilineal descent. After the death of the father, the sons inherit the property. They follow the rule of equigeniture for inheritance of property. However, the son with whom old parent live inherit house. The removable and immovable properties are distributed equally among the brothers(Ibid).

It is to be noted that generally the property is being divided when the sons get separated from each other. The land is being equally divided among them.
CLAN

The Thengal Kacharis are divided into 21 exogamous clans. These clans are according to various occupations. They are Hajowal, Manikial, Muktal, or Mukutial, Durungial, Dalangial, Sakurial, Haigiyal or Sargiyal, Xukrial, Hugral, Biyagheral, Kumral or Kumariyal, Dekral or Dhekiyal, Nagal, Lathiyal, Mekheliyal, Neguriyal, Dinkgiyal, Dhuliyal, Formal, Ejmal. Some distinctive features can be seen among the clans of the Thengal Kacharis. The marriage between the same clan is strictly prohibited among the Thengal Kacharis of Assam (Borah 1999:26). Also, when the a person of a particular clan dies, the members of the clan have to do fasting till the funeral rites of the deceased person takes place.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Due to the influence of the neo-vaishnavism preached by the great saint scholar Sri Sankardeva, one can see the religious prayer hall called Nāmghar in each village of the Thengal Kacharis of Assam. This Nāmghar has great role in the social, cultural and religious life of the people of Assam. Regarding the social system of the Thengal Kacharis, Nanda Bora concludes:

The Nāmghar plays a wondrous role in the religious culture and socio-economic condition of them. In order to conduct the social work of their village there are the post of medhi, bārik, bāyan, rāndhani, deuri, nāmgharīā, pathek, bihuā bora etc are still in existence among them (Bora 2000: 20-21).

The various rituals and religious ceremonies are run by the Satradhikar in the Thengal Kachari villages through the Rajmedhi, Pasani and Barmedhi (Borah 1999:25). Although many Thengal Kacharis are the disciple of the Auniati Satra, still there are villages and section of Thengal Kacharis who are not the followers of the Auniati Satra (a neo-vaishnavite religious institution). The section
of Thengal Kacharis who are under the Srimanta Sankar Sangha obeys the rules and regulations of that organization. There is a village council in each villages. The Thengal Kachari villages have the village headman. He is like a mediator between the government and the people. In all important occasions and matters, the presence and the recommendation of the village headman is must. The small disputes and other small cases of breaking of the rules are settled by the village headman. The other officials like the Medhi, Barik etc may also present if the village is under the satra. In some other problems, the cases are settled by the Satradhikar in the village which is under the Satra. There is also the role of the gram panchayat in the Thengal Kachari villages. In recent time, the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council is also vested with many powers to look after the administration of the community.

ECONOMY

The average economic conditions of the Thengal Kacharis are not good. Agriculture is the main occupation of the people. The wet cultivation of paddy is the primary agricultural practices. The farmers generally have their own agricultural land but those who have no land have to depend on others land to work. They pay the revenue of the land to government periodically. The use of modern method of cultivation by the farmers is less. There are also the natural hazards as flood, drought etc in Assam. The Thengal Kacharis are also facing the same problems. Beside, the paddy cultivation, the Thengal Kacharis engage themselves in the cultivation of the other cash crops as pumpkin, ladies finger, cabbage, chilly, jikā (a kind of vegetable), potato, pot herbs and vegetables etc. Some community members also do the cultivation of the sugarcane, māti māh (a kind of pulse) etc. The trend of cultivating the cash crop is growing in Assam
in the recent time. Many villagers engage themselves in making various products from bamboo and sell it in the market. Also, many earn their livelihood by selling duck, cock, pigeon, cow, buffalo, goat which they keep in their home as a domestic animal (Borah 1999:26). Banana and the papaya are the main horticultural crop and one can see the trees of bamboos, betel nut and betel vine in the houses of the Thengal Kacharis (Sen Gupta 2003: 832). Sericulture is one of the secondary income of the Thengal Kacharis of Assam. They rear endi and muga at home in villages. The silk products are used for themselves and are sold in the market at a very small scale. In this way, some families earn some money. The women folk are very expert in making clothes in their handloom. In recent time, few educated Thengal Kacharis are doing government jobs but the number is less. A few are college lecturers, few are doctors, engineers and beside them there are no high government officials among the community (Borah 1999:26).

RELIGION

The Thengal Kacharis are mostly the followers of the Neo- Vaishnavism religion. The Thengal Kacharis are completely Hinduised and they are no longer in pristine form. At present their religion is neo-vaishnavism (Bora 2007:220). They are the followers of Vaishnav religion from the time of Basudev Gosain and are the disciples of the Auniatri Satra (a neo-vaisnavite religious institution) from the time of the pranhari Gosain. In this way, they are the followers of the Brahma sanhati and obeys the vedic rites and rituals (Ibid :24-25). They are also known as Bāmoniā or Māhektā as they engage Brahmin priests in their religious ceremonies. Although the Thengal Kacharis are the saranias of the Vaishnav religion of different Satras specially the Auniati Satra, still the preachers instead of giving them the main chant of the Ek Saran Bhagabati Dharma, are making them to follow both the Karmakandi (devoted to sacrificial rites and rituals) and
the path of Mahapurushia bhakti religion (Saikia 1994:41). Another section of the Thengal Kacharis are the followers of the ek saran nam Dharma and are under the Sri Manta Sankar Sangha. They are also known as the Namkirtaniā or Haridhaniās. The devotees are of two types: Bhajanias and Saranias. Due to ill functionaries of the Satras and to maintain a distinct tribal identity many Thengal Kachari people prefer to join the Sri Manta Sankar Sangha which is free from caste system in the recent time (Bora 2007:152).

There is also a section of Thengal Kacharis in the Titabor subdivision of the Jorhat District of Assam who have taken the Ek Saran Bhagabati Dharma and initiated into the mode of worshipping of Mahapurushiya Dharma(Ibid:42). But they are not under the Sri Manta Sankar Sangha. Both these section are not under the Satras.

The Thengal Kacharis were originally the followers of lord Shiva. There are still many Thengal Kachari people who are the devotees of Lord Shiva. Many Thengal Kacharis still offer prayer and worship Lord Shiva specially in many ceremonies related to the cultivation of paddy. There are also the worshippers of Goddess Durga among the Thengal Kacharis. These worshippers of Shakti religion can be seen in many Thengal Kachari areas. There is the traditional celebration of the Durga Puja Festival in the Dhalbitala village of Bihipuria subdivision of North Lakhimpur District, Assam. There is the Rāni Bhetā Durgā Thān in the Titabor subdivision of Jorhat District, Assam. In this place, the Thengal Kacharis offer prayer every year. There were many animistic beliefs and practices among the Thengal Kacharis in the past. Still, the Bamunia section of the community are seen to retain some of this practices. Earlier they used to believe in spirits and beside the worship of different types of God and Goddess, they used to worship many planets and ghosts. Thalguri Dāngaria, upar sabāh,
Traditional Drum (Khol) & Cymbal

A Drum of Religious Prayer Hall

Monikut (An Altar)
äî sabah, *Ranshri Devatar Puji* etc were seen among the Thengal Kacharis (Ibid :46). There were *Deu pujä*, ancestor worship and many ceremonies meant for satisfying the ghosts and spirits. These type of traditional religious and other ceremonies are prevalent among the Bamunia section of the community.

**CULTURE**

The Thengal Kacharis of Assam is an intercultural group. The community have its own distinct cultural traits. In case of Thengal Kacharis, it is seen that the group have undergone the process of acculturation and assimilation to a great extent. In the process, the group has taken the Assamese culture. However, a section of the community is still retaining many of the Indo-Mongoloid culture. In this regard, it is also to be noted that the community has also contributed a lot towards the Assamese culture. As already discussed, the Thengal Kacharis became the follower of Neo-Vaishnavism Religion and are the disciple of the Auniati Satra. The impact of this religion preached by great saint Scholar Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva is solely responsible for the Thengal Kacharis in adopting the Assamese culture and life in general.

The courtyard (*sutäli*) and a backyard (*bäri*) are the important component of the Thengal Kachari houses. The courtyard is generally big and used for many works related to agriculture. Moreover, it is being used for many other household purposes. The backyards are also very big. In the house compounds, the trees of betel-nut, betel vine, banana trees are common. In the far backyards, the bamboo trees are seen in many houses. In general, the Thengal Kachari houses look like the houses of other community of Assam. The modern houses are also seen in the present time. Originally, the Thengal Kachari houses are divided into three to four rooms. For example: *Barghar* (the house in which the owner sleeps and valuable things are kept), *Märoli ghar* (an inner apartment in
which the females work and receive visitors), Sorāghar and ākhal ghar (Kitchen). Many people do not have this type of divisions; specially the poor people make their houses only with two rooms (Bora 2000:18). The fireplace of the kitchen is a very important place. Generally, in all the Assamese houses, the kitchen is auspicious and people are not allowed to enter into it without taking bath. The houses of average Thengal Kacharis are made of bamboo walls and the roof is of hay. The doors are of bamboo and are closed by a dāng (a bar for fastening the door). There are cowshed and a granary in each house, which are very important. Genarally, they have a long entrance which leads to the house. The door of the gateway is of bamboo called as japana or closed by long bambooos called as nangalā. The community has many rituals and ceremonies. The Thengal Kacharis have adopted the social and cultural life of the Assamese society to some extent. However, they are retaining some of its cultural elements of its own. The contribution of the Thengal Kacharis is immense towards the Assamese culture. They have many rituals and ceremonies related to the rites of passage as birth, marriage and death. They have some distinct customs and beliefs in all these ceremonies. Being an agricultural community, the community has many customs, traditions and festivals related to agriculture. Beside, one can see the seasonal and religious festivals among the Thengal Kacharis of Assam. Bihu is the main seasonal festival of the community. They observe the three Bihus viz Bohag Bihu, Magh Bihu and the kati Bihu. Bihu is the national festival of Assam. The Thengal Kacharis have some distinct custom associated with the Bihu. For instance, ancestor worship in all the Bihus is a distinct custom of the Thengal Kacharis. Beside this, the Thengal Kacharis have some distinct customs associated with the Bohag Bihu. The other two Bihus are almost same with the Assamese society. Before some days of the Bohag Bihu, the Thengal Kacharis used to tear
wild cardamom (torā) in the day time and practice the bihu dance and song in the night. In Bohag Bihu, beside the men folk, the young girls and the old women use to practice bihu dance and songs in different groups. They use to buy salt from the money collected from the carol singing (Huchari) in Bihu and distribute among all the people of the villages. Dhol (the drum) is a distinct musical instrument played in the Bihu songs and dances. The Kachari cheo or burā cheo (a specific style of beat of the drum known as Dhol) and the dance of the drum (Dhol) are specific contribution of the Thengal Kacharis towards the Assamese culture. In the case of the beating of the drum (dhol) in upper Assam, nobody can deny the contribution of the Thengal Kacharis (Borah 1999:25). The Thengal Kacharis also had the custom of practicing Bihu dance and song in the night before the Bohag Bihu which is called as the rāti bihu. The Thengal Kacharis are basically the followers of Neo-Vaishnavism. There is a section who is under the Srimanta Sankar Sangha. They observe the anniversary of the two saints as Sankardeva and Madhabdeva in the Nāmghar (religious prayer hall). Also, they celebrate the birthday of Lord Sri Krishna. The Thengal Kacharis observes the death anniversary of the last Sattradhikar of their respective Satra to which the disciples belongs. Every Neo-Vaishnavite Thengal Kachari villages observes the anniversaries regularly by holding nām-kirtanā (Praise) at the village religious prayer hall known as Nāmghar (Bora 2007:139).

Suwa Utuwa Utsav (Festival of immersion of the impurities into river) and Panitulā Sabāh (Festival of ceremoniously fetching of water) are two distinct ceremonies of the community. Beside this numerous other ceremonies are seen to be observed by the community. These are mostly related to the folk belief and customs. Some of them are Āi sabāh, Apesari sabāh, Lakhimi sabāh, Gopini

4. This is already discussed in the religion section of this chapter.
sabāh, pirdiyā, Gohali Diyā (Worship of cow shed), numerous ceremonies related to worship of lord shiva etc. The Thengal Kacharis also believes in many ghosts and spirits. There are many ceremonies associated with it. Some are Jakh-jakhini pujā, Gā Dāngariā pujā, Bhitar sakām, Sani grahar sāwal khuwā, jal debatā pujā etc. In many Thengal Kachari villages, these ceremonies are still in practice. The Thengal Kacharis were traditionally the worshipper of lord Shiva. They also use to worship Goddess Durga. They used to observe Baithou pujā or deu pujā, the Durga pujā in thān (a religious establishment of the Vaishnavas of Assam), Suwa utuwa puja in river, garakhiyā pujā in the island formed by river, Sawul khuwā near river (Borah 1999:25). The Thengal Kacharis are seen to celebrate the traditional durga puja in than in some villages now. Other ceremonies are also observed by them. They also obey the Sāt. But the Thengal Kacharis which are under the Srimanta Sankar Sangha only restrict themselves according to the rules and regulations of the organization. This section of the Thengal Kacharis are known as the nāmkirtanīā. The use of betel nut and betel vine is the part and parcel of the greater Assamese culture. The Thengal Kacharis are not an exception to it. An extensive use of the betel nut and betel vine are seen in all the social and the household ceremonies of the Thengal Kacharis. Also, there is the tradition of offering betel nut and betel vine to guests who come to their house. The Thengal Kacharis have their traditional wine known as the xerekā. The use of this wine is although left by many Thengal Kacharis in general. They use it in festivals and ceremonies to some extent. The wine is very important for the ancestor worship ceremony of the community. Earlier the use of this wine was in abundance. At present, the neo-vaisnavite section of the community does not use it at all. The Thengal women are the expert weavers. Rearing of

5. It is also known as Amethi.
A Flamboyant Lass Amid Hamlet Green

Thengal home made rice beer is taken with religious fervour

Clad in Traditional Grab - A newly married Thengal Couple lost in future dreams

Source: Photos published on the calendar of Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council, 2009
Bihu: Full Joy and Gay abandon

Two thengal old ladies sharing past reminiscences over a pestle and a Tamuli Bota

Vibrant Thengal Ladies in Enthralling Spring

Source: Photos published on the calendar of Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council, 2009
silk, muga silk and making clothes from them are the part and parcel of the Thengal culture. The Thengal Kachari women apply vermillion at their parting of hair as a symbol of marriage and the older women wear *rihā* along with *mekhelā* (skirt) and scarf known as *chādar* (Sengupta 2003:831). The old men generally wear *dhoti* (a long and broad cloth worn round the waist by men) and *pānjāb* (a kind of Indian trouser). However, the community has its own traditional dress earlier.

Nanda Bora observes, regarding their dresses:

The Thengal Kachari menfolk wears the general dresses of the Assamese people. But the Thengal women earlier used to wear *mekhelā* (a kind of lower garment worn by Assamese women) and *methoni* (the Assamese women lower garment when worn over breasts) in the bosom that is prevalent among the tribals. This custom is even prevalent among the old women. They do not use blouse. They wear *mekhelā* in the bosom and wear the *methoni* over it. They also take a cloth in their head. However, the married women use to wear *rihā*, *mekhelā* and *chādar* (Bora 2000:41-42).

In the modern time, the young Thengal Kachari also wears all kind of western and other Indian dresses. The Thengal Kacharis are expert in craft work. They are rich in the area of material culture also. Papori Borah (2000:9) divides the craftwork of the Thengal Kacharis genderwise:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Craft-work</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basketry</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinning and weaving</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood carving</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pottery</td>
<td>Exclusively female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal work</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An Expert Drummer

A Thengal Man

An Expert Drummer

A Thengal woman
The Thengal men folk are seen to be extensively engaged in the bamboo works in villages. The bamboo products are used for household purposes and some are being sold in the weekly markets. Also, bamboo fencing are used for agriculture and as fencing in homes. The Thengal women are expert in the bāri management. Community work, team work are the part and parcel of their culture. These can be seen in agriculture, house building, fishing, hunting etc.

The people of the village together makes the pendal of the marriage. It is just a part of their tradition and culture. A distinct traditional rural cultural life can be seen among the Thengal Kacharis of Assam. The maintaining of a distinct way of life and culture can be obviously seen among the Thengal Kacharis. The Thengal Kacharis have a beautiful cultural life like the other communities of Assam. Their folklore and folk culture proves that they are a cultured and civilized community. The Thengal Kacharis have contributed immensely towards the Assamese culture like the other ethnic groups and communities (Bora 2000:58).

Thus, nobody can deny the immense contribution of the Thengal Kacharis towards the greater Assamese culture and society. In the modern time, the impact of western culture is also seen among the community. It is no doubt the young educated section of the community are moving towards the new modern style of life. The change is inevitable. However, the members still retaining a distinct traditional life.

### FOOD HABITS

The principal food of the Thengal Kacharis of Assam is rice. They are not vegetarian like many other communities of Assam. Various pulses, vegetable curries are general items with rice. Various pot herbs and vegetables (Sāk pāchali), other vegetables as cabbage, brinjal, pumpkin etc are eaten as fried vegetables with rice. Use of potato in fried vegetables and curries is common.
Use of green chilly can be seen. However, use of the spices is not so strong as other main stream Indian food. Meat, fish, egg are their favourite food. The meat of duck, chicken, goat etc are very popular. Some families also eat pork. Dried fish and dried meat are also eaten by them. Occasionally they also eat the meat of tortoise. The Thengal Kacharis are very fond of Kharichā (fermented bamboo shoot pickle) and khār (an alkaline condiment). The khar is prepared from the ashes of dried banana peel (Sengupta 2003:830). A kind of sauce made of ground mustard seed (Khārali) and the dried leaves of jute plant (Sokutā) are popular. Taking fish and meat by roasting, cooking food in a joint bamboo, burnt fish and meat in fire are seen occasionally. A powder of dried fish prepared by a special method known as sukuti māsh is also popular among them. It is preserved in either earthen pot or bamboo tubes (Bora 2000:39). The traditional wine consumed by the community is known as xerekā. As already discussed, the use of traditional wine in general is less among the Thengal Kacharis. However, one can see the use of this wine in the various rituals and ceremonies. The Thengal Kacharis are very fond of tea. Cow milk is also popular among them. Other light meals as powdered rice (pithā-guri), coarse powder of parched rice (sāndah-guri), parched paddy (ākhoi) eta are very popular, especially in ceremonies and rituals, these items are very important. Various types of cakes and sweet meats (pithā-panā), a kind of food made of rice flour which is cooked in a joint of bamboo (chungā pithā) are common items in the festivals like Bihu. Chewing betel-nut and betel vine is also common among the Thengal Kacharis.

**LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**

The language of the Thengal Kacharis of Assam is Assamese. They speak Assamese language as first language at home and in other spheres. However there are some distinct phonetic variations in their speech due to the influence of
their ethnic and racial background. According to Nanda Bora, “The language of the Thengal Kacharis and the Sonowal Kacharis living in the Upper Assam is actually Assamese. In the past, their language was under the Boro Language but the circulation of this language is no more at present. At present, their mother tongue is Assamese” (2000 : 43). The Thengal Kacharis have not retained their own language. They had their own language or dialect. But due to assimilation, it has been merged with some other language (Borah 2009 :16). Some of the language differences of the Thengal Kacharis in pronunciation from the Assamese language are mentioned below as an example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thengal Kachari</th>
<th>Assamese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Khāng</td>
<td>khaun</td>
<td>To eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kakarā</td>
<td>Kekur</td>
<td>Crab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dadā</td>
<td>Dadāyek</td>
<td>a paternal uncle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dapdapāi</td>
<td>Besikoi</td>
<td>More</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gadgadiā</td>
<td>Mojbut</td>
<td>Firm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhenu</td>
<td>Dhāriu</td>
<td>Bow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kāi</td>
<td>Kakāyek</td>
<td>Elder brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasaki</td>
<td>Dhemeliyā</td>
<td>Sportive, jocular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeruwā</td>
<td>Jeurā</td>
<td>a bamboo railing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Māsi</td>
<td>Māsh</td>
<td>Fish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saru</td>
<td>Kerāhi</td>
<td>an iron pan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jāng</td>
<td>jaun</td>
<td>go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hukān</td>
<td>xukān</td>
<td>Dry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunkale</td>
<td>Xunkale</td>
<td>quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ekhāxali</td>
<td>ākhalghar</td>
<td>kitchen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Thengal Kacharis have very rich and diverse oral literature. Many folktales, proverbs, riddles, ballads, myths, legends, folksongs, riddles etc can
be found among the Thengal Kacharis of Assam. These oral literatures have been in circulation among the community orally from generation to generation. Proper collection and documentation of these materials has been started very recently among them. The written literature of the community is very less. In the literature of Assam, writings about the Thengal Kacharis are very less. The Thengal Kacharis have a biennial Magazine called as the *Thengal Darpan*. The first *Thengal Darpan* was published in the year 1992 on the occasion of 1st conference of 'All Assam Thengal Kachari organization'. This Magazine is being published every after two years from then. Beside this, few other articles are being published in some other journals. As already discussed, a book called *Asamar Thengal Kacharir Itibritta* was published by Golaghat Zila Sahitya Sabha (Literary society of Golaghat district) in the year 2000. The author of this book is Nanda Bora. Some writings about Thengal Kacharis can be find in the book called *Auniati Satrar Saharar Itibritta*, edited by Kamal Dutta and published by Auniatri Satra in the year 2004. Recently some other articles about the community has been included in the book called *Asomar Loka-Sanskriti*, written by Chow Lokeswar Gogoi in the year 2007. The most prominent scholar of the Thengal Kachari community is Dr. Jogeswar Borah. He has written many research article on the community. Another prominent scholar of the community is Dr. Jyotika Bora. She was awarded Ph.D by the Dibrugarh University for her thesis entitled *The Thengal Kacharins of Assam: A Sociological Study*. Beside this some other writers are Bipin Bora, Bipin Kumar Borah, Hemanga Neog, Umakanta Neog are a few to name.

**ASSIMILATION**

The conversion of the mongoloid people of Assam into the fold of Hinduism paved the way for the assimilation in the past. Regarding its origin,
Chandan Kumar Sharma writes:

The relatively advanced mode(s) of production and cultural conditions of the semi-feudal states of the central and lower Assam created the objective condition that facilitated the process of sanskritization among various tribes of the region. This process was engineered by the upper caste Hindus, especially Brahmins, who had already settled under royal tutelage in the area otherwise dominated by mongoloid people and their cultures. They established marital ties with the overwhelmingly local tribal population. These migrants initiated the process of Hinduization among the autochthons. The ruling class, especially the mongoloid royal dynasties, desirous of acquiring, for consolidation of their power, the respectable Kshatriya caste status, embraced Hinduism, and the Brahmin literati generate generated many myths and stories linking the origin of the these new converts to some important characters of the Hindu Mythology in order to justify their newly acquired status. Following the king, many autochthons also embraced Hinduism. In order to make the process of Hinduization more acceptable to the autochthons, many local religious faiths and customs were also incorporated into the folds of Hinduism in the locality (Sharma 2001:3).

Later this process was more strengthened by the neo-vaishnavite religion preached by Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva in 15th and the 16th century. Specially in upper Assam the impact of neo-vaishnavism role was tremendous and the various sattras played a great evangelistic role (Ibid : 4). In this regard, the Thengal Kacharis are one of the best example to mention.

Dr. Jogeswar Borah writes:

Chakradhwaj became the king of the Thengal Kingdom at Kachamari after king Jangbahadur. There is a saying that during his reign there was a big earthquake. The houses were destroyed and there was poverty in his kingdom. At that time, a religious
preacher called Basudev Gosain was preaching religion outside the kingdom towards east. The preacher thought of giving sarana (religious shelter) to this Thengal Kacharis. He informed the king about it. He gave sarana to one or two Thengal families and gave them the houses and land to live. By knowing this many other Thengal families decided to take sarana (the act of being initiated into the vaishnava religion) by taking the permission of the king. As they tried to cross the river, an old woman started crying as she left her raw eri silk kept in lump for twisting. In the meantime, the Nagas opened the embankment and the current of water took away the people, here and there. The people who survived went to the preacher and told their story. Then the preacher divided the people into 21 groups and decided to give them saranas differently. He allowed them to live in different places by giving them land and houses. The incident proves that they were the devotees of vaisnav religion from the time of the Basudev Gosain. The Thengal Kacharis became the disciple of the Auniati Satra from the time of the Pranhari Gosain (Borah 1999:22-23).

Regarding the conversion of the Thengal Kacharis into Neo-Vaishnavsim religion, Kamal Dutta writes:

The Thengal Kacharis were independent people. They found hard to obey the rule of Ahoms totally. 1769-1780 A.D., when they came to know about the Moamoria revolt, Lord Lakhi Singha sent a messenger to Pranhari Dev, the Satradhikar (abbot of satra institutions) to give sarana to the Thengal Kacharis of north Kachamari area. During that time the Thengal Kacharis were not trustworthy. So, if they became the Sarania of the Auniati Satra, the king will be consoled to some extent. That's why, he sent the message to the king. Pranhari Dev also made maximum of Thengal Kacharis as Sarania (taking refuge). From that time, the Thengal Kacharis of north bank became the disciple of the Auniati Satra. With the passage of time, the place is named as north Thengal by including those Thengal Kacharis (Dutta 2004:87-88).
There are many subdivisions of the Auniati Satra which includes some villages. They are known as sahar. There are many Thengal sahars. There are the Uttar Thengal Sahar, Bar Thengal Sahar, Doiyang Thengal Sahar, Marangi Thengal Sahar, Marangi Thengal Barsahar. All the Thengal Kacharis of these subdivisions are the disciples of the Auniati Satra. They are following all the rules and regulations of the Satra. Beside this there are a section of the Thengal Kacharis who are under the Srimanta Sankardev Sangha. They are not under the Satras but following another path of neo-vaishnavite religion. A few people in Titabor subdivision of Jorhat district are also under the Barpeta Satra. In all cases, it is seen that the impact of the neo-vaishnavism religion on the Thengal Kacharis is great. Due to this they have adopted the cultural and social life of the Assamese society in all aspects.

STATUS OF WOMEN

The Thengal Kachari society is a male dominated society. Still, the women are morally not disrespected in the society. In many cases, the role of the Thengal Kachari women is immense. Like the Assamese society as a whole, they are the bearer of tradition. In all aspects of day to day life of the people, the Thengal Kachari women play an important role. Although a patriarchal society, the social position of the Thengal Kachari women is always above. In any social activities, the influence of women is immense (Saikia 2002:20). However, in many spheres, the position of women was lower than the men in the traditional Thengal Kachari society. However, the situation has changed in the present time. The women were deprived in political, religious, economic and education in the traditional Thengal Kachari society. Even, they were deprived in some personal independence

6. It refers to the villages under the Auniati Satra here.
and rights. As compared to male, the women cannot fulfill their wishes so independently. The wife can eat only after the husband. Thus, the position of the women were lower than men in the traditional Thengal Kachari society (Bora 2010:3). According to Sengupta, “In this society, a female is not at par with a male. However, major decision are taken by the husband in consultation with his wife. The women are hard workers and they participate in agricultural operations. They are expert weavers. Tradition permits widow and divorce remarriages” (Sengupta 2003:831). The Thengal Kachari women folk are specialized in the maintainnance of the bari system of farming.

Barooah and Pathak observes:

> Women held deep knowledge on growth habit and utility of each plant, and they devised to allocate plants to make full use of limited space adjusting such plant’s tolerance as against water loggings, shade, direct sunshine, and drought. The Thengal Kacharis also maintain lots of rules and regulations in the consumption and harvesting of produce from the Baris. These rituals and taboos have implications in sustainable use of resources (Barooah & Pathak 2009:36).

In the recent time, the Thengal Kachari women are able to get the facilities from government like the other tribal women. However, it depends upon the question of education. The uneducated women are still lagging behind in all aspects and had to basically depend upon the men. The Thengal Kachari women are also getting the benefit of the 33 in case of Panchayati Raj and politics (Bora 2010:3). The guardians of the educated Thengal Kachari society are equally conscious of the girl education. The present girls are also equally conscious of education. In traditional Thengal Kachari house, the women had lots of household duties. These are still seen in case of the women of the rural areas. Besides, taking the responsibility of all the household works, the Thengal women also
contribute to the economy of the house. The Thengal women play a great role in the agricultural sector. In weaving the Thengal women are experts. They rear silk worm and by making thread from them, they weave clothes as eriyā kāpur, pāt mugā, riẖā mekhelā etc. They also rear duck, cock, pigeon etc at home and make small earnings. Also, they look after the goat, cows, pig etc at home. However, with change of time, the Thengal women who got the education are seen to do various jobs. The Thengal Kachari women are inspiring the men folk in every steps of the life. The participation of the Thengal Kachari women in their recent identity movement is immense. From the formation of the main Thengal Kachari organization, “All Assam Thengal Kachari organization”, the Thengal Kachari women are contributing in every spheres namely political, social, economic and education. Some women are also the members of the central committee of the organization (Bora 2008:46). The “All Assam Thengal Kachari Women Organization” was formed 29th March, 2008. According to Banti Saikia, the vice president of the “All Assam Thengal Kachari Women Organization” the organization has recently planned to revive their traditional culture. besides the other issues, they are trying to encourage other women to become active in all spheres. Thus, it can be seen that the modern Thengal Kachari women are not lagging behind in any spheres. The position of the women cannot be neglected in recent time in the Thengal Kachari Society.

CONSTITUTIONAL STATUS

The Thengal Kacharis are a Scheduled Tribe community of Assam. However, the name of the community is not found in the constitution of India as a separate group. The community is enjoying this status as Kachari only. However, the other groups of the Kachari Community are enjoying this status individually.
Dr. Jogeswar Borah, the Chief advisor of the “All Assam Thengal Kachari Organization” writes:

In the list of the plain Tribes of Assam of the Constitution, due to the inclusion of the other groups of Kacharis by different names, the Thengal Kacharis remained as the ‘Kachari” only. Accordingly, the group is getting the facilities given by the government. But the Thengal Kachari community is now overlooked by the constitution of India. The old literatures only proves that the Thengal is a tribe of Kacharis(Borah 1999:27).

Thus, it is a matter of great concern for the community in the recent time. Being a distinct community of Assam, the non inclusion of the name of the Thengal Kacharis in the Scheduled Tribe list of Assam as separate community is a question of great politics.

IDENTITY MOVEMENT

The Thengal Kacharis are one of the oldest inhabitants of Assam, north-east India. Living in Assam from time immemorial, they are one of the bhumi putras (Son of the soil) of Assam. As discussed, Till recent time, the community has never considered themselves to be separated from the Assamese society. Whatever the circumstances, the community has adopted the Assamese culture and language. It is no doubt that the community has contributed a lot towards the Assamese culture. It is true that the community is giving its identity as Assamese from the long historic past till the recent time. The community has assimilated to a great extent and given away their language, culture etc in the hope of building a greater Assamese society. Wherever they stay, they are giving its identity as an Assamese only(Bora 2002:15). It has to be admitted that the community has their rich glorious past and cultural history of its own. In all the major movements of the state of Assam, the community has took part considering themselves to be
the part of the Assamese society. The demand for a separate identity among the Thengal Kacharis is a very recent one. From, the last decade of the 20th century, the community has started its own identity movement. The basic reason behind this movement is deprivation. Why a peaceful and intelligent community like Thengal Kacharis have to start an ethnic movement has to be understood from various angles. It is also a great question of identity politics. As already discussed above, the Thengal Kacharis are a Scheduled Tribe group of Assam. But the irony is that the group is not shown as a separate Scheduled Tribe group in the Scheduled tribe list of the government of Assam. According to Dr Jogeswar Borah, one of the spokesperson of the Thengal identity movement, it is a matter of great concern for the community. Earlier the name Thengal Kachari was used in many government records. He writes:

The school inspector of Jorhat issued Thengal Kachari certificate in order to get seat in the Berry White Medical School in 1926. In the lease of land of 1930, there can be found the title of Thengal. On the other hand, in the Scheduled tribe and scheduled tribe list published in Assam Gazette of 12 April, 1921, there can be found government circular as Kachari including Sonowal(Sarania, Thengal). In that way, regarding the Thengal Kacharis as a scheduled tribe, they were given the facilities. But due to mistake or by some conspiracy, from 1976, the name of Sarania and Thengal were omitted and was made Kachari, Sonowal in the list of the scheduled tribe and scheduled caste. As a result, some tribal people started trying best to prove the Sarania and Thengal Kacharis to be not a tribal. Specially in the Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh district, the Thengal Kacharis were forced to write as Sonowal Kacharis. There was conspiracy by the "Tribal Sangha" of the Lakhimpur and Jorhat district under the trust of All Assam Tribal Sangha, not to give tribal certificate as even Kachari. (Borah 2006:1-2).

7. An Apex Tribal Body of Assam.
There are many examples where the name of the Thengal Kachari is found distinctly. The name of the community as Thengal is found in many land records. A certificate has been collected from Tarun Saikia of Titabor Subdivision, Jorhat district. It was the certificate of his father Phanidhar Saikia where he was mentioned as Thengal Kachari by caste. The certificate was issued in the year 1926 (see the Appendix). In 1961, the population of the Sonowal Kacharis and the Thengal Kacharis were shown separately in the Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur district of Assam (Census of India, 1961). In the memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission by All Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilani by their representative Shrijut Jadav Chandra Khakhla, vide its letter dated 14 September 1928, the name of the Thengal Kachari can be found. In this letter, it was mentioned, The Kacharis are divided into several sub-races. The Rabhas, Sonowals, Mechals, Thengals, Lalungs, Saranias, Dimasas and Husai etc. are all from different ramifications of the same community e.g. the Kacharis. The Census Report does not show the whole community under one head Kachari. The number of people shown under the head Kachari is misleading (Mitra and Narzary 2004:83).

In the year 1928 only, the Resolution taken by various representatives under the presidentship of Jadav Chandra Khakhla at Titabor, Jorhat is as follows:

Resolution No 10 “Resolved that all the different sections of the Kachari Community such as Rabha, Sonowal, Thengal, Dimacha, Lalung etc. of both the valleys be counted and recognized as the Kachari community” (Borah 1999:27).

There are many instances where many community members have to face problem for not getting the distinct status of Thengal Kachari in the present time. The caste Hindu surnames also stood as a problem in many circumstances. Thus, some conscious members of the community realized that there will be
problem for the future existence of the community if they did not take any steps. These situations gave rise to the sense of identity and ethnicity among the community. For a distinct Thengal Kachari identity, the conscious members decided among them launched a movement. However, this identity movement is very peaceful in nature. Under the leadership of some educated and conscious members, an organization named "Bihpuria Thengal Kachari Organization" was formed in the Kawaimari village, Bihpuria subdivision, North Lakhimpur, Assam on 25th November, 1990. The first president and secretary of this organization was Shri Umakanta Neog and Shri Prabin Hazarika (Borah 2006:19). The organization initially started the work in a small scale. Later, the organization took the responsibility of all the Thengal Kachari people living in different parts of the country and the organization was renamed as "All Assam Thengal Kachari Organization" in its first conference, which was held in 24-26th April, 1992. The following lines are from the editorial of the first issue of the souvenir Thengal Darpan published on the occasion of 1st conference of this organization:

The oldest inhabitant of Assam, the Thengal Kacharis are now neglected, deceived and are deprived of getting the facilities from the constitution of India. The dream of making a great Assam, which the peaceful Thengal Kacharis of Assam has seen by giving and taking to and from Arayan and Ahom people has not became true. In lieu of it, they are not only crying but it has became difficult for them to keep their existence. Even in the list of the scheduled tribe made by the constitution of India, the Thengal are kept out although all the politicians of Assam know that Thengal Kacharis is a scheduled tribe. So in order to give its own identity and to preserve its own existence, "All Assam Thengal Kachar organization" has been formed (Saikia 1992).

Thus, it is observed that the inclusion of the name of the Thengal Kacharis in the scheduled tribe list of government, independently was one of the basic
agenda from the first conference of the organization. From its formation, the organization is also paying attention to the other problems of the community. The other issues are backwardness in various spheres as economic, social, political, education etc. The community is also lagging behind in cultural development too. From the time of its formation, the “All Assam Thengal Kachari organization” is playing a pioneering role in different issues. To gather and consolidate the scattered Thengal Kacharis in different parts of Assam and to work for the economic, social, political, education, religion and culture are some of the basic objective of this organization. The organization used to have its conferences after each two year in different parts of Assam. Another pioneer organization of the community is “All Assam Thengal Kachari students union” (AATKSU). The organization was formed on 23rd November, 1997 with its head office at Titabor, Jorhat, Assam. The basic aim of this organization is to establish unity and amity by uniting all the students of Thengal Kachari of Assam for their progress in social, economic, educational and cultural spheres and to prepare plans for implementation of policies on these lines. Beside others, one of the grievances and demands of the organization is also the inclusion of the community in the list of SC/ST of the constitution of India as ‘Thengal Kachari’ instead of Kachari (Hazarika 2005:272). This organization is working as a supporting organization of the “All Assam Thengal Kachari Organisation”. In the recent time, another organization known as the “All Assam Thengal Kachari women organization” was also formed. The Women related issues are some of the agendas of this organization. The organization is also equally concern about the other issues of community. The preservation of culture and tradition is also one of the objective of this organization. The Thengal Kacharis had to face another problem of identity regarding the formation of the Autonomous Council in the year 2003.
6th Biennial conference of All Assam Thengal Kachari Student's Union, 2008

8th Biennial conference, All Assam Thengal kachari Organization. Bihpuria, 2006

8th Biennial conference, All Assam Thengal kachari Organization. Bihpuria, 2006
Dr. Jogeswar Borah writes:

In the month of July, 2003 the Sonowal Kachari autonomous rule demand committee and other national organizations of the tribe included all the Thengal Kachari villages in their “Draft Modality” which they prepared and submitted to the government. This fact was noticed by us and we opposed it immediately. Instead of creating any conflict between the two groups, we carried out many discussions with the autonomous demand committee of Sonowal Kacharis and other organizations of the group at Nandanath Saikia college Titabor and at the tribal guest house, Guwahati. We offer them a suggestion to name the autonomous council as “Sonowal Thengal autonomous council” instead of “Sonowal Kachari autonomous council” as most of the Thengal Kachari villages are included in the Sonowal Kachari autonomous draft. Otherwise they will have to omit the Thengal Kachari villages from the Sonowal Kachari autonomous council. However, the Sonowal Kacharis did not agree with any of the above suggestion. Even, the problem could not be solved at the government level. Under such circumstances, ‘All Assam Thengal Kachari organization’ had to demand a separate autonomous council for the Thengal Kacharis. The decision for demanding a separate autonomous council was taken on 12.3.2005 at the 8th biennial conference of the Jorhat district committee of ‘All Assam Thengal Kachari’ organization (Borah2006:2-3).

Thus under such circumstances, a committee called as Thengal Kachari autonomous council demand committee was formed. Within a very short span of time, the Assam government passed the Thengal Kachari autonomous bill on 12th August, 2005 without any debate. In this way, the community got its autonomous council. It is a satellite autonomous council and it is one of the great political and constitutional achievements of the community. The formation of the Thengal Kachari Autonomous council has to face several criticisms from the time of its formation.
M.S. Prabhakara writes in *Frontline*:

The State now has a sixth autonomous council, this time for the Thengal Kachari whose very status as a tribe is fraught with some ambiguities. Further, the utterly uneventful five months between the formation of the 'Demand Committee' and the passing of the legislation and the appointment of an interim TKAC do stand in sharp contrast, for instance, with the militancy and violence, that preceded and accompanied and even followed the creation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (May 1993). (Prabhakara 2005:2).

Thus, the formation of this council has to face some criticisms. The task of the community does not end with the formation of this council only. The gaining of the independent status in the constitution of India is still a matter of great concern for the community. But it is true that the formation of this council drew the attention of the people of the State towards the community. After five years of the formation of the 'Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council', the first election of the council was held on 7th June, 2010. The Thengal Kachari population of five districts of Assam were included for the election. The Districts were Jorhat, Golaghat, N. Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Dhemaji. Many Thengal Kachari people expressed dissatisfaction over the issue of inclusion of many non Thengal Kachari people in the voter list. As discussed above, there is not a separate census of the community till date from the independence. Besides the other issues, the proper working of this council and the existence of the council in near future are another great question of identity and challenge for the community in recent time.