BACKGROUND

While discussing the peopling, growth and distribution of population in Darrang district in the preceding chapter, it has been stated that the northern *tarai* region is inhabited by the Bodo-Kacharis and the Nepalis, the foothills region is occupied by the ex-tea garden labourers, the central built-up region is mostly inhabited by the Assamese Hindus, Assamese Muslims and the Bengali Hindus, and the flood plain region is occupied by the immigrant Muslims. The density of population is the highest in the central built-up region of the district. It has also been observed that geographical, historical and other factors have played important roles in determining the ethnic composition of the district. It should be noted here that migrations of people throughout the course of history of the area have been playing a significant role in bringing about changes in size, structure, characteristics and distribution of population in the district.

Migrations of people to various parts of Darrang district from the ancient to the present time have significantly contributed towards the growth of ethnic and cultural diversity in this area. This has not only resulted in socio-cultural
transformations, but also as a result of migration, a few ethnic groups have come into existence. This may be viewed as a consequence of prolonged interaction between the cultures of the migrant and those of the indigenous inhabitants.

The ethnic composition of the present micro study area i.e. Chapai, is by and large the same with that of the district. In the following lines, brief outlines of the major groups of the people inhabiting the study area are presented.

PROFILE OF THE PEOPLE

THE ASSAMESE HINDUS

The indigenous Hindus who constitute 58.69 per cent of the total population of the *mouza* are divided into a number of caste groups. The Brahmins, the Ganaks, the Kayasthas, the Kalitas, the Kochs, the Keots, the Salois, the Naths (Jogi) and the Kaibartas are some of the major caste groups inhabiting the study area.

The Brahmins

Epigraphical and literary evidences clearly indicate that the Brahmins had a privileged status in Assam in the past. Traditionally, their profession is priesthood. But now they have taken up various non-agricultural occupations. The Brahmins constitute only a small fraction of the total population of the district. The major concentration of the Brahmins in Darrang district is found in Mangaldai area. In the study area they constitute only 5.43 per cent of the total Assamese Hindus.

The Ganaks

Traditionally the Ganaks are astrologers by profession. They are variously
The Batchora (porch)

An Assamese Hindu family
known as Daibajna, Grahacharyya, Lagnacharyya, Surjyavipra, etc. Although socially inferior to Brahmins, they rank above all other castes in the study area. At present, they are seen to pursue various occupations. They constitute 9.04 per cent of the total Assamese Hindus.

The Kayasthas

The Kayasthas are said to have come from Upper India. The Kayasthas constitute a small fraction of the population of the district. They enjoyed a high social status and worked as officers and scribes in the Ahom court. They do not plough their land for cultivation. In the study area they account for only 1.55 per cent of the total Assamese Hindus.

The Kalitas

The Kalitas form a major caste group of Assam. It is difficult to say how the word 'Kalita' was derived or what significance is ascribed to the name. The name is also not heard of in any other state. Although mainly agriculturists, they have now-a-days moved into almost all sorts of occupations. In the study area they are not numerically predominant. They constitute only 8.27 per cent of the total Assamese Hindus.

The Keots

In social hierarchy the Keots are placed just below the Kalitas. In the study area they are mostly agriculturists. They constitute 4.39 per cent of the total Assamese Hindus.

The Salois

The Saloi caste is peculiar to Assam. The hierarchical position of this group in the society is below the Keots. The people belonging to this caste
are mostly agriculturists. They constitute only 1.81 per cent of the total Assamese Hindus in the *mouza*.

**The Kochs**

Originally they were indigenous tribals, apparently of mongoloid origin. This caste group has been remarkably an 'open' caste in Assam for receiving converts into Hinduism mainly from the Bodo-speaking tribal population. In the present study area, they form the dominant caste group. They are agriculturists and constitute 47.80 per cent of the total Assamese Hindus. Recently they have attained the status of a scheduled tribe and are also referred to as Koch-Rajbangsis.

**The Naths**

The Naths or Yogis or Katanis are found in various places of Assam. In Upper Assam, many of them are known as Katanis who were formerly weavers by profession. The original professions of the Yogis were drum-beating, palanquin carrying, quackery, snake-charming, etc. Most people of the present generation of the Yogis are agriculturists (Dutta 1978: 127). They constitute 14.47 per cent of the total Assamese Hindus in the study area.

**The Kaibartas**

The Kaibartas from a professional caste traditionally engaged in fishing. But with the increasing scarcity of fish on the one hand and the spread of education on the other, many of its members have withdrawn from fishing. Some of them, who have land, have taken to agriculture while others have moved to other petty jobs, such as agricultural labour, shop keeping, wage
earning, etc. The Kaibarta is a scheduled caste in Assam. In the study area the Kaibartas constitute 7.24 per cent of the total Assamese Hindus.

THE ASSAMESE MUSLIMS

The present day Assamese Muslims inhabiting the study area are the descendants of (a) Muslim soldiers captured by the Ahom rulers in the battle of 1532. (b) the Muslim clerics who propagated Islam; (c) the Muslim artisans brought to Assam by the rulers of Assam from time to time; and (d) converts to Islam at different historical times. The overwhelming majority of the Assamese Muslims are agriculturists and are the followers of the Sunni\(^1\) sect. The common name of the indigenous Muslims of this area and of Assam in general, is Garia. There are several views regarding the origin of the term (Ali 1994: 6-13). The Assamese Muslims are the product of prolonged interaction between Islam and local Assamese folk cultural tradition. They share many elements of Assamese folk traditions of culture with the Assamese Hindus. In the present study area they constitute 9.72 per cent of the total population.

THE IMMIGRANT MUSLIMS

The immigrant Muslims inhabiting the study area are the descendants of those immigrants who migrated to this area in the 1930s from Mymensing district of eastern Bengal. They are mainly found to settle in the low lying areas. They have added significantly to the number of the Muslim population of the study area. Other than religion, the immigrant Muslims have not much

\(^1\) The Muslims who consider prophet Muhammad as the last messenger of Allah.
An Assamese Muslim family

Three immigrant Muslim women
cultural similarities with the Assamese Muslims. Many of them, who were originally cultivators, have now taken up various wage earning occupations like carpentry, masonry, rickshaw pulling, thela (cart) pulling, etc. They constitute 1.55 per cent of the total population of the mouza.

THE BENGALI HINDUS

The Bengali Hindus, who started setting in this part since 1829 in small numbers as professionals, constitute now 10.01 per cent of the total population of the mouza. Although the urban Bengali Hindus came in the wake of the British rule, the rural ones came to settle here as refugees after partition in 1947. In the rural areas their main profession is agriculture. In the town areas, however, they are seen in different trades.

THE TRIBALS

The Bodo-Kacharis

The Bodo-Kacharis belong to the mongoloid racial stock. They are indigenous to the North-East India. They speak a language belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. Though basically patrilineal, the matrilineal elements are also in evidence among the Bodo-Kacharis. The Bodo-Kacharis are traditionally animists. At present, however, they are found to worship some of the deities of the Hindu pantheon as well. They are mostly agriculturists. The Bodo-Kachari women are very much industrious who spend much of their time working in the fields. They are also expert weavers. The Bodo-Kacharis constitute 6.24 per cent of the total population of the mouza.

In addition to the major communities described above, in the study area there are also a few people belonging to various communities, namely the
A Bengali Hindu joint family

A group of Bodo-Kachari women
ex-tea garden labourers, the Nepalis, the Hindi speaking Muslims (mainly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) and the Marwaris. Since their number is very few, all of them are included in the 'others' category for various kinds of analyses in the present study.

The tea garden labourers of Assam belong to various cultural, linguistic and ethnic groups who have migrated from Bihar, Orissa, Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Munda, Gond, Oraon, Goala, Lohar, Khond and Boya are some of the tribal groups to whom the tea garden labourers belong. In the study area there are only a few ex-tea garden labourers who are now mainly wage labourers.

The Nepalis of Assam are mainly the migrants from parts of Nepal. They are not a homogenous community. The Nepalis are divided into a number of castes and sub-castes. In the study area there are only a few Nepali families residing in Mangaldai town. The Nepalis are traditionally cattle breeders but in Assam they turned into marginal farmers-cum-small dairymen. In the study area the Nepalis living in the town area are mostly businessmen.

The few Hindi-speaking Muslims of the study area are the residents of Mangaldai town. They have come mainly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Their main occupations include cotton carding and quilt making. A few of them are also engaged in butchery.

There are a few Marwari families residing in Mangaldai town. Like the other Marwaris, they also pursue various business. However, they are not an economically dominant group in Mangaldai town. Map 11 shows the spatial distribution of different communities in Chapai mouza.
CHAPAI MOUZA
COMMUNITYWISE DISTRIBUTION
OF POPULATION

1 0 1 2 Km

MOUZA BOUNDARY
VILLAGE BOUNDARY

INDEX

ASSAMESE HINDU
ASSAMESE MUSLIM
BENGALI HINDU
IMMIGRANT MUSLIM
BOOD-KACHARI
OTHERS

MAP 11
INTERACTIONS AMONG THE COMMUNITIES

In many towns and villages in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, the Hindus, the Muslims and many other communities live cheek by jowl as members of the same habitat maintaining various kinds of interactions. Each of the communities in such situations, maintains its identity through exclusive religious and community organizations but at the same time the interactions among different communities are evident in many joint activities and organizational features. The sharing of common habitat and the common mode of livelihood pattern and also various wider community level institutions and organizations provide opportunities for establishing various types of linkages among different communities.

It has become evident from Map 11 that out of 44 villages in the mouza 13 villages are inhabited exclusively by the Assamese Hindus who are also numerically dominant in the mouza. The immigrant Muslims who are culturally distinct from all other indigenous groups and who have migrated to this region in the 1930s are exclusively occupying six villages—two in the flood plain and four in the built-up zone of the extreme north. The Bodo-Kacharis, another culturally distinct group of the mouza live exclusively in two villages. The lone exclusively inhabited Bengali Hindu village is situated centrally in the mouza. Thus, of the 44 villages of the mouza, 22 villages are exclusively inhabited by a single community. The remaining 22 villages of the mouza are mixed in terms of habitation of the communities. Fifty per cent of these mixed villages are occupied exclusively by the indigenous communities. There are six villages inhabited by the Assamese Hindus and the Assamese Muslims alone and five villages are occupied by the Assamese and the Bodo-Kacharis. The remaining villages are the mixed villages of different communities. Though there are
a number of religious and linguistic groups, the sharing of a large area of socio-cultural life in common by the Assamese Hindus and the Assamese Muslims is frequently observed in the mouza. This is evident from the fact that not a single village in the mouza is exclusively inhabited by the Assamese Muslims. Despite their belonging to a distinct religion, they have been living in close interaction with other indigenous groups more particularly with the Assamese Hindus.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE ASSAMESE HINDUS AND THE ASSAMESE MUSLIMS

In Darrang district the indigenous Hindus and Muslims have been living as neighbours in different villages since historical time. Since the historical past, contact and communications between these two indigenous communities have been a part of the overall social milieu. This is due primarily to the sharing of a large area of socio-cultural life in common by these two communities. Besides language, there are many other points of socio-cultural identity between the two communities which have been facilitating contact and communication between them across religious boundaries.

An event from the history of recent past of Darrang district may be pointed out here as a case in point to indicate the quality and content of unity that has been existing between the Assamese Hindus and the Assamese Muslims of the area. The land revenue was raised at an interval of every ten years between 1832 and 1858. But when the revenue was raised in 1868, the Assamese Hindu and Muslim villagers of Patharughat in the Mangaldai area assembled in an unruly mob and surrounded the Deputy Commissioner, the Subdivisional Officer and the District Superintendent of Police. But no extreme measures were resorted to on either side. In January 1894, after the reassessment of
the Assam Valley, the Hindu and Muslim villagers of Patharughat jointly decided not to pay their revenue, and collected in tumultuous crowds with the evident intention of overawing the authorities. The Deputy Commissioner accordingly proceeded to Patharughat with twelve military policemen and nineteen members of the armed civil police. The people assembled in a dense crowd in the compound of the Inspection Bungalow and they were ejected by the police. Afterwards the mob returned armed with sticks and clods, and the police again advanced and drove them to an open plain. Here the mob rallied and began to pelt the police with clods and sticks, and gradually to hem them in. The police were compelled to open fire. A final volley was then discharged and the police charged the rioters who at last begun to yield. Fifteen people were killed and thirty seven wounded in this unfortunate affair (Allen 1905 : 60-61; Sarma 1961). Those who were killed and wounded in the riot were indigenous Hindus and Muslims. This peasant riot of Patharughat of 1894 is known popularly in the Mangaldai area as "Patharughatar Ran". The riot of Patharughat occupies a distinctive place in the history of Mangaldai, for it is considered as a glittering example of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Thus, the common mode of livelihood based on agriculture is one of the most significant factors in creating linkage as well as interdependence between the Assamese Hindus and the Assamese Muslims. This is also apparent in the mouza situation. There are instances of share-cropping across the community line. The Hindu and the Muslim villagers borrow agricultural implements on the bases of neighbourhood and personal friendship. The nature of economic interdependence between the two communities in the case of those villages where they live together, is more pronounced.
The social contact and visits between the Hindus and the Muslims are effectuated on occasions when necessity arises. For example, a Hindu or a Muslim folk-medicine practitioner is often visited by either a Hindu or a Muslim in search of an amulet or for some indigenous medicine. On formal occasions like a wedding, invitations are often extended to people outside one's own community. Individual friendship across community boundaries is one of the important aspects of Hindu-Muslim relations in Chapai area.

With regard to the village level socio-political organizations, it may be noted that there are government appointed gaonburhas (village headmen) for each village. The various problems and disputes arising within a community at times may be the concern of that community only. But when occasions arise the Muslim and the Hindu leaders meet as a common body and such joint village level actions involving the Hindus and the Muslims are evident in many cases. Occasional disputes involving Hindu and Muslim villagers do not affect the overall relationship between the two communities.

The composite Hindu-Muslim villages in the mouza were settled more than a century ago. Obviously the people of these two communities have had a long period at their disposal to reach mutual adjustment and understanding.

INTERACTIONS AMONG THE ASSAMESE HINDUS, MUSLIMS AND THE IMMIGRANT MUSLIMS

While the interactions among the Assamese Hindus, Muslims and the immigrant Muslims are taken into consideration, it should be noted that the extent of interactions between the two indigenous groups, i.e. the Assamese Hindus and the Assamese Muslims is more apparent than those between the immigrant Muslims and the two indigenous groups. Despite their belonging to a common religion, the contact and communication between the Assamese Muslims and
the immigrant Muslims of the study area are relatively thin. Varying socio-cultural background, exclusive settlement pattern, etc. have stood on the way of contact and communication between these two communities.

In this context the observations made by Colson (1953: 88) may be referred to. She states:

"If people are closely associated in their daily lives, they must have some understanding of each other's habits, customs, motivations, and symbols, and be prepared to show these some degree of respect. Where the association is close, the two may be said to share common definitions of the situations within which they meet and to exhibit similar habits of behaviour. To this extent, they then share a common culture. As contacts include more and more of the total range of human relationships, the field of common definitions also widens."

In the case of the Assamese Hindus and the Assamese Muslims, Colson's observations apply to a fair extent. The two groups may also be said to share "common definitions of the situations" and a "common culture". The linguistic behaviour of the two groups is similar. Both the groups speak Assamese language - a derivative of Sanskrit. They share in common many elements of the wider Assamese folk life and its culture.

Information on the general pattern of interactions between the immigrant Muslims and other indigenous communities including the Assamese Muslims in Assam in general and in some specific areas within the state in particular reveal certain interesting facts (Ali 1978: 65-72; Choudhury and Gogoi 1995:87-112). These interactions had mainly economic rather than socio-cultural orientation in the past. This is also to a great extent true in the present. The spread of education and occupational diversifications among the immigrant Muslims to a large extent have opened up channels of contact and communication between them and other indigenous communities.

Because of their long stay and close contact with the local Assamese
people, some aspects of the socio-cultural life of the present day immigrant Muslims have undergone considerable changes. Being originally Bengali speakers they have now accepted Assamese not only as a communication medium, but also as a medium of instruction in schools from primary level. Many students have shown proficiency in this language in school, college and in university examinations. Many of them have earned reputation in Assamese literary circle for their contributions. The immigrant Muslims participate, attend and enjoy religious festivals, folk theatre (bhaona) and folk festivals like Bihu and others without any reservations. Such a symbiotic relation in course of time has led to the process of percolation of many cultural traits and elements into their culture from the neighbouring Assamese communities. This has fostered the process of assimilation and adaptation.

Coming to Chapai mouza, it can be stated that many of the preceding observations also hold good in so far as the interaction between the immigrant Muslims and the indigenous Assamese communities is concerned. The interactions between the immigrant Muslims and the indigenous people in Chapai mouza exhibit certain variations in terms of rural and urban situations. In the rural area many of the immigrant Muslim males are engaged mainly as agricultural wage labourers by the local peasants including the Hindus and the Muslims. Some of them are also engaged as mason, carpenter and also for timber sawing. In Mangaldai town, the only urban centre in the mouza, the situation is different. Here the immigrant Muslims are seen pursuing various occupations. In the past the rickshaw-pullers in the town were mostly from Bihar and a few of them were locals. Now, they are being replaced by the immigrant Muslims. So is the case with the thela-pullers. For various household works also both
the male and female immigrant Muslims are engaged by the local people on wage basis. The masons and carpenters are mostly from among the immigrant Muslims. The daily market and the bi-weekly market of Mangaldai town cater the need of the people from the town and from the neighbouring villages. In that market the vegetable and fish selling are more or less the exclusive domain of the immigrant Muslims. The immigrant Muslims also supply the major part of the vegetable and fish requirements of the buyers of that market. Following Piddington (1957: 751-752) it can be stated that the immigrant Muslims are living in a kind of condition of economic symbiosis with the local people. The immigrant Muslims and various indigenous groups live in a condition of economic interdependence, yet they display in many respects different cultural features and maintaining different values.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN INDIGENOUS TRIBALS AND NON-TRIBALS

In any discussion on interactions between the tribals and the non-tribals in Assam, it should be kept in view that since historical time there has been several linkages between the tribal and non-tribal populations including the Hindu castes. This phenomenon in the context of North-East India has been described by Bhagabati (1988), Goswami (1967), Mazumdar (1972), and Sinha (1967) within the broad frameworks of 'Sanskritization' and 'tribe-caste continuum'.

In the district setting of Darrang, the dominant tribal group is the Bodo-Kacharis. Though their main concentration is found in the northern part of

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2 "... the process by which a "low" Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, a twice born caste" (Srinivas 1966: 6).

3 It provides the model for understanding the process of tribal transformation. For details of the concept, see Sinha 1965: 58-83.
the district, they are sparsely distributed in other parts of the district as well. In all these areas they are in close contact with the non-tribal indigenous peoples which has resulted in the transmission of various cultural traits and elements from the tribals to the non-tribals and vice-versa.

As pointed out earlier in Chapai mouza there are two exclusive Bodo-Kachari villages. There are many other villages where they also live alongside some other indigenous non-tribal people. The situation obtaining in the mouza clearly indicates that the Bodo-Kacharis have been co-existing with the non-tribals.

As in other parts of North-East India, the process of 'Sanskritization' has also been operating in Chapai mouza since long past. A sort of 'tribe-caste continuum' is also discernible in the mouza. It is held that the Koches of Assam are mainly the converts to Hinduism from many indigenous tribals including the Bodo-Kacharis.

The preceding discussion reveals that the interactions between different communities in the study area have paved the way for assimilation and absorption of tribals into the Hindu social fold and the non-indigenous people into wider Assamese society.

The assimilation and absorption were continuing processes. These have however, been affected by regression in some cases whereas in others these are still continuing. These processes of assimilation and absorption have been dictated by social, cultural and economic securities and a desire for better social status in the local society.

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