Chapter Three

THE SETTING
ASSAM IN THE CONTEXT OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

The north-eastern region of India, of which Assam is a part, has a distinctive geo-ethnic personality. The region has an area of little over 255,000 km². The geographical distinctiveness of the region arises out of an extra-ordinary mix of mighty mountains (offshoot of the Eastern Himalayas) in the north; plateaus (e.g., Meghalaya); hill ranges (e.g., offshoot of Patka: and Barail ranges) and riverine plains (e.g., the plains of the river Brahmaputra and Barak in Assam; Imphal in Manipur and Agartala in Tripura). The region is divided into seven states of unequal area and dissimilar terrain and population characteristics. Beside Assam the other states are Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya. Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya are hilly and tribal majority states. In these states the percentage of tribal population to the total population are, Arunachal Pradesh 63.65 per cent; Nagaland 87.7 per cent; Mizoram 94.75 per cent; Meghalaya 85.52 per cent (1991 census). Assam, Manipur and Tripura have riverine plains inhabited by plough cultivating non-tribal peasantry in addition to tribal population (Bhagabati 1992:139). There are substantial tribal population in each of these three states (Assam 12.82 per cent; Manipur 34.41 per cent;
Tripura 30.94 per cent; 1991 census). The north-eastern region is bounded by foreign
territories (Bangladesh, Myanmar, China and Bhutan) on all sides except a narrow corridor in
the west connecting it with West Bengal and the rest of India (Map 1).

From the point of view of ethnic personality, the region is unique in the sense that it has
more than hundred tribes living in different states each having distinct language and style of
life. In addition to the tribes, which are largely distributed in the hilly areas, there are many
other castes, religious and linguistic communities inhabiting the plain areas. There is remarkable
wealth of social, cultural and economic configurations in the north-eastern region. The plains
areas have traditionally been the abode of peasant populations. Even tribal communities
living in the plains came to gradually imbibe and absorb the economic and cultural attributes of
the peasantry. They adopted wet rice cultivation with the help of plough and participated in
regional economy through articulation with periodic markets and have entered into interactive
relationships with the non-tribals since ages past.

Assam has a centuries old history of existence as a socio-political unit particularly in the
Brahmaputra plains. In the six hundred years of Ahom Rule (1228 AD–1826 AD), there was
remarkable administrative consolidation of the area. The Ahom Rulers even entered into
effective relationship with the otherwise turbulent tribal populations of the surrounding hill
regions. As a matter of fact, periodic markets in the plains as well as in the foothills on the
fringe of the plains were established for effective exchange of goods and commodities
between different communities. In the subsequent period of British Rule since the 1830s, till
Indian Independence in 1947, there was continuity of this tradition. Even today, peasant and
folk markets dot Assam country side and in the bordering regions between plains and the hills
these act as loci of interaction between the plains and the hills people.

Till early 1960s, Assam was a large state comprising the expansive plains of the river
Brahmaputra, the surrounding hilly areas and the Barak plains. However, after several
re-organizations beginning with the carving out of the hilly state of Nagaland in 1963, continuing
through the formation of the hill state of Meghalaya (1971) and Mizoram (first as Union
Territory in 1971, subsequently constituted as a state in 1987), Assam came to have a drastically reduced area of 78,523 km².

The state is bounded in the north by monarchial Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya are situated in the south. A part of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland are situated in the east; while the northern part of West Bengal lies on the western boundary (Map 1).

Assam today has only a limited hill area of 15,000 km² constituted into two autonomous districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The predominant tribes of the two hill districts are the Karbi and the Dimasa Kachari. There are small populations belonging to twelve other tribes (viz., Lakhe, Poie, Simtong, Chakma, Garo, Hajong, Hmar, Man, any Mizo, any Naga tribe, Khasi and Jayantia, any Kuki tribes).

In addition to the two autonomous hill districts, there are eighteen districts in the expansive Brahmaputra plains (area 56,561 km²) and three in Barak plains (area 6,962 km²) 9 scheduled tribes in the Assam plains (viz., the Bodo Kachari, the Rabha, the Mishing, the Kachari including Sonowal, the Lalung [Tiwa], the Deuri, the Barman in Cachar, the Mech and the Hojai) with a total population of 2.43 million in 1991. There are large number of castes and other communities in the plains of Assam having different cultural, linguistic and racial affinities. According to an assessment made by the Anthropological Survey of India in its 'People of India' project, there are as many as 115 recognizable communities in Assam (Singh 1992:209). This is an indication of rich diversity in the cultural composition of the people of Assam. The total population of the state at 1991 census date is 22.41 million. Of this population, the tribals constitute 12.82 per cent.

The peasant society in the Assam plains, like peasant society anywhere else, provides the base for periodic markets. The complement of castes and communities, each having a distinct occupation creates the conditions for exchange of services and commodities between different groups.
THE STUDY AREA IN THE CONTEXT OF ASSAM

The study area lies on the south bank of the lower reaches of Brahmaputra River in western Assam. Bounded by the Brahmaputra in the north and Garo and Khasi Hills of Meghalaya in the south, and having an east-west spread between Boko township in Kamrup District and Lakhipur township in Goalpara District, this area is approximately 3,500 km² in size. This wide stretch of lower Assam plains is a rich agricultural area devoted to the cultivation of rice and a few other cash crops like jute, mustard, areca nut, banana and papaya. The extensive southern foot hill tract has always been famous for rich forest of saal (shorea robusta), teak (tectona grandis), gomari (gmelina arborca), titasompa (talauma rabaniana) and bonsum (phoebe goalparansis), etc. It is only in the last three decades or so that the rich forest cover has been denuded due to large scale and often illigal exploitation of timber, as well as land hunger of the ever-increasing number of cultivators – both local and immigrant.

The region has three identifiable zones, one merging into another. These are the low hills and the foot hills in the south; the low lying riverine area and the river islands in the north and the main valley part in the centre.

Like the remainder of the Brahmaputra plains, western Assam too has a sub-tropical climate with heavy rainfall in the summer months which lead to flooding of the low lying areas. The maximum temperature (June-August) seldom shoots above 38°C, while the minimum (Dec.-Jan.) rarely falls below 12°C. High rainfall coupled with moderate temperature are responsible for making the area agriculturally productive as well as giving it a lush green apperarence. The forest resource of this area has led to ruthless commercial exploitation of timber. The depletion of forests has also affected wild life. Many wild animals like elephant, deer, leopard and even smaller jungle cats and rabbits have retreaded to the hills.

From the point of view of road communication, this tract of western Assam is excellently served by a network of all weathered, black-topped roads, including the National Highway 37. The National Highway connects the city of Guwahati and the state capital of Dispur with...
Boko, 66 km west of Guwahati and passes on to district head-quarters town of Goalpara in the west at a distance from 87 km from Boko. Lakhipur is situated at a distance of 168 km to the west of Guwahati. The North-East Council has built interstate roads in the region between Meghalaya and Assam which also serves the region. In addition, there are number of motorable roads built and maintained by the Public Works and the Forest Departments of Assam which provide easy surface communication.

Before the development of motorable roads, the river Brahmaputra in the north was extensively used as a means of transport and communication. At present boat transport has limited utility for the people. Buses and trucks ply in large number on the National Highway and other roads. The inhabitants of the area thus have very little difficulty of movement.

The 113 market centres serve an essentially agricultural area. According to a 1993 estimate of the Directorate of Agriculture, Government of Assam, in Boko Agricultural Sub-Division there are as many as 55,882 farm families. There are another 81,969 farm families in Goalpara and Dudhnoi Agricultural Sub-Divisions. Most of these are small and marginal farmers.

Rice being the staple food of the people, cultivation of paddy is extensively undertaken in the low lying plain tracts of the region. Other important crops are mustard and pulses. Horticultural crops like pineapple, banana, coconut, areca nut and papaya grown by the inhabitants have considerable economic value. Among fibre crops, jute is the most important. The Kharif vegetables are more popular among the tribal people but they also cultivate vegetables in the winter, mostly for their own consumption.

As for industry, there is hardly anything worth mentioning. There are couple of saw mills, rice mills, brick klin's and roof-tile manufacturing units located in different parts of the area. Household industries (cane and bamboo works, sericulture, weaving, pottery, etc.) play an important role in the economy of the area. Soofari (dried areca nut) and bamboo broom stick are two cottage industries which have emerged as important avenues of cash earning for many villagers of the area.

SOURCE: 1. Directorate of Agriculture, Govt. of Assam, Publicity Division, Guwahati.
A string of small commercial and service townships have grown up over the years along the main roads of the area. Boko in the east and Lakhipur in the west, there are a number of such centres along National Highway 37. Important among these are Nagarbera, in Kamrup District; Dhupdhar, Rongjuli, Darrangiri, Dudhnoi, Damra, Matia, Mornoi, Krishnai, Agia and Rongsai in Goalpara District. None of these have been declared as towns in the census. From the point of view of population, the largest would be Dudhnoi (approximately 25,000) and the smallest would be Rongsai (approximately 2,500).

Nagarbera and Mornoi are situated on the bank of the river Brahmaputra and flourished at a time when the river Brahmaputra was the main route of communication. After Indian Independence improvement of the road linkages in the area, the importance of these riverside townships has decreased considerably.

As indicated earlier, from north-south the region has three rather distinct habitational zones which can also be called eco-cultural zones. The flood prone, alluvial northern riverine plains and the river islands (locally called chars) are predominantly inhabited by non-tribal Assamese Hindu and Muslim peasantry. Most of the Muslims are of immigrant origin from neighbouring Eastern Bengal/East Pakistan (now called Bangladesh). Locally they are referred to as Bhatiya. Though their mother tongue was Bengali many of them now adopted Assamese language and prefer to identify themselves as an Assamese. There are also a considerable number of Assamese Muslims who settled down as early as 13th century.

The Assamese Hindus belong to a number of castes. In order of population size, these are Kalita, Koch Rajbongshi, Jogi (Nath), Keot, Hira, Namasudra, Brahmin and Kayastha. Most of these are agricultural castes and constitute the bulk of the local Hindu peasantry. The villages of the caste Hindu populations extend into the central part. The central part also has major concentration of two plain tribes of Assam, viz., the Rabha and the Bodo Kachari. In addition, small number of Hajong refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan settled here in 1964. Bengali Hindu refugee of different castes affiliations also came and settled down in the central valley and took up the occupation of petty business and labour.
The third eco-cultural zone, viz., the foot hill stretch in the south is occupied by the Garo tribesmen. The Garo settlements continue into Garo Hill Districts of Meghalaya who too depend on the markets in the plains. The Garos and the Khasis are traditionally shifting cultivators. It is thus clear that the folk markets of western Assam covered in this study truely serve a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural population ranging between the shifting cultivators of the hills and advanced peasantry of the plains.

The distinctive feature in regard to land ownership and administration in western Assam was the extension of the Zamindary system from neighbouring Bengal. The estate of landlord called zamindar such as those of Mechpara and Bijni controlled the land and collected revenue from the villages. The estate of Bijni covered a large area on both banks of the Brahmaputra. The area in Goalpara District between Dhupdhar in the east and Rongsri in the west was part of Bijni estate. The land-lord or zaminder also held control over the periodic markets from which regular toll was collected. However, following the abolition of Zamindary through the Zamindary Abolition Act of 1952 which became effective in the area in 1959, the hold of the land, the regional economy and the markets have disappeared.

**SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE STUDY AREA**

Kamrup and Goalpara, the two districts within which the study area is located, has a total population of 2.66 million, constituting 11.8 per cent of the State's total population of 22.41 million (in 1991 census).

The area covered by these two districts lies in the fertile agricultural belt of Assam and has been settled for a long time by people of diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious affiliations. From the point of view of religion, the majority (65.75%) profess Hinduism. The Muslims constitute the second largest (30.1%) religious community (Table 2).
TABLE 2
RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION OF THE POPULATION — KAMRUP AND GOALPARA DISTRICT (1991)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RELIGION</th>
<th>KAMRUP (%)</th>
<th>GOALPARA (%)</th>
<th>TOTAL (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>1077 (.04)</td>
<td>47 (.001)</td>
<td>1124 (.041)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>31820 (1.19)</td>
<td>52745 (1.97)</td>
<td>84565 (3.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>1486526 (55.71)</td>
<td>266499 (10)</td>
<td>1753025 (65.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jain</td>
<td>5622 (.21)</td>
<td>488 (.02)</td>
<td>6110 (.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>467544 (17.52)</td>
<td>335275 (12.58)</td>
<td>802819 (30.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>3331 (.12)</td>
<td>59 (.002)</td>
<td>3390 (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Un-specified</td>
<td>1436 (.05)</td>
<td>12896 (.48)</td>
<td>14352 (.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion not stated</td>
<td>2715 (.1)</td>
<td>129 (.004)</td>
<td>2844 (.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As already mentioned, the study area comprises parts of these two districts, stretching between Boko in southern part of Kamrup to Lakhipur in Goalpara. The approximate size of the area is 3,500 km².

There are five Development Blocks in the study area, viz., Boko-Bongaon in Kamrup District; Dudhnoi, Matia, Balijana and Lakhipur in Goalpara District. The 113 market centres located in these five Development Blocks serve a population of over 620,000 (1991 census). The population of the five block areas is thus 23.3 per cent of the total population of the two districts.
The tribal and non-tribal population in the five development block areas is outlined in Table 3 and Fig. 1.

The majority (78.95 per cent) of the total population in these block areas is constituted by the non-tribal people belonging to the Assamese Hindu and Muslim, Bengali Hindu and Muslim, Marwari Hindu and Jain, North Indian Hindi-speaking communities, Nepali, tea garden labourers and ex-tea garden labourers. Together, their total number become 490,901, of which 22,235 belong to the scheduled caste category (in 1991 census).

**TABLE 3**

DEVELOPMENT BLOCK-WISE TRIBAL AND NON-TRIBAL POPULATION, 1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEVELOPMENT BLOCK</th>
<th>TRIBAL (%)</th>
<th>NON-TRIBAL (%)</th>
<th>TOTAL (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lakhipur</td>
<td>13006</td>
<td>162687</td>
<td>175693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7.4)</td>
<td>(92.6)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balijana</td>
<td>29751</td>
<td>117221</td>
<td>146972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(20.25)</td>
<td>(79.75)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matia</td>
<td>18245</td>
<td>136347</td>
<td>154592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(11.8)</td>
<td>(88.2)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dudhnoi</td>
<td>26471</td>
<td>33899</td>
<td>60370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(43.85)</td>
<td>(56.15)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boko-Bongaon</td>
<td>43408</td>
<td>40747</td>
<td>84155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(51.58)</td>
<td>(48.42)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td>130881</td>
<td>490901</td>
<td>621782</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(21.05)</td>
<td>(78.95)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The number of tribesmen in the five development blocks are 130,881 belonging to the Rabha, the Bodo Kachari, the Garo, the Hajong and the Khasi. They constitute 21.05 per cent of the total population in these block areas (Table 3). The proportion of tribal population as against non-tribals is also outlined in Table 3. In each development block, the tribal dominated areas are easily identifiable and are located along the foothills and central eco-cultural zones. The tracts along the foothills is especially marked by the presence of tribal inhabited villages. Even in Lakhipur Development Block where the tribesmen constitute only a small proportion (7.4 per cent), the foothill area is dominated by these people. On the other hand, the plains tracts along the bank of the river Brahmaputra is inhabited by the non-tribals.

The number of literate persons in the five development blocks are 216,860 (in 1991 census) giving a literacy percentage of 34.87 (see, Table 4 and Fig. 2 for details).

The inhabitants of the study area belong to a number of language groups. The speakers of Indo-Aryan groups of languages are the Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Gorkhal and Rajasthani. The Tibeto-Burman speakers are the Rabha, the Bodo Kachari, the Garo and the Hajong. The Austro-Asiatic (Mon-Khmer) speakers are the Khasi. Lastly, there is a small group of Dravidian (Mundari) language speakers among the tea garden and ex-tea garden labourers. In respect of social organization, the people vary from matrilineal (the Khasi and the Garo) to patrilineal (the Indo-Aryan language speakers and the Bodo Kachari). There is also a third type which can be termed as patri-matri social system for the elements of both in their societies. The Rabhas and the Hajongs exhibit such characteristics in their system of inheritance. Diversity is also found in the economic life of different communities inhabiting the
area. There are settled cultivators (the Rabha, the Bodo Kachari, the Hajong, the Nepali, the Assamese and the Bengali peasants), shifting cultivators (the Khasi and the Garo) as well as commercial farmers. Moreover, there are traders (Marwari, Hindi speaking north Indian and Bengali), labourers (tea-garden labour) and artisans (potters, mat makers and fishermen communities).

TABLE 4
DEVELOPMENT BLOCK-WISE LITERATE PERSON, 1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEVELOPMENT BLOCK</th>
<th>TOTAL POPULATION</th>
<th>LITERATE (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lakhipur</td>
<td>175693</td>
<td>41992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(23.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balijana</td>
<td>146972</td>
<td>51309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(34.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matia</td>
<td>154592</td>
<td>54665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(35.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dudhnoi</td>
<td>60370</td>
<td>30940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(51.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boko-Bongaon</td>
<td>84155</td>
<td>37954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(45.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>621782</strong></td>
<td><strong>216860</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(34.88)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The salient ethnographic characteristics of the tribal and the non-tribal communities living in the study area are outlined below.

TRIBAL GROUPS

There are five distinct tribal groups numerically and of socio-economic prominence, viz., (1) the Rabha, (2) the Bodo Kachari, (3) the Garo, (4) the Hajong and (5) the Khasi.

1. **The Rabha**:

The Rabha, a scheduled tribe of Assam plains, is numerically the most dominant population in the study area. In fact, south Goalpara and Boko-Bongaon Development Block area in south Kamrup are the major area of their concentration. Belonging to the Bodo language
group, the Rabhas have four sub-groups, viz., Pati, Dahori, Maitory and Rongdani. Numerically, the Pati is the dominant section among all and thickly concentrated in Dudhnoi and Boko-Bongaon development blocks. There are few pockets of Dahori Rabha in Dudhnoi and Bajijana development block. The first two sections (Pati and Dahori) of the Rabhas have adapted Assamese as their mother tongue. But the Maitory and the Rongdani have their own respective dialects. Considering their numerical strength in the area and their socio-political and economic development, Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council has been formed in 1995 by the State Government with its headquarters at Dudhnoi. Although, the area of the council is yet to be demarcate clearly but it roughly covers the entire central and foothill ecocultural zones of the study area where these people are thickly populated.

The Rabha religion is admixture of Hinduism and animism. The Pati and Dahori sections are Hinduized. A small section among the Rabhas in the study area embraced Christianity. The traditional supreme goddess in the Rabha pantheon is Khuksi or Baikhu who has four incarnate forms, i.e., Daduri, Suchari, Nakati and Tamai (Rabha 1974:89). There are other gods and goddesses, i.e., Langa, Rontak or Rontuk, Bera-Hasubai, Marang-bai, etc., Now-a-days, the Rabhas identify several of their gods and goddesses with the Hindu Pantheon, i.e., Langa with lord Siva, Rontak with goddess Lakshmi, etc. It is to be noted that a considerable number among them are completely absorbed in the Assamese Hindu caste fold known as Koch Rajbongshi by observing atonement ritual and abandoning tribal mode of life.

Among each of the Rabha sub-group, there are some matrilineal clans called barai. The inheritance of property occurs in both parental lines; the son inherits his father's property and the daughter inherits her mother's property. But the offsprings are always affiliated to their mother's clan. The Rabha have a tradition of cross-cousin marriage, but the practice is disappearing.

The Rabhas are predominantly agriculturists and practice wet rice cultivation. They also grow mustard, jute, lentil, gram etc. In the garden attached with the homestead land, the Rabhas always grow vegetables, banana, areca palm. Nearly every household has a bamboo grove. Until recently in the study area the Rabhas practised of barter with the
neighbouring Garos. But after increased number of market centres in the area, they prefer to sell their surplus in the markets.

After spread of modern education in the study area, the Rabha socio-economic life has undergone a tremendous change. Several institutions of higher education, viz., undergraduate colleges, vocational institutions, etc., have been established, several urban centres are coming up in this region, communication network has been improved. Together all these obviously generating impetuous for the change among the Rabhas. A considerable number of educated class among them are engaged in various white collar jobs which includes, teacher, bureaucrat, clerk etc., and the emerging modern socio-political leadership in the study area belong to this section of the Rabhas.

2. The Bodo Kachari:

In Assam the main concentration of the Bodo Kachari people are found in the Bodoland Autonomous District Council area, situated in the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra. But there are number of Bodo Kachari villages located in Dudhnoi-Dhupdhara-Boko region in the central and foothill eco-cultural zones of the study area. In numerical strength, this is the largest tribal population of Assam.

It is believed that these people migrated to their present habitat from Tibet and China in pre-historic period (Endle 1990:3). After descending on the Brahmaputra valley they branched out in all direction and migrated upto Sadiya in the east and Tripura in the south of Assam. The proximity of each branch resulted in several other cognate groups, i.e., the Rabha, the Garo, the Dimasa, the Tiwa, the Mech, the Chutia, the Koch, the Tippera, the Thengal and the Sonowal Kachari. Each of these branches have their own languages belonging to the Bodo speach of Tibeto-Burman language family.

The Bodo Kachari religion is of animistic type and have a very extensive number of deities. But "..... only a comparatively small number are strictly of tribal or national original, many having obviously been borrowed from their Hindu neighbours" (ibid, p. 35). The principal god in the Bodo Kachari Pantheon is Bathau brai and his living symbol is siju, a
cactus (*Euphorbia splendens*). *Bathau brai* protects the family from all misfortune. The *siju* cactus is present in all Bodo Kachari household and regarded with special reverence.

A section among the Bodo Kachari embraced *Brahma dharma*, a sect of the Hindu religion in the 1920's decade. The Christianity has also paved its way to the Bodo Kachari society. But in the study area there are very few number of Christian Bodo Kacharis.

As a rule the Bodo Kacharis are an endogamous tribe and practise monogamy. However, in the area under study, Bodo non-Bodo alliances are also found and there are occasional instances of polygyny.

The economy of the Bodo Kacharis is basically agricultural. Their staple crop is rice. They also cultivate mustard, jute and seasonal vegetables. The homestead land is often extended to a garden where beside local fruits, banana, areca palm and a bamboo grove is always kept. Cattle, pig and fowl are reared. But the followers of the *Brahma dharma* do not raise pig and fowl.

After expansion of modern education in the study area, the Bodo Kacharis are attracted towards it. The educated among them are more inclined towards salaried jobs. Moreover, recent growth of several urban centres within the study area opening up new avenues for cash generations. In these newly established towns many Bodo Kacharis are found working as daily wage earner, rickshaw and cart puller. A small section among them is also engaged in petty business.

Traditionally the Bodo Kacharis abstained from trading activities. There is a belief that to make profit through trade involves speaking lies. Until recently, there was a practise of going through purification ritual if, for example, cattle was bought and sold in the same year and thereby making a profit (Narzi 1971:52).

3. The Garo:

The bulk of the Garo population is found in the two Garo Hills districts of neighbouring western Meghalaya. But a large number of Garos also live in Assam. There are many Garo villages situated in Kamrup and Goalpara districts.
These highlanders have four sub-groups, viz., the Abeng, the Machi, the Arvi and the Atong. "The Abeng live in the hills to the west and south-west of Tura range, the Machis in the interior to the north of this range, the Atongs on the either side of the Someswari and the Arvis on the low hills towards Damra and Nibari on the Goalpara frontier (census of India 1961. Vol III. Assam, Part V-A, p. 60). Each of these sub-groups have their own dialects which belong to the Bodo group of Tibeto-Barman speech family.

The Garo society is matrilineal and descent is reckoned through the mother’s line: daughters inherit the family property. Playfair (1909) reported 127 clans among the Garos which are known as machong. There is another smaller group than the machong and it is known as mahari. Each machong is affiliated to a larger group known as chatchi. Burling (1963) regarded the mahari as a village lineage. Goswami and Mazumder (1972) call it extended family. The mahari is the most functional unit in the Garo society and regulate consanguinity. The agricultural akhing land is held jointly by all mahari members in a village and give the right to look after it to a certain family. Thus, a family becomes the right-holder of akhing land which continues for generations. In traditional society of the Garos, the consent of mahari members is required even in transfer of individual property. The chatchi and machong are gradually loosing their importance.

The major chunk of the family property always goes to the youngest daughter nokna. She also inherits the custodianship of akhing land in the akhing land-holder family. But in reality, the person who marries the nokna and comes to live with her family looks after the akhing land. He is known as nokma.

The Garos are traditionally animists. The supreme being in the Garo belief is called Saljong. There are hosts of other benevolent and melevolent spirits which are ranked below Saljong. The followers of the traditional religion is known as songsarek.

In the middle of the last century Christianity made a headway into the Garo society. The first church was established by the American Baptist Mission at Rajasimla, a Garo dominated area in 1867. At present, majority of the Garos are followers of Christianity of various denominations, viz., Roman Catholic, Wales Presbeterian, American Baptist.
The Garos are agriculturists. In the hills they practise traditional shifting *jhum* cultivation. But in the foothills and the plains of Assam they have taken to wet-rice cultivation. In their *jhum* field they produce hill rice, millet, maize, ginger, chilli, turmeric, cotton, etc. In the foothill region they also cultivate orange, pine apple, papaya and banana mainly as cash crops.

The Garo society has devised a very effective mechanism known as *chapanggipa* to meet the scarcity of labour in their *akhing* field. A *chaparikgipa* is a person of either sex who is capable of physical work and comes to a host family *mepalnokgipa* as an additional hand in the *akhing* field. In the traditional Garo society the source of *chaparikgipa* is the consanguinal kin groups. But gradually this traditional socio-economic institution is disappearing. Goswami and Kar (1985:216) traced the reason for diminishing importance of this socio-economic institution to the ".... profit motive and atomistic tendencies .... along with the increasing participation of the villagers in the market mechanism."

4. The Hajong:

The Hajongs, a Mongoloid people, possess a dialect of their own. They are mostly concentrated in the neighbouring Garo Hills Districts of Meghalaya. These people are also found in Mymensingh and Sylhet districts of Bangladesh. After partition and independance of India in 1947, an appreciable number of Hajongs fled to India from the newly created East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). In the post Independence period, the first Hajong exodus to India was after the 1965 Indo-Pak war and the second wave came after the second Indo-Pak war fought in 1971. Many of these refugees found a ready home among their kith and kin in Garo Hills. But a considerable number remained in the refugee camps established in Goalpara and Kamrup districts of Assam. Later on, they settled down permanently in these two districts.

The Hajong society is divided into a number of exogamous units (clan) called *nikni*. Descent in the *nikni* is matrilineal. However, the *niknis* are gradually losing importance and many Hajongs in the study area could not remember their *nikni* affiliation. Therefore, the past role of a *nikhi* in regulating marriage has diminished considerably. Monogamy is the general rule of marriage in the Hajong society. Widow and widower marriages are permissible.
It is believed that the name 'Hajong' is ascribed to them by the Garos, meaning 'expert cultivator'. The Hajongs in the study area practise wet-rice cultivation. Many immigrant Hajongs are engaged in share cropping with their neighbouring Rabhas and Bodo Kacharis. The poorer ones are found working as wage labourer, rickshaw and cart puller.

5. The Khasi:

The Khasis, a better known tribe of Meghalaya, also inhabit in the adjoining areas of Assam. The foothill region of the study area which lies in Boko-Bongaon Development Block is dotted by several Khasi villages. The Khasis with their matrilineal social system is distinctive from the linguistic's point of view. Their language belong to the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic language.

The Khasis are divided into four sub-groups, viz., the Khasi Khynrium, the War Khasi, the Bhoi Khasi and the Lyngam Khasi. The Lyngam Khasis are found in the north-western part of West Khasi Hill District bordering Boko-Hahim region of the study area. In Meghalaya the Lyngam area borders East Garo Hill District and the Garos call their Lyngam neighbour as Megam Khasi.

Each of the Khasi sub-groups are divided into several feudal groups and have their own chief called Siem (literally king) and the minister called Lyngskor. These feudal lords still command and exercise high power in the Khasi society. The Khasi have as many as 303 clans called kurs or jaits.

The traditional Khasi society is partly theistic and partly animistic in the sense that they have a conception of a high God or Creator-God at the same time surrounded by hosts of spirits. They divide the realm of spirits into two in accordance with their intention toward mankind, viz., benevolent and melevolent. Christianity came to Khasi Hills as early as 1833. Majority of the Khasis are Christian of various denominations like the Wales Presbeterian, Roman Catholic.

The Khasis practise shifting as well as settled wet-rice cultivation, depending on the nature of the terrain. In settled cultivation, sali paddy is the main crop and in the former type
they cultivate millet, maize, vegetables, potato, ginger, turmeric, etc. In the southern and the northern slopes of the Khasi hills, orange is cultivated in large number. Other commercially important fruits are, pineapple, plum and pears. These produce find their way to the periodic markets in the adjoining area of the Assam plains.

Since ancient times the Khasis are good traders. There were several important trade routes passing through their land by which trans-national trades prospered. The Khasi traders are regular visitors to the haats located in the Boko-Hahim area.

NON TRIBAL GROUPS

The non-tribal population in the field area belong to eight different communities, viz. 1. the Assamese Hindu, 2. the Assamese Muslim, 3. the Bengali Hindu, 4. the Bengali Muslim, 5. the Hindi-speaking people, 6. the Marwari, 7. the Nepali, 8. the tea garden and ex-tea garden labourer.

1. The Assamese Hindu:

The Assamese Hindu society is traditionally a heirarchical caste-based society. But the castes are neither as numerous nor is the system as rigid as in the remainder of India. Some of the groups which today belong to the Assamese caste social fold are of indigenous origin while others have a history of migration to the region from the west (mainly Gangetic Plains) in the historical times.

Broadly, Assamese caste are divided into two categories, viz., Bamun (Brahmana) and Sudir (Sudra), two extremity in the Hindu caste heirarchy. "Unlike other parts of India, the Assamese Brahmins are not further subdivided into endogamous groups. The Sudir category covers a number of castes, e.g., the Kayasthas, Kalita, Keot, Koch, Nath, Chutia and the Kaibarta" (Bhagabati 1992:143).

The Kalitas are further divided into two broad groups: Bar Kalita and Saru Kalita.
The Saru Kalita, often known as brittiyal or artisan Kalitas includes several artisan castes in Assam, viz., Sonari Kalita (the goldsmith), the Kahar Kalita (the brazier), the Kumar Kalita (the potter), the Nat Kalita (the dancer) and the Malakar (the florist); there is another potter caste known as Hira. Beside their traditional occupation the Saru Kalitas also practise agriculture. In the study area many of them have abandoned their traditional caste-based occupations.

The Keots are divided into two sections: the Halowa Keot and Jalowa Keot. The Halowa Keots are engaged in cultivation while the Jalowa Keots are engaged in fishing. There is another caste group known as Dom or Kaibartta whose occupation is fishing. But now-a-days, the Jalowa Keots and the Kaibarttas are more inclined towards agriculture.

The Koches and the Naths are numerous in the field area. The Nath is also known as Jogi. The Koch caste is considered as 'open caste' in Assam by the anthropologist for receiving converts into Hinduism mainly from the ".... tribal groups such as the Bodo-Kachari, Rabha, Mech. Hojai, Lalung (Tiwa), Mikir (Karbi) and the Deuri Chutiya ....." (Bhagabati 1992 : 13). The chief pursuit of the Naths and the Koches is agriculture.

2. The Assamese Muslim:

Linguistically the Muslims in Assam can broadly be divided into three, viz., the Assamese Muslims, the Bengali Muslims and the Urdu or the Hindi speaking Muslims. The Assamese Muslims are usually referred to as Goria in Assam while those of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) origin are called Miyah. The Assamese Muslims mostly belong to the Sunni sect and occupy a distinctive position in the wider Assamese society with their contribution towards the Assamese language, culture and regional agriculture-based economy.

In the field area, the Assamese Muslims are also known as Desis or Ujania. In the early part of 1930s', hundreds and thousands of Bengali Muslims from East Bengal (now Bangladesh), were encouraged by the British colonial government to settle down in Assam for their expertise in agriculture. In latter period many of these Muslim settlers opted to identify themselves with the Assamese people as na asomiya, i.e., new Assamese.
In the study area the Assamese Muslim inhabitat villages are located on the alluvial bank of the river Brahmaputra as well as in the char areas. These people are the main suppliers of green vegetables to the haats in the study area.

3. The Bengali Hindu:

Among the non-tribal communities, the Bengali Hindu is a prominent one in the study area. The area received several waves of migration of these people in the recent past (i.e., after partition of the country in 1947 and two Indo-Pak wars fought in 1965 and 1971 respectively) from erstwhile East Pakistan now Bangladesh. In the study area, several refugee camps were established to accommodate thousands of refugees. After the wars, the refugees never returned to their country and dispersed in the entire region. For their livelihood, they took up petty business. Many engaged themselves in their traditional caste based occupations, e.g., barbers, cobblers, potters and mat-making, etc. These artisans find a ready market for their wares and services in the haats located in the region. Some of the Bengali Hindus are also engaged in works of servile nature, e.g., domestic servant, daily wage labourer, etc. in the urban centres of the region. But the educated are absorbed in white collar jobs.

4. The Bengali Muslim:

The Bengali Muslims are mostly immigrants from the erstwhile East Pakistan now Bangladesh. These people are called Bhatiya in the field area (Miyah, elsewhere in Assam). After migrating to this country, they occupied the chars and low-land on the bank of the river Brahmaputra. The local people use the term Bhatiya to denote relatively backward Muslims who speak in their traditional dialect of Mymensingh, Rongpur, Pabna or Sylhet District of Bangladesh. The educated among these people have a tendency to identify themselves with the Assamese nationality. The earlier Bengali Muslim immigrant identify as 'na asomiya' meaning 'new Assamese'. The Bhatiyas are concentrated mostly in Lakhipur Development Block in the study area.
Basically, the *Bhatiyas* are agriculturists and cultivate all kinds of vegetables and paddy that grow in their locality. Most of them are peasant farmers who cultivate these agricultural produce along with jute, maize, gram, betel leaf and any other agricultural products which can be sold in the *haats* located in the study area.

5. **The Hindi-speaking people:**

The bulk of the Hindi-speaking people are Hindus from several states, viz., Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh. Although, these people from different states have their own dialects, Hindi is the *lingua-franca* for all sections. Another distinctive feature of this group of people in the study area is the lenient attitude towards the rigid caste boundary they have in their home states. In religious, marriage and other social functions, the people ineract socially across their respective caste and home-state boundaries. In such social occasions they form a single group and it is hard to distinguish who is from which state. But yet, members of lower castes, e.g., *Murari, Surahiya, Chamar, Muchi, Dom*, etc., maintain little distance and show respect to the members of upper castes, e.g., *Brahmin, Kshatnya, Rajput, Kayastha*, etc.

The major economic pursuit of these people is trade. The rich among them lend money to the new comers to begin their own business. Most of them are engaged in petty business like selling grocery, cloth, stationery goods and keeping tea stall in the urban centres of the field area. Many among them have taken up their own traditional occupation, e.g., hair-dressing, shoe repairing, carpentry and menial works like cleaning and sweeping. These urban centre based people also visit the periodic markets for retailing their wares.

Beside the Hindi speaking Hindus, there are some Hindi-speaking Muslims also who are engaged in different occupations. The Hindi speaking Muslims mostly own bakery and butcher's shop in the urban centres located in the study area.
6. The Marwari:

The Marwaris, originally hails from Rajasthan, are divided into two religious groups: the Hindu and the Jain. Both groups are found inhabiting in the small towns located in the study area.

The Marwaris are engaged in trades. The rich among them are whole-sale dealers of grocery, cloth and stationery goods. There are number of Marwari retailers of these commodities who visit the periodic markets in the region. The Marwaris are also engaged in bulk purchasing of local agricultural produce (viz., paddy, mustard, jute, etc.), in the periodic markets and export these goods out of the region.

7. The Nepali:

The Nepalis are inhabiting in few villages situated in the southern part of the study area. These people started to migrate and settle in Assam since the last century. The early settlers were retired armymen of the British armed forces. In the latter period, the Nepalis migrated to Assam in search of livelihood outside their homeland Nepal and the adjoining Nepali dominated area in India (viz., Sikkim and Darjeeling District of West Bengal).

The Nepalis are divided into several endogamous castes and ethnic groups. The caste groups include Hamal (priest), Jaisee (astrologer), Thakuri (Kshatriya), Jogi (practitioner of yoga), Charki (cobbler), Kurale (potter), Domai (tailor) and Kami (goldsmith), etc. Other ethnic groups included in the wider Nepali nationality are the Limbu, the Tamang, the Lepcha, the Mogor, the Gurung and the Sherpa. Each of these groups have their own distinctive traditional culture and dialects. But in the field area their distinctiveness is difficult to recognize and all sections share the common Nepali identity and speak Gorkhali language.

In the field area all sections of these people are adhered to agriculture and some are engaged in small dairy business. Very few are engaged in traditional caste-based occupations.
8. The Tea garden and ex-tea garden labourer:

During the colonial regime the British established several hundred tea gardens in different parts of Assam. In the study area, there are two tea gardens located in the northern part of Goalpara District.

To work in the tea gardens the British imported large number of labourers from the central and the south India belonging to different tribal groups. After years of sharing the same habitat and leading a common economic life these people of distinctive ethnic identity (viz., Munda, Oraon, Santhal, Savara, Khariya, Kurwa, Chik-Baraik, Koya, Baiga, etc.) came to be known as *bagishar cooli* tea garden labourers. After their retirement the labourers did not like to return to their home provinces and settled down in the peripheral area of the tea gardens. Their progenies showed little interest to work as labourer in tea garden. These people are known as ex-tea garden labourer, *practon chah bagishar cooli*.

The ex-tea garden labourers are adhered to agriculture as their chief economic pursuit. Many among them are engaged as agricultural labourers in their neighbouring villages.