A human community claiming a common descent and normally living in a homogeneous area with distinct language, social organization and culture including totem constitutes a tribal group. Among the tribal groups inhabiting Assam, as already indicated, the Boros, the Misings, the Karbis, the Sonowal-Kacharis, the Rabhas, the Tiwas, the Dimasas and the Deoris are the most important in numerical strength and distinct socio-cultural practices. Though belonging to same ethnic group Indo-Mongoloid and sharing almost same ecological setting, all these tribal groups present a varied demographic character and socio-cultural practices. Hence, an attempt is made here to outline the demographic behaviour and a few general characteristics of these tribal groups with a view to understand the nature of social change among them in true perspective.

Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristics reflect the quality of human population and level of socio-economic development of any region. These include attributes like fertility and mortality rate, age-sex composition, marital status, age at marriage, life expectancy at birth, etc. and they vary from one place to another, and also from one social group to the other depending on a number of historical, social and economic factors. In consideration of the above, in the present study the attributes like fertility, age composition, dependency ratio, proportion of children in age group 0-6, sex composition, marital status and age at marriage have been analysed in the context of scheduled tribes population in the state.

Fertility Pattern

The most important determinant of natural increase of population in any region is fertility. It may be expressed in terms of crude birth rate, general fertility rate, general marital fertility rate and age specific fertility rate. It is closely associated with health condition of child bearing women and is an important indicator of physical well-being of women population (Kar, 2002).
As per 2001 Census, the crude birth rate (CBR, i.e., the number of live births during a year per thousand of mid-year population) of ST population is 18 as against 26.9 for the state as a whole. It is highest for the Karbis (21) and lowest for the Sonowal-Kacharis (15). The general marital fertility rate (GMFR, i.e., the number of live births during a year per thousand women of child bearing ages 15-59) for the ST of the state stands at 103. Among the tribal groups, the Karbis record the highest in this respect (127), while the Sonowal-Kacharis the lowest (86). The Misings, in spite of having high influence of Vaishnavism and Christianity, witness noticeably high rate of fertility (116), followed by the Rabhas (100). This may be associated with high infant mortality rate, poverty, lack of adequate medical and health care facilities.

Again, if the sex ratio of children at birth is considered, it is seen that the Rabhas have more balanced sex ratio (990) and Misings the most imbalanced (912) among all the tribal groups considered in the study.

**Age Composition**

Age structure, which is considered to be one of the basic demographic indicators of population, influences population growth, age at marriage, employment pattern, education, health care facilities, social security and other services. It also speaks about the entries into and withdrawals from labour-force (Census of India, 2001). The population in the age group 15-59 years is generally bracketed as economically active or population of working age. The size of this age group in relation to the population in the two age groups 0-14 and 60 and above provides an idea about the magnitude of burden of dependency on it. It also provides meaningful insight about the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of a population group. With this perspective the age composition in terms of broad age groups 0-14, 15-59 and 60+ among the major tribal groups of Assam is analyzed here.

An examination of Census data reveals that the proportion of population in the younger age group (0-14) among the scheduled tribes (ST) population in the state is 37.8 per cent as against 37.4 per cent among the total population. It is, however, encouraging to note that the proportion is lower than that among the ST in the country (39.4 per cent). Moreover, higher proportion in the 15-59 age group among the ST (56.9 per cent) as compared to both among the total population in the state (56.6 per cent) and ST in the country (54.3 per cent) is a positive indicator of development. But the proportion of elderly population (60+) among the ST in the state (5.3 per cent) is lower than among the
total population in the state (5.9 per cent) and among the ST in the country (6.1 per cent) (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Age Composition among the Major Tribal Groups in Assam, 2001
(as percentage of total population)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tribal Groups</th>
<th>0-14</th>
<th>15-59</th>
<th>60+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Boro</td>
<td>36.60</td>
<td>58.26</td>
<td>5.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mising</td>
<td>40.99</td>
<td>53.93</td>
<td>5.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Karbi</td>
<td>42.19</td>
<td>52.93</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rabha</td>
<td>36.05</td>
<td>58.44</td>
<td>5.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sonowal-Kachari</td>
<td>31.79</td>
<td>61.98</td>
<td>6.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Tiwa</td>
<td>37.22</td>
<td>57.11</td>
<td>5.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Dimasa</td>
<td>38.51</td>
<td>56.42</td>
<td>5.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Deori</td>
<td>35.06</td>
<td>58.85</td>
<td>6.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All ST of Assam</td>
<td>37.76</td>
<td>56.99</td>
<td>5.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam for Total Population</td>
<td>37.40</td>
<td>56.60</td>
<td>5.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India for ST Population</td>
<td>39.40</td>
<td>54.30</td>
<td>6.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 2001, Special Tables on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Assam.

So far the age composition among the major tribal groups in the state is concerned, the Karbis are found to have the highest proportion of population in the age group 0-14 (42.19 per cent), followed by Mising (40.99 per cent) and Dimasa (38.51 per cent). On the other hand, the Sonowal-Kacharis witness the lowest in this regard (31.79 per cent) (Table 3.1). It is quite satisfactory to note that the percentage share of population in the age group 15-59 is significantly higher among all tribal groups. It is the highest among the Sonowal-Kacharis (61.98 per cent), followed by Deoris (58.85 per cent) and Rabhas (58.44 per cent), and the lowest among the Karbis (52.95 per cent). Though the proportion of elderly population (60+) is significantly low among all tribal groups, the Sonowal-Kacharis with 6.23 per cent and Deoris with 6.09 per cent occupy better position even as compared to the state average of 5.9 per cent. The Karbis have recorded the lowest proportion of population in this age group with 4.86 per cent. This is indicative of the prevalence of low life expectancy among them.

There has been significant rural-urban differential in age composition among the tribal groups. The percentages of population in age groups 0-14, 15-59 and 60+ among the ST in the state are found to be 37.96 per cent, 56.69 per cent and 5.35 per cent for the rural
areas, and 33.62 per cent, 63.21 per cent and 3.17 per cent in the urban areas respectively. Relatively high percentage share of population in the age group 15-59 in the urban areas has been primarily due to large scale rural to urban migration for employment opportunities. On the other hand, low percentage share of children population as found in urban areas is mainly due to low birth rate and presence of male migrants without their families. It is worth mentioning that the percentage share of population in the old age group (60+) among the ST is significantly higher in the rural areas than their urban counterparts (Table 3.2). This may be the result of outflow of many immigrants from urban areas after retirement from services. It is interesting to note that among all tribal groups the proportion of population in the age group 0-14 in urban areas is notably lower than rural areas, and reverse is the case in the age group 15-59. It may be mentioned here that among all tribal groups, the Deoris have the highest proportion of working population in the urban areas, followed by the Sonowal-Kacharis and the Mising. In rural areas, however, the proportion of population in the working age group is more among the Sonowal-Kacharis, followed by the Rabhas (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Age Composition among the Major Tribal Groups for Rural and Urban Areas in Assam, 2001 (as percentage of total population)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tribal Groups</th>
<th>0 - 14</th>
<th>15 - 59</th>
<th>60 +</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Boro</td>
<td>36.75</td>
<td>32.52</td>
<td>58.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mising</td>
<td>41.17</td>
<td>31.04</td>
<td>53.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Karbi</td>
<td>42.44</td>
<td>39.50</td>
<td>52.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rabha</td>
<td>36.16</td>
<td>31.51</td>
<td>58.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sonowal-Kachari</td>
<td>32.06</td>
<td>28.25</td>
<td>61.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Tiwa</td>
<td>37.36</td>
<td>32.94</td>
<td>56.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Dimasa</td>
<td>38.92</td>
<td>35.06</td>
<td>55.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Deori</td>
<td>35.39</td>
<td>29.97</td>
<td>58.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All ST of Assam</td>
<td>37.96</td>
<td>33.62</td>
<td>56.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 2001, *Special Tables on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Assam.*

Dependency ratio, an important demographic index to understand the pressure of children and older population (non-working group) upon the adult population (working group), is found to vary from one tribal group to another, and also from rural to urban areas in the state. Such variation is mainly associated with variation in fertility and life expectancy. Among the ST population of the state, this ratio is found to be 75.47 per cent.
as against 76.4 per cent for total population in the state and 75.2 per cent for the ST in the country. However, there exists significant variation in the ratio among the different tribal groups in the state. Depending on fertility behaviour and socio-economic condition the dependency ratio is found to vary from 61.34 per cent among the Sonowal-Kacharis to 88.86 per cent among the Karbis (Table 3.3). Moreover, there exists marked variation in this respect among the tribal groups between rural and urban areas. Remarkably, the rural-urban differential in dependency ratio among the Mising community (Rural: 86.22 per cent; urban: 50.31 per cent) is found to be the highest. The picture in this respect is quite satisfactory among the Sonowal-Kacharis (rural: 62.55 per cent; urban: 47.23 per cent).

Table 3.3: Age Dependency Ratio among the major Tribal Groups in Assam, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tribal Groups</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Boro</td>
<td>71.64</td>
<td>72.32</td>
<td>55.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mising</td>
<td>85.43</td>
<td>86.22</td>
<td>50.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Karbi</td>
<td>88.86</td>
<td>90.37</td>
<td>73.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rabha</td>
<td>71.11</td>
<td>71.61</td>
<td>53.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sonowal-Kachari</td>
<td>61.34</td>
<td>62.55</td>
<td>47.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Tiwa</td>
<td>75.10</td>
<td>75.74</td>
<td>57.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Dimasa</td>
<td>77.24</td>
<td>79.56</td>
<td>59.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Deori</td>
<td>70.25</td>
<td>71.67</td>
<td>46.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All ST Population</td>
<td>75.47</td>
<td>76.40</td>
<td>58.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 2001, Special Tables on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Assam.

Population in the Age Group 0-6

Population in the age group 0-6 provides insight into the demographic characteristics of women in an area. In Assam, among the ST population it varies spatially depending upon related demographic and socio-economic factors. At district level, the percentage share of population in this group varies from 19.46 in Karbi Anglong (dominant Karbi area) to 12.48 in Dibrugarh (Sonowal-Kachari dominant area) as against 16.68 for the state's ST population (Fig. 3.1). Again, when tribal groupwise data are considered, the picture is further strengthened with Karbis having the highest population in this age group (20.06 per cent) and the Sonowal-Kacharis the lowest (13.33 per cent). The situation is true for rural areas as well. In urban areas, though the Karbis still maintain
ASSAM
CHILDREN POPULATION AMONG THE SCHEDULED TRIBES, 2001

Fig. 3.1

DISTRICTS
1. Dhubri
2. Kokrajhar
3. Bongaigaon
4. Goalpara
5. Barpeta
6. Nalbari
7. Kamrup
8. Darrang
9. Sonitpur
10. Lakhimpur
11. Dhemaji
12. Morigaon
13. Nagaon
14. Golaghat
15. Jorhat
16. Sibsagar
17. Dibrugarh
18. Tinsukia
19. Karbi Anglong
20. North Cachar
21. Karimganj
22. Hailakandi
23. Cachar
their rank, the position of the Sonowal-Kacharis has been taken up by the Deoris who have recorded the lowest proportion of population in the age group 0-6 (Table 3.4). The low percentage share of population in this age group is indicative of the prevalence of low child-woman ratio or lower birth rate and relatively higher socio-economic status of women among the Sonowal-Kacharis and Deoris. On the other hand, prevalence of high birth rate, lack of adequate medical facilities and family planning measures accompanied by low social status of women have been responsible for high percentage share of population in the age group 0-6 among the Karbis of the state.

Table 3.4: Proportion of 0-6 population among the major Tribal Groups in Assam, 2001 (in percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tribal Groups</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Boro</td>
<td>15.98</td>
<td>16.08</td>
<td>13.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mising</td>
<td>18.20</td>
<td>18.33</td>
<td>10.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Karbi</td>
<td>20.06</td>
<td>20.41</td>
<td>16.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rabha</td>
<td>15.51</td>
<td>15.59</td>
<td>12.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sonowal-Kachari</td>
<td>13.33</td>
<td>13.54</td>
<td>10.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Tiwa</td>
<td>16.65</td>
<td>16.78</td>
<td>12.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Dimasa</td>
<td>17.53</td>
<td>17.94</td>
<td>14.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All ST of Assam</strong></td>
<td><strong>16.69</strong></td>
<td><strong>16.86</strong></td>
<td><strong>13.16</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assam for Total Population</strong></td>
<td><strong>16.87</strong></td>
<td><strong>17.68</strong></td>
<td><strong>11.45</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>India for ST Population</strong></td>
<td><strong>18.45</strong></td>
<td><strong>18.74</strong></td>
<td><strong>15.23</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 2001, Special Tables on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Assam.

Sex Composition

The study of sex ratio (number of females per thousand males) is vital to know the growth pattern and quality of life of any population in an area (Roy Burman, 1987). As a matter of fact, the sex ratio has a profound impact on the demographic structure of any region including the growth of population, marriage, working force and employment pattern. Moreover, an imbalance in sex ratio may lead to emergence of many social and moral evils. In addition, differentials in sex ratios are linked to variations in well-being and are vitally related to biological and social reproduction and also economic production (Momsen and Townsend, 1987). The overall sex ratio among the ST population of the state as per 2001 Census is 972 as against 935 for the state’s total population and 978 for the country’s ST population. The data pertaining to the tribal sex ratio at district level
reveal that Cachar (1003), Barpeta (1002) and Bongaigaon (1000) have the most balanced sex ratio, while it is least balanced in Karimganj (876) and Hailakandi (887) (Fig. 3.2).

Table 3.5: Sex Ratio among the major Tribal Groups in Assam, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tribal Groups</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Boro</td>
<td>981</td>
<td>983</td>
<td>943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mising</td>
<td>959</td>
<td>961</td>
<td>877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Karbi</td>
<td>962</td>
<td>965</td>
<td>937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rabha</td>
<td>973</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sonowal-Kachari</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>977</td>
<td>943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Tiwa</td>
<td>985</td>
<td>985</td>
<td>982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Dimasa</td>
<td>951</td>
<td>957</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Deori</td>
<td>978</td>
<td>985</td>
<td>877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All ST of Assam</td>
<td>972</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam for Total Population</td>
<td>934</td>
<td>944</td>
<td>872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India for ST Population</td>
<td>978</td>
<td>981</td>
<td>944</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 2001, Special Tables on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Assam.

Again, when tribal groupwise data are considered, it is seen that sex ratio is highest among the Tiwas (985), followed by the Boros (981), the Deoris (978) and the Sonowal-Kacharis (974), and it is lowest among the Dimasas (951) (Table 3.5). The higher mortality rate among the female than that of male and immigration of male in excess of female from outside are the main reasons behind lower sex ratio. However, it is satisfactory to note that the sex ratios among all the tribal groups are higher than the state’s sex ratio. Again, when rural-urban sex ratio is considered, it is seen that among the ST of the state it is 974 for rural and 928 for urban population. The corresponding figures for India (Rural: 980; Urban: 943) are however relatively better than those of the state. The rural-urban differential in sex ratio is indicative of the male selective migration to the urban areas both from within and outside the state. Among the different tribal groups the gap between the rural and urban sex ratio is highest among the Deoris (Rural: 985; Urban: 878), followed by Mising (Rural: 961; Urban: 877) and Dimasas (Rural: 957; Urban: 900). This gap is however lowest among the Tiwas (Rural: 985; Urban: 982) who have also witnessed the highest sex ratio in urban population among the tribal groups. Educational advancement of women and expansion of weaving and handicraft marketing
have encouraged the women to move to urban areas from rural areas. In addition, growing equality of women with men and increasing mobility of women have lowered the gap between rural and urban sex ratio among the tribals of late. Moreover, if the sex ratio of children at birth is considered, it is seen that the Rabhas have more balanced sex ratios (990) compared to the other tribal groups of the state. The Misings (912) however have the lowest sex ratio among all the groups.

**Marital Status and Age at Marriage**

Marital status is an indicator to know the demographic character and also social well-being of population in any area. Marital status of population includes never married population, married population, widow or widower population and divorced or separated population in respect of both males and females. The influence of marital status upon women is most striking. As per 2001 Census, the proportion of never married ST population of the state is 57.47 per cent as against 55.3 per cent for the state as a whole and the national average of 49.5 per cent. Among the different tribal groups the percentage of never married population is highest among the Misings (60.54 per cent), followed by the Deoris (60.23 per cent) and Karbis (59.93 per cent) (Table 3.6). It is found to be lowest among the Tiwas (54.33 per cent). The proportion of never married at the younger age is an important indicator of possible access to options other than marriage and relative acceptability of remaining single for each sex and age group (Kar, 2002). It may be mentioned here that the proportion of never married population has been increasing over time among all the population groups not only in the state but also the country because of economic independence and self sufficiency. Interestingly, the proportion of married population is quite low among the different tribal groups and as well as among the ST population as a whole compared to the never married population. It is highest among the Sonowal-Kacharis (41.37 per cent) and lowest among the Deoris (36.56 per cent). Among the female, though the proportion of married women is highest among the Sonowal-Kacharis (42.82 per cent), it is lowest among the Karbis of the state (37.83 per cent). Moreover, it is interesting to note that the proportion of widow/widower and divorced and separated population is quite low among the ST population of the state (3.30 per cent and 0.18 per cent respectively). The Tiwas are seen to have the highest proportion of widow/widower (4.22 per cent) and Mising the lowest (2.65 per cent). The percentage of divorced and separated is highest among the Rabhas (0.25 per cent), while it is the lowest among the Deoris (0.11 per cent) (Table 3.6).
Table 3.6: Marital Status among the Major Tribal Groups in Assam, 2001
(As percentage of population)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tribal Groups</th>
<th>Never Married</th>
<th>Currently Married</th>
<th>Widowed/Widower</th>
<th>Divorced/Separated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Female</td>
<td>Total Female</td>
<td>Total Female</td>
<td>Total Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Boro</td>
<td>56.53 52.40</td>
<td>39.99 41.22</td>
<td>3.28 5.09</td>
<td>0.20 0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mising</td>
<td>60.54 57.75</td>
<td>36.69 38.10</td>
<td>2.65 3.95</td>
<td>0.12 0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Karbi</td>
<td>59.93 57.10</td>
<td>36.63 37.83</td>
<td>3.33 4.94</td>
<td>0.12 0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rabha</td>
<td>55.05 50.98</td>
<td>40.75 42.09</td>
<td>3.95 6.55</td>
<td>0.25 0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sonowal-Kachari</td>
<td>54.75 51.24</td>
<td>41.37 42.82</td>
<td>3.71 5.69</td>
<td>0.17 0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Tiwa</td>
<td>54.33 50.48</td>
<td>41.22 42.51</td>
<td>4.22 6.65</td>
<td>0.23 0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Dimasa</td>
<td>59.04 55.78</td>
<td>37.74 39.10</td>
<td>3.00 4.82</td>
<td>0.22 0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Deori</td>
<td>60.23 57.47</td>
<td>36.56 37.87</td>
<td>3.70 4.49</td>
<td>0.11 0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All ST of Assam</td>
<td>57.47 54.28</td>
<td>39.05 40.35</td>
<td>3.30 5.10</td>
<td>0.18 0.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 2001, Special Tables on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Assam.

It may be mentioned here that though marriage is a social phenomenon, age at marriage is considered as a demographic one as it determines the fertility pattern and natural growth of population, and at the same time it is linked with the status of women. According to Child Marriage Restriction Act of 1978, the legally prescribed minimum age at marriage in India is 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys. However, it is observed that a large proportion of females is getting married even before attaining this age. This proportion in the case of Assam is as high as 30.27 per cent (2001 Census). The picture in this respect is found to be slightly better among the ST (22.06 per cent) and worse among the SC (34.53 per cent). It is pertinent to mention here that the proportion of ST in this respect is quite encouraging (22.06 per cent). However, it is worst among the SC (34.53 per cent) population of the state. Depending on socio-economic condition and level of educational attainment, the age at marriage among the tribal women varies significantly across the state. Among the districts, the proportion of tribal women marrying before 18 years of age is quite high (above 25 per cent) in Nagaon, Morigaon, Golaghat, Kamrup and Nalbari districts, and quite low (below 15 per cent) in Kokrajhar, Hailakandi and Cachar districts of the state.
The Boros represent a section of the Indo-Mongoloid people whose forefathers are believed to have migrated from Burma (Myanmar) crossing the Patkai Arakan Yoma ranges (Taher, 1977). They represent numerically and sociologically one of the most prominent plain tribes of north-east India, particularly Assam. Their original homeland was called Bod in their own language. Hence they are known as the Bodos. These people have been able to retain their Mongoloid culture only in the rural areas, where the impact of urbanization and modernization is yet to penetrate. In the urban areas, however, their traditional socio-cultural practices have undergone noticeable change due to a number of factors.

The Boros who claim to be the original inhabitants of Assam constitute about 40.09 per cent of the total scheduled tribes population of the state (2001 Census). Kokrajhar, being the dominant pocket of the Boros, alone shelters 21.23 per cent of total Boros in the state and 94.19 per cent of Boros to total scheduled tribes in the district. The linguistic survey of India describes the Boro tribe or Boro-Kachari as a member of the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese linguistic family. The Boro speaking areas of Assam extend scatteredly from the western border of Goalpara district to the eastern boundary of Dibrugarh district. The total number of Boro speakers in Assam is 1,184,569 as per 1991 Census.

The source of Boro literature is mostly indigenous. It has hardly borrowed any legendary or mythological episodes of the old Indian scriptures unlike the literary works in other regional languages (Bordoloi, 1987). Boro literature consists of vast amount of oral literature including folksongs, folktales, ballads, proverbs, etc.

As per the 2001 Census data, the literacy rate among the Boros in Assam is 61.3 per cent as against the overall tribal literacy of 62.5 per cent. There exists significant male-female differential in literacy among the Boros. The female literacy rate among them is as low as 52.4 per cent as against 72.3 per cent for the male.

The Boros live in compact villages with barriers all around their homestead. This speaks of their sense of privacy and aesthetic beauty in putting up a residential house. Each house is surrounded by a ditch and fence, so that they are not easily surmounted from the outside by the intruders.

Their livelihood pattern is characterised by preponderance of agricultural occupation. They practice both Ahu and Sali paddy and are very much prone to the
adoption of improved techniques in production process. They have replaced the traditional mono-crop culture and have undertaken diversification of crop. Boros are expert weavers and each house has a loom. Their art of dyeing yarn and cloth is distinct from other tribal groups. They generally use dark orange or black colour cloth where they weave floral or geometric designs in yellow and blue. Their prominent design is the eight point star. They weave cloth both for the family use and also for commercial purposes.

The Boro tribal people are known for their qualities like honesty, truthfulness, straightforwardness, and a general trustworthiness. According to the customary law their line of descent is traced through the father who is the family head. After the death of the father the eldest male member assumes the charge of the household and discharges his responsibilities in consultation with his mother. The place of women in the Boro society is high. The Boro society is divided into twelve sub clans. Harmony among different sub clans is the key-note of their social system (Hazarika, 1996).

The religious outlook of the Boro tribe centres round the super power of Bathou Barai or Khoria Barai Maharaja who is analogous to Sibrai or Siva of the Hindu Trinity (Bordoloi, 1987). The Siju Plant is regarded as representing the Bathow - the supreme deity of adoration. Every traditional Boro household is seen planting a sizu tree along with a sapling of jatrasi and a tulsi in the northern corner of their cowyard next to Bathau. Mainao is worshipped as the Goddess of wealth by the Boros. Within this tribal group there are 90.31 per cent Hindus, 9.40 per cent Christians and 0.22 percent Muslims as per 2001 Census. The most important occasion of merry making for the Boro-Kacharis is the celebration of Baisagi in the month of Baisakh. It is also known as Bishu. They also celebrate Domashi (Bhogali Bihu) and Katrigacha (Kangali Bihu). But the most important of them all is the one that comes on the last day of the month of Chaitra. The supreme deity, Bathou is worshipped on that day by offering chicken and rice beer. Merrymaking in the form of community singing and dancing continues till the seventh day of the month. In Baisagu dance, there is no bar either of age or of sex. The traditional musical instruments used in dance festival are Kham (Madal), Jotha (Manjari), Gogana (Flute), etc. During this time they observe certain taboo, which includes prohibition of entry into the household granary, disposal of any property by way of sale, husking paddy or rice, etc. It is customary at the close of the Baisagu festival to offer community prayer.

The institution of Kherai, an annual community festival of the tribe, is another occasion when the entire atmosphere is agog with much enthusiasm and festive fever. To some it is the national festival of the community. In creating a festive mood of much
gaiety and merriment the Bagrumba dance has a special role for the Baro-Kachari girls, who make their graceful debut in natural surroundings by wearing their traditional costumes, specially woven by themselves for the purpose. This bears testimony to their inherent skill in textile workmanship and artistic manoeuvre of colour and shade. (Bordoloi, 1987).

In the mode of dress the Boro-Kacharis do not differ much from their non-tribal Hindu neighbours. But they are more inclined toward coloured garments. The male members both young and old put on garments woven at home which hang down to the knees from the loins. During winter they wrap their body with a wrapper of cotton or Endi spun and woven at home. The females tie a cloth round the chest just below the armpit that hangs to the toe. It is called Wokha. In the olden days they never wore blouse, but now they are in the habit of wearing blouse as the other Hindu women, especially in the urban areas. They also use a small border decorated scarf called chadar.

Boro women are fond of jewellery made both of silver and gold. The traditional Boro ornaments are the Kharu, Puti for the ear, Nak-Phuli, Baluki, nose pendent, Chandra har a heavy necklace of five layers from the neck to the chest. Bisa har, and Thanka Siri are their favourite necklaces made of both silver and gold. They are also fond of wearing rings (Brahma, 1987).

Rice is the staple food, but this is supplemented by a plentiful supply of vegetables. The most prized article of diet is the pig and a number of it can be seen in all Boro villages. Their favourite beverage is a kind of rice beer known as madh or jau, prepared by steeping rice in water for two or three days. The rice beer has great importance in the Boro society. It is used in social functions and is also offered to the Bathau borai - their supreme God and other minor Gods and Goddesses. It is the traditional custom of the Boro-Kachari people to welcome their guests by offering a full cup of jumai or jao and the pork. The Boros are very fond of fish and meat. They dry the flesh of deer or pork and preserve it for a long period and use it as food when they are busy with their agriculture. These dried fish and dried flesh are called Bedor goran and na goran respectively. They neither eat beaf or buffalo nor do they eat snakes. They have the custom of community hunting and fishing for food.

The Boro society has been found to be strictly following the rule of clan exogamy in their marital relationship till the recent past. But the rigidity is gradually on the way to dilution. Due to Sanskritisation or due to the impact of Vaishnavism and contact with the people of the plains, they have a tendency to merge with the Hindu social folds.
TRADITIONAL DRESSES AMONG TRIBAL WOMEN IN ASSAM

BORO WOMEN

MISING WOMAN

KARBI WOMEN

Plate 3.1
Among the Boros the usual practice of contracting a marriage is by negotiation. But, the marriage of servitude and widow remarriage are not permissible. In a marriage of servitude, the would-be groom is to render physical labour usually for a period of one year, but the period may extend depending on the degree of satisfaction of the would-be father-in-law. In recent years it is seen that Boro societies do not encourage this type of marriages. On the other hand, a new rule now in force in certain areas is that a man entertaining a would-be son-in-law must give by his will one-eighth of his property in the name of his daughter. In widow remarriage, the widower must cut off all his patrilineal relationship and induct himself to the clan of the widow. *Khar-Chanai* is another type of marriage in Boro society. Here the girl goes voluntarily to a man’s house with the intention of marrying him and stays there forcefully until he is forced to marry her. Boro-Kachari society is primarily monogamous. The system of demanding bride price is only prevalent among the lower echelons of the society.

The Misings

With 17.8 per cent of total scheduled tribes population Misings constitute the second largest plain tribal community of Assam. This colourful ethnic group living amidst the fellow Assamese people for many centuries has been able to maintain its traditional socio-cultural traits unimpaired in spite of the changes that have taken place in the socio-political and religious life of Assam. It is a truism that the Miris, now a plain tribe known as the Misings, were originally hill tribe within the ranges of Abor, Miri and Mising hills of the North East Frontier Agency, now known as Arunachal Pradesh. They came down to the plains and began settling in the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra and Subansiri rivers of Assam.

With a population of 5.87 lakh (male: 2.99 lakh and female: 2.88 lakh) as per 2001 Census the Misings are found mostly in Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts of the state. Dhemaji being the dominant Mising pocket it houses 47.29 per cent of tribal population to total population in the district. Out of total tribal population here as high 68.73 per cent are Misings.

The written form of Mising language was introduced about a decade ago. Mising language is a store-house of oral literature. This oral literature includes folk songs, folk tales, proverbs, etc.

By faith Misings are worshipers of Donyee (Sun) and Polo (Moon) whom they consider as their ancestors. They regard moon as their father and sun as their mother. And
TRADITIONAL TRIBAL HOUSE TYPES

MISING CHANG GHAR

INTERNAL STRUCTURE OF MISING HOUSE WITH MERAM (FIRE PLACE)

DEORI CHANG GHAR

Plate 3.2
therefore, in any ritual performance they recite the name of Ane Donyee (mother Sun) and Abu Polo (father Moon) (Mipun, 2002). However, the primitive religious practices among them have changed to a great extent. Due to adoption of Hinduism as their religion, three distinct features are found among them. Firstly, their religion nowadays is known as Kewalia in place of nameless animist belief and practices. Secondly, the emergence of Bhakats has replaced the importance of their village priests 'Mibu' in all religious activities. Thirdly, introduction of Namghar has replaced the significance of Murong in their society. The Misings do not have any caste system. It may be mentioned here that 98.82 percent of them are Hindus followed by 0.62 per cent and 0.08 per cent Christian and Muslim respectively (2001 Census).

Rice is the staple food of the Misings, and fowl and pork are their delicacies. After conversion to Hinduism they gave up the habit of eating beef. Like Assamese Hindus they offer betlenut to the guests. The use of milk, oil and tea is gradually replacing Apong, which is looked down by people who are converted into Vaishnavism. At the same time, Apong is considered to be the most prestigious item among the non-converts for entertaining guests. Preparation of Apong is done considering certain rules of ceremonial purity. The preserved fish known as Ngo San has a great demand among them.

A distinctive characteristic of Mising women is their expertise in weaving. Their dresses include Egey (garment wrapped around the waist), Gasor (a long piece of cloth, i.e., the chadar) and blouse. Elderly women rarely wear blouse and a long egey serves for the purpose. On festive occasions the ladies display their expertise by wearing 'lekey egey gasor', 'gero', 'ribigaseng', etc. Young women not expert in weaving find it difficult to get married. Traditional male dresses include Ugon (dhoti), Kaping (long narrow piece of cloth around the waist), Hura (head dress), etc.

Dwelling along the riverside it is very natural for the Misings to design their houses according to their existing surroundings. They have no option but to construct their houses in raised platforms about 5 feet above the ground. The house is sometimes 30-40 meter in length and contains 30-40 persons living without any compartments. The length and breadth of the average house are about 60 feet and 20 feet respectively. The roof is thatched and walls, floors and doors are made of split bamboo. Generally the looms are placed under the platform of the house. The houses are constructed facing east, south and north, but not west. As there is no separate accommodation for pigs, they are kept under the platform of the house. The fire place called 'Meram' is considered to be an auspicious place. Above the Meram there are 2-3 layers of bamboo racks known as Perabs used for
PREPARING RICE BEER BY MISING WOMEN

Plate 3.3
drying and storing eatables and other things. Morung or the batchelors’ dormitory is an important institution in Mising village. The main festivals of the Misings are Ali-aye-igan and Porag.

The economic condition of Mising family depends to a certain extent on domestic animals and birds such as pigs, chicken, cattle, etc. In their system cattles are owned by their entire family and thus become common property. But chicken and pigs reared by women as individual property. In Mising society, there is a system of private cultivation among the female members called Riksang and the money earned from it is generally used for making ornaments. The Mising women are financially independent to men. The Mising women are required to collect vegetables and firewood in addition to preparing meal and their customary beverage, Apong. They also go for fishing from time to time. In fact, they contribute more than menfolk to the family economy. The Misings are patrilineal and the line of descent is traced through the male line. A woman cannot inherit or claim any property of her father or husband. Except the property earned by her private income a woman does not have the right to claim any part of the family property although she has a major contribution to family economy. The Mising women also do not have much say in decision-making matter of the family and are least consulted in matters related to acquiring or disposing of property, holding religious and social functions, children’s education and even in marriage. Thus, the Mising women have lower position than the men in the hierarchy of social status (Doley, 1998).

The Karbis

The Karbis, formerly known as the Mikirs, constitute an important ethnic group in the hill areas of Assam and form the third largest tribal group in the state. In the plain however they are not regarded as the scheduled tribes. They do not like to call themselves Mikir but Arlang which literally means a man. Racially belonging to the Mongoloid group, they belong to the Kuki-Chin group of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. It is very difficult to trace the history of the early settlement of the Karbis bereft of any written documents and other evidences. It is however known that they entered Assam from central Asia and their original abode was the eastern portion of the Khasi and Jaintia hills. Karbis are divided into three groups from the point of view of habitation. These groups are Chinthong, Ronghang and Amri. Those who live in the plain are called Dumrali (Bordoloi, 1987).
Total Karbi population in Assam according to 2001 Census is 3.54 lakhs (Male: 1.81 lakh and Female: 1.73 lakh). They constitute 10.70 per cent of the total tribal population of the state (2001 Census). It may be mentioned here that although a large number of Karbis are living in the plains of the state, they are not regarded as scheduled tribes during enumeration. Hence, this number would be much more if the Karbis of the plains are also considered.

The Karbis like to live on the hill top. A typical Karbi hut is neither too small nor too big. It is built on a bamboo-platform using timber posts for the super-structure. The platform is several feet high above the ground. They use thatch for roofing purpose. The house contains two varandas at the front and at the rear. Lengthwise the house is divided into two parts. The front part or room with a hearth at the centre is called Kam or guest house while the inner chamber or the living room is called kut. A wooden or bamboo ladder is used as an approach to the front varanda. Cattle are generally kept under the bamboo platform. However, of late in the plains, the traditional housing pattern has more or less been abandoned by the Karbis. Instead of raised platform houses, the houses are constructed on the ground. Each revenue village has a headman called gaonbura who is appointed by the District Council Authority. It is very interesting to note that each Karbi village is named after the gaonbura.

The Karbis are generally animists. However, Hinduism in its crudest form finds manifestation in their worship of gods, goddesses and deities. There are 84.64 per cent Hindus among them and they believe in the immortality of the soul and life hereafter and reincarnation. They have no idols, temples or shrines. Arnam Khathe is one of their household gods. Since they believe in reincarnation they name their children after their dead relatives, because it is believed that the dead come back to the world. They also believe in witchcraft and black magic. A smaller section of the Karbis has embraced Christianity (15 per cent) and Muslim (0.25 per cent) religions.

The Karbis observe several festivals of which the most important ones are the Rongker and Hacha. Rongker is performed at the beginning of the new-year by propitiating the different Gods and Goddesses for the well being of the entire village and to reap a good harvest. The women are not allowed to enter into the worshipping arena. There is another kind of Rongker performed in a greater scale. This type of Rongker which is performed at the beginning of every 5 years is called Wofong Rongker. The Karbis perform another festival called Hacha after the harvest. This is rather a marry-making
festival where community eating, singing and dancing to one’s heart content are the most striking features of this festival.

The Karbis have their distinct traditional dress and ornaments which vary according to the age of the wearer. Among them both man and women wear ornaments. A young Karbi man wears a white turban *poho* on the head. It has black borders and lines of cowries at two ends. The *poho* is also used as shoulder cloth. The two ends of it are beautifully designed with geometrical or animal figures in black and red colour. A sleeveless shirt or jacket covers a man’s body up to the waist. It is called *choihongthor*. He wears a white coloured loin cloth, *rikong-lengti*. (Phangsho, 1989). The women wear black coloured and thick single piece of cloth that goes little more than one round in the waist and hangs down to the calf. This piece of cloth is called *pini*. A narrow white piece of cloth about one and a half inch broad is used to fasten the *pini* to the waist. It is called *wamkok*. The upper part of the body is covered by a square piece of cloth called *ekok*. In the olden days however blouse was not worn even by young women which has changed now.

Both male and female are fond of ornaments. In the olden days a young man used to wear oval shaped beads in the neck called *pule ahi*. He also used to wear rings *arran* in every finger except the thumb. A middle aged man wears small ear-rings *onti* made of silver and a bangle called *roi*. The women are very much fond of wearing large sized ornaments. They are also very fond of finger rings. In the wrist a woman wears *roi-pengkharr* thick broad bangles made of silver. They also wear necklace of gold, silver and of coloured beads usually red and black. These necklaces are called *lek* (Das, 1986). The Karbi women are fond of tattoo. They call it *duck*. A *duck* is given to a women when she is very young, by pricking with thorn and then applying a kind of juice extracted from the leaf of a plant called *sibo*.

The food habit of the Karbis which depends on the available plants and animals and crops of the region does not differ much from other tribes of N.E. India. Like the other tribes of Assam, the staple food of the Karbis is rice. Other cereals like *dal* are occasionally taken. Rice curry prepared with dry fish is their favourite delicacy. Rice is taken twice daily in the morning hours and in the evening. Pork and chicken are also liked by them (Phangsho, 1989). The most favourite beverage of the Karbis is a kind of rice-beer which is known to them as *Hor*. This beer is brewed by every family at home. Rice-beer is compulsory in social and religious rituals where it is freely consumed by all. (Das, 1986). There are mainly three types of drinks popular both in the hills and in the plains.
They are mainly *horpo* (rice beer), *horlang* (a special quality of rice-beer) and *hoc-wak* (spirit). In the plains another kind of beer is made out of *bora-rice*, it is called *Solia*. Guests are also entertained with rice beer. Distilled liquor is also consumed by them occasionally. They also consume black tea without sugar and milk. The Karbis are also fond of smoking. Even the ladies are seen smoking tobacco wrapped into *bidi* in a kind of dry leaf called *Kumreng*. They also have the habit of chewing betel nuts (Das, 1999).

In respect of marriage the Karbis strictly follow clan exogamy. Monogamy is the prevailing practice. But there is no bar to polygamy, although the cases of polygamy are very rare. Widow remarriage is allowed in the Karbi society and the unmarried younger brother is required to marry the widow of his elder brother. But under no circumstance is the elder brother allowed to marry the widow of his younger brother. Cross-cousin marriage is a preferential one. Both marriage by negotiation and marriage by selection of like partner are prevalent among the Karbis. Marriage by capture is also found to be present to a limited extent and in this case the formal marriage has to be solemnized after the birth of the first child at a convenient date. Divorce is rather rare in the Karbi society and the Karbis do not have the system of bride price. After marriage the wife continues to use the surname of her father. But the children assume the title of their father.

The Karbis follow the patriarchal system of family structure and as such the father is the head of the family and his authority is undisputed. The line of descent is traced through the male members only. Generally, a Karbi family is an unitary one and joint family system is prevalent to a very limited extent. After the death of the father, his sons inherit the property and the daughter is not given any share.

Agriculture is the primary occupation of the Karbis. In the hills they practise shifting cultivation whereas they have resorted to settled cultivation in the plains. Most of the Karbi families rear cows, goats, birds, specially fowls. Handloom industry is very much common among all the Karbi families. It is a household industry and a woman without having knowledge of spinning and weaving is unthinkable in the Karbi society. All the Karbi women are expert weavers and most of the cloths for domestic use are produced in their family looms. Spinning of yarn from home grown cotton is a common sight in the Karbi villages. The Karbis have an economic system in which they produce what they actually need leaving either no surplus or little for sale. Their economic condition is far from satisfactory and this is further aggravated by the fact that a considerable portion of paddy produced is used for brewing rice-beer which is required for
the performance of social festivals and religious rites, for domestic consumption and for the entertainment of guests as well.

The Karbi women enjoy equal status in their society (Sharma Thakur, 1992). There are certain areas and occasions where the entry of women is restricted. However, the womenfolk is not found to have any grumbling in this respect. They accept the restrictions as the reminiscence of a glorious tradition followed from time immemorial. Peace and harmony in the family front are of prime importance rather than quarreling for such mundane adjectives and abstract terms like ‘status’.

Regarding marriage, the status of Karbi women is a bit high compared to other tribes. They are monogamous by nature. Before marriage, the consent of the girl is very important. There is no child marriage and widow remarriage is allowed in the society. Divorce is rare and they do not have the system of bride price. Among the Karbis, the maternal uncle plays a distinct role in socio-religious ceremonies signifying a high position of the womenfolk.

The Rabhas

The Rabhas - a section of Indo-Mongoloid people had come down to Assam from Tibetan region and settled first at Garo hills from where they subsequently came over to Assam plains. They constitute a major segment of the Boro linguistic group and they belong to the Mongoloid stock of people. E.A.Gait expressed that the Rabhas were ethnically and culturally a distinct tribe who came down in successive waves from the north and north-eastern region. The endogamous division of the Rabha tribe consists of Rangdania, Pati, Maitori, Totla, Dahuri, Dhunga, Hana etc. (Das, 1960). The major constituents in the tribe are described to be Rangdania. Pati, and the Maitori. The Paties are concentrating mainly on the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra right from Guwahati in Kamrup District to Dudhnoi in Goalpara district. The Rangdanias and the Maitories are mainly found in Goalpara district. The Pati section is more Hinduised and the impact of acculturation is more prominent amongst them.

With a population of 2.77 lakhs (Male: 1.41 lakh and Female: 1.36 lakh) the Rabhas account for 8.14 per cent of the total tribal population of Assam (2001 Census). They are mainly concentrated in Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang districts.

The Rabha language is now confined among the Rangdani and the Maitori group. The Patis, one of the major groups of the tribe now speak a mixture of Assamese
language. Efforts have recently been made to standardise the language and to impart education at the primary level through mother tongue.

The Rabhas live in compact blocks comprising of 50 to 100 families in each block. Usually the dwelling of the Rabha household consists of four houses - one main house, one guest house, one outer house for the adult family member and a fourth for using as a cook shed. In addition to them, a cow-shed, a granary and a poultry house where possible are also separately constructed. The main house is constructed on the northern side of the courtyard maintaining its length in the east-west direction. Facing immediately this, is the guest house, the courtyard being in between the two. The other two houses are constructed facing each other.

Rabhas were once a matriarchal tribe. However, the matriarchate which had its glorious past has gradually lost its grip through cultural contacts with other adjoining tribes. They are now in a state of transition from matriarchal to the patriarchal form of family life (Saikia, 1993).

Rice is the main item of food for the Rabhas though they also depend on a number of wild edible roots, leaves and other green vegetables for their survival. Besides, vegetables are preferred by them. They also use a variety of spices, collected locally from the forests. Mushroom is a favorite item of vegetable and the Rabha women are expert in selecting the edible varieties (Goswami, 1984). Some of the special food items of the Rabha include Rompe (fried rice powder), Bam Rangre (Common Cake), Nala Gunjlagi (special type of cake), Pangna (Steamed cake) and Ata Kuta (a type of rice generally served with tea). Both males and females are fond of smoking hukka and Biris.

Like the other tribal groups the Rabhas are also fond of spinning and weaving cloths. However in the urban areas, this art is on the verge of decline. Rabhas, both men and women can be distinguished easily by their dresses. Their male dress is very simple, and they wear pajal, which resembles an Assamese dhuti. A pajal is 2.5 to 3 m. in length and about .75 m. in width. The colour of the pajal is white. Pati is worn mostly by young men. It is about 1.5 to 2.75 m. in width, generally white but adorned with figures of flowers. Pasar or Pasra is a kind of silk cloth used by men to warm the body in winter. Khopang is a piece of cotton cloth to be used as pagri (turban). The women’s dress consists of ripen, which is used to cover the body from the waist to ankles. Young women prefer to wear red ripan. Generally ripan is adorned with imprints of flowers. Kambung is used by a Rabha female to cover the upper part of her body. The colour of kambung is usually chocolate. Chingshaphak is an extraordinary part of the Rabha dress. It is a small
TRADITIONAL DRESSES AMONG TRIBAL WOMEN IN ASSAM

SONOWAL-KACHARI WOMAN

RABHA WOMEN

TIWA WOMEN
rope made of cotton thread and it is worn round the waist of both male and female. Till mid nineties the Rabha women used indigenous colour for their clothes. But at present they have given up and they prefer to buy coloured thread from the market.

The basis of the religious philosophy of the Rabha community is based on animism. However under the influence of Hinduism a considerable number of Pati Rabhas have already assimilated with the neighboring Hindu culture and have begun to participate in all the Hindu religious festivals. As per 2001 census, there are 96.58 per cent Hindus among them. Yet another development in the field of religion has come to notice with the adoption of Christianity by a section of them (3.23 per cent). Among the Rabhas there are 0.14 per cent Muslims.

The Rabha community as a whole does not have any national festival of their own. The different groups celebrate their ritualistic festival which relate more or less to their own religious concept and beliefs. *Rangali Bihu*, the spring time festival and *Bhogali Bihu*, the harvesting festival are celebrated only by the Pati Rabhas. The Rangdani and Maitori groups celebrate *Baikho* or *Khoksi* Puja festival with the intention of propitiating *Baikho* - the Goddess of wealth and prosperity. The Pati Rabhas also perform the *Langapuja* where Mahadeva is the primary deity of propitiation (Bordoloi, 1987).

**The Sonowal-Kacharis**

The Sonowal-Kacharis form the fifth largest tribal group in Assam. They are largely found in Dibrugarh district. They are also found in Tinsukia, Jorhat, Golaghat and Lakhimpur districts. The Sonowal-Kacharis belong to the great Bodo group and they nostalgically trace their close relationship with the Barmans of Cachar district, Boro-Kacharis of Lower Assam, and Dimasas of N.C. Hills district: As a matter of fact, it is difficult to draw exclusive ethnic line between Boro-Kacharis and Sonowal-Kacharis as both these sections originally came from the same stock. Like other Mongoloid people Sonowal-Kacharis are short-statured, flat nosed, almond shape eyed, straight haired and scanty beard people. It is said that during the Ahom rule some of the Kacharis were engaged in washing gold particles from the sands of the Brahmaputra, and therefore the prefix ‘Sonowal’ (gold washer) was added to signify them.

The Sonowal-Kacharis have a total population of 2.35 lakhs (1.19 lakh males and 1.16 lakh females) in the state. Due to continued assimilation with the Assamese speaking people, most of the Sonowal-Kacharis have forgotten their own dialect and now speak
Assamese. Many of them also have non-tribal Assamese surnames like Hazarika, Saikia, Bora, etc. (Barooah, 1998).

Sonowal-Kacharis have great faith in religion. They are the devout followers of Mahapurushia Vaisnav Dharma. They are the disciples of either Auniati or Checha Satra. They are either Sarania or Bhajama. Although vaishnavism is deep-rooted in the mind and soul of the Sonowal-Kacharis, yet they maintain their traditional religious beliefs and practices. Like other Kacharis, the Sonowals too worship Lord Shiva and observe bathow puja. They also worship household deities like Bura Poha, Swargadeo Puja, Pir Diya, Morak Diya and Lakhimi Puja for peace and harmony in the family. It may be mentioned here that 99.37 per cent of population among them are Hindus, followed by 0.38 and 0.12 per cent of Christian and Muslim respectively (2001 census).

Bihu is the main festival of the Sonowal-Kacharis and they consider Bihu as their traditional community festival and actively participate in all the three Bihus, i.e. Bohag Bihu, Magh Bihu and Kati Bihu. They celebrate Bihu with much fanfare by attending Namghar and holding nam-kirtan on these occasions.

The dresses of Sonowal-Kachari, both for male and female, are similar to those worn by other rural Assamese men and women. Most of their clothes used in day to day life are woven by the womenfolk and almost every house possesses a loom. Knowledge of weaving is considered as a qualification for the brides. It is compulsory that in the marriage of a girl the parents should give a loom to their daughters as a gift.

Rice is the staple food of the Sonowals. All kinds of vegetables and pulses are included in their menu. Their great delicacies are fish, mutton and chicken. They do not take pork and rear pigs. Rice beer is locally prepared by a few families and they take it occasionally. Of course, pan-tamul (betel leaves and nuts) is a must item which precedes or follows a cup of tea or other food items. They use a special variety of rice (komal choul and bora choul) for their tiffin.

A typical Sonowal-Kachari house has similarity with that of the non-tribal house in rural the areas of Assam. They construct separate sheds for their cattle, ducks and poultries. The granary is generally constructed towards eastern side and in a corner in front of the house. Every house must possess a separate courtyard for threshing and processing paddies and campus is neatly maintained. The house has compartments (rooms) and the first one is used as drawing room to which the outsiders have easy access (Bordoloi and Sharma Thakur, 1988).
The system of inheritance among the Sonowals is patrilineal. The land belongs to the family and the head of the family is the owner of the lands. The house is considered as immovable property and after the death of the father generally the eldest son becomes the owner of the house. The status of male is higher than female among the Sonowals-Kacharis. In religious sphere as well a woman cannot become a priest. However, the women are able to occupy equal status in the field of economy. Besides doing all household work, they earn additional income for their family by means of rearing birds and cattle. In the field of politics as well, the status of women among them is lower than men, yet it is seen that they attend the village council meetings. It may be mentioned here that the male dominant behaviours are legitimized in the Sonowal-Kachari society through the process of engenderment. It is the way of enculturing the people, and through which the females accept submissiveness to the males. The overall result is that the males have the tendency to dominate over the females and in this way the gender system stability is maintained among them (Sonowal, 1996).

The Tiwas

The Lalungs who prefer to be called themselves as ‘Tiwa’ largely belong to the great Bodo ethnic group. In Lalung language ‘Ti’ means water and ‘wa’ means superior. As they landed on the plains following the course of the river Brahmaputra, they call themselves ‘Tiwa’ (Bordoloi, 1987). They possess mongoloid physical features with flat nose, straight hair, wide face, scanty beards. The Tiwa concentrations are mainly found in Morigaon, Nagaon and Dhemaji districts of the state. There are 1.71 lakh Tiwa people (male: 86,000 and female: 85,000) in the entire state of Assam.

The Tiwas are spread in both plains and hills of Assam. The socio-cultural characteristics, viz., food habit, dress, religious beliefs and practices, etc differ considerably between hills and plains. There is, however, a close relationship between them. The plain Tiwas areas are not exclusive, rather they are interspersed with non-Tiwa villages. The hill Tiwas, on the other hand, have maintained their traditional traits intact, but the plain Tiwas have lost most of their traditional traits including the language. Moreover, a group consciousness about the past heritage is rooted among them. The plain Tiwas are shallow cultivators, where as the hill Tiwas still resort to jhuming.

The property of the Tiwas can be divided among the sons. The house, however, goes to the son who lives with father till his death. Among the plain Tiwas the daughters
do not inherit property, but reverse is the case among the hill Tiwas who inherit the property from mothers.

The Tiwas have elaborate festivals, which are closely linked with worship of different deities. Their important festivals are Bihus or Bisu, Barat, Boka Nach, Gosai Uliwa Utsav, Jonbil Mela, etc. Of these festivals, Jonbil Mela is the most attractive feature of the Tiwas. Mahadeo is their supreme god. All worships begin with a prayer to Lord Mahadeo. Their religion is based on a belief in some deities which can be considered as one of the branches of the Hindu religion. 99.70 per cent of them are Hindus (2001 census) They worship many deities, and Barghar, Thanghar and Namghar are the places of community worship (Sharma Thakur, 1984).

The Tiwas have their special traditional tribal dress. But plain Tiwa women wear dresses similar to those worn by other rural Assamese women. Their typical dresses consist of one mekhela, one chadar and one riha. They are expert weavers and weave all the clothes for both male and female. In festive occasions the ladies wear Thongali (a waist band) while doing their day to day activity. The women do not wear the Mekhela on the waist, rather the same is worn at the breasts extending a few inches below the knee. The young girls, however, wear blouses. The dresses of the menfolk are similar to those of other Assamese menfolk. Scanty ornaments are used by the Tiwa women more as a sign of femininity than for enhancing the effectiveness of the personal appearance. Some elderly women wear silver bead or stone necklaces and ear rings.

The Tiwas can express their artistic tendencies in their textile designs. Both floral and geometrical designs are popular among them. They are expert in bamboo and cane work. Cane baskets of various designs are widely used by the women folk. Bamboo and cane products like Japa, Pera, Petari (suitcases), Saraibata (wooden plates with stand), etc. are their other special products. Tiwas are expert in blacksmithy and stone and metal works. They are also lovers of music and dance.

Both nuclear and joint families are found among them. Formerly, Tiwas were matriarchal and matrilineal, but today the plain Tiwas are patrilineal, where as the hill Tiwas still adhere to the old system.

Rice is the staple food among the Tiwas. Fowl and pork are their delicacies. Guests are entertained with chicken or duck. Milk is not considered as food item. Rice beer (Zu) is essential in religious ceremonies, the consumption of which is discouraged by the educated section. The hill Tiwas have their own delicacies. Kharisa (bamboo shoot
mixture) and dried fish are favourite food items. Food cooked in bamboo pipes is relished the most (Sharma Thakur, 1985).

The Tiwa houses are similar to those of the Boros. They construct their houses on plinth. Thatch is used for roofing, walls are made of reeds and bamboos. The plinth of the cooking house (barghar) is raised about two feet above the ground in order to distinguish it from other compartments or rooms. Choraghar, an out house, is constructed a few yards away from the main house where guests are entertained and young boys sleep at night. In addition, there is the Majgar used for sleeping. The room towards the west is used for household deity. Granary is constructed towards the east. There is a courtyard in front of every Tiwa house.

There are four types marriage among the Tiwas: Gobiya, Barbiya, Joronbiya and gandharbabiya. Widow remarriage is not acceptable among them and considered as a taboo and penalty is levied to the person who marries a widow.

The Dimasas

The Dimasa Kacharis constitute an important ethnic group in the hill districts of Assam. Their percentage share in the state’s scheduled tribes population is 3.40 and they are mainly concentrated in the N.C. Hills and Karbi Anglong districts sharing respectively 58.46 per cent and 41.54 per cent of the total Dimasas in the state. The Dimasa-Kachari belongs to the Bodo group of people and linguistically they belong to Tibeto-Burman group. The term ‘Dimasa’ literally means the son of a big river. ‘Di’ means water, ‘Ma’ means big and ‘Sa’ means son. They consider themselves to be the descendent of the Brahmaputra. According to 2001 Census, the total Dimasa population in Assam was 110,976, of which 56,876 are male and 54,100 are female. The Dimasas follow a patriarchal system of family and consist of the head of the family, his wife, unmarried sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters. As soon as the children or brothers and sisters are married they live separately. The most outstanding characteristics of the Dimasa social life is the existence of female clan almost parallel to the male clan. They have forty male clans and forty two female clans. Both the clans are exogamous and no marriage can take place between boys and girls of the same clan.

Among the most important festivals celebrated by the Dimasas mention me be made of Busu, Ragini Gabra and Harni Gabra. Busu, which is celebrated after the completion of the harvest, is the most important community festival of the Dimasas. Ragini Gabra and Harni Gabra are held once annually before starting of new cultivation.
TRADITIONAL DRESSES AMONG TRIBAL WOMEN IN ASSAM

DIMASA WOMAN

DEORI WOMAN

Plate 3.5
Religion followed by Dimasa is rather a mixture of their traditional religion and Hinduism. Six ancestral gods, viz. Sibrai, Doorajo, Naikhu raja, Waa raja, Ganyung Braiyung and Hamiadao are called ‘Madai’ and are worshipped with great reverence. They have 98.54 per cent Hindus, 1.24 per cent Christian, 0.13 per cent Animist and 0.12 per cent follower of Muslim religion.

A Dimasa man generally wears a green loin cloth about a meter in breadth and covers his legs little down the knees as dhoti called ‘Risa’. Besides a shirt, he also uses an artistically designed scarf called ‘Rinsao’. While going out he uses a cotton or endi silk turban about 19 meter in length. A Dimasa woman puts on a skirt called ‘Rigu’ made of cotton or endi silk. A beautifully designed scarf called ‘Rijamphai’ is used by them to cover the upper part of the body. They are fond of silver ornaments. To name a few are Poal (necklace), Khamon tai (ear rings), Rong Bora (necklace of silver coins) and Kharu (heavy silver bracelet).

Rice is their staple food. Bora rice is generally used for tiffin. Vegetables grown in jhums as well as kitchen gardens and wild roots and leaves are used to supplement their food. They drink milkless tea. They neither drink milk nor do milche the she buffaloes for commercial purpose. The logic behind this is that mother’s milk (whether human or animal) is only meant for their offsprings, and consumption of which is a great sin. Deer’s meat and dry fish are delicacy for them. They eat pigs, ducks, goats and sometime buffalo meat. Their most favourite beverage is rice beer called ‘Zou’ which is brewed at home, but they are not habitual drinkers. They also prepare dry fish in various ways making the meal a tasty one. (Phangcho, 2001)

The Dimasa house is constructed with timber and bamboo on the ground and not on the platform, which is a common phenomenon in case of most hill tribes. The bamboo walls are generally covered with mud and roof is made of thatch. The houses are built in rows facing each other on both sides of the road. Protective walls of bamboo are erected around the house. In a village thirty to forty houses are constructed – each village, therefore is a cluster of houses. Nodrang, a dormitory for unmarried boys is a large hall constructed in an easily accessible place. It serves as an institution where young boys learn music, art, crafts and various community works in a co-operative manner and above all they protect the village at night from attack of wild animals as well as other enemies (Lalsim, 2005).

Among the Dimasas, although marriage by negotiation is a common practice, marriage by capture is also found. They have a system of accepting bride price called kalti
which is discouraged by the literate section presently. They approve of widow remarriage and divorce.

Though the Dimasas follow the patriarchal system of family structure, women have more or less equal status with men. A husband does everything in consultation of his wife though his decision is final. In all spheres of life, be it social, economic, cultural or political a Dimasa woman takes part along with man. They lead a simple and hardworking life. Both patrilineal and matrilineal system exists in Dimasa society. As stated, woman of different matriclan do not live in the same house. A married woman lives separately with her husband. There is a division of labour in Dimasa family. Generally the hard work is done by the males and the light work by the females. The Dimasa compares the woman with the earth. In Busu, the harvesting festival woman takes major responsibility. In funeral procession also woman plays an important role, who continuously throws paddy and cotton-thread from village to the cremation ground there by making a bridge between the dead and living called Maiokhrai. In Dimasa society women in the village who conduct the child birth and her helper is given a special status (Bhattacharjee, 1992). However, a woman cannot become a priest or a diviner.

The Deoris

The Deoris are one of the four divisions of Chutiyas. These divisions are Hindu Chutiya, Ahom Chutiya, Borahi and Deori. The Chutiyas are believed to have been the members of great Bodo race. The original abode of the Deoris was on the banks of the rivers Dibong and Tengapani which are now in Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. With a total population of 41,161 (male 20,809, and female 20,352), the Deoris form the 8th largest tribal group of Assam and constitute 1.20 per cent of the total scheduled tribe population. They are mainly concentrated in Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Sibsagar and Jorhat districts.

Among the Deoris, monogamy is the rule and they prefer joint family system. In respect of social stratification, the Deori society can be divided into two, viz., secular and religious. In the former category the gaonbura reigns supreme, and is the head of all socio-political activities. The Deodhani, however, plays significant role in the religious life of people. Among them 99.59 per cent are Hindus, followed by 0.20 and 0.13 per cent Christian and Muslim respectively (2001 census).

The Deoris observe two festivals during a year- bohag bihu and magh bihu. Sacrifice of goat is a must in the bihu puja. Once in every four year a white buffalo is also
sacrificed. Deodhani dance forms the most essential part of bihu puja. The Bordeori offers puja to the deities of the than during bihu. The women, however, are not allowed to take part in the feast and puja. Rice is the staple food of the Deoris. Along with rice they take boiled vegetables seasoned with chillies and salt. Fish forms a special delicacy in Deori menu. The preserved fish known as Namsing is of great demand for entertaining guests. Rice beer is prepared in every house and served to all irrespective of age and sex. Habit of taking tea is not popular among them and even if they take they take it without milk and sugar. (Bordoloi, 1887).

The Deoris still maintain their traditional beliefs and practices. All sections worship shiva and parvati as their supreme deity. Sacrifice of animals, fowls, and pigeon form an important part of Deori puja. The presence of Bardeori is a must during puja.

As the Deoris live along the river banks they construct their houses in raised platforms. Their houses are thirty to hundred feet in length and ten to fifteen feet in breath. The floor is raised about four feet to eight feet above the ground. The houses are constructed in east-west direction. A single house often accommodates a family of forty persons living in one big room. This is however undergoing change at present and Assam type houses on plinth are seen in Deori villages.

The Deoris broadly have four types of marriages, viz., bor biya, maju biya, bhakat rupiya or saru biya and the most popular is gandharva or marriage by elopement. The Pathoria or the mediator plays the most important role in Deori marriage. The essential items of Deori marriage constitute dried fish, pork, Suze (local wine) and betel leaves and nuts. The system of bride price is prevalent among them which is Rs.126.00, but for the marriage by elopement the bride price is Rs.1000 or even more. The most significant aspect of Deori marriage is the voluntary contribution of essential items, which is called Dali or Bujani by the villagers. The important items of their marriage constitute rice, fish, pork, rice-beer, betel-vine leaves and arecanuts. Of these rice-beer and betel nuts are must in Deori marriage ceremony (Deori, 2002).

The Deori women and girls are expert weavers. They produce very colourful clothes which are of great demand in the society. The women sell homemade local wine called suze made of rice which acts as a source of their income. The status of women in Deori society is same as that of men. In absence of male members, the female is the family head who walk side by side with their male counterparts and perform their day to day activities.
Due to the contact with the outside world, marked changes are noticed among them in all spheres. No longer the males keep their hairs long, clad modern dresses and fashionable ornaments, live in Assam type houses on plinth and prefer nuclear family. But at the same time, they are still maintaining their traditional social traits intact keeping an window open for incorporating modernism without effecting the core of culture.

From the above discussion it is found that the demographic characteristics and socio-cultural practices among the tribal groups residing in the state vary markedly from one another owing to each group’s diverse degree of exposure to the process of modernization, different way of adapting to acculturation processes and interaction with the non-tribal culture.

Summary Statement

The above discussion has unfolded certain demographic characteristics and socio-cultural practices among the major tribal groups of Assam. So far demographic characteristics are concerned, the study basically focuses on fertility pattern, age composition, age dependency ratio, population in age group 0-6, sex composition, marital status and age at marriage. It is observed that the crude birth rate and general marital fertility rate among the scheduled tribes population of Assam are 18 and 103 respectively. Among the tribal groups, the Karbis record the highest both in crude birth rate and general marital fertility rate, and the Sonowal-Kacharis the lowest in both these respects. So far age composition among the major tribal groups in the state is concerned, the Karbis have the highest proportion of population in the age group 0-14 and Sonowal-Kacharis witness the lowest in this regard. Satisfactorily, percentage share of population in the age group 15-59 is significantly high among all the tribal groups and the Sonowal-Kacharis occupy the top position. Though the proportion of elderly population (60+) is quite low among all the groups, the Sonowal-Kacharis and Deoris occupy a better position as compared to the state average, and Karbis witness the lowest position in this regard.

The dependency ratio among the scheduled tribes population is 75.47 per cent as against 76.40 per cent for the total population of the state. However, depending on fertility behaviour and socio-economic condition, the dependency ratio is found to vary from 61.34 per cent among the Sonowal-Kacharis to 88.86 per cent among the Karbis. Again, it may be noted that low percentage share of population in age group 0-6 is indicative of the prevalence of low child-woman ratio or lower birth rate and relatively higher socio-economic status of women particularly among the Sonowal-Kacharis and Deoris. On the
other hand, the prevalence of higher birth rate, lack of adequate medical facility and family planning measure accompanied by low social status of women have been responsible for high percentage share of population in the age group 0-6 among the Karbis of the state.

Satisfactorily, the overall sex ratio among the scheduled tribes population is more balanced than that of the total population of the state. Among the tribal groups, sex ratio is found to be the highest among the Tiwas, followed by the Boros, and lowest among the Dimasas. Relatively low sex ratio is due to higher mortality rate among the females than that of the males, and migration of males in excess of females from outside. As regards the rural-urban sex ratio, it is observed that while it is 974 for the rural, it is 928 for the urban.

The second part of this chapter is devoted to the salient socio-cultural practices traditionally prevalent among each of the tribal groups covering their language and literature, clan and family structure, marriage system, house type, dress habit, food pattern, and occupation. The status of women among each of the major tribal groups has also been discussed here.

References


