CHAPTER V

Social and Cultural Institutions in the PanPunjis of the Pnar

After analysing the migration, settlement and livelihood of the Pnar in Barak Valley, it becomes important to also bring to the fore their social and cultural institutions. This chapter intends to draw special attention to the same in the Pnar Pan Punjis of the Valley. Straddling the three districts of Barak Valley, the Pnar in the Punjis continue to retain their identity and maintain their culture, tradition and beliefs. The PanPunjis had therefore, for long stood and still stands to provide an interesting picture of keeping up the tradition and culture of a community thus situated, away from home, surrounded by villages of other tribes such as the Kuki, the Zemi Naga, Cacharee, the Reang etc. who also constitute a population in the Valley. The Pnar play a vital role in the maintenance of their social and cultural order and their traditional mores had all along continued unaffected. This is reflected through the rigid form of matrilinealism, religious beliefs and practices, traditional system of administration, dress, language and festivals.

Matriliney and Women

The social structure of the Pnar writes S.N. Lamare, originated from the clans. The clans trace their origin from a common ancestress and their lineal descent is from the mother to the daughter. It is a general practice among the Pnarto

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2 Ibid., p.15.
maintain the same *moo-tyllein* or cairns\(^3\) so long the lineal connection is from the same ancestress.\(^4\) The Pnar in Barak Valley retain the structure by carrying the bones of the dead to the native place known as *i rah chyien*. They would travel all the way from the *Punjis* to the Hills in order to deposit them in the same cairn. With the passage of time, such practice of carrying the bones to the Hills is dying out, though the Pnarpaticularly the *NiamTrein* the Valley continues to hold on to the practice of maintaining the same cairn of one descent group in their respective *Punjis*.

The most striking feature retained by the Pnar in the Valley is the institution of matriliny. Surrounded by patrilineal tribes, the matrilineal organisation is kept up in the *Punjis* of the Pnar. The descent or lineage is matrilineal, with the children in the family, belonging to the clan of the mother. The Khasi-Pnar tribe is one of the few tribes that follow the matrilineal system of which the reason is still unknown. Nevertheless, there are a number of folk stories that throw light on the origin of the matrilineal system among the Khasi-Pnar tribes. The stories according to O.L.Snaiteang,\(^5\) have similar accounts with slightly different events, yet almost all of them appear to reach the same conclusion. One such story worth mentioning is that, in a pitched battle that had claimed most of the lives of the Khasi-Pnar warriors, a lone Khasisurvivor who had to fight the last battle knew not for sure of his survival to provide continuity to his community, so he finally handed over the clan lineage to his mother and made her custodian of property as well.\(^6\) The story might have been taken as an account of a historical event; hence, the Khasi-Pnar found it appropriate

\(^3\)The Cairns are the places where the ashes of the dead are deposited after an elaborate ceremony.  
\(^4\)S.N.Lamare, *op.cit.*, p. 15. 
\(^6\)Ibid., p. 18.
to adopt the matrilineal system. In the *Punjis* of Barak Valley, the Pnar continue to carry the family’s name after their mother’s clan name.

The solidarity of the *IungBei* is maintained. The youngest daughter inherits the *IungBei* or mother’s house and the ancestral property would be handed over to her. Like in the Hills, the youngest daughter is subjected to certain responsibilities and duties and acts as the house keeper of the *IungBei*. Apart from taking care of her parents, she has to conduct all religious rituals connected with the family. For instance, the ritual of *I Siang Ja* or *I Sung Ji* performed once a year to venerate the ancestors is observed at the *IungBei* by which all the expenses are taken care of by the youngest daughter. Also, like in the Hills, the youngest daughter or the *wasdiah* is herself an institution. Her unmarried brothers and sisters continue to live in the parental home.

Village endogamy has been well established among the Pnar in Barak Valley and marriage is strictly exogamous, i.e outside the *kur* or clan. According to R.T.Rymbai, among the Khasi-Pnar, "there cannot be a greater sin than a coition between members of the *kur*". He continues to write "other sins are forgivable, but not like this before God and man, and person guilty for the sacrilege are out casted." This marriage pattern, in relation to the "clan" and all its related aspects, is surprisingly strictly followed among the Pnar in Barak Valley. The Pnar in the Valley do not enter into alliance of couples belonging to the same clan – the relation though near or distant. That is a pre – requisite and utmost care is taken to ensure that couples are from separate clans. As pointed earlier in the previous chapters, the migration of the Pnar to the Valley was undertaken by a family or by an individual,

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but never by a group of clan members. Therefore, the population in the Punjis is grouped in small descent groups according to each migration. Presently, there are approximately thirty different clans in the valley which can intermarry and taking a spouse from the outside the community was and still is very rare. To adhere to their unique matrilineal institution, the headmen of the Punjis lay down strict principles with regard to the institution of marriage. To the Pnar in the Punjis, entering into a matrimonial alliance within the same clan (shikur) is considered an act of sacrilege and both parties should be expelled from the village and should forgo all rights including the right to property that they could otherwise enjoy. They would never be accepted as members of the village in future.\(^{10}\) On the other hand, whenever a Pnar women enters into marriage with those from other communities (Dkhar or non tribal), she would be expelled forthwith from the Punji (village) and forgo all social rights as enjoyed by any other resident. However, those who marry from other tribal communities could continue to stay in the village but should retain the matrilineal lineage (offspring adopting the mother's clan). It is only when a male Pnar marry from other tribal communities, that the children adopt the father's clan of the Pnar\(^{11}\) on the condition that he takes his wife to the Punji. The matrilineal system of the Pnar in the Punjishas, therefore, survived the test of time despite being surrounded by patrilineal societies.

It may not be out of place, to mention at this juncture, that the Pnaris sometimes mistaken to have change from the matrilineal to adopt the system of patrilineal. This might have caught the attention of Chie Nakane who took up Jatinga (north Cachar Hills) as one of her fields in the course of her comparative


\(^{11}\) Ibid., p.81.
study on the matrilineal systems of the Garo and the Khasi. Chie Nakane writes that an interesting social usage which reflects the importance of the husband of the first generation emerged among the Pnar.\textsuperscript{12} This is the addition of the name of the husband of the first generation to the matrilineal clan name. For example, \textit{RupsiTah}, \textit{RupsiLeh}, \textit{RupsiKhla} are found in the \textit{Rupsicl}an. \textit{RupsiTah} is one of the lines of the first immigrants to Jatinga. Tah was taken from Pryntah the husband of SyntuRupsi.\textsuperscript{13} She is of the opinion that such addition of name is simply due to the fact firstly, that they hold in high regard the man of the first generation because of his great contribution and secondly, to distinguish themselves from members of the same clan according to the descent group established at each immigration.\textsuperscript{14} This same view can be applied to the Pnar in the present day three districts of Barak valley who have the names of the husband of the first generation added to the mother’s clan name. For example, \textit{PohthmiChara}, \textit{Pohthmi Pot}, \textit{PohthmiTharaw}, \textit{Pohthmi Long} are found in the \textit{Pohthmi} clan, \textit{SuchenPaniaw} and \textit{SuchenJhum} in the \textit{Suchen} clan, \textit{SuchiangLahong}, \textit{Suchiang Bang}, \textit{SuchiangNiaw}, \textit{Suchiang Dong} in the \textit{Suchiang} clan and many others. However, it is important to note, that the Pnar in the \textit{Punjis} strictly followed and still follow the matrilineal descent rule and the addition of names is merely because of the fact that the Pnar are conscious of their father or grandfather’s contribution and to distinguish the members of the same clan according to the descent group after each migration.

Women, in the \textit{Punjis} of the Pnar in Barak Valley occupy a privileged position particularly in matters of descent and property. In addition, her role from the hearth to the market finds an important place. The women play an important role in sharing

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}, p.172.
\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 172.
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and shouldering responsibilities with men. Apart from household activities, we still find women taking an active part in market places which is visible till date in all the three districts of the Valley. She also plays a role in fixing and negotiating prices of betel leaf with middlemen or *paikars*. Another striking feature observed in the Valley, is that women participate in the traditional political administration of the *Punjis*. According to tradition, women have no place in the field of local administration. S.N.Lamare observes that they take part "in socio-economic activities like looking after the siblings, cultivation, cattle rearing and trade but not in politics". Women cannot participate in any kind of decision making process. They cannot attend any *dorbar* or the village council or participate in any kind of political affairs. In contrast to this traditional custom, a departing feature is noticed in the Valley where women do take part in village administration and even assuming the role of village headmen. In most of such cases, women take advantage of their financial position and assume the role of *mantris* where less privileged villagers are made to accept. The female mantri, presides over the village *dorbar*, keeping herself in a position of authority in any kind of meeting or other gathering in the *Punjis*. She takes over the responsibility of a male *mantri* or village headman in every sense of the word. It may be pertinent to mention here of a few *Punjish*aving women as headmen or *mantrios* of a village, which we came across in the course of our field study:- Eris Pohthmi *Mantri* of Jaroltala Khasia Punji, Theo Jungngai of Darolcherra Khasia Punji, Thelis Manner of Jamirkhal Khasia Punji, Mary Syrti of Puthicherra Khasia Punji, Silsila Shadap of Chotosalganga Khasia Punji, Dharli Suchiang of Badshatilla Khasia Punji and many others.\footnote{Field study to the respective *Punjis* in the Valley.}

\footnote{S.N.Lamare *op. cit.*, p. 28.}
\footnote{Ibid., p. 28.}
Political Organisation

The traditional method of village administration, having the office of a *wahehchnong* or village headman is maintained by the Pnar in the *Punjis*. Like the Kuki, the Tripuri, the Kachari and other hill tribes in the Valley, particularly those inhabiting the forest tracts especially in the Sylhet and Cachar District,\(^{18}\) the Pnar lived in separate groups, each under a headman or *wahehchnong* of their own to carry on the local administration. In the valley, he is being referred to as a *mantra*,\(^{19}\) though officially or theoretically he is known by the name of *goanburha*.\(^{20}\)

The Pnar, after being permanently settled in the Valley, the question of leadership gradually emerged. A senior male member of the family or clan or any male member, generally the one who initiated the migration process would become the natural headman or *mantri* of the particular *Punji* he established. The succession of headman-ship seemed to be hereditary and was usually passed down from the father to the son or daughter which is why in most cases, the *mantri* or the headmen are descendants of the family of the first generation who had contributed greatly to the settlement of the villagers in the *Punji*. Otherwise, the Pnar inhabitants of the village would select a person who may belong to any clan efficient enough to hold the responsibility in maintaining social control and discipline in the *Punji*. Tenure-ship of the headman was not fixed and he may remain a headman as long as he can hold the post.

The headmen acted and continue to act as the administrative head of the *Punji* and at the same time as a fountain of justice who takes the responsibility to

\(^{18}\)The evidence recorded by the Forest Enquiry Committee, Assam, for the year 1929, Shillong, 1929, p. 4.

\(^{19}\)*Mantri* is a minister, (see glossary in J.B. Bhattacharjee, Cachar Under the British Rule in North East India, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1977).

\(^{20}\)*Goanburha* is a village headman, (see glossary in J.B. Bhattacharjee, Cachar Under the British Rule in North East India, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1977).
settle disputes among the villagers and clans. They also play a role in undertaking various development works in the villages, and control the social order in accordance with the traditional laws. It can be understood that the headman laid strict rules and regulations with respect to social, traditional and religious matters in their respective *Punjis.* The main function of the headmen in the *Punjis* was to protect his people from any kind of crisis and issues that they might encounter in their *Punji,* for example the grabbing of lands, destruction of their *pan* leaf cultivation etc., He also took the responsibility to allocate the granted lands to the villagers and to collect the annual payment of taxes. However, there are instances of the headman taking advantage of his or her position thus putting the people into serious problems out of his/her despotic nature. Such attitude worsens the status and condition of the Pnar in the *Punjis* who continue to survive the stress and strain, though left neglected and subjected to oppression and suppression by their leaders.

Major decisions were taken by the headman in consultation with the elderly members of the community constituting a *dorbar* or village council. Each adult male Pnar from each household in the *Punji* was a member of the *dorbar* barring aforementioned exceptional cases where women take over as *mantris.* The members contributed to its funds to maintain the well being of the community. The headman could call the *dorbar* at any time he felt necessary to discuss or tackle certain issues. In most cases however, the *dorbar* met at least once a year. Presently, the office of the *dorbar* still exists though losing its importance day by day. Meetings are hardly held, except for those rare occasions when required. Yet the system of traditional headman-ship still holds its significance and the headman, as a leader, has a strong control over the other members of his community with respect to social, traditional and religious issues till date.
Religious Customs and Beliefs

Two major religious groups, the Christians and the NiamTre exist in the Pan Punjis of the Pnar in Barak Valley. Presently, a majority of the Pnar population in the Valley are Christians, yet, a few Pnar Punjis are still holding fast to their traditional credence - the NiamTre. Mention may be made of Punjis entirely populated by the NiamTres such as PetladKhasiaPunji (Hailakandi district), DamsaraKhasiaPunji (Hailakandi district), Majkhal U ArunKhasiaPunji (Cachar district) and Maruacherra Part II KhasiaPunji (Cachar district).21 Other Punjis having a fraction of their population as NiamTre are DejorSrikona, Chandipur, Jamirkhaland PaglanalaKhasiaPunjis. The Pnar call their religion as NiamTre or the original religion by which they claim that their religion or niam and other ceremonies are pure and follow the tenets of traditional times.22 The religion has belief in nature and spirits and at the same time different names and attributes have been given and propitiated.23 Like many other tribal religions, writes Lamare, the Pnar religion, which has belief in nature is mainly characterised as animism.24 However, Lamare, continues to write, that though these things prevail, it is important to note that the Pnar religion has a clear conception of God almighty and refers to him as \textit{U BlaiWaBooh, Wathoo}, or in general talk they refer to him as \textit{U TreKirot}.25 They also address God as \textit{Ki Blai} i.e., in the plural sense and as \textit{U or KaBlai} in the singular.

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\begin{enumerate}
\item[21] Field study to these Punjis reveals that they consisted entirely the NiamTre Pnar inhabitants.
\item[22] S.N. Lamare, \textit{op cit.}, p.58.
\item[23] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 59.
\item[24] \textit{Ibid.}, p.59. Literally, animism as a religion can be referred to those practices where the concept of God, the almighty is very vague and man tried to control the natural phenomena by appeasing and worshipping the Gods and Goddesses of nature like the god of thunder and lightning, the god of river, hills, mountains etc.,
\item[25] \textit{Ibid.}, p.59.
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sense, e.g. *U BlaiPyrthat* or God of Thunder, *KaMyntdu* or Goddess of River, *Ka Ron-Chandi* or Goddess of accident.\textsuperscript{26}

According to P.R.T. Gurdon, the spirits worshipped by the Pnar and the Khasi for that matter, are numerous. The principal spirits worshipped by the Khasi-Pnar as mentioned by Gurdon are *U’LeiMuluk* (the God of state) who is propitiated yearly by the sacrifice of a goat and cock, *U’LeiUmtong* (the God of water) who is propitiated once a year, so that the water supply may remain pure, *U’LeiLongspah* (the God of wealth) who is propitiated with a view to obtaining increased prosperity, *U Ryngkew* or *U BasaShnong* (the tutelary deity of the village) who is propitiated by sacrifices whenever thought to be necessary and *U Phan U Kyrepid* a similar god to *Ryngkew*.\textsuperscript{27} In the Punjis of Barak Valley, the NiamTrePnar continue to adhere to the traditional belief of such spirit worship. The principal spirit worshipped by them is “*U Ryngkaw*” by the name “*U Kitnarain*” presumed to be the tutelary deity of the village. To propitiate the spirit, they perform a ritual known as ”*KaKniaIang Raid*” in their respective Punjis annually, which they considered as an annual ritual of importance. There is no fixed date for the ceremonial worship except for Maskhal U ArunKhasiaPunj and DamsaraKhasiaPunj which observe it on a *Shivaratri*.

In the Hills, *UKitnarain* is widely worshipped by the Pnar of Batawand Suchen locating in the southern slopes of the Jaintia Hills. The ritual being carried out by the religious priest at Suchen. However, propitiation to this spirit has disappeared among the Pnar in the Hills, though, till today the NiamTre of Bataw and Suchen, in times of trouble would simply call upon the name of Kitnarain. They would utter in their language “*ieinKitnarain*” meaning “Kitnarain stand by our side”

\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., p.59.
to help them and save them from any kind of troubles and worry. Traces of Hindu influence on the worship of *U Kitnarain* could be drawn from the fact that *U Kitnarain* is being referred to *Mahadev*. According to S.N. Lamare, under the influence of Hinduism, Hindu deities were given local honorifics, like the Hindu God of artisan, *Biswakarma* was called *U Biskurom, Shiva* as *U Mahadev Khloo, Lakshmi* as *Laskmi*, and *Durga* as *Parvati* etc., *Kitnarain* might be a local honorific for *Mahadev*. To Dhren Biam of Bataw village, *Kitnarain* among the Pnaris *Mahadev* among the plainsmen. Also, if one looks at the meaning of *Kit* meaning carry (carry human’s burden) in the Pnar language and *Narain* i.e. Narayan then one may conclude that the worship has been influenced by the religion of their Hindu neighbours.

Among the NiamTrePnar in the Valley, the worship of *U Kitnarain* is still very much prevalent with Hindu influence being more pronounced. As observed at U ArunKhasiaPunjiMaskhal, in the course of our field study, the Pnar have even set up *mandirs* and display images of Mahadev and his consort Parvati in their homesteads suggesting adherence to Hindu culture and religion. The propitiation to the spirit in this *Punjias* stated earlier is observed on a *Shiva Chaturdashi* or *Shivaratrito* appease him so that he continues to act as a guardian and protector of their *Punji*:

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\begin{align*}
Iowmiatkathiahkadem
Iowmiakrep kathung
\end{align*}
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29 Interview with Dhren Biam, Bataw village, on 10th May, 2016.
(loosely translated as follows:-

For the good of society and the Punji
For the good of sleep and rest
For the good of cultivation and harvest

On the auspicious occasion of Shivaratri Shiva Chaturdashi, thousands of people climb the BhuvanPahar in Barak Valley to pay their homage to the GodBhubaneshvara Shiva. At BhuvanPahar, two large rocks project from the face to make a natural cantilever roof on top of a portion of this yard. Two stone images, one of Bhubaneshwara Shiva, the presiding deity of the hill and the other of his consort, Bhubaneswari are installed beneath the roof. Bhubaneshvara Shiva commands great respect from the Hindus of the Barak Valley. S. Choudhury writes

It is painstaking to climb up seven mile of the steep hilly tract. This does not deter the devotee. One can count amongst the pilgrims hundreds of old men and women who set out on this pilgrimage gracefully. There is a natural spring at the top. It has been converted into a pond and its water is held sacred. The pilgrims bathe in the pond and worship the god after that. It is customary for the pilgrims to spend a night at the site and to take at least one nocturnal meal there. So they carry cooking utensils with them and build thatched sheds as night shelters.

On such a day, the Pharat U ArunKhasiaPunji would perform their indigenous practice or ritual of propitiating Kitnarain known as "KaKnialong Raid". They begin with their religious practice of keeping the whole village awake the

31 S.Choudhury, op cit., p. 47.
32 Ibid., p. 47.
night before which they call as "Ka Chong Pynchit". The following day the specialized priest, known as U Nongknia would perform the ritual by offering sacrifices to "Kitnarain", or "Mahadev" and his consort Parvati. The ritual is carried out at the temple premises, attributed to Mahadev and Parvati within the Punji. One lamb, a hen and a drink known as "ka Bhang" is being sacrificed and offered to Mahadev and a pigeon is being offered to Parvati. This is followed by a grand feast.

The Pnar of the valley also continue to carry on their indigenous rites and ceremonies such as kakniapyrthat(appeasement of thunder spirit), by the sacrifice of a pig, knialum(appeasement of mountain spirit) by the sacrifice of a red rooster and kakniawah(appeasement of river spirit) by sacrificing one ewe (female lamb or blangkynthei). Another important religious practice of the Pnar is the performance of "KaKnia Ron Chandi", the Goddess of accidents. The Pnar practice this ritual to please the Goddess, in order to protect them from any kind of danger and accidents that they might encounter. The worship of Ka Ron Chandi could have also been the influence of Hinduism on the Pnar through their contact with the plains. Ron Chandi might have been a corruption of God Ranachandi. The God Ranachandi is a Dimasa deity transformed into a recognised Hindu divinity after the Dimasa Kachari tribe during their stay at Maibong and Khaspur came into contact with the Bengalees living in the plains.

Ancestor worship too, continues with the Pnar in the Punjis of Barak Valley. They consider it the most important part in their religious life. According to Homurai Diengdoh, writes P.R.T. Gurdon, "the real religious demand" among the Khasi-Pnar the "ai-bam", or “giving of food to the spirits of the deceased ancestors in order that the latter may aid the living members of the clan with their help and

33 For details, see S.Choudhury, op cit., p.63.
bless them”. Diengdoh also mentioned, "To honour dead ancestors is the duty of every Khasi and he who wilfully neglects this duty it is believed, will neither receive their help, nor be defended from the influence of the numerous spirits of evil in which the Khasi believe”. The Khasi-Pnar, therefore, adore their ancestors by means of offerings, which are sometimes periodical, and sometimes made when thought necessary as in times of trouble. These offerings take the shape of articles of food which are theoretically - partaken off by the shades of the deceased ancestors. According to the traditional custom, in former days, the offerings of food were made upon the flat table-stones to the spirits of the deceased ancestors. This practice however, may be said to be largely dying out, it being presently the custom to make the offerings in the house, either annually or at times when it is thought necessary to involve the aid of the departed.

To propitiate the ancestors, the Pnar in Barak Valley perform a ritual, known as Isiang Ja or Isung Ji or sometimes referred to as KaPhor, in the Punjis annually usually in the month of January. The offering of food takes place at ka "IungSein" or IungBei (main ancestral house) that takes the form of rice, fruits, vegetables, or any other food the ancestor usually take, betel nuts and leaves. In addition to this, there are Punjis that propitiate the founder of their village which became part and parcel of the ritual. In the course of the field study, it was observed that at Petlad Khasia Punji (Hailakandi district), food and drink was being offered to the founder of the village, Kiang Padu along with two other deceased kinsevery year on the 24th of January. The ceremony of feeding them is governed essentially by the eldest male descendant.

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34 P.R.T. Gurdon, op cit., p. 110.
36 Ibid., p. 110.
37 Ibid., p. 110.
38 Rev. Vanlalchunga, op cit., p. 158.
of the founder’s family. No special priest is required. The ceremony begins with the sprinkling of water over the area by the female members of the family known as ka "e um ksiar um rupa". This is followed by the elder male member muttering incantations to the deceased known as ka "Yir pang". Simultaneously, under the supervision of the male member of the family, the females would offer food to the ancestors consisting of various food, fruits, cakes, sweets, etc including betel leaf and nut that the ancestor daily partakes. Two aluminium pitchers are placed in the room, where the Pnar families of the village would come and pour a bottle or two of a drink known as "KaKiatJyndem" (fermented drink made of rice) to be offered to the ancestors. After food is being offered, the male members of the family would assemble in another room to offer the drink to the ancestor. The ceremony is followed by a grand feast conducted for the entire village accompanied by different forms of entertainment such as ka Chad Pliang, ka Chad Sukra and others. It is usually a big affair.

The NiamTrePnar in the Punjis also continued to preserve their traditional ceremonies such as the naming ceremony ISyipSyin, the dead ceremony and ka Rimha (where Pnar females take a spiritual bath after giving birth). With regard to the dead, as already stated earlier, the body would be cremated in the Punjis but the bones would be carried to their homeland to be kept in the family cairn. As of now, after cremation, the bones are collected in the family cairn within the Punji itself. Yet, there still exist a few Pnar families, particularly the NiamTrePnar inhabitants of UmpyrditKhasiaPunji (Hailakandi district), who would still carry the bones to their native place.
Christianity grew rapidly among the Khasi-Pnar inhabiting the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya. Beginning with the Baptist Mission, the Welsh Mission and, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Mission, Christianity made great progress which brought about a change in the social, cultural and religious condition of the people. It developed a distinctive outlook on life and ethos, distinguished from the age-old traditions of the tribe. The Pnar in the valley too, felt the impact of Christianity which brought about a new and distinguishing look in their Punjis. There was an increasing growth of Pnar Christian converts in the Valley, constituting a majority of the population till date.

The Welsh Mission field set foot in the Sylhet-Cachar region towards the middle of the 19th century. According to the Report of 1911, Rev. J. Garland Williams writes "Our Missionaries first entered in this field in the year 1850. The work was for a time abandoned and afterwards resumed in the year 1887." The plains of Sylhet lie at the foot of the Khasi Jaintia Hills and the plains of Cachar are on the eastern side of Sylhet. From the beginning the Welsh Missionaries on arrival in Cherrapunjee were concerned of the people in the plains. In the mid 1850s, after a stay of nine months in Cherra, Rev and Mrs William Pryse moved to Sylhet to commence their missionary work, in anticipation of a favourable reply from the Directors where they laboured till 1867.

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41 Ibid., p.156.
Sylhet, he had visited Cachar in 1851 and soon in 1856, on the advice of captain Verner, Government Agent of Cachar, a school was opened in Silchar with Pryse's helper Thompson in charge. In December, 1863, Pryse succeeded in opening a high school at Silchar, towards which a government monthly grant of Rs. 60 was made. In spite of the heavy work in Sylhet, Pryse paid utmost attention to the Cachar District emphasizing on education and humanitarian service. In October 1856, he wrote that the missionaries could also establish a mission school at Borkhola about nine miles from Silchar. The school was gifted by an old and revered gentleman who was the last of the Chief Ministers of Govinda Chandra, the last king of Cachar. This contributed greatly to the progress of the mission in that area. However, unexpectedly, the General Assembly of the Llanloes terminated William Pryse as a Missionary in July 1867, because he had connections with other mission bodies. As could be gathered, he decided to remain in India, and entered into business relations with a lime quarry company. Two years later, he was seized with a serious illness, from which he died on August 2nd 1869. Due to unavailability of persons to serve as missionaries in Sylhet, the General Directors Meeting held in December 1872 resolved to discontinue the work in the plains. Hence, the Silchar Cachar field was abandoned in 1872 until it was again resumed in 1887 with the arrival of Rev and Mrs Pengwern Jones and Miss Sarah A John at Sylhet on 28th November, 1887. By this time, the increase in the number of immigrant population in the Valley could have provided the missionaries strong

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ground for justifying their work in Barak Valley.\textsuperscript{48} Towards the end of 1892 and the beginning of 1893, three Indian aborigine missionaries, Rev J. H. Lorrain, Rev F.W. Savidge and Rev William Pettigrew were in Silchar waiting for permission to enter Lushai Hills and Manipur.\textsuperscript{49} They requested the Welsh missionaries to stay back and convinced them that having a station in Silchar, would get their wages for working amongst the hill and mountain tribes.\textsuperscript{50} The Welsh became keen and desirous for the mission field in Silchar by which their proposal was approved by the Director of Wales before the end of March 1893.\textsuperscript{51} It was during the missionary work at Silchar, that the Welsh missionaries found a population of the Pnar inhabiting the forest tracts of Barak Valley involved in the cultivation of pan. They became the chief attraction for the missionaries apart from the other inhabitants in the plains. According to Hamlet Bareh, the success of the growth of Christianity among the Khasi-Pnar was due to the fact, of finding in Christ a true solution of their spiritual problems.\textsuperscript{52} Bareh further elucidates that by the advent of Christianity, due to historical reasons; many tribals had forgotten their religious origins and had lost their main basic directions. As a consequence, a search for a new light and identity became imminent, so the earliest tribal convert were inflamed by their absolute faith in the Saviour.\textsuperscript{53} Along the same lines, we may presume of the growth and spread of Christianity among the Pnar of Barak Valley. Gradually and increasingly, the Pnar in the Punjis became Christians because they look upon the contribution of the missionaries, by way of providing faith in the universal God, support and attention.


\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 147.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., pp. 147 - 148.

\textsuperscript{52} Hamlet Bareh, \textit{A Short History of Khasi Literature}, Shillong, 1962, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 20.
to their needs, as highly commendable. Most importantly, they found the Christian missionaries to be sincere enough to help them in every way with the problems they encounter in the valley. There are instances recorded in the course of our study where missionaries played a crucial role in helping the Pnars sustain their livelihood through *pan* leaf cultivation and to establish their permanent stay in the Valley. According to Elias Syad, the *Mantriof DamcherraKhasiaPunji*, it was a *sahepadri* (Christian missionary) who brought his *woh* (maternal grand uncle), Long Syad from Sylhetto Borkhola to explore the forest tracts fit for the cultivation of *pan* which ultimately led him and his family, along with their relatives, to settle at DamcherraKhasiaPunji. On the other hand, it was Rev J.G.Williams who helped the Pnars such as Lakhon Bang Suchiang to make a survey over the forest areas of North Cachar Hills which eventually resulted in the establishment of the Jatinga village as already discussed in chapter two. Jatinga Village of the Pnar was the first Christian village in the North Cachar Hills. Lakhon Bang Suchiang was converted and baptised in 1894 at Kalaincherra in the District of Cachar. He was married by the missionaries to Missibon Phanwar, a Christian convert and teacher at Jaintiapur. After establishing themselves at Jatinga, they both became instrumental in propagating this new faith among their fellow villagers, which subsequently turned Jatinga into an entirely Christian village in the North Cachar Hills. The Jatinga Church constructed in 1910, gained herself a status of the mother of all other churches in North Cachar Hills. It was the first church to be constructed in concrete form, which could hold a congregation of about four to five hundred. With regard to

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54 Interview with Elias Syad, 13th November, 2013.
The Pnar contributed money and labour: the men carrying the heavy materials, iron posts slung and pull up on their shoulders up and down the hills, the women carrying all the water, and the children baskets of sand. In addition, to the original contribution, each member gave one penny of every rupee received from the sale of pan leaf. The Chapel stands in a prominent portion, is excellence designed in and out, protected in the outside by thick asbestos, sheets and holds a congregation of four to five hundred.

In course of time, in order to further expand the propagation of Christianity among the Pnar in Barak Valley, Pnar inhabitants from the hills were encouraged by the Christian Missionaries to migrate and act as compounders among their brethren in the Valley. Rev. O. O. Williams reported in 1903 that the presence of these compounders and their knowledge of Khasi was always a great help, because at several times during the year, there were a number of Pnar visitors in any kind of congregation. These "Khasis" (Pnar) he wrote, came down to establish colonies in the plains for the cultivation of Pan. Churches were founded in order to keep the Pnar converts in the Valley alive, with numerous candidates for church membership.

According to available records, the first Pnar church was founded in 1903, at Borkhola, at the foot of the North Cachar Hills. In the following year, a new church was established at Kalain Khasia Punji (Cachar).

The Christian faith had its foothold at Kalain through the efforts of U Kher Sutnga from the

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59 Vanlalchhunga, op cit., p. 104.
61 Vanlalchhunga, op cit., p. 115.
62 Ibid., p. 115.
Sutnga Church in the Jaintia Hills. U Kher Sutnga was able to obtain converts at Kalain Khasia Punji by the name- U Myllon Suja, U Lakhon Lakadong, Do Bamon, Sunia Suja and U Kot Bthuh. Soon, with the help of Pastor Bormukhla of Sutnga Church, he founded a church at Kalain. Both the churches at Borkhola and Kalain, consisted of the Pnar who had moved from the Jantia Hills and came to the Valley for the cultivation of pan and in both the churches, the candidates numbered forty to forty five. The churches were made of small bamboos and a thatched roof where worship and fellowship was conducted every Sunday. The services were very warm and well attended reported a teacher, in charge of the Borkhola church, with the number of hearers increasing, excepting for a few who were continually harassed by the clerks in the Forest Department.

The Gospel further grew which necessitated the growth of local churches in the valley. A church was founded in 1919 at Guabari Khasia Punji (Cachar) at the foot of the Borail Hills as reported by Rev J.M. Harries Rees. In 1926, a new church started at Borogumpi Khasia Punji (Cachar) by Rev Edwin Adams. The earliest local workers in these churches were U Lakhon Bang Suchiang, U Mon War, and U Both Nongsubi. In the same year, Rev Edwin Adams founded a church at Mothurapur Khasia Punji and Sonapur Khasia Punji (Cachar). In these Punjis, local persons named U Kophul Pohthmi, U Lobli Tongper, U Joling Palong, U William

64 Ibid., p.11.
65 Vanlalchhunga, op cit., p.115.
66 Ibid., p.115.
67 Ibid., p.125.
68 Ibid., p. 232.
69 Ibid., p. 232.
70 Ibid., p. 272.
71 “Ka Histori LyngkotKa Balang Borogumpi” in Ka Souvenir Iing Presbytery, op cit., p.15.
Suchiang, Ka Miriam, KaBrabTongper and kaPhrinManar accompanied the missionary work.\textsuperscript{73} The supervision and administration of the Pnarchurches in Barak Valley came directly under the missionaries like Dr O. Williams, Rev J.G.Williams, Rev E Adams, Rev T.W. Rees, and others. The missionaries were assisted by Bengali elders and evangelists who were mostly teachers. Mention may be made of PremRonjoyUpadhayay baptised in 1895,\textsuperscript{74} who constantly worked as a teacher and evangelist; BabuMandraNathBarni\textsuperscript{75} who also contributed greatly in the missionary work among the Pnar in the Valley. The teachers and evangelists were supported by friends from the Rhondda Fach Church.\textsuperscript{76} It may also be in place to mention the name of a Khasi evangelist-U BabuS.Gatphoh, sent by the KhasiJaintia Presbyterian Assembly to preach among the Pnar in the Valley in 1939.\textsuperscript{77} Churches were set up in the Punjis from time to time that widened the mission operations among the Pnar in the Valley.

To keep the churches at different levels of existence properly organised and administered, church courts were established. For the organisation and administration of churches, we come across terms like Sub-District or District, Presbytery, Synod and Assembly.\textsuperscript{78} In Barak Valley, a group of local churches form a Sub-district or District under the control of a Presbytery known as KaPnar Thor Presbytery that emerged under the Assembly of Sylhet and Cachar (1924).\textsuperscript{79} In the year 1925-26, a number of the Pnar local churches were grouped in two Sub Districts-Karimganj and Cachar as follows:-

\textsuperscript{73}Ibid., p.5.
\textsuperscript{74}Vanlalchhunga, op.cit., pp. 92-93.
\textsuperscript{75}Ibid., p. 104.
\textsuperscript{76}Ibid., p. 120.
\textsuperscript{77}H.C. Lamare, “KaJingtreikaPnar Thor Presbytery” in KaSouvenir Iing Presbytery, op cit., p.28.
\textsuperscript{79} A. Syngkor, op cit., p.11.
I. Karimganj Subdistrict:

(1) Dewtali  (2) Kumarsail (3) Laimukh  (4) Kabolcherra
(5) Jengala  (6) Chamtilla (7) Hatma   (8) Bapna
(9) Borthol with Dewtali as the centre.  

II. Cachar Subdistrict:

(1) Guabari  (2) Kalain  (3) Damcherra (4) Kunapara
(5) Lower jiri  (6) Sunapur   (7) Robipur  (8) Mutharapur
(9) Jalenga   (10) Alambagh  and (11) Lalpani

The Assembly of Sylhet and Cachar made immense contributions to the administration and management of the two Sub-Districts of the Pnar local churches in the Valley. Rev. Angell Jones writes:

KaBalangKhasi- Jaintiaka la kitramshibun ha ki pastor bad k evangelistlem bad ki missionary jongka Assembly Sylhet bad Cachar, khamtamkibashong ha Karimganj bad Cacharnamarki leitjingohtengteng bad pynlongjingiaseng ban pyndepiakiniam kirukom, iakhristanKhasi bad Pnarkiba la leitshong rep tympewha kitokithain bad kiba long kumkilangbrotkhlemsharai.

(loosely translated as follows:

The Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Church is highly indebted to the Pastors, Evangelists and Missionaries of the Sylhet Cachar Assembly particularly those sojourning in Karimganj and Cachar. They from time to time, visited and organised church meetings along with other religious observances among the Pnar who had gone to those areas for Pan Cultivation and are left like the sheep without shepherd.

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81 Ibid., p.24-25.
As passed by, the Pnar began to have ministers or pastors of their own, like Rev Ram Rymbai, the first Pnar pastor ordained in 1949. He was soon followed by Rev Solomon Rymbai and others. With the passage of time, a need was felt by the Pnar churches to join the Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Synod, which materialised in 1975, and remained so till date. By then, the Pnar churches had grown by leaps and bounds which, subsequently, led to the grouping of churches into six Districts or Sub Districts as follows:  

(1) District Karinganj:- Kabolcherra, Dhubri, Rampur, Kirtikona, Nagnacherra, Panaicherra, Lacherra, Torjacherra, Chondrapur, Badshahtilla, Sagolma, Patiala, Choudwa, Dosdwa, Churaibari, Darturcherra.

(2) District Sepngi Cachar: Ratacherra, Sunacherra, Larang, Darolcherra, Damcherra, Dulungcherra, Bandarkhal, Kayang, Tibongcherra, Panighat, Kunapara, Telacherra and Subong Cherra.

(3) District Mihngi Cachar: Indranagar, Nagadum, Goabari, Ataicherra, Borokompi, Bagazin, Harinagor, Digly, Lowerjiri, Aluthal, Uchathal, Baibon, Alni Narainji

(4) District Bhubon Hill: Dilkush, Tilka, Robipur, Mashkhal, Panichowki, Kalakhal, Bhubon Khal, Nagakhal, Butangkhal, Mutharapur, Gurudayalpur.

(5) District MihngiHailakandi: Alombagh, Elgin, Jalenga, Rutonpur, Baghpahar, Madhucherra, Bondukmara, Gaglacherra, Kalacherra.

(6) District SepngiHailakandi: Borcherra, Gorkandi, Mohauncherra, Lalacherra, Vernapur, Rupacherra, Malicherra, Khasiatilla, Karicherra, Lalpani, Katlicherra and Harishnagar.

However, it is important to bear in mind that some of the local churches, mentioned above, are no longer in existence today. A few, for instance, Dewtali and Kumarsail churches, lying in the bordering areas are now in Bangladesh (after partition) while others became extinct due to the nature of livelihood among the Pnar moving from one tract to another, in search of greener pastures or were driven out from their Punjis because of compelling circumstances such as an attack of a deadly pan disease on their pan groves.

The Catholic Mission, on the other hand, initially started with the visit of a catholic priest to administer the catholic residents at Bondashill (village close to the boundary which separates the districts of Cachar and Sylhet). The village derived its name from its location where the river that runs below the village flows through a narrow passage of rocks. “Bond” means closed and “Shill” means “rock”. The notable presence of Catholic community in Barak Valley in the earliest times was at Bondashill. Though we do not have precise historical data on the origin of this community, it is believed that their ancestors were Christian Portuguese soldiers in

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85 Ibid., p.99.
86 Ibid., p.99.
the service of the Mughal emperor of Meerut in Uttar Pradesh. They fought for the nawab against the British and after the battle they settled down in the Bondashill area. Meanwhile, the Burmese entered Assam and Raja Govinda Chandra appealed to the East India Company for help by which Portuguese soldiers were sent to assist the Cachar Raja. When the Raja was restored as ruler, he rewarded them by giving them land at Baniyachong in Sylhet. Consequently, some settled in the new site, while the large number remained in Bondashill and gave it its distinctive feature. The earliest record of a priest visiting Bondashill was that of Freycinon in 1844. Then for many years, this community did not have any priest to minister to them till the Holy Cross Congregation included Sylhet and Cachar within their ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Their first priest to be ordained in Dacca, Father Benoit Adolphe Mercier, made a number of visits to Bondashill. Records show that he made a journey in 1860 and the following year accompanied Bishop Dufal of East Bengal to Bondashill where they admitted converts to the Catholic faith. Visits continued and in 1870 FrFourmond took up permanent residence at Bondashill, to administer and carry on the mission in a place which may be called, according to Becker, “an oasis in the midst of a pagan population.” Since then, the mission began to cultivate acquaintances with the local residents providing impetus to the

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87 Ibid., p.103.
88 Ibid., p.103.
89 Ibid., p.103.
91 Ibid.,
92 Ibid.,
93 Ibid., Bondashill Baptist Register entries dated 10th to 18th October, 1861.
94 Ibid., also Alfred Le Pailleur “Le Diocese de Chittagong and Bengal” p.140
95 C.Becker, op cit., p.99.
96 Ibid., p. 99.
growth of the Catholic Mission which started in 1911 when the mission succeeded in buying a plot of land not far from Bondashill.\textsuperscript{97}

It was round about the same time that the construction of the Bengal Assam Railway with a junction at Badarpur (about a quarter of an hour from Bondashill) was going on. According to Kelious Pohthmi, Cathecist of Marua Khasia Punji,\textsuperscript{98} a number of Pnar labourers were working at Badarpur for the construction of the rail tracks. These Pnarcould have come into contact with men belonging to the Catholic Community of Bondashill who were also employed in the construction of railways.\textsuperscript{99} The Pnar showed great interest in the Catholic faith and expressed wishes to become Catholics. In this way, the Catholic faith started to penetrate into the Pnar \textit{Punjis}. Good acquaintances with the Pnar developed which led to the beginning of the mission among the Pnar in the \textit{Punjis}. Chapels and schools were put up in the \textit{Punjis} and a cathechist was appointed for the \textit{Punjis} who could instruct the people in their own language and prepare them to receive their sacraments. The Catholic Pnar churches in the \textit{Punjis}, since then, gradually developed under the control and management of the principal stations in Barak Valley like Badarpur and Silchar. Mention may be made of the names of Pnar \textit{Punjis} consisting of the Catholic inhabitants such as – Sonaicherra Khasia Punji (Karimganj), Lailongcherra Khasia Punji, Doloogram Khasia Punji, Maruacherra Khasia Punji, Banglatilla Khasia Punji, Rotonpur Khasia Punji (all in Cachar) and a few others.

Transformation in the social and cultural life of the Christian Pnar in the \textit{Punjis} became inevitable. They abandoned their former religious rites, beliefs and

\textsuperscript{97}Ibid., p.108.  
\textsuperscript{98}Interview with Kelious Pohthmi, Cathecist, Maruacherra Khasia Punji, March, 2010.  
\textsuperscript{99}C. Becker, \textit{op cit.}, p.107. During the time when the Catholic community at Bondashill were without pastors, their economy was stagnant. Most of them had no other choice than to be hired by the British as domestic servants. Some were employed on the railway construction.
rituals, accepting Christian teachings and observing Christian ways of life. Marriage and funeral ceremonies, ancestor worship and other religious celebrations (in the original form) were no longer practised by the Christian Pnar in the Punjis. Nevertheless, the Pnar converts do not alienate themselves from the Pnar customs and traditions. They simply embraced a new faith and adopted the mode of worship of that faith but continued to retain a strong sense of their identity through the dress they wear, the language they speak and the festivals they perform in their Punjis. Also, though they observe a different form of marriage ceremony, the matrilineal system still holds sway and is being observed in the Punjis of the Pnar.

The female Pnar continue to wear their "Iusem" wrapped around the waist and the “kyrchah” wrapping their body, fastening it to one of their shoulders. In the Punjis, the Pnarspeak in the Pnardialect with their kin groups and relatives, though there exist different spoken forms like Bataw, Sokha, and other War dialects. With their neighbours belonging to other communities, they speak in Bengali, Hindi or other tribal languages. The Pnar in the Punjis have their own festivals. In the words of R.T. Rymbai, “A Khasi-Pnar is known by his festivals”\textsuperscript{100} he also mentioned that “without festivals a Khasi-Pnar is not only incomplete, but rootless and parasitic; for the roots of the whole being of a Khasi-Pnar, his very culture are embedded in his traditions which blossom forth through his festivals”.\textsuperscript{101} The Pnar in the Punjis of Barak Valley never abandoned their festivals and cultural dances. They perform the Laho, Chad Pliang and the Chad Sukra. In general, the Laho dance is usually performed after harvesting and, hence, can be termed as the harvest dance. Chad pliangis a dance of joy and merriment and is performed on any kind of occasion in

\textsuperscript{100} R. T. Rymbai, “The Festivals of AKhasi and Their Influence in his Life” in Khasi Heritage, SengKhasi, Shillong, 1979, p. 128.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., p. 128.
the form of an entertainment. *Chad Sukra*, on the other hand, is primarily religious and is performed annually after observing the ritual of *KaKnialong Raid* and *I Siang Ja* in the *Punjis*. The *Behdeinkhlan*, regarded by the Pnar in the Hills as the most important festival, is not observed by the Pnar in the *Punjis* of Barak valley.

The Pnar in the Valley, therefore, had preserved their social usages and cleaved to their own social, religious, cultural and economic way of life that is in sharp contrast with their neighbours. With *pan* or betel leaf cultivation at the centre of their economy, they live an honest and peaceful life, constituting a unique social and cultural institution which had gone a long way in enriching their heritage and culture in the Valley.