

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1. General Introduction**

Without society mankind cannot be expected to exist in this world. The nature of the society in the past was the folk. Robert Redfield does observe: "I shall say that the societies that existed before the rise of cities were folk societies and I shall say that the societies that are found today unaffected by the great civilization are folk societies" [Redfield: ix]. The enriched social life is considered to be the outcome of the economic and cultural activities of the people living in a society. A society is consisted of the people who live collectively following variety of rules and regulations and customs and traditions. While we think of a society, naturally the cultural and economic activities regarding the people of the society do occur in the mind. Thus the economic and cultural activities are the two such entities. So, when we try to investigate the problems of a group of people concerned we must have to study their social life.

#### **2. The Land and the People of Assam**

##### **2.1 Physiography**

J.H. Mills does rightly comment: Assam is situated in one of the greatest routes of migration of mankind [Mills, J. H: 24]. Down the ages Assam has been receiving people of different strains, such as, Indo-Chinese Mongoloids. Across her geographical boundaries there came men, ideas and means of production to mingle together with the aboriginals. She maintained her independence status till 1826. Since the revolt of 1856, Assam has completely identified herself with the main stream of Indian culture [Baruah, S. L: 3]. She played a significant role in the national struggle for freedom like the other states of India. Ever since Independence, she has been sharing the weal and woe of the nation and contributing towards the country's progress.

"Assam is the homeland of a large number of populations of various ethnic affiliations having desperate socio-cultural heritages and speaking different languages" [Das, B. M: 85]. "The migration of different human races to ancient land of Assam

began two hundred years ago before the birth of Christ” [Bhatt, S. C. & Bhargava, G. K: 23]. An ideal meeting ground for diverse races, Assam has given shelter to streams of human waves. They have brought with them their distinct cultures and trends of civilization [Bhatt, S. C. & Bhargava, G. K: 18]. On the basis of fossil evidences it is conjectured that South China, South-East Assia and North-East India were first inhabited by the Australoid or Austriacs. These people were also known by other names such as Pre-Drividians, Proto-Australoids and Veddids [Das, B. M: 89].

Assam is situated in between  $28^{\circ}$  and  $24^{\circ}$  North latitudes and  $89^{\circ} 86'$  and  $96^{\circ}$  East longitudes. On the north, Assam is guarded by the eastern section of the great Himalayan range. On the east lie the mountains inhabited by the *Chamois* and the *Singphos*. The Pataki range on the south-east is inhabited by the Nags and merges itself into the mountains of Burma. On the south of the Brahmaputra valley the mountain chains take the name of the Giro hills, the Khaki and the Jayantiya hills the North Catcher and the Maker hills and the Naga hills. This mountain system is collectively known as ‘Assam Range’. During the British rule, most of the neighbouring hills were tagged together to the state of Assam. Of course, these hill areas have attained their separate autonomous existence after independence. But Assam’s cultural and political relation with them is so close that the history of Assam cannot be separated from the history of the neighbouring hill areas. The present-day Assamese culture has grown out of an assimilation of elements of tribal and Hindu cultures.

The Assam range broadly divides Assam into two valleys-the Brahmaputra valley or Assam valley and the Surma valley or Barak valley. The Brahmaputra is one of the largest rivers of the world. It flows majestically through the heart of Assam valley. The Brahmaputra valley is an alluvial plain. It is about 720 km. in length with a breadth of 96 km.

The Brahmaputra is also known as *Louit* or *Lohit*. It is derived from the Sanskrit word *Lauhitya* which means ‘the red river’. It is called red river, perhaps, because the

river takes this colour during the rainy season, when it flows through the red soil and embankments [Barua, H: 7].

The total length of Brahmaputra is about 2897 km. It is navigable throughout the year. During the monsoons, the river grows majestic in its vastness and intensity and is like a sea with the interplay of tremendous waves.

## **2.2 Flora and Fauna**

Nature has lavishly bestowed all her beauties on Assam. The hills and forest has contained the valuable flora and fauna of Assam. The forest region of Assam contains valuable timber like *Sal* i.e. Shorea, *Khoir* i.e. Acacia, *Sisso* i.e. *Bonsom* i.e. phoebe, *Simalu* i.e. Bombax, *Koroi* and *Maz* i.e. Albizzia etc. Vegetable plants and essential oil producing plants are also not uncommon. Lac and Agarum are the two important forest products of the state. The abundance of *Chom* i.e. Machilus, *Noon* i.e. Morus, *Era* i.e. Ricinus etc. helps in the rearing of silk worm. These silk worms help in nourishing the famous silk-industry of Assam. Assam is also rich in producing the sealing wax, gum and rubber. Medicinal herbs and many varieties of beautiful orchids are exported from Assam. Betel-nut and betel vine are also abundant in the state which constitute an integral part of Assamese culture.

The forest regions in Assam also abound with many kinds of animals like one-horned rhinoceros, elephants wild buffalo, tiger, leopard, bison, black panther, deer, monkeys etc. The *Kagiranga* wild life sanctuary is one of the attractive tourist spots of Assam which is mainly known for the one-horned rhinoceros.

## **2.3 Mineral Resources**

Among the mineral resources of Assam, the most important are the oil fields. Digboi, Duliajan, Naharkotia, Moran, Rudrasagar, Hugrijan, Lakua, Barhola, Tengakhat, Jurajan, Geleki etc. Ledo, Bargolai-Numdung etc. are some of the oil fields of Assam.

## **2.4 Climate**

Due to its constant high humidity, Assam has a moderate climate. Rise of temperature in Assam checked by frequent showers and thunder storms. There is wide variation of temperature between summer and winter month. But the summer is not

extremely hot and the winter is not extremely cold. In short perpetual humidity, frequent and heavy rainfall and moderate temperature changes of a warm summer and cold winter especially distinguish the valley of Assam [Das, A. Et. Al: xxix]. But floods are the most common and regular natural calamities in Assam. The flood of 1954 was one of the highest ever recorded [Barua, S. L: 10].

## **2.5 Area**

Assam, a north-eastern state of India is situated in between 24<sup>0</sup>1' and 27<sup>0</sup>9' north latitudes and 89<sup>0</sup>8' and 96<sup>0</sup>1' east longitudes. Assam covers an estimated area of 78523 sq. km. It is bound on the north by the territories of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur fall on its east side of Assam. Mizoram, Tripura, and Meghalaya are on the south side of Assam. Bangladesh and West Bengal fall on the west side of Assam. The major portion of Assam is covered with hills and plains. The climate of Assam is in general temperate but not uniform all over Assam. Most of the rainfall occurs in the months between April and September. Usually the rainiest months are general June and July. November and February are considered as only cold months in the year.

The prime geographical features or characters that form the topographical features of Assam are the Barak valley and the river Brahmaputra. From north-eastern corners to west and further towards south, the Brahmaputra spreads its rich alluvial plains across the length and breadth of Assam. The agricultural field of Assam are specially blessed by the river of Brahmaputra being divided into several rivulets and streams, the river as a whole makes lands of Assam suitable for agricultural Productions. The forest lands of course, occupy a major part of Assam's area.

## **2.6 Population**

The total population of Assam has been 31169272 in 2011 census. The total scheduled caste population of Assam is 2231321 in 2011 census. It constitutes the 7.16 percent of the total population of Assam. There are sixteen notified scheduled castes in Assam and these have been numbered in 2011 census

According to the census report of 2011 census the population figure of the Kaibartta community of Assam is 693219. The Kaibarttas constitutes 2.22 percent of

the total population of Assam and 31.06 percent of the scheduled caste population of Assam according to 2011 census. 2011 census of India records 17539 Kaibarttas in Nalbari district, of whom 8845 are males and 8694 are females.

## 2.7 Religion

From the point of view of religion Hinduism is the dominant religion in Assam. Other faiths like Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism etc have also their followers. The tribal people are largely animists. Most of their animistic beliefs have got refused with non-tribal religious rites and superstitions. The popular forms of Hinduism namely, *Saivism*, *Saktivism* and *Vaisnavism* are prevalent in Assam. Under the leadership of Sankardeva, the Neo-*Vaisnavite* movement got a wonderful momentum in Assam. At present about 75 percent of the Hindu population are the followers of this cult. In ancient days the *Saktism* was also popular. The temple of Kamakhya on the Nilachal hill at Guwahati is the principal centre of *Sakti* worship in India.

The Muslims of Assam are generally known as *Gariyas*. The term is originated from the name of the kingdom of *Ghor*. There is another section of Assamese Muslims called *Gariyas*. They are the descendents of the war prisoners of the Turbak's army [Gait, E: 96]. Besides, the *Mariyas*, there are also Assamese Muslim families of *Sayeds*, *Mughals* and *Pathans* [Gait, E: 96].

Christianity was established during the British rule in 1826. American Baptist Mission was the first in setting their feet with a view to spreading the Christian religion in Assam in 1836. Though this mission succeeded in gaining a large number of converts, but they could not do the same in the plains.

Buddhism also existed in ancient Assam. There are also traditions in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Assam, according to which, the *Mahaparinirvana* of Buddha took place in western Assam in Saulkuchi or somewhere near Hayagriva-Madhava temple at Hajo [Gait, E: 96].

Jainism seems to have entered Assam in the modern period. With the coming of the British, the Marwari traders had made their entry into Assam.

## 2.8 Castes and Tribes

Assam has been the melting pot of all branches of human race and of cultures of both hills and plains. Waves of people belonging to different ethnic groups poured into this region from time immemorial. In the process of assimilation of these diverse elements the Assamese culture grew up. “The functional classification of the tribes which is supposed to be the caste system gradually gave away to a more fluid type of social set-up and the rigidity of the caste distinction markedly receded with the passage of time, particularly during the last few decades” [Assam District Gazetteers, Guwahati: 227]. The tribes and castes residing in Assam are as follows.

### A. Brahmins

The earliest reference in historical documents to the settlements of Brahmins in ancient Assam dates from the early 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. But there are reasons to believe that migration of Brahmins to Assam began long before that date. Traditional accounts indicate that Parsurama settled Brahmins near the present *Parsurama Kunda*. The Assamese Brahmins originally came from Mithila, Orissa, Benerasa and Kanauj. There are also a few Bengali Brahmins, who in social questions usually keep themselves distinct from their Assamese confreres [Assam District Gazetteers, Shillong: 90].

### B. Kayastha

The Kayasthas do belong to the Khatriyas. They are said to have come to Assam from places like Maithila, Kanauj and Bengal. The Kayasthas are not accustomed to the ploughing of land. The Khatriyas observe *Annaprasana* and *Sudhakarana* as the sacramental rites

Many of the Satradhikaras are Kayasthas. Even Sankardeva himself was a Kayastha Bhuyan [Baruah, S. L: 15].

### C. Kalitas

It is generally held that the Kalitas came to Assam from places of upper India during the reign of Dharmapal i.e. c.1095-1120. Regarding the traditional account of the Kalitas controversy is raised. According to the traditional account the Kalitas were Kayasthas and they concealed their identity regarding caste for fear of *Parsurama*. But

this has been rejected by some scholars of Assam [Assam District Gazetteers, Lakhimpur: 129 & Medhi: 75].

#### **D. Keots**

The Keots are inclusive to the caste-Hindus. They are also known as Kamars or blacksmith. Besides this occupation the Keots are also connected to agricultural works and other trades.

#### **E. Bariyas**

The Bariyas are a peculiar caste in Assam. The term is said to have been derived from *Bari* which means a widow. It is also said that the Bariyas are originated from an offspring of a Brahmin widow by a Sudra husband. The girl child of Brahmin married to a Sudra was called Bariyas.

#### **F. Suts**

The term is derived from Sut who was the expounder of the *Puranas*. Sut himself was the son of a Brahmin widow. The Suts generally follow the *Vaishnavism*.

#### **G. Yogis**

The yogis are also known as Naths, Nath-Yogis and Katanis. The Katanis are the sub-caste of the Yogis. In the *Ballalacharitam*, a Sanskrit book supposed to be written in 12<sup>th</sup> century AD, we find mention of sect of people, who lived on the bank of the Brahmaputra and were known as *Jungis*. They were drum-beater, whose descendents are still found in some parts of Assam and are known as Kendra-Jogis i.e. Yogis. Their original profession was drum-beating, palanquin-bearing, quackery, snake charming. They have now taken to agriculture [Assam District Gazetteers, Lakimpur: 130]. The Jogis wear holy thread. They perform their social and religious rites by their own priests. Some of them follow the practice of burial and others follow the practice of cremation.

#### **H. Kaibarttas**

The Kaibarttas belong to the scheduled caste Hindu religion. Fishing is their main age-old occupation. Some of them have now taken to agriculture and other trades. Most of them are the followers of *Vaisnavism*. This religious cult was propounded by Sankardeva and Madhavadeva.

Sen Sipra is of the opinion that the Kaibarttas are scattered all over the plain districts of Assam. They are divided into two subdivisions - *Halwa* [Cultivators] and *Jaliya* [Fishermen]. Halwa Das of Barak valley or Halwa Kaibarttas of Brahmaputra valley seems to get higher status and better privileges than the Jaliya Kaibartta. The Jaliya Kaibartta has one gotra i.e. Kasyap. Their titles are Das, Hazarika, Saikia, Baishya etc. They are settled mainly near rivers, ponds etc.

The Kewots are Kaibarttas. They are mainly a fishing community and they sell fish. In Assam their rank is superior to Sudra caste. They are scattered in Brahmaputra valley. Like the Kalitas, they are also divided into a number of functional sub-castes. The main division is between the Halwa [Cultivators] and the Jaliya [Fishermen] Kewots. The Holwa Kewots are considered superior to the Jaliya Kewots. They want to upgrade their position in the social hierarchy of the Hindu society. The Jaliya Kewots are found mostly in the plains of Assam. These are Mali Kewot, Kumar Kewot, Saru Kewot etc. Halwa Das and Kaibarttas are mentioned by Manu as alternative designations of the same people.

Besides, many sub-castes and classes are there among the Assamese Hindus. These are Mali, Kumar, Sonari, Hira, Napit, Dhoba, Koches. On the other hand the Chutiyas, Bodo-Kacharis, Marans, Barahis are the ruling dynasties of Assam. The Khamtis Phakials, Aitonias, Turungs, ShaymsKhamjangs are all Tai-Shans like the Ahoms. The Miris were originally a hill tribe and agriculture was their main occupation. It is seen that amongst the population of Assam, Manipuris, Singphos, Adis, Karbis, Garos and Nagas are also found.

## **2.9 Language and Dialects**

Assam is a bilingual state with Assamese as the court language in the Brahmaputra valley and Bengali in the two districts of the Surma valley. “The present Assamese script is not an outcome of natural evolution but is the product of certain historical factors” [Assam District Gazetteers, Nowgong: 101].

The earliest specimen of Assamese script is found in the copper plates and various inscriptions of Assam. But the present Assamese script differs widely from its earlier specimen. Among the important dialects of Assam, majority of them come under

Tibeto-Burman. The Tibeto-Burman speech is distributed in Assam as follows [Barua, H: 97].

1. Tibetan and its dialects 2. Himalayan group of dialects 3. North Assam group-Aka, Miri, Abor, Dafla and Mishmi 4. Assamese-Burmese group-Bodo, Mech, Rabha, Garo, Kachari, Tipra, Ao, Angami, Sema, Tengkhul, Manipuri, Singphoand Burmeese and its dialects. Next to Assamese, the other important language is Bengali.

### **2.10 Festival**

The Bihu is the special festival of Assam. It is observed by all the Assamese people without any sectarian tinge in it. This festival helps in promoting unity among different castes and creeds. Three types of Bihus are observed in Assam. These Bihus are Bohag or Rangali, Kati or Kangali and Magh or Bhogali. The origin of these Bihus is associated with the cycles of cultivation. The Kati Bihu is celebrated on the last day of Ahin i.e. the middle of October. Earthen lamps are lighted under a basil plant, cattle-shed and rice field. The Magh Bihu is celebrated on the last day of Puh i.e. the middle of January. Bonfire, feast and social gatherings are the special marks of this festival. The Bohag Bihu is celebrated with the advent of the Assamese New Year. It begins on the last day of Chait i.e. the middle of April.

It is a spring festival of dance and music. In this Bihu the cows are smeared with pasted black gram and turmeric and then bathed. In the evening the villagers go house to house singing Huchari songs and exchanging greetings. It continues for seven days with dances, songs and merriment.

Besides, the death anniversary of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, tithi of Damodardeva, Doijatra, Sivaratri, Durga Puja, Saraswati Puja, Viswakarma Puja etc. are also performed annually. On the other hand the Muslims and Christian and the followers of other sects observe their religious festivals with co-operation from fellow brothers of other sects.

### **2.11 Marriage**

The Assamese Hindus perform their marriage ceremonies according to Vedic rites. The special part of the ceremony takes place in the bride's place. Performance of marriage songs forms a special feature of an Assamese Hindu marriage. The *Ahoms*

perform their marriage ceremony according to their own rites called *Chaklang*. Of course the other sects perform their marriage ceremonies according to their respective rites [Statistical Hand Book, Assam, 2011].

### **2.12 Education**

Right now there are 6 universities, 2 institutes of national importance, such as IIT and NIT, 627 colleges, 54953 secondary and elementary schools, 12 institutes of professional education, 50 institutes of teachers training and 23 schools for vocational, professional, special and other education in Assam [Statistical Hand Book, Assam, 2011].

### **2.13 Transport and Communication**

Transport and communication in Assam is not well developed. In the rural areas, gravelled roads are few and that is why transport is extremely difficult in the summer season. Even the National High and the PWD roads are of deplorable conditions in most parts. The total length of roads under PWD in Assam as in 2011 is 39800 km. and the total length of National Highway is 2841 km. The total length of railway route in Assam including broad gauge and metre gauge is 2433.99 km. On the other hand the total length of N.F. railway including broad gauge, metre gauge and narrow gauge is 3908. 02 k. m. [Statistical Hand Book, Assam, 2011]

### **2.14 Life Style**

Assam is called a peasants' land. So, 91 percent of her total population live in the village, with agriculture as their main occupation. The main crops in Assam are rice, wheat, pulses, mustard and oily seeds, sugar-cane, jute and different kinds of fruits and vegetables. There are at present 756 tea gardens in Assam covering an area of 189338 hectares. [Barua, S. L: 19-20] After oil and tea, plywood is another important industry of Assam. Of course, during the past few years, some medium-scale industries have been started. The total number of registered industrial units including micro, small and medium in Assam as in 2011 is 59926.

As in 2011 census, Assam has been covering an area of 78438.08 sq km. There are 56 sub-divisions, 214 towns, 26395 villages, 219 blocks and 2202 Gaon Panchayats in Assam. The villagers are mostly self-sufficient in their economy. The peasant ploughs

the land and produces his own food. He builds his own houses with thatches and bamboos. The womenfolk actively help in every step except ploughing. The woman folk maintain a kitchen garden and weaves clothes for the male members of her family. She wears a *Mekhela*, a *Riha*, a *Chadar*, and a blouse. On the other hand the man folk uses a *Dhoti*, a shirt, a *Gamacha* and an *Endi* i.e. a shawl.

Weaving constitutes the most essential part of a girl's education. One's lack of it was considered as her discredit regarding the marriage. But, slowly the picture of a traditional village has been spoiling by the inroads of foreign capital into Assam. Decay of feudalism has resulted in the loss of traditional habits and customs.

Assam has been also showing her excellence since long past in the field of manufacturing of silk clothes. There is found three varieties of Assam silk worms, such as *Eri* or *Endi* i.e. *attacus ricini*, *Muga* i.e. *antheroea* and *Pat* i.e. *patta*. Then cane, bamboo and palm leave works constitutes the indigenous cottage industries of Assam in the rural areas.

### **3. Fish Lore and Fishing Practices of Assam**

#### **3.1 Fish Lore**

Fishes are considered as the largest group of vertebrates. Fish catching is one of the oldest hobbies of mankind. Human beings have been catching fishes accepting it as one of their important food items since long past. So, people all over the world are associated with oral songs and narratives related to fish. Assam is not an exception to this fact. The fish lore of Assam is rich. Songs and narratives relating to fish have enriched the oral literature of the people of Assam. The influence of fishes is seen in the oral literature, social customs, material culture and the performing arts associated with the Assamese people.

#### **3.2 Oral Literature**

The songs, tales, riddles, proverbs and myth which have been transmitting orally since the time immemorial are called oral literature. Assam is rich in fish lore. Several castes and communities have been living in Assam since the past. Oral literature is the literature transmitted orally from generation to generation. The oral literature of

Assam associated with fish, fishing, fishing tools, fishing practices etc. is found in the following way.

### A. Oral Songs

Oral songs are the traditional songs transmitted orally from generation to generation. These songs are generally related to day to day life activities of the people. The Assamese people have been enjoying some oral songs in terms of fishing, fishing tools and waterbeds along with some common songs. Some of such songs are as follows:

#### I. Ballad

Ballads are inclusive to the oral song. Ballads are mainly story based. In the past the group of hunters expressed their experiences through songs. These attracted the easy going people of the village. The authors of these ballads are not known. The reference of fish is found in some of the traditional ballads of Assam. The following one is such kind of example.

[i]

*Āmguri Khātor sukān kharisā*

*Balmā beelor mās*

*Tumije āhisā Sonābor Tāmuli*

*Manidhar kimānor pas*

[Gogoi, A: 25]

This means:

*Amguri Khat is popular for dry Kharisa, a kind of food item. On the other hand fish of*

*Balma beel is delicious to consume. Though Sonabar Tamuli has come, when will*

*Manidhar come?*

It is a popularly known ballad among the Assamese people. It is known as the ballad of *Manikowar*. This ballad refers to *Balma* beel and fish.

#### II. Religious Song

Some religious songs transmitted orally make reference to fish and fishing related activities. One such example is as follows.

[i]

*Tāmore kolosi rupore dunari*  
*Pārbati lāhekoi lowā e*  
*Pārbati lāhekoi lowā*  
*Silāi puthi mās nile e*  
 [Gogoi, A: 26]

This means:

*Parvati, the wife of god Shiva is asked to carry the vessel of copper and the basket of silver with her. The kite takes away the chola barb.*

### III. Love Songs

Love songs are popular in the Assamese society. Some of these love songs speak of fish and fishing tools to express feelings of love. One such example is as follows.

[i]  
*Uzāi āhilā māse ki Māgur*  
*Uzāi āhilā Sihu*  
*Āhilā lākhuti dhari jetiyā shunili*  
*Batori Bihur*  
 [Gogoi, A: 27]

This means:

*Magur has come against the current of water. Sihu has also come against the current of water. The old man becoming excited has come with the help of a stick at the approaching of Bohag Bihu, a national festival of Assam.*

### IV. Work Song

Some work songs reflect fondness of fishing of the Assamese people. They like to fish with hooks in the beels, ponds and river. During fishing some oral songs, associated with fishing are sung. Some of these songs are as follows:

[i]  
*Āthi gāthi barosi māse āhibā gāthi*  
*Zār zār mukh lāgse tāk sāt kuri lāthi*  
 [Gogoi, A: 33]

This means:

*The fisher folk expect more and more fish while fishing with the help of hook. He or she is also conscious of an evil eye of his or her fellow fisher folk during while fishing. Those who have given an evil eye while fishing will receive severe physical assault.*

[ii]

*Zālowā jāi*

*Zālkhān kāndhat loi*

*O guzung guzung koi*

*Sāgarot mās mārā matyashor kārane*

*Mone Krishna kare sumoron*

*O mās pāu nā nāpāu*

[Gogoi, A: 34]

This means:

*The fisher folk go for fishing taking net on his shoulder. The fisher folk think several things in his mind that makes him go silently. He prays to God Krishna before starting fishing in the sea. He is also confused regarding whether he will get fish or not.*

## **V. Festival song**

Assamese people observe several kinds of festivals round the year. Some festivals are observed with singing oral songs, which are associated with fishing. Some of such songs are as follows:

[i]

*Sunote shunishilo borther borgiri*

*Sodāi rou mās khāi*

*Aiotik dibare tāmūl pān nāikiyā*

*Sindhi khāndiboke jāi*

[Gogoi, A: 54]

This means:

*The bridegroom belongs to a well to do family. They always consume rohu fish in each meal. But they cannot welcome the bride with betel nuts and betel leafs. They even engage in stealing.*

## VI. Song of Children and Games

Children songs are sung by the children during play time. Sometimes the rhymes carry no meaning. Some of the children songs are also associated with fish. These songs state the names of fish. Some such songs run among the Assamese society are as follows.

[i]

*Humā humā humā*

*Māgur māser jumā*

*Khāi got got lāru*

*Pindhe sākā khāru*

[Gogoi, A: 56]

This means:

*The word 'Huma' is a musical combination added to maintain the rhythm of the song carrying no literal meaning. This song states the name of Magur which eats piece of rice ball. This fish also wear bracelet.*

[ii]

*Ghāter sur sur mās*

*Bārir bāigān*

*Tāke khāi burah-buri*

*Jurse nāsān*

[Gogoi, A: 57]

This means:

*The old couple dances expressing their delight after eating fish and brinjal. They collect the fishes from the bank of the river and the brinjal from the vegetable garden.*

## B. Prose Narratives

Prose narratives are the traditionally transmitted narratives stories. Prose narratives in the form of myth, tale and legend are found among the Assamese people. Some of the narratives are associated with fish and fishing. Some of these narratives are as follows:

## **I. Myth**

Fish has been playing an important role in the creation of myth. The story written in the very old times and believed by the folk society as true is called myth. The myths are mostly from the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagawata* and the *Purana*. Fish has been playing an influence in the socio-cultural life of the Assamese life. Assamese people believe the first *Avatar* of *Vishnu* as *Matysa Avatar*.

### **i. Myth of Brahma and the Universe**

Once, Brahma was sleeping at night. Then great ravage was started on the earth. Then *Vishnu* being the avatar of *Matysa* took responsibility to save the whole universe. Thus the universe is saved. [Gogoi, A: 71]

### **ii. Myth of Creating the World**

At the beginning the universe was filled with water. *Aham Garu*, the God thought of creating the universe with soil. So, he ordered the beasts and animals, pig and turtle in search of the soil. But all their attempts to collect soil were in vain. Then he ordered two magur fishes and the magur fishes were found dead. Then *Aham Garu* made alive the fishes and found soil in its body. Thus the universe was created [Gogoi, A: 71].

## **II. Legend**

### **i. Legend of Hari Kowari**

When the *Tiwas* went from the state *Zayantiya*, it was without king. Then the *Tiwas* prayed god *Fa-Mahadev* for a king. *Fa-Mahadev* became satisfied and was going to this place with *Parvati*. On their way they saw the beasts and animals were engaged in making sexual pleasure. Then *Mahadev* touched *Parvati*. She became excited and lost sperm. A Mali fish ate this sperm and became pregnant. One day a fisherman caught the fish and found a baby inside it. This baby became *Hari Kowari* and her husband became king of the state *Zayantiya* [Gogoi, A: 81].

## **III. Tale**

### **i. The Head of Rohu Fish and Greedy Son**

Head is an important part of rohu fish. One day father-in-law bought a long whiskered cat fish and a rohu fish from the market. His wife was instructed to cook the fishes deliciously. His son liked to eat the head of rohu fish. So he went to his mother

and said that the head of a long whiskered cat fish is delicious. Hearing this mother decided to give the head of the long whiskered cat fish to her dear son-in-law. When mother-in-law came to give it to her son-in-law, a cat ate the head of the rohu fish that was kept for her son. As a result her son neither could eat the head of rohu fish or the head of long whiskered cat fish [Gogoi, A: 87].

#### **ii. The Sadhu of Step Mother and Two Sons**

A farmer married for second time when his first wife died. She left two sons. Their step mother did not like them. Their father always caught fishes. But they were not given any fishes. One day they went to collect fishes from the *Chepa*. They ate all fishes there leaving only the heads. The step mother was angry with them. She told her husband they were under the spell of *Zakh Devata*. Then they were left in *Migumimat* a country of *Bhot* according to his wife. Father took them to their own home in disguise. He was sharpening the knife to cut them. They came to know that he was not their actual father. It was an evil spirit. They flew away from *Migumimat* and took shelter in a village. There they met two girls who also flew away from *Migumimat* and hiding themselves in two pots. Then they all flew away from *Migumimat*. They married the two girls and lived happily in their own village [Gogoi, A: 92].

#### **iii. Kawai Fish and Brahmin**

During the rainy season the fishes go together in a group. Once in such a season a Brahmin ordered his servant to catch fish. He caught a lot of *Kawai* fish i.e. climbing perch. But during the time of meal the Brahmin was given a lot of fish and the servant was given only one fish. Then he asked the Brahmin, “Does the climbing perch go together in a group?” Then the servant put his only fish to Brahmin’s pot. Then the Brahmin gave all the fishes to the servant to eat. He did it for the tradition of untouchability [Gogoi, A: 94].

#### **iv. Old Couple and Kawai Fish**

Once there lived an old couple in a village. One day the old man went to fish and got five climbing perches. He ordered his wife to fry the fishes. The old man said to his wife, “Give three fishes out of the five”. The old woman said, “No, I shall eat three and you will eat two”. They were engaged in hot argument. Then they decided that

one who would wake up first from sleep in the next morning would eat two fishes. That is why nobody woke from sleep in the next morning. They were sleeping for late. The villagers thought that the old couple has died and were taken to the cremation site. The villagers decided to place the woman bellow the man in a single pyre. When the fire caught the woman cried and shouted that I would eat two fishes and he would eat three fishes. Thus their lives were saved [Gogoi, A: 99].

### C. Proverbs

Assamese society is formed of several castes and communities. These castes and communities carry some proverbs in their day to day life. Some of the proverbs are associated with fish. Some fish related proverbs are as follows.

[i]

*Kom poisāi beshi mās*

*Shekh e khāi gojār mās*

[[http://www.academia.edu/1280164/FISH\\_IN\\_THE\\_FOLK\\_CULTURE\\_OF\\_BARAK\\_VALLEY](http://www.academia.edu/1280164/FISH_IN_THE_FOLK_CULTURE_OF_BARAK_VALLEY)]

This means:

*Some fishes are bought more in quantity spending less money. It is possible in case of fishes that are quantitatively available in the market. The Shekh, a sect who is from a Muslim community likes to eat the gangetic goonch. This kind fish is cheap in price as the people of other community abstain from consuming it.*

The *Shekh* indicates here a category of Muslim community who eat *Gojar* fish i.e. gangetic goonch as this fish can be brought more with a little price. This proverb also indicates the availability of this fish as the other community avoids it to eat.

[ii]

*Noram noram tin noram*

*Bhāl mainsher beti noram*

*Bāul mācher peti noram*

*Adh māiyā māti noram*

[[http://www.academia.edu/1280164/FISH\\_IN\\_THE\\_FOLK\\_CULTURE\\_OF\\_BARAK\\_VALLEY](http://www.academia.edu/1280164/FISH_IN_THE_FOLK_CULTURE_OF_BARAK_VALLEY)]

This means:

*Three things are very soft, according to this proverb, such as, wife of a gentleman, breast of a sheat fish and soil in 3<sup>rd</sup> month of the Bengali calendar.*

Generally three things are soft in nature, such as wife of a gentleman, breast of sheat fish and the soil in the month of *Ashadh* i.e. the third month of the Bengali calendar. The metaphor used in this proverb has enhanced its beauty and elegance.

[iii]

*Hokkol māse gu khāi  
Lāirār upde bodnām jāi*

[[http://www.academia.edu/1280164/FISH\\_IN\\_THE\\_FOLK\\_CULTURE\\_OF\\_BARAK\\_VALLEY](http://www.academia.edu/1280164/FISH_IN_THE_FOLK_CULTURE_OF_BARAK_VALLEY)]

This means:

*All fishes consume stool, but blame goes only to the Laira i.e. gangetic latia.*

All the fishes eat stool but the blames go to only *Laira* i.e. gangetic latia. This proverb tends to explain that all the people happens to make mistake more or less, but the responsibility of making mistake has to suffer only the weaker section in the society.

[iv]

*Chenge o ujhāi benge o ujhāi  
Koiyāe punti tāin o ujhāi*

[[http://www.academia.edu/1280164/FISH\\_IN\\_THE\\_FOLK\\_CULTURE\\_OF\\_BARAK\\_VALLEY](http://www.academia.edu/1280164/FISH_IN_THE_FOLK_CULTURE_OF_BARAK_VALLEY)]

This means:

*Smooth brassed snake head and the frog travel against the current of water. The climbing perch also tries to imitate them.*

The smooth brassed snake head and frog go to the upstream and imitating them the unable climbing perch also tries to do the same thing. This suggests that one should not try to imitate a task that is out of one's capacity.

[v]

*Mās khāi nā māngso khāi nā*

*Kuichā khāi dhuichā loi*

[[http://www.academia.edu/1280164/FISH\\_IN\\_THE\\_FOLK\\_CULTURE\\_OF\\_BARAK\\_VALLEY](http://www.academia.edu/1280164/FISH_IN_THE_FOLK_CULTURE_OF_BARAK_VALLEY)]

This means:

*Some people do not eat fish and meat. But they like to consume the eel fish.*

Someone does not eat fish and meat, but eats the eel fish. This suggests that some people do not include the eel as a fish species.

#### **D. Riddles**

Some riddles run among the Assamese people are with fishing and fishing related activities. Some of these are as follows:

[i]

*Rojā ghoror kali gāi*

*Ghāte ghāte pāni khāi*

[Gogoi, A: 116]

This means:

*The king possesses a black cow.*

*This cow drinks water at every bathing place of banks of the river.*

Answer: Fishhook

[ii]

*Chālehi tok nilehi mok*

[Gogoi, A: 117]

This means:

*The fisher folk has watched you i.e. fish and he has carried me i.e. fishing trap to home.*

Answer: Chepa i.e. a fishing trap

#### **E. Charms**

Some charms run among the Assamese people are associated with fish. Fish has been playing an important role in charms like the riddles and proverbs. Assamese people believe in the magical power of these charms. Some of such charms are as follows:

[i]

*Ramar āggyāi boroshi loi māsoloi jāou*

*Mor boroshit kurhi chani khāi*

*Lokor boroshit oshore nājāi*

*Muchundarir basane sile dile hāt*

*Mor boroshit mās lāgi thāk*

*Jodi mor sungā eri āoar boroshit jā*

*Teou e Mahādevar māthā khā*

[Gogoi, A: 120]

This means:

*The fisher folk go for fishing following the order of Ram, the God. I catch kuria labeo and olive barb with the help of hook. The other fisher folk cannot catch fish. The fisher folk who has already caught fishes pray to the God for more fishes. He even vows in the name of Mahadeva telling that the fishes have to engulf only my hook.*

[ii]

*Ban kāto muthā muthi ikarār māro gojā*

*Pātā mahādeou rojā*

*Mok dolā kori niyā*

*Gā kore porā dhamā mure kore fāli*

*Āth ānguliyā pasalā khāi nite sune gāli*

*Gālio o gāli pārbotiyā gāli*

*Kot haruwāli pukhari āli*

*Pukhari āli goi dutā misā mās pālo*

*Marā gosot kāpor thoi dāngi nasowālo*

[Gogoi, L: 9]

This means:

*I cut grass of leaves bundle by bundle and I plant reed. I request maternal uncle to make me king carrying in a stretcher. I feel irritation in my body and pain in my head. One is severely rebuked eating young banana tree, 8 fingers in length. Where have you*

*lost the way to the bank of pond? Going to the bank of the pond I got two prawns.*

*Keeping the cloth in the dead tree I make it danced.*

### **3.3 Fishing Practices**

Several kinds of traditional fishing methods are practised in the hill and plain districts of Assam. Some of the old traditional fishing methods are as follows [[http://nopr.niscair.res.in/bitstream/123456789/8179/1/IJTK%209\[2\]%20252-255.pdf](http://nopr.niscair.res.in/bitstream/123456789/8179/1/IJTK%209[2]%20252-255.pdf)].

- I. Crab fishing
- II. Fishing with smart weed
- III. Fishing with *Karoi* tree
- IV. Fishing with *Moin* tree
- V. Eel fishing in plain areas
- VI. Eel fishing in hill areas

#### **I. Crab Fishing**

The traditional crab fishing method is generally practised by the tribal communities, such as Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa etc. The crabs are generally found in the holes in the midst of the paddy fields. It also lives in the pond margin. The tribal fisher folk are generally expert in catching the crabs by hands from the shallow paddy fields. The people of the tribal community like to include crabs in their day to day meals. The crabs are caught with the help of *Zakhe* and fishing nets. But the tribal people also adopt an old traditional method of catching the crabs. They practice this method in the ponds or small tanks. The equipment of catching crabs is an empty gunny bag. The attractants kept inside the gunny bag are left over rice bran, poultry or cattle feed. Then the gunny bag is placed in the shallow areas of the pond for two to three days. When the crabs enter the gunny bag in search of food, they are trapped in the bag. The gunny bags are collected from the water and removed the crabs. This method of catching crabs is practised during the winter season.

#### **II. Fishing with Smart Weed**

Fishing with smart weeds i.e. *polygonum hydropiper* is a traditional method of catching fishes. There are a number of ethno-toxic plants in the hill districts of Assam. Though these are used as fish poison, they make no harm to the human beings. The

fisher folk use this smart weed in catching fishes in the ponds, tanks and streams. It is like a kind of shrub and it grows mostly in the wetlands and withstands water logging. It has small hairy leaves and stems. A paste is made with the help of traditional grinders i.e. *Ural* or *Dheki*. The paste is sprayed over the targeted water bodies. The fishes come to the surface and start to gasp. The paste helps in making the fishes feeble and the fishes cannot move. Thus the fishes are caught easily by the fisher folk.

### **III. Fishing with Karoi Tree**

*Korai* tree i.e. *albizzia odoratissima* is also traditionally used in catching fishes. It is used as a valuable wood and used for making furniture. Its powder is found during swaging the woods. This powder is mixed with water and is spread over the water bodies of the targeted areas. When the fishes come to the surface of the water body, they are intoxicated and cannot move. Thus the fishes are caught.

### **IV. Fishing with Moin Tree**

The *Moin* i.e. *duranta plumerie* is a kind of traditional fishing plant. This is a kind of thorny plant. The size of the fruit of the *Moin* tree is like a cricket ball. The green and the ripe fruits both are used for catching fishes. The fruits are crushed to make paste. The paste is thrown into the water bodies and the fishes are intoxicated. Thus the fishes are caught.

### **V. Eel fishing in Plain Areas**

The eel fishes are caught with the help of gear. The gear is locally known as *Cuichahana Sholi*. A gear is made of rod having a pointed needle like end. Its length is from 55 cm to 75cm. Its diameter is from 4 mm to 5 mm. The other end the rod is attached to a bamboo handle. This fishing method is adopted for the marginal water bodies like the paddy fields and ponds. The fisher folk continuously pierce on the soft margin of water bodies. The fisher folk knows whether the eel is pierced or not by the jerk of the handle. When the eel is pierced, it is caught by removing the soft soil.

### **VI. Eel Fishing in Hill Areas**

The traditional method used in the hill areas is known as *Nujung*. Some species of the eel know to climb up the stream. The eels do it in search of food. The eel is caught

with the help of wooden sticks, gears and gunny bags. The fisher folk catch the eel, when it comes up from the water into the wet bamboo groves.

### **3.4 Fishing Methods and Bamboo**

Bamboo has been playing an important role in making the fishing implements in rural areas. Bamboo and cane have been playing an important role in forming the Assamese culture. The rural folk of Assam use these implements during the rainy season. Some of the fishing implements are as bellow [Gogoi, A: 200].

#### **I. Jaj Mara**

*Jaj Mara* is a traditional fishing. It is basically used in the streams for fishing. The upper part of the bamboo, piece of wood, root of the bamboo etc. are kept inside the water in the stream during the rainy season. In the winter season these are kept aside and the area is covered with *Bana* i.e. a kind of fishing implements made of bamboo splints. Then fishes are caught.

#### **II. Sunga Pata**

*Sunga* is also a kind fishing implement. It is a piece of bamboo of which one side is closed and other side is open through which fishes are entered.

#### **III. Thoha Pata**

*Thoha* is resembles to *Khoka*. It is also made of bamboo. It is smaller than *Khoka*. This fishing trap is used in swallow water.

#### **IV. Elangi Pata**

*Elangi* is a kind of fishing implement. Its width and breadth are equal. One side of is made with a hole to enter fish and the other side also made with a closed door. It is kept in the midst of dead crops in water. Some snails are kept inside the *Elangi* to attract the fish. It is used to catch the Elang fish.

### **V. Pauri Pata**

Pauri is made of bamboo. It is generally used in stream or river. The front part of it is wide and the back part of it is narrow. It is checked after two or three days. Two or three persons are necessary to use this implement.

### **VI. Veta Rakha Dewa Bana**

This is an attractive fishing implement of the Assamese folk society. This is generally kept in the river or stream during the rainy season. This is like a fencing having small holes. It is made of bamboo splints. It is fixed straight in the water. The back side if the *Bana* is attached with a net. When the fish is obstructed by the *Bana*, it jumps over the *Bana* and falls in the net.

### **VII. Zongarere Hana**

*Zongar* i.e. fishing gear is of several kinds. These are made of singularly or in group. This is connected with a long bamboo stick. This is used in the midst of paddy field during the rainy season at night.

## **3.5 Fishing Net**

There are several kinds of fishing nets are used for fishing activity besides the fishing implements made of bamboo. Some of the fishing nets are as bellow. These are used in the several parts of Assam. [Gogoi, A: 200]

### **I. Parngi Jal**

To make this net four pieces of bamboo sticks are used. These are fixed with a long piece of bamboo stick. It is used in the stream, pond and river during the rainy season. A piece of string is also used to check the net.

### **II. Dheki Jal**

It is kept in the water and checked like paddle grinder. So it is called *Dheki Jal*. It is used in the stream, beel and pond.

### III. Kami Jal

In this kind of net a pair of long bamboo splints is used. So it is called *Kami Jal*. This kind of net is generally used in the Brahmaputra.

### IV. Sangla Jal

*Sangla Jal* is like the *Kami Jal*. But its length is less than the *Kami Jal*. This kind of net is used in the deep water.

### V. Bheli Jal

*Bheli Jal* is another kind of fishing net used by the Assamese people. The fisher folk use this net in the Brahmaputra.

## 4. Scheduled Caste and the Kaibarttas of Assam

The title of my research work is 'A Socio-Cultural Study of the Kaibartta Community of Nalbari District with Special Reference to Fish Lore and Fishing Practices'. Melville J. Herskovits does comment: "Culture is the way of life of a people while a society is an organised, interacting aggregate of individuals who follow a given way of life" [Herskovits: 316]. D.N. Majumdar & T.N. Madan rightly do observe: "Man is born an asocial being; he attains sociality by going through the sanskars" [Majumdar & Madan: 14]. The term fish lore means knowledge, stories, songs and traditions associated with angling or fishing. It also means knowledge, science or study of fish. Fishing practices, on the other hand, mean the practices associated with fish.

In the primitive stage people lived inside the caves, near the streams, rivers, seas and lakes. They lived near such places to collect drinking water easily from the rivers, lakes, streams and seas, to protect themselves from the ferocious wild animals and enemies inside the caves, to run their lives by catching fishes and selling in the market and to use river and seas as the means of trade and commerce. Thus the evolution of human civilization became possible centring the river. The primitive societies and its occupation mostly depended on water.

So, it is found that people took fishing as an occupation from the earliest time. Such kind of people had in them craftsmanship, ingenuity and acumen in the occupation which they acquired from their forefathers. Thus, in due course of time, these fisher folk came to be known as fishing community. Later on, the people who lived depending upon water were known as the *Doms*, the *Nodiyals*, the *Kaibarttas*, the *Jalkeots*, the *Jalho-Malos*, the *Patnis* and the *Namasudras*.

The 'Kaibartta' is a Sanskrit word which means one who depends on water. In other words Kaibartta is a community who earn livelihood from the related occupation. Historian such as Gangabandhu Singh has referred to the *Padma Purana* and the *Brahma Vaibarta Purana* and came to the conclusion that *Mahishyas* and *Kairbarttas* are belonged to the same caste. The children who are born of a *Khatriya* father and a *Vaishya* mother are called a Kaibartta or *Mahishya*. *Kalika Purana*, a historical document explains that the Kaibarttas were living in Kamrup even before 9<sup>th</sup> century B. C and they ruled over the land for several centuries. They came to live in Majuli during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. According to the Bengali historian *Sevananda Bharati*, the ancient home of *Mahishya* race or Kaibarttas is near the present day Ratnavati which is situated on the bank of the Narmada. This was then known as *Mahishamati*.

The existence of the Kaibarttas is evident from the ages of the great epics, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Kaibarttas are one of the aboriginal ethnic groups of India who have been living in Orissa, Bengal and Assam from the unknown past. They are also known by other names, such as, *Kewat*, *Kewath*, *Kevath*, *Kevat*, *Haluwa Keut*, *Jaluwa Keut* etc. According to H.H. Risely, West Bengal is the origin of Kaibarttas. Major fishermen communities of India are generally found in Tamilnadu, Maharasta, Kerala, Gujrat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

In due course of time, the *Doms* or *Nodiyals* of Assam are known as Kaibarttas. The Kaibarttas are one of the most prominent communities among the scheduled castes of Assam. The Kaibartta, a constituent of fishing community, is an important caste of India. They have been engaging themselves traditionally in the fishing trade which is supposed to be their main livelihood. They are specified as scheduled caste

for Assam by the constitution order 1950 [a] Part II: Assam. Fish catching is one of the oldest occupations of mankind. In India million of people of fishermen community including Kaibarttas have been depending on this occupation. Like other parts of India, fishing is a caste based occupation in Assam and is traditionally practised by Kaibarttas. Assam is full of fishery resources. The Kaibarttas of Nalbari district of Assam have been surviving on their traditional knowledge based techniques for fish harvesting. And the socio-cultural life of the Kaibarttas is also remarkable. The Kaibarttas of Assam have been observing their own Pujas and festivals like the Bodos and the Kacharies of Assam. A study of our little known neighbour is a stepping stone for national integration through proper understanding of its socio-cultural life.

Scheduled castes are notified in 31 states and Union Territories of India. There are altogether 1241 individual ethnic groups, etc. notified as scheduled castes in different Indian states and Union Territories. 2011 census of India records 201.4 million scheduled caste population in India. Kaibartta and Namasudra are the two major scheduled castes in Assam sharing more than half of the total Population. Other sizeable castes in Assam are Patni, Jhalo, Muchi, Sutradhar, Bhuinamli, Hira, Dhupi, Brittial Bania and Jalkeot. Among the districts of Assam, Cachar, Karimganj, Marigaon, Hailakandi and Bangaigaon are the main scheduled caste prominent districts.

Distribution of Sixteen Scheduled Caste Population Percentage in Assam [Census of  
India: 2011].

Table No-1

Sl. No.		Total Population	Percentage of Total Population
	All Schedule Castes	2231321	100%
1	Bansphor	16359	0.73
2	Bhuinmali, Mali	69535	3.12
3	Brittial Bania, Bania	50598	2.27
4	Dhupi, Dhobi	52431	2.35
5	Dugla, Dholi	7991	0.36
6	Hira	55300	2.48
7	Jalkeot	24774	1.11
8	Jhalo, Malo, Jhalo-Malo	80376	3.60
9	Kaibartta, Jaliya	693219	31.07
10	Lalbegi	790	0.04
11	Mahara	1822	0.08
12	Mehtar, Bhangi	8835	0.40
13	Muchi, Rishi	77643	3.48
14	Namasudra	631542	28.30
15	Patni	181904	8.15
16	Sutradhar	66303	2.97

2011 census of India also reveals that more than 85 percent of the scheduled caste population lives in rural areas. Wide variation is seen regarding the rural urban distribution of the scheduled caste population of Assam. Kaibartta records highest of 31.07 percent of total scheduled caste population of Assam while Lalbegi records the lowest of 0.04 percent of total scheduled caste population of Assam. On the other hand, Namasudra, Hira, Muchi and Kaibartta are predominant in rural areas having more than 85 percent of rural population.

Distribution of Sixteen Scheduled Caste Population in Nalbari District [Census of  
India: 2011].

Table No-2

Sl. No.	Name of Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Caste Person
1	Bansphor	106
2	Bhuinmali	2529
3	Brittial Bania	3049
4	Dhupi	4091
5	Dugla	15
6	Hira	1625
7	Jalkeot	1490
8	Kaibartta	17539
9	Lalbegi	2
10	Jhalo	862
11	Mahara	Nil
12	Mehtar	146
13	Muchi	372
14	Namasudra	17687
15	Patni	31
16	Sutradhar	244

Besides, among scheduled tribes Bodos represent nearly half of the scheduled tribe population of Assam. There are eight notified scheduled tribes in Assam, such as, Bodo, Miri, Rabha, Kachari, Lalung, Dimasa, and Deori. The scheduled caste and the scheduled tribe belong to Hindu religion. Thus Assam is living place of several religious communities, such as, Hindu, Anukul Thakur, Baishnava, Bathau, Kabir Patni, Sanatan Dharma, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain.

## District-wise Distribution of Kaibartta Population in Assam [Census of India: 2011].

Table No-3

Sl. No	Name of Caste	Name of District	Population	Male	Female
1	KAIBARTTA	Kokrajhar	4229	2195	2034
2		Dhuburi	9755	5085	4670
3		Goalpara	10475	5244	5231
4		Barpeta	17024	8562	8462
5		Marigaon	22098	11083	11015
6		Nagaon	103621	52742	50879
7		Sonitpur	51031	25983	25048
8		Lakhimpur	51664	26276	25388
9		Dhemaji	16503	8428	8075
10		Tinsukia	16870	8676	8194
11		Dibrugarh	31676	16369	15307
12		Sibsagar	29011	14667	14344
13		Jorhat	64249	32679	31570
14		Goalpara	44025	22380	21645
15		Karbi Anglong	19296	10080	9216
16		Dimasa Haso	518	272	246
17		Cachar	60150	30762	29388
18		Karimganj	29614	15283	14331
19		Hailakandi	2578	1352	1226
20		Bangaigaon	12461	6400	6061
21		Chirrang	2988	1529	1459
22		Kamrup[R]	24750	12478	12272
23		Kamrup[M]	24708	12407	12301
24		Nalbari	17539	8845	8694
25		Baska	11437	5866	5571
26		Darrang	7582	3768	3814
27		Udalguri	7367	3766	3601

## 5. Historical Background of the Kaibarttas

The Kaibartta Community is one of the old communities of India. The Kaibarttas were the makers of civilization in the Indus valley at *Harrapa* and *Mahenjodaro*. They were the developers of Indian writing, township and drainage and central heating system before 2500 B.C. The Kaibarttas were of royal caste. Historian, such as, Gangabandhu Singh has referred to the *Padma Purana* and *Brahma Vaibarta Purana* and come to the conclusion that *Mahisyas* and Kaibarttas are the same castes.

*Kalika Purana* a historical document explains that the Kaibarttas were living in Kamrup even before the 17<sup>th</sup> century. According to the Bengali historian, Sevenanda Bharati the ancient home of *Mahishya* race or Kaibarttas is near the present day *Ratnavati* on the bank of Narmada. This was known as *Mahishamati* [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahishya>].

Etymologically the word *Kaibartta* carries several opinions. Derivationally, the word *Kevarta* or *Kaibartta* is from the root *Ka* or *Ke* that means water and *Vrit* means exist. Some of the explanations regarding the word *Kaibartta* are: I] *Ka- Barta-Eti*, where *Ka* or *Ke* carry different meanings like water, *Ganga*, peacock, *Bishnu*, soul, *Brahma*, Sun [Mitra, S: 259], II] *Ke + Vrit*, where *Ke* means water & *Vrita* means to live in [Hemkosh Abhidhan, 1991: 236].

During the Brahmin and *Shanghita* Ages the Kaibartta was known as *Kimvarta* where *Kim* means ugly and *Varta* means occupation.

## 6. Mythical Origin

In the past communities were the result of the classification of labour and Kaibarttas were not an exception of this. The Kaibarttas are Dravidians or they belong to Dravidian stalk. In general terms the children who is born of a *Khatriya* father and a *Vaishya* mother is called Kaibartta. It is come to known that king *Dhibor*, the leader of the fishing men had a step daughter. Her name was *Mashyagandha* or *Satyabati Kaibartta*. This lady was the mother of *Vyasa* who composed the Mahabharata. Form this it helps us to understand that the primitive people of India were form fishing community.

God in the *Satya* Ages ordered the several races of the human beings to collect some goods for a festival. Among the several classes, the Kaibarttas offered their goods to God at the beginning as they have their own boats. The God Satisfied with their dedication and called them as *Keots*. So the Kaibarttas are also known as *Keots*.

According to a legend when Ram Chandra, the son of king *Dasaratha* of *Ayodhya*, was sent to exile, he had to cross a river. When he approached to a Kaibartta who had a boat, he denied his proposal. The Kaibartta was threatened knowing the power of Ram Chandra. But Ram Chandra convinced him and he helped Ram Chandra. But Ram Chandra convinced him and he helped Ramchandra in crossing the river. Being highly satisfied with the Kaibartta, the boatman, Ram Chandra advised him to net in the river only once. Then the Kaibartta net in the river to collect fishes, but fortunately he was favoured with gold instead of fishes. But when he net for the second time he got only snails and frogs. He got the prize for failing to control his greed. Those who took fishing business as their prime occupation were known as Kaibarttas from then [Bezbaruah, D. K: 5].

## **7. Migration**

The Kaibarttas came to Assam in the pre-historic time. The Kaibarttas started to live permanently in Assam from the 4<sup>th</sup> century. When we go through several religious books, *Puranas* and historical documents it can be said that the Kaibarttas migrated mostly from Orissa and Gour Pradesh. During the reign of Ahoms, many Kaibarttas come to Assam to avoid the wars, taxes and Political ups and downs. To catch fishes in the *Puthimari*, *Kalajal* and *Baralimari* beels, two Kaibarttas were brought to Assam. Later on these two Kaibarttas brought may Kaibarttas and settled themselves on the soil of Assam. During the invasion of Maan and the reign of English many Kaibarttas migrated to Assam as they felt unsecured. After the independence many Kaibarttas came to Assam from West Bengal.

Some scholars, on the other hand, opine that the Kaibarttas are the primitive people of Brahmaputra valley or Assam valley. The old books and the wall writing also support the opinions of these scholars. Hajor Barman, the king of old Kamrupa also included the names of Kaibarttas in the stone writing. In the same way, the stone

and wall writing of the Middle Age also proves the existence of some Kaibartta villages [Bezburah, D. K: 6-14].

### **8. Demography**

The Kaibartta population in Assam recorded in 2011 census of India is 693219, of whom 353177 are males and 340042 are females. Total population of Assam, according to 2011 are 31169272. The Kaibarttas constitute 1.89 percent of the total population of Assam 31.07 percent of the scheduled caste population of Assam according to 2011 census of India. The Kaibartta population recorded in Nalbari district in 2011 census of India is 771639, of whom 396006 are males and 375633 females. 2011 census of India also records 17593 Kaibarttas in Nalbari district, of whom 8845 are males and 8694 are females.

### **9. Study Area**

Nalbari district is situated in between  $26^{\circ}\text{N}$  and  $26.51^{\circ}\text{N}$  latitudes and  $91^{\circ}\text{E}$  and  $91.47^{\circ}\text{E}$  longitudes. Bhutan falls in the north of Nalbari district and Kamrup district is on the east of Nalbari district. The Brahmaputra falls on the south of Nalbari district and Barpeta district is on the west of Nalbari district. Nalbari district is large in areas as well as in population concerned. It presents a panorama of folk elements in the cultural life of the Kaibarttas. Besides, this area has sufficient no. of fishery resources, such as, the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. The Kaibarttas of this area have been surviving on their traditional knowledge based techniques for fish harvesting. Therefore, this area is found to be suitable for the study.

Nalbari district occupies diversified water bodies in various forms, such as, beel-*Behkuri*, *Dhansiri*, *Bouta* etc, swamp, wasteland, ponds and tanks. The Kaibarttas of Nalbari district have been adopting the old traditional techniques of fishing as these techniques of fish harvesting have been generously passed on to newer generations by the older ones. The oral literature of the Kaibarttas of Nalbari district in relation to fish is also rich. But research particularly on fish lore and fishing practices prevalent among the Kaibarttas of Nalbari district has not been done. The oral literature of the Kaibarttas living in Nalbari district, associated with fish and fishing practices is found

in the form of riddle, proverb, charms and prose narratives, such as, legend, tale and myth.

#### **10. Statement of the Problem**

The Kaibartta community living in Nalbari district remain significant with their culture and tradition that includes beliefs, festivals, folk medicines, folk games, art and crafts, cooking, folk performances acquired by them in living their day to day social and occupational life. The beliefs, festivals, folk medicines, folk games, art and crafts and cooking of the Kaibartta community revolve round their social and occupational life which results in narratives of various kinds. The Kaibarttas nourish some common folk customs, art and crafts, folk performances, when they go for fishing, observe their festivals, practice their religion. They perform and celebrate some forms of oral tradition in terms of songs, dances and fishing related activities. Being influenced by traditions and customs, they observe several religious occasions, celebrate some festivals associated with various stages of life cycle like birth, puberty rite, marriage and death.

The Kaibartta, a constituent of fishing community, is an important caste of India. They have been engaging themselves traditionally in the fishing trade which is supposed to be their main livelihood. Like other parts of India, fishing is a caste based occupation in Assam and is traditionally practiced by Kaibarttas. A detailed study of the related literature i.e. newspapers, articles, books and documents show that the authors have already focused on socio-cultural life of several fishing communities in different states of India. Some of them also narrate the folk beliefs and social customs of the fishing communities of Assam. Yet, there is hardly any book, dealing with the fishlore and fishing practices of the Kaibartta community relating to their fishing contraptions, waterbeds, folk deities, mythical origin, customs, folk narratives and oral songs. In absence of sufficient number of adequate books and journals, comprehensive and minute study regarding the social customs, material culture, performing art form, fish lore and fishing practices of the Kaibartta community living in Nalbari district is not found. So, Kaibarttas of this area and their socio-cultural life is lesser known due to the lack of comprehensive literature and studies of their cultural life. It is felt that

there is still much necessity of in depth and systematic study on their socio-cultural life in terms of fish lore and fishing practices. Hence, this study aims at stating and discussing the socio-cultural life of the Kaibarttas in terms of fish lore and fishing practices taking Nalbari district as a study area.

### **11. Objectives of the Study**

Considering the above, the present study has been undertaken with the following objectives:

- A. To study the origin of the Kaibarttas as a fishing community.
- B. To study the socio-cultural life of the Kaibarttas.
- C. To study the fish lore of the Kaibarttas of the proposed area.
- D. To study the fishing practices of the Kaibarttas.