CHAPTER 2

THE FOLK CULTURE OF BARAK VALLEY

Barak Valley is the southern most region of Assam which is the outcome of the changes brought about by new cleavages, new alignments of power through invasion and colonization, trade, migration within the frame work of the State leading to the formation of a pluralistic society. Barak Valley, was originally an extension of East Bengal. In 1874, Assam was organized as a province by the British and two Bengali speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar were carved out of Bengal Presidency and incorporated to Assam to meet the revenue deficit of the newly formed province. These districts were known as the Surma Valley division. In 1947, the major part of Sylhet district was transferred to East Pakistan and the remaining part of Surma Valley division was re-organized into three districts – Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi within the State of Assam after independence (Choudhury 2003 p-xi). Since the time immemorial Barak Valley has been the confluence of people belonging to different ethnic groups, communities and cultural entities. Presently, the dominant community is the Bengali speaking community of Hindus and Muslims in Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi districts of South Assam. The valley constitutes a total geographical area of 6,941.2 sq. km., about 9% of the total land area of Assam with a population of 31,162,272 (Census 2011). The district of Cachar covers an area of 3786 sq.km.and it comprises two sub-divisions; namely Silchar and Lakhipur. The district town of Hailakandi is 55 kms from Silchar. Hailakandi is the smallest district of Assam covering an area of 1,327 sq.km. The district of Karimganj covers an area of 1,809 Sq. km. It is the easternmost part of Barak Valley and the major part of the district is bordered by Sylhet district of Bangladesh. The Barak Valley, formerly known as Cachar (Bhattacharjee 1977) is a natural extension of Bengal plains. This valley was peopled by the Bengalis. For sometime, in the medieval period the valley was under the Tipperahs and their capital was at Khalangsha on the bank of the Barak River, but the Tipperahs gradually migrated to Tipperah Hills. The North Cachar Hills were then under Dimasas and in the seventeenth century they shifted their capital to Khaspur in

the Cachar Valley. The Dimasas were generally confined in the hills and very few villages were there in the plains. The British records testify the existence of large Bengalee Khels in the valley and the ancient coins and scripts give sufficient evidence that the valley was predominantly Bengali speaking. The Barmans, that is the Dimasas of the plains, were gradually Bangalised and, as Bhattacharjee (1977) writes in his 'Cachar under British Rule in North-East India', Raja Krishnachandra and Govindachandra made correspondence with East India Company's Government in Bengali language.The Bengali population in Cachar had increased in the nineteenth century after the British annexation. Bengali was given official status in the three districts of Barak Valley under the Assam Official Language in, 1960. Sylethi (a dialect of Bangla) is ofcourse spoken by the majority (Chatterjee 2000).

The valley has a long history of Muslim rule; half of the valley was under the rule of the Turk-Afghan dynasties of Bengal from 13th century and continued with the establishment of the Mughal Empire. But this Muslim dominance and rule from 1204 came to an end with the introduction of British rule in Bengal in 1857. As such, the valley has Hindus and Muslims mainly and some other religious communities make only 4%. The Hindus form 50% of the total population and the Muslims 46%. In Cachar district the Hindus are in majority with 60% of the total population whereas in Karimganj and Hailakandi the Muslims are in majority with 53% and 57% respectively of the total population (Roy 1961). Many Manipuris migrated to Cachar, Sylhet and Tripura during the Burmese occupation of Manipur in 1758 (Bhattacharjee 2004). The introduction of tea plantation in the valley also invited migrants from different parts of India, especially North India since 1860s during the colonial rule. Most of the migrants were tea-garden labourers and along with them came some of the traders from Rajasthan in commercial pursuit (Bhattacharjee 2004:242). At the close of the eighteenth century the plains of Cachar were dominated by different groups of tribes. They were mainly the Dimasas, the Kukis, the Nagas, the Reangs, the Manipuris, and the Kochs. Barak Valley is populated by the communities such as the Bengali Hindus, the Bengali Muslims, the Barman, the Bishnupriya Manipuris, the Mitei, the Hmar, the Rongmei Naga, the Khasi, the Kuki, the

Assamese, the Reang or Bru, the Chakma, the Dhean and the Tea Garden populace (Chattarjee 2000). These various ethnic groups compose the folk culture of the Valley in contemporary time. It is being discussed here.

The Bengalees

The Bengali Hindus celebrate religious festivals like Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Saraswati Puja, Suryabrata, Sivaratri, Dol Yatra, Barani Puja, Manasha Puja, Sitali Puja, Kartik Sankranti, Paush Sankranti, Shasti, Rath Yatra, Dol Purnima, Lakshmi Puja, Nauka Puja, Dasha- Avatar Puja, Jhulan Jatra, Phuldal, Rupashi Puja, Savitri Brata, Mangalchandi Puja, Atanajer Brata, Karma Purusher Brata, Charak Puja etc. Along with some of these festivals, fairs or melas are held. To name a few, the Siddeshwar Mela during Baruni Yatra, the Bhuban Mela during Sivaratri, the Bharam baba's Mela, the Posh Mela,the Gandhi Mela, the mela on the day of Mahalaya,which add to the fervour of celebrations. There are numerous shrines and temples of historical significance scattered all around in the valley. Two Kalibari temples were founded at Silchar, one in 1833 and another one in 1871 at Tarapur. The Kalibari at Hailakandi was established towards the close of the nineteenth century. The Baramthan in Silcoorie and Shyamananda Ashram, the Radhamadhab Akhra, Mahaprabhu Akhra and Shyamsundar Akhra in Silchar were established in the 19th Century. The Kachakanti Bari at Uddharbond and Ranachandi Mandir in Khaspur was founded during the Heramba rule and have been kept in high esteem by the devout Hindus; a Siva temple in Subhang has references since 7th century AD and the images of Hara-Parvati in Bhuban Hills were probably installed by the Tipperahs, while the Siva temple in Badarpurghat is said to have been established by Kapil Muni, the celebrated author of Sankhya philosophy. All these shrines are considered to be sacred by the Hindus and have continued to be places of pilgrimages (Bhattacharjee 1977).

Bengali Muslims of Barak Valley have a significant identity and have rich traditional customs and practices which contribute to the folk culture of the valley. The Bengali Muslims in Cachar mostly belong to Sunni sect. The Imam Medhi Mukam and Langer Shaer Mukam at Phulertal and Kari Pirer Mukam near

Badarpur are very old Muslim shrines. The Pirbadi, the Dargah of Sufi saint is 35 kms from Hailakandi, where special religious celebrations are held every year in the month of February. The Hazarat Shah Adam Khaki Dargah is another important Mocum (Muslim prayer house) in the Barak Valley and is one of the 360 Aolias (Mocums) from all over the world. The Darul Ulum at Baskandi is one of the biggest Arabic universities of India, which was established by Hazi Akbor Ali, a pupil of Hazi Imdadulla Mahazir of Mecca in 1897. Every year many Muslim spiritual leaders visit the university and religious discussions and celebrations are held (Barak Utsav 2005). The Muslims celebrate Id with great pomp, and Jari dance and songs are performed during the Maharam. The Gaji dance and song is popular among the Bengali Muslims. Kamaluddin Ahmed (2004) refers to Maripatigan, and Islamic religious songs in his 'Sanskritir Rong –Rup'Chatterjee (2000) Apart from that they sing songs in praise of Shah Jalal even now. The Bengali Muslims eat beef and buffalo's meat but do not eat pork.The Hindus do not eat beef. The Bengali Muslim women too wear sarees and in some of the villages they wear Burkha (a long flowing garment covered from head to feet). The men usually wear lungi (a long stitched loin cloth) and Panjabi (a loose long shirt type garment) and a white cap. Many Muslim women especially the younger generation wear modern dresses like shirts and pants, salwar-kameez, tops and skirts, jeans and kurtis, frocks etc. The Bengali Hindu women are fond of gold ornaments and jewelleries, the married women also adorn themselves with bangles made of shell (sankha) and vermilion (sindur). The Bengali Hindu women traditionally wore sarees, whereas the men traditionally wore dhoti (a long loin cloth,usually white in colour) and Panjabi (a loose long shirt type garment) but, nowadays both men and women wear their traditional dresses on special occasions and wear modern dresses specially salwar suit at other times. Both Hindu and Muslim widows wear white sarees and the Bengali Hindu widows, abstain from non-vegetarian diet and widow remarriage is not practiced usually. Rice is the staple food of both Hindus and Bengali Muslims. They are also fond of fish, sutki (the local name for dried fish), uti (smoked fish), chungar peetha (rice stuffed inside bamboo and cooked over fire) sheddho pitha (steamed rice cakes) meat,etc. There is rich traditional art and craft

practices amongst the Bengalees, both Hindus and Muslims. They are skilled in bamboo craft and make mats (*ashan),*winnowing platter or tray called *(kula)*, sieve *(chaloin),* hand-fan (*bisoin*),round platter for winnowing (*dala)*, fishing articles, baskets of various sizes and shapes, bedsteads called (*chang*), Pottery making is another essential occupation of the Bengalees. Most of the villagers are agriculturists. Ofcourse, nowadays, most of the youths do not like cultivation and they are more interested in other jobs.

The Bengali Hindus of Barak Valley follow the caste system but are less rigid and the Bengalees have two castes namely; the Brahmin and the Sudra (Chatterjee 2000:126-127). Brahmins enjoyed high rank but nowadays situation is changing and people have become more liberal minded. Apart from the Brahmins there are Kayasthas. The greater section of population comprises Dom Patni (fishermen and boats men) communities. Apart from these there are Baruis (Betel growers), Baniks (traders), Dhopas (washermen), Kamars (smiths), Napiths (barbers), Namasudras (sweepers), Das (slaves), Phulmalis (gardeners), Telis (Oilpressers), Tantis (weavers) and the Kaivartas, all belonged to the lower strata of the society. The Kaivartas are non-Aryans, and fish trading is their main occupation.The Kaivartas belong to two classes; namely, the Haloya Keyots and the Jaluya Keyots.The Haloya Keyots engage themselves in cultivation. They were originally Saktas (worshippers of Shakti or Kali) but, nowadays, large sections of them follow Vaishnava dharma. Most of the women are engaged in household jobs and also engage themselves in construction sites with their male counterparts.The Jaluyas are mainly fishermen by occupation and are Mohammedans. The Nath (Yogis), descendants of Gorakanath- the Saiva Saint, are yet another dominant community which has a stronghold in the valley. They have their own priests who are known as Mohantas. They marry within their own community. The traditional occupation of the Yogis was agriculture and weaving. Most of the Naths are land owners and are very prosperous. The Nath Yogis bury their dead unlike the other Hindu castes (Chatterjee 2000:127). There are also Vaisnavites within the Bengali Hindus.

Earlier child marriage was highly prevalent amongst both the Hindus and the Muslims but, nowadays, this is hardly practised because most of the people

are educated. Another interesting fact is that irrespective of caste or religion both the Hindus and Muslims have the common titles like Choudhury, Mazumdar, Biswas, Bhuiya, Laskar etc. These titles were revenue titles conferred upon them by the Kachari Raja Krishna Chandra (Chatterjee 2000:128). Most of the Bengali Hindu families practice monogamy. In the urban area most of the families are nuclear whereas in the villages there is still prevalence of joint families. Saridance Dhamail, Bounachar Badhubaran, Ojha Nach, Charaknach are some of the dances performed by the Bengali Hindus on different occasions. The Barmashi songs, the lokogeet, pauligan, marriage songs, religious songs, sarigan, Baulgan, Dulargan, Lutergan, and Kirtan are the major songs. Apart from these, songs are sung to celebrate every occasion by the Bengali Hindus.

The Hmars

The Hmar tribe is one of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups of people spread on a large area in North-East India and are recognized as Scheduled tribes under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India (Hazarika 1994:238). There is no written document stating the Hmar origin and movement and it is their folktales and songs which reveal the history and movement of this tribe (Dena Lal 2008).The word 'Hmar' literally means north and, as such, it is believed that this tribe is known as Hmar, for it was living in the north of Lushai (Mizo) Hills. There is yet another opinion that the term Hmar is derived from the word Marh or Mhar which means 'tying of one's hairs in a knot on the nape of the neck'. A folk tale goes that Tukbemsawn, one of the ancestors, tied his hair in a knot on the nape of the neck and those who followed him came to be known as Hmars. Very often the plain people identify the Hmars as the old Kukis but the Hmars proclaim themselves as a distinct ethnic group. The Hmars at present reside in North-East India, especially in Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and Assam. In Assam they have settled down in the eastern part of Cachar, in Karimganj and Hailakandi and the Dima Hasao district. In Cachar district most of them are living in different villages like Juitha, Mualdan, Baroidisa,Tlangmawi, Kumba, Harinagar, Hmarkulien, Chiru Punjee, Kalam Punjee, Rema Punjee, Longekhar, Boro Kumpi, Dipucherra, Nengthi Punjee, Morchakal, Tulpi, Chuta Tulpi, Bijingsu, Bhula, Tuiset, Singa Punjee, Buma,

Diglang, Karem Faillen, Beithe Punjee, Digli Choorpunjee, U.S. Moloing, Lower Ladi, Mirpur, Saichel Punjee under Lakhipur Police Station.The highest concentration of Hmars is in Cachar district. The language of the Hmars is Hmar Tawng and it is introduced as a medium of instruction at primary and higher secondary level in Cachar district.The Hmar divides into clans: namely, Biete, Changsan, Chawnthel, Darngawn, Faihriem, Hmarlusei, Hranghawl, Khawbhung, Kheite, Khiengte, Khuolhring, Lawitlang, Leiri, Lungtau, Neitham, Ngente, Ngurte Pautu, Rawite, Thiek, Vangsie, Zote Chorai, Chothe, Darlong, Koireng, Langrong, Kom etc. Each of these clans is divided into sub-clans. The Hmar settlement pattern is determined by their clan affinity. The Hmar villages are thus multiclan villages (Dena Lal 2008).These clans and even the family does not have much influence in determining the choice of partner for marriage. A Hmar can marry almost any girl, except his sister, aunt, mother and grandmother. The Hmar prefer maternal cross-cousin marriage. In Hmar society widow remarriage is prevalent. A boy in the Hmar society can marry according to his choice but the consent of parents of both the sides is necessary. Formal negotiations are held in the girl's place where the boy's parents have to go with a piece of white cloth and rice beer and, then, the bride price (nuhmeiman) is decided (Dena 2008). Monogamy is their ideal form of marriage. The Khuong lawn, Lunglak and Sesun are their important festivals.Chawn-lam (festive or harvesting dance), Dar-lam (funeral dance), Pheipheet-lam (war dance), Hrang-lam (head hunting dance), Tinna-Hla-lan (parting dance) are some of the folk dances of the Hmar tribes.Traditionally the Hmars are animists. The Hmars believed in the supreme power of Pathien, their God. They made offerings to different spirits and not to Pathien and in times of trials and diseases they tried to propitiate these spirits. The Hmars bury their dead, and their priests (Thiempu) perform various rites over the graves of the dead.The Hmars are traditionally agriculturists. They practice jhum cultivation. Rice is their staple crop and apart from that they grow vegetables and fruits, such as watermelon, ginger, potatoes, chillies, pumpkin, bananas, oranges, etc.The women folk are skilled in weaving and handloom products. They also make products out of bamboo and cane (Singh 2003). It may be mentioned here that the Hrangkhol and the Faihriem are amongst the

numerous phanams or clans of Hmar Kuki tribes. In Barak Valley there are seventeen villages of the Hrangkhol with a total population of 8,347. They build their houses on wooden pillar and use bamboo mostly for construction of houses. They celebrate the Rual-Chapak harvest festival, and during the spring time they celebrate the Parangat festival .The Paranghat festival is a festival of flowers which is celebrated on a full moon night. The festival commences in the evening and continues till next morning. Young men collect baskets of wild flowers to offer to the eldest man of the village. Thereafter, they invoke the spring season through songs and dances and make merry with drinks. Fish is a symbol of prosperity to the Hrangkhols and in connection with this Soksolkirlam dance is organized by the community. Bhailam is another dance performed to welcome special guests to their village. Here, men wear Churia, Kamis, Lukom, Changkaltak, and women dancers wear Ponpomtak, Ponamnei, Kongkhit and Thepbop etc. They also wear ornaments; viz, Jakcher, Chumhrui and Lirthei. There are other folk dances like Darlam, Doinkini, and Rochemiam where traditional instruments like Dar, Cheranda, Rochem and Theile are used. The Faihriems have their own dialect and is still spoken in not more than two villages of Cachar district in Barak valley. The Faihriem clan is further divided into subclans, namely, Bapui, Hmuntha, Khawral, Khawkhieng, Saivate, Saihmar, Seitling, Thlanghnung, Tuollai etc (Bahadur 1977).

The Assamese

Some of the Assamese speaking people entered the Barak Valley with the Koch General Chilarai, but the army of Chilarai consisted of not only the Koch as there were also many Assamese from Kamrup. These Assamese ultimately did not return to Brahmaputra valley but stayed back in Cachar. Many Assamese people from Upper Assam entered Barak Valley during the Moamaria rebellion to escape from the oppression of Ahom Queen Phuleswari. The Assamese speaking population settled down at Gumrah (near Kalain) Gader Bhitar, Badarpur, Alkhargul, Borgul, Tarapur (Silchar) etc. They were Vaisnavites and inspite of the Bengali impact they retained their language and culture. In the early part of the nineteenth century, the Brahmaputra Valley was ravaged by the Burmese and as such many of the Assamese people fled and took shelter in the

Surma Valley.Even today there are many Assamese villages in Cachar and Karimgang districts of Barak Valley (Bhattacharjee 2004). The Assamese populace of the valley celebrates Bihu and organizes Bihutolis like those in any other place in Assam. They have even their own Namghars (prayer halls). Of course, due to Bengali influence some of them worship Sakta gods and goddesses. The traditional dress for men is dhoti (a long loin cloth for men usually white in colour), kurta (long shirt like garment) and gamocha and women wear mekhla (dress from the waist up to the ankle which is stitched like a long skirt), sadder (a long piece of cloth to cover the upper part of the body) and riha (upper garment). Various ornaments are used around the neck by the women such as *dugdugi, jonbiri, dholbiri, kouthanar, golpata, mogerbona,* etc. Ornaments worn on the ears are *kanfal, thuria* (pierced through the ear lobe), *lokapar* (hanging from the ear lobe). Ornaments worn on the wrist are *bala muthikaru, gamkharu* etc. (Singh 2003:39).

The Dheans

The Koch or the Rajbangshis have also come to Barak Valley from Brahmaputra valley with Chilarai who conquered Cachar from the king of Tripura and the plains of Cachar were annexed to the Koch kingdom in the year 1563 (Chatterjee 2000:132-133). Kamal Gohain, the brother of Chilarai was made the viceroy of Cachar and the local people paid their respect to him and addressed him as the Dewan. Subsequently the word Dewan corrupted to Dhean. Khaspur was made the capital of Kamal Gohain, and from then onwards many priests were appointed from amongst the Assamese Brahmins of Kashyapa Gotra and Devagrihi or Deoris from amongst the Koch were appointed to assist the priests. The Dhean rulers established the Shyama Shrine of Thaligram, Kancha Kanti temple of Uddarbond, Ranabauli, Andheri, Chandai Mala and Bhairaba temples. Later on, the Koch territory of Cachar was attacked by the neigbouring states of Jaintia and Tripura and, as such, the Koch territory in Cachar was reduced to a small Zamindari around Khaspur and the Dhean remained the de jure ruler of Khaspur.The Koch worshipped Kamakhya and so also the Dheans of Cachar followed the Sakti cult. The Dhean rulers were devout Hindus who first spread the Vedic rites amongst the people of Cachar.The Dheans were

conservative; they did not support child marriage and divorce was not officially recognized. The Dheans also married only from their own ethnic group living in Cachar. The Dheans, in course of time, came under the influence of the Manipuri Brahmins and, as such, even their Bihu dance bears the stamp of Thabal Choubi dance of Manipuris.The Dheans are divided into several groups based on occupation; namely, Barpatra, Deka Patra, Senapati, Ujir, Rajkazi, Shyama Bhandari, Kavi Bhuyan, Dalai, Deori, Purkait, Shingadar Chanadar, Bagadar, Kumarlaskar, Bherualaskar, Dhulialaskar, Sonapatra and Bharipatra. But, gradually, most of these traders gave up their traditional occupations and have turned agriculturists. (Chatterjee 2000) The Dheans speak Assamese with slight variations and there are some six or seven villages greatly influenced by the Manipuri culture in their dress and ceremonies and there exists a great affinity between Dhean dialect and Bishnupriya Manipuri (Sinha 1984).

The Chakmas

The Chakma tribe is mainly settled in the Chittagong Hill tracts of Bangladesh. In addition to that many Chakmas reside in Mizoram, Tripura, Barak Valley of Assam and in Arunachal Pradesh. In Cachar there are four Chakma villages. Most of the Chakmas follow Theravada Buddhism mixed with elements of Hinduism and Animism. The Chakmas are divided into clans (*gojas*); namely, Dameyi, Huttia, Barseke, Hammey, Bangsa, Dachya, Malima, Rangi, Baburua, Boga, Thanya, Kukua, Angnu, Fema, Fedengsuri, Fagola, Hamuja, Lachra,Homreng, Naduktu, Karma and Fejara which are further sub-divided into sub-clans (*guttish*). Members of the same sub-clan are not permitted to inter-marry.The grooms family has to pay a bride price of goods fixed at the time of negotiation.The marriage ceremony is known as Chumulong.The Chakmas have their own traditional village council (*adam*),with the village headman (*gaon-bura*) who takes important decisions. The office of the headman is hereditary.Widow remarriage is allowed. The Chakma women wear ankle length cloth called *Phinon* and a *Haadi* wrapped above the waist.The women like to wear silver ornaments. They are non-vegetarians but they do not take beef. The Chakmas of Barak Valley speak mainly Bengali. The Chakmas celebrate a three-day Bihu Festival which is similar to Assamese Bihu. On the first day they

celebrate Phool Bihu wherein the womenfolk offer flowers to the river god, the second day is celebrated as Mool Bihu and the third day is celebrated as Gajya Pajjya Din. They also celebrate Buddha Purnima. These folks celebrate the funeral ceremony with great pomp and dignity.They keep the corpse for five to seven days and thereafter men and women gather to burn it. Finally, they make gifts according to their economic condition. They sing their folksongs and perform dances during festivities and ceremonies (Singh 2003).

The Dimasa Kacharis and the Barmans

The Dimasa Kachari known as the Barman in Barak Valley is a Scheduled Tribe (Plains). Their language belongs to the Tibeto-Barman language group, but since the complete assimilation with the Bengalis in South Assam and with the Assamese in the plains of Assam, the Dimasas of these regions have almost forgotten their own language. The term Dimasa literally means the children or descendants of the big river, 'Di' meaning water, 'Ma' meaning big and 'Sa' meaning children. Thus, Dimasa means the inhabitants on the bank of the big river (Brahmaputra or Subansiri or Chiri). The Barmans of Cachar also prefer setting up of their villages and living by the river side or on the bank of a stream.The Barmans of Cachar are completely Hinduized and after the Hindu mythology consider themselves as *Pitri acharis* (the followers of Bhima, the second Pandava in Mahabharata) and they are considered to be Kshatriyas. In Cachar the Barmans follow the Bengali Hindus and call upon the Bengali Hindu priests to perform their religious rites during marriage, funeral ceremonies and they also wear the sacred thread like the Bengali Brahmins. Passing through Sanskritization the Barmans of Cachar have shed many of their old and traditional practices (Chatterjee 2000).

The Barmans of Cachar are mainly agriculturists, and paddy is their staple crop.The Barmans are fond of fermented rice liquor which they call *khar pani*. They are fond of both dry and fresh fish. Preparation of dry fish (*naflam*) is not the same as found among the Bengalis or Manipuris. They pulverize the turmeric along with dry lemon leaves and use the powder as preservative for the dried variety of small fish. They further preserve the dry fish in bamboo cylinder

and keep it round the year. This process of drying is also followed in the case of dry meat. The Barmans are also fond of rice beer and every festive occasion is celebrated with rice beer.The houses (*nah*) of the Barmans are like those of the Bengalis. They use mostly bamboos and dry reeds (*chan*) in making their houses. Most of their household items are also made of bamboo. The Barmans of Cachar follow the dress pattern of the Bengalis in areas where they are living near the Bengalis, and Manipuri dress in Manipuri dominated areas. *Madru* is another primitive type of cooking practised by the Barmans. In this type of cooking they do not use any oil or spices and only salt is used. They also prepare a special form of chutney with dry fish, egg plant and green chillies. They are also fond of bamboo shoots.The Kachari-Barman families are normally monogamous. The whole of the Barman society is broadly classified into *Shemphongs* (male clans) and *Julus* (female clans). The sons inherit the father's property and also father's clan whereas the daughters assume the mother's clan and the mother's properties. The *Hozais* or priests are called in to perform the ceremonies, connecting *Shemphongs* and *Julus* (Chatterjee 2000, Singh 2003).

The Rongmei Nagas

The Rongmei or Kabui Nagas also inhabit some places in Barak Valley. They are a Naga group of people and their major clans are Kammei, Gonmei, Gangmei and Longmei. They observe *genna* (taboo), while performing ceremonies related to their festivals, cultivation of land, death and birth. They worship Ting Gwang, a deity, whom they believe to be the creator of the sun, moon and the earth. They do not have their own script and, as such, use Bengali and English.Their houses are built in parallel rows from north to south direction. They practice monogamy. The male Kabui wears a shirt and a *khudai* (a kind of dhoti), the women wear blouse and a *pheishoi* or skirt as lower garment. They tie the pheisoi over their breast and the cloth hangs down upto the knees.The tribe is fond of non-vegetarian diet and rice is their main diet. They have their own priests for performing their traditional rites. Phao-nei, Phakkong, Zainei and Ngunkhan Soumei are their major traditional rites. They also say mass-prayers and pay great respect to their village headman called Khullapa. Tunalegan and Lakpuile Meipu are their traditional songs. They bury their dead.

The Kacha Nagas

The Kacha Naga, a Naga tribe, belonging to the Zeliangrong tribe, inhabits the valley. The east and south of Silchar town is dotted with Naga punjis (settlements). These Nagas have six clans namely Mpame, Nikuame, Newme, Nriame, Songome and Hezarme. Their clans are exogamous. They have a monogamous family and the husband at the time of marriage pays bride-price. Divorce is allowed but if the proposal comes from the wife's side she has to return the bride-price to her husband. Every village has a *Dekachang* (a bachelors' dormitory) and boys attaining adolescence have to spend four years in the dormitory to get trained in their way of life. In some of the villages there are *Deki- chang* for maidens also. However, this is not common amongst the Nagas of Cachar.The Kacha Nagas live in wellbuilt houses made of bamboo and wood. The roofs of the houses are very low and often touch the ground. The roofs are thatched with *chan*. The men wear loin cloth and hand-woven shawl. Of course, in the urban areas they dress up in pants and shirts. The women dress up in short skirts up to the knees and wear a strip of cloth to cover their breast and, sometimes, wear huge necklace to cover their upper part of the body. The women wear necklaces made of shells, elephant tusk and even bones and horns of mithun. They are also fond of coloured stones and beads. The Kacha Nagas are pagans and they have their own beliefs and rituals of course, most of them are now converted to Christianity. Animals and birds are sacrificed during their festivals and also to appease the evil spirits. The Kacha Nagas bury their dead in the vicinity of their homes, and food and salt are offered to the dead.The Kacha Nagas are fond of meat and drinks. They usually prepare their wine from rice and jaggery. Rice beer is used in every occasion whether it is marriage or funeral. They love pork, beef and even dog's meat (Chatterjee 2000).

The Meiteis

There are 196 Manipuri villages in Barak Valley with a total population of 1, 00697 (Bhattacharjee and Ray 2010). There are Meithei Brahmins, Methei Muslims, Bishnupriyas or followers of Vishnu or Vaishnavaites in Barak Valley.The Meithei people are mostly residing in Imphal distirct of Manipur and

are scattered in Bishnupur and Thoubal districts and also in Jiribam areas of Manipur. In Cachar, they are scattered over different areas but are predominant in Lakhipur, Ramnagar, Borkhola, Uddharbond and Sonai. In Hailakandi district they are predominatlly settled in Laishramkhum and Lala and in Karimganj they are found in Dulabchara and Patherkandi. The Meithei linguistically belong to the Kuki-Chin group of the Sino-Tibetan family. They have seven exogamous clans (*yeks-salais*); namely, Ningthanuja, Angom, Luwang, Khuman, Khaba- Nganba, Chenlei and Moirang. These clans are further sub-divided into sub-clans (*yumnaks*). Each sub-clan is further divided into major lineages (*sageis*). These major lineages have social segments (*chagoks*). A segment consists of different families. They cannot marry in their own gotra or segment.The Meitheis have three types of marriages; namely, arranged marriage (*haina singnaba*) which is the most preferred system, marriage by elopement (*chenba*) and the Gandharba (*Lonna Luhongba*) marriage or secret marriage.There is a customary practice amongst the Meiteis that after marriage the son has to leave the family or household and form his own. This is called a *Tonganchaba* (separate eating). There are no cross cousin and levirate marraiges. The Methei Manipuri men wear white *dhoti (a long loin cloth)* and *Panjabi (a long loose shirt)* and a chaddar, and on ceremonial occasions they wear white turban whereas the women wear different colours of *Phaneks* on different occasions. Weaving is customary amongst the women folks. The Hindu Meitheis adorn their forehead and nose with sandalwood paste. (Sanajaoba 1991). There is caste system prevalent amongst the Meithei Manipuris.They worship Sanamahi (the Methei God) and also follow the Hindu religion, nowadays. They have special priests and priestesses, the *Maibas* and *Maibis*. The Maibis perform most of the ceremonial rituals. The Maibis have special dress code. They wear white phaneks and chaddar and white waist-wrapper and a long white sleeved blouse. They adorn their head with flowers and also wear colourful garlands. The Maibis perform the famous *Maibi Jagoi* dance (dance for leading the gods). The Meitheis celebrate the annual festival *Lai- Haraoba* (rejoicing of gods) with great pomp and grandeur. This festival is observed with the wishes for wealth, health and

prosperity of the whole community. The Haraoba dance is said to be the origin of all Manipuri dances (Sanajaoba 1991).

The *Cheiraoba* is another important festival which is celebrated to herald the New Year in the month of March/ April. A bamboo stick with a small flag and a bell at the top indicates the closing of the previous year and beginning of a new year. The Meithei Manipuris also organize puja (worship) of the Rain God and both men and women sing and dance to invoke the god. Chingoi Iruppa is the Meithei customary rite of bathing in stream known as *Chingoi* .The Chingoi stream (*Maril*) is one of the most significant and holy places of the Meiteis; the votaries take their bath in the stream and then climb the Nong Maijing Mountain to worship *Nongpok*, *Ningthou* and *Panthoibi* (ancestral spirits). This festival is held in the month of March. In Barak Valley the Meitheis take dip in ponds and rivers to celebrate the occasion. Still, another important festival Emoinu Ahongbi is usually observed by the Meithei families of Barak Valley in the month of January. Fruits, flowers and vegetables are offered in two separate dishes; one meant for Lainingthou and the other for Funga Lairu Lairembi. They also light fires to welcome Emoinu Ahongbi. There are many rites and rituals which are performed by the Meitheis at childbirth, marriage and also death. At childbirth the ritual of *Ipan Thaba* (delivery ritual) is performed by the Maiba and Maibi. Sharp bamboo blade is used to cut the umbilical cord after invoking the *Thawais* (souls). The sacred name-giving ceremony is held right at the time of birth and the sacred thread of seven strands is given at the time of *IpanThaba* ceremony. Their marriage is also marked with rituals like Waroipot, Heiching, Kharoi, Puba Kujaba, Mitam Nak Thaba and prayers and offerings are made to Sanamahi and Leimalel. The Hindu Meithei Manpuris usually cremate the dead and they also believe in rebirth. Songs are sung at funeral rites, praying for the rebirth of the soul. In case of unnatural death *Chupsaba* is observed. On all occasions the Meitheis pray to Sanamahi, the Supreme Lord who is believed to reside in the south-western corner of the house for the peace and prosperity of the individual, family and the community as a whole.The Manipuri Lois, one of the seven Scheduled Caste communities found in Manipur (Brown 2001), migrated to Cachar during the Burmese aggression and as such the traditional silk industry of

the Lois was introduced in Cachar also and this boosts the economy of the region.The Manipuri women have a special status in the society. They are very hard working and industrious. The women help in cultivation of paddy, cotton and vegetables. They are skilled agriculturists and live by the river banks, cultivating paddy and growing vegetables. They even weave the cotton and sell in the market. They also sell puffed rice (*muri*) flattened rice (*chira*) in the market. Many a times, they walk for miles carrying the products on their head and selling them from door to door like any other male vendors.The most famous dance form of the Manipuris is the Lai Haraoba. The dance is generally known as the duet dance of Khamba and Thaibi (the two great legendry lovers). The Meiteis sing Kirtana which is known as Nata Sankirtana. Ras Leela, the traditional dance, is performed by the Meitheis in Barak Valley on full moon night of Kartik, Chaitra and Ashvin months. Apart from the Meithei Hindus there are also Meithei Muslims in Barak Valley known as *Pangans*. The Manipuri Muslim women do not follow the purdah system as the other Muslims do and have more socio-economic freedom.The Meithei Muslims belong mostly to the *Syad*, the *Garia* (Sheikh) and *Maria* group of Muslims. These Meithei Muslims have their own Kazis (Priests) and they bury their dead (Singh1975; Sanajaoba 1991; Chatterjee 2000).

The Bishnupriya Manipuris

The Bishnupriya Manipuris like the Meitei Manipuris are scattered all over the Barak Valley. The Bishnupriya, as the name suggests, are followers of the Lord Vishnu and have accepted Vaishnavism as their religion.The Bishnupriya Manipuri women perform Rasleela and the men perform the Kirtans. The Rasleela is of two types; viz; the Gopal Ras and the Krishna Rasleela. Gopal Ras is perfomed by young boys whereas Sri Krishna's Rasleela is performed by girls in the role of Gopis. Boys in the costumes of the Gopalas perform *Udykhala* and *Rak howala*, which are modeled on the life of Sri Krishna. Besides these, some dramatic performances like *Kurukshetra*, *Lankakanda, Kansabadha etc* are also performed. *Padaballi* is another dance form of the Bishnupriyas. Drum dance is generally performed by men but this was performed by few female dancers in Silchar (Sinha 2008).The Bishnupriya Manipuris, also, invoke the rain

god with dance and song during the agricultural season.The Bishnupriyas celebrate all the Hindu festivals but in their own manner. The *Kartik* festival is one of the significant celebrations for them which begins on *Lakhsmi Purnima* and continues upto *Ras Purnima*. On this occasion cultural competitions are held which are called *Kartikar Phanna.*They also celebrate Holi or *Phaguwa* with great enthusiasm. It is a spring festival commemorating the birthday of Chaitayana Mahaprabhu. Sheds are constructed in open fields, and poles with flags of celebration are raised in every household. The whole community gets engaged in merrymaking, playing with colours and dancing and singing.The Bishnupriyas follow the Vaishnavs and thus wear the tulsi beads and sacred thread across their chest. The Bishnupriyas cremate their dead and there are some who do not perform the obsequital rites after the death of a person and, they rather prefer performing *namkirtans*. Of course, there are also some Saivas amongst the Bishnupriya Manipuris. As regards marriage, the Bishnupriyas follow the *Prajapatya* form of Hindu marriage. In this form no ceremonial sacrifice is performed and the marriage is performed through *kirtans (*singing hymnes*)*. Widow re-marriage is permitted in their society. In the Bishnupriya community there is caste system. All the non-Brahmins consider themselves as Kshatriayas. Most of them are agriculturists and weaving is the familiar occupation of the women.The Bishnupriyas' main diet comprises rice, vegetables and fish. Before their adoption of Vaishnavism they use to take meat and drinks but, later on, they gave up. (Sinha 2009). The dress of the Bishnupriya male is *dhoti (a long loin cloth)* and *Panjabi (a long shirt)* and the female wear two piece garments; one covers the upper part whereas the other covers the lower part. They are also fond of ornaments and deck themselves up with *heikuru, liksai, and pundarei thapak* for the neck, *jhamka or camei* for the ear and wristlets for the wrist. Married women like those of the Bengali Hindus wear vermillion and keep their hairs long.The influence of Bengali and Assamese languages can be clearly found in Bishnupriya language (Sinha 2009).

The Khasis

Meghalaya, the neighbouring state of Assam is the chief habitat of the Khasis. Before the formation of Meghalaya, the Khasi land was a part of Assam.

As such, there are many Khasis in the state of Assam, even now, especially in Barak Valley. There are many Khasi punjis or villages. According to Grierson, the Khasi as a race are supposed to belong to Mankhmer sub-group of the Indo-Chinese linguistic group. Ethnologically the Khasis belong to the Austro-Asiatic family. The Khasis of Barak Valley are mainly traders in betel nuts and leaves, ginger and turmeric. They are Christians and celebrate all the Christian festivals such as Christmas, Easter and New Year. The Khasis have matrilineal family and the youngest daughter (Ka Khudduh) inherits the mother's property but she cannot dispose of the property without the consent of the maternal uncle or brothers. After marriage the son-in-law resides with the wife's family but with full dignity and respect and he earns on his own and the son-in-law's personal income is called Kamai Nonkhynraw. His earning for his parents family is called Kamai ung kur.The female Khasis dress themselves in Jainseim, two-piece material pinned at the shoulder and a tapmakhlieh or shawl. The males have a traditional dress of turban as head dress and a sheet of silk or a fringed jacket over his shoulder and strips of cloth either of cotton or of silk for the loins; of course, nowadays most of the Khasi men wear pants, shirts and coats. There is no caste system among the Khasi but there are clans, and marriage is not permitted within the same clan.The Khasis in the past worshipped the objects of nature, and snake worship was very significant among them. They also honoured and worshipped the spirit of their ancestors. The *Behdiengkhlam* festival is celebrated to drive away evil spirits and bad luck from the village. At the demise of any family member, the corpse is usually kept unburied for three days during which family and friends come to share the grief.The members of the locality also take part in the cremation or burial of the body and, later on, everybody is offered food and drinks. After their conversion to Christianity, most of the traditional practices have been given up. They usually solemnise marraige in churches. The Khasis are fond of meat, fish and wine. They also chew raw betel nuts as the Assamese do and it is called *kwai*. Rice is their main food. The Khasis of Barak Valley practice terrace cultivation. They grow and trade in many fruits and vegetables like potato, cabbage, betel leaves, banana, orange, pineapple etc.The Khasis have their own local governing body which takes important

decisions.The *Shad Shuk Mynsiem* is a harvest thanks-giving festival celebrated for three consecutive days admist songs, dances and merry-making.*Wangala* is a special harvest dance performed on such occasions. The male Khasis also perform the *Girika* dance which is a war dance. Dancing is accompanied with various musical instruments and drums like hornpipe, bamgi, gong, pipe harp called *Ka Duitara* etc (Gordon 1973; Phanbuh 2008; Men & Sawian 2012).

The Reangs

The Reangs, a sub- tribe of the Tripuri clan (Tippera), lives in the hills near Patherkandi Police Stations at Karimganj and also near Lala and Katlicherra police stations in Hailakandi. The Reangs belong to the Tibbeto- Barman racial stock. They are broadly divided into two clans; namely, the *Mhual Sui* clan and *Maska* clan. Their dialect is *Belang*; however, while living in close contact with the Bengalis, their language is influenced greatly by Bengali language. The Reangs live in villages, each headed by a chief known as Choudhury. There are several other headmen under him who are called Karbari. A Karbari is, in fact, the administrator who is assisted in his work by a council represented by all sections of the community. The Choudhury is the president of the village council.The most important festival of the Reangs is *Baisei*, a spring festival which is similar to Bengali New Year celebrated on first day of Baisakh. Just like the Bengali Hindus they wear new clothes as well as sing, dance and eat rice cakes and meat. They also take rice beer or vodka .There is other festivals and ceremonies like *Basi Puja* where they drink Ara, which is prepared specially for the occasion. Their *Kital Raibese Khuima* and *Sakcha Ma Bai Maw* are the dances performed only by the women whereas the *Zara Ri Jhem* is a dance where both male and female dance together. The Reangs are pagans who worship the nature. They have been influenced by the Hindus and therefore they also worship the God Shiva and the Goddess Kali. They also worship the evil spirits like *Matai Katar*. The Reangs believe in animal sacrifice. The chief occupation of the Reangs is agriculture. They are economically backward, for most of their lands were confisticated by the government and the Muslim emigrants also snatched away their lands (Chatterjee 2000).

The Tea Tribes

The tea tribes comprise folks from different regions of India, yet they are collectively dealt with as tea-folks of Barak Valley. In 1856, Barsangan became the pioneer tea garden in Cachar and gradually tea industry made a remarkable progress.There are 99 registered tea gardens in Barak Valley,56 in Cachar district, 24 in Karimganj district and19 in Hailakandi district.The Grand area under the tea gardens in Barak Valley is 97762.47 out of which the total area under tea cultivation is 36412.18 hectares (Tea Board of India 2011) .Tea industry created the need of inducting labourers from outside the State as the indigenous people were reluctant to work in the tea plantations. The British planters pooled in labourers from other parts of the country, mostly tribals, from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Bengal and Madras to work in the tea gardens. The tea garden community constituted an ethnic, linguistic, religious and socio- cultural group, unique by itself (Bhattacharjee 1977). The culture of the indentured labourers from various parts of India in the tea gardens is a class apart. It is an ethnic fabric of varied cultural, linguistic and ethnic heritage. Different groups were recruited from different places, e.g., the Munda and the Gonds from Bihar; Santhal, Tanti and the Bhumij from Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, the Khond from Andhra Pradesh, and the Boya from Tamil Nadu (Raha 1989: 38). These independent tribes of the tea gardens combined together to form a common work culture have gradually developed a common language called the *Bagani Language*, which is also referred to as *Sadri* in some places (Paul 2007), it is a mosaic language of the different ethnic groups with different cultural moorings enabling them to communicate in a diverse lingual and cultural setting.

There are different communities in the tea gardens of the valley but in some gardens certain tribes dominate numerically and culturally. The Bengali speaking people who are better known as Burdwanis predominate in Borthal, Labac, Lalong, Thailu, Binnakandi, Pallorbond, Nutan Kashipur, Pathicherra, Matrycherra, Coomergram, Koomber, Nichthal, Rosekandi, Urrunabund or Arunabond, Dolugram, Rahaman Nagar, Poloi, Manik Nagar, Durganagar, Promodnagar, Chandighat, Nagar Tea Estates. The people have the titles such as

Chasa, Ghasi, Das, Bauri, Ree, Kalindi, Proja, Bhagati, Karmakar, Bakti, Turi, Malpahari, Baraik, Tantubai Mirdha, Bhumij, Teli, and Lodhi (Kumar 2006). The Bengali speaking people of Cachar do not treat the immigrant Bengali speaking as part of their culture and language. The Adivasis predominate in Boali Tea Estate, Dolu, Motinagar, Bortal, Dayapur, Mazirgram, Bagarkuna, Digurkhal, Matrycherra, Urrunabund, Dolugram, Arkatipur, Lalbagh, Rampur, Nisthal, Bheel, Lediacherra Medley, Pathni, Chankhira, Lalkhira, Longai, Champabari, Dharamkhal, Koyah, Rukni, Bag-o-Bahar, Larsingah, Borosingah, Pangram etc. They are ethnically branded as Munda, Santhal, Oraon, Ho, Kol, Bhil, Panika, Gond, Akuwra, Savara, Ghatwar, Bhumij and Kheria. Within their respective tribe they speak their mother tongue such as Munda, Ho, Farsi and Santhali language (Kumar 2006).There are some Hindusthani Muslims and Hindus belonging to the Hindi speaking community. They mostly predominate in Binakandi, Dewan, Pallorbond, Borthol, Baladhon, Lediacherra, Rosekandi, Elanpur, Barajalinga, Westjalinga, Silcoorie, Borakhai, Isabheel, Bubrighat, Ramkrishna, Hathicherra, Chandipur, Lalamukh, Lalacherra, Aenakhall, Bariknagar, Derby, Palloi, Bhaskhal, Rukni, Bhubandor, Thailu, Jalalpur Tea Estate etc. The Hindustani Muslims are also called Julahas whose occupation was weaving but now-a-days they do not weave. They used to do tailoring and were called *Khalifa* or *Darji* who were brought to the tea estates from Giridhi and Taranari village of Bihar as labourers (Singh 2003:315). There are a few Christians in Dewan, Dolu, Rampur and Koomber Tea Estate. Their population is very less. There are a few people from Nepal in Changduar and out-garden of Ratanpur Tea Estate. There are also Oriya groups of labourers. They are titled as Tanti, Nayak, Jena, Mishra, Telipathar, Panda, Kalindi, Patro, Moyra and Keaf. There is a large number of Oriyas in almost all the gardens, especially Bajrangpur Tea Estate, Ratanpur, Ichacherra, Champabari, Koyah, Ramchandi, Longai , Chankhira, Dwarbond and Dewan Tea Estate. In the Chandipur Garden, Kunchunpur, Adamtilla, Lalkhira, Longai, Dwarbond etc. there are the Madrasi people titled as Telangana, Naidu, Mal, Salia, Malo and Madrasi. They mostly speak in Telegu amongst themselves. There is a large number of migrated populace from U.P., M.P., Jharkhand and Bihar, comprising Goala, Dhobi, Singh,

Pasi, Kurmi, Koiri, Rabidas, Baroi, Bhar, Rajbhar, Bind, Nunia, Gareri, Musher and Dusadh. These people are Hindi speaking and more popularly speak the Bhojpuri language. The entire workers' community consisted of different castes and the work was distributed according to their caste. Each caste had its traditional job. Once these people came down to the gardens they were employed accordingly. The Gaola (Ahir/Yadav), the Brahmins, the Kumars who later on adopted the title of Prajapati and Kohar consider themselves as descendents of the Lord Brahma. Traditionally they were potters making vessels out of clay. Then, there were blacksmiths titled as Lohar and Karmakar; the Goldsmiths titled Sonar and Paddor who now-a-days use the title Verma. The Sweeper or Mathar from Bihar especially titled Basphor were primarily employed as Scavengers; they were also skilled in making bamboo and cane baskets, mats, fans etc. The Dusads are Scheduled Caste, who believed to be ancestors of Rahu; they eat and drink during Lunar and Solar eclipses which is otherwise not allowed. These people are not allowed to worship or perform any rites. They were traditionally given the right to worship only the Dih god under a tree outside the village. There is no particular image of the Dih god and they offer wine and meat, especially chicken to the god yet due to Sanskritisation some of them use Kumar as their title and also read the Gita in community celebrations. The Dhobis are considered to be of low caste amongst the Hindus. The Dhobis are believed to have descended from Neta, the heavenly washerwoman. The Kahars were people who carried water for the people and were the common paniwallahs. The people of Barai caste amongst the immigrants were known as wood cutters. They were assigned the task of sawing wood, most of them were carpenters. There are Muslims mostly Hindustani or Bihari Muslims who use titles like Miah, Sha, Khan, Ali and Sheikh. The Sha belongs to the beggar community; they accept alms from others. These Hindustani Muslims as already mentioned are known as Jullahas (Bordoloi 2003).

Briefly, the tea garden immigrant labourers consist of different castes, creeds and languages but in the tea garden setting they acquired a new nomenclature the Tea and Ex-Tea Tribes living in unity amidst diversity (Sengupta 2009). In respect of the three states in eastern India-Orissa, Bihar and

West Bengal, there are nearly one hundred tribal groups. In Orissa alone there are sixty two groups (Mahapatra 1992) but the tea tribes of Barak Valley constitute of few tribes compared to their home states from where they were indentured or migrated.

The Folk Culture of the Tea Gardens

The tea garden folks like any other folks have their own distinct culture. Some of their distinct cultural features are discussed here:

Religion

Religion in a more specific way has been playing a vital role in the social life of the tea garden people. As an important aspect of culture it is indispensably associated with the socio-cultural life of the people. Every human society has belief in some supernatural entities or supernatural power which is termed differently and the expression of established faith is given through various rituals, practices, ceremonies including magic or occultism or tantricism which may provide a sense of security in crisis when one is thrown against the forces lying beyond human beings. The tea garden workers though alienated from their ancestral homes still follow their religion and adhere to the cultural practices of their forefathers. Here, it can be said that the younger generations do not have taste, preference or knowledge of their religious and cultural practices as such, it is fast vanishing. There are about 98% Hindus, barely 1% Christians, and less than 1% Muslims (Singh 2006). This is an evidence that the British planters were not interested in buying the souls of the labourers they were more commercial in their outlook. They left the migrants on their own, to their faiths and practices.

The Hindus worship various gods such as Durga, Kali, Shiva, Chattmaiya, Jagannath, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Krishna, Goverdhan, The Sun, The Moon and The Earth, snakes, tigers and various deities of the forests and also venerate Sitala, the goddess of various diseases like Sitala.The tribes have their own deities like Sing Bonga and Barpahari of the Mundas, the Santals worship the Marang Buru and the Oraons worship the Dangri Nad and believe that Dharmesh is the creator of the Universe.They perform special community rites in the Sarna

Dharma, sacred grove of the community and on every social and religious ceremony they invoke the blessings of Orabonga,the ancestral spirits.The Mundas worship the Hatu Bongako and the Oraons worship the Chala Pachcho which are their village deities. Their only visible objects of worship are stones, wooden posts or a lump of earth.

The Muslims celebrate *Mohurum*, *Id*, *Tajia* and *Bakhri Id.* It may be mentioned here that during Bakri Id, the Muslims are not allowed to slaughter cows, so, they celebrate Bakri Id with chicken and mutton. There are few mosques and churches in those tea gardens where there are Muslims and Christians.

The Christians celebrate Christ the King Feast (last Sunday of the ordinary year), Christmas, Ash Wednesday (Lenten season), Palm Sunday,Good Friday, Easter, also hold masses on Sundays .They solemnize seven sacraments namely, Baptism, Holy Communion, Confirmation, marriage etc. in the Churches. Advent (liturgical New Year), Confession, Saints days (feast days) are held only in Catholic Churches in the tea gardens.

Festivals

The tea-garden culture provides a panorama of colourful festivals varying from community to community and area to area. Inspite of their dire poverty the folks try to preserve their culture through the performance of varied festivals.

Durga Puja is celebrated in all the tea gardens of the valley where people of all communities participate and as in other parts, it is celebrated for four days. Brahmin Priests are invited to perform the Puja. During the Puja the traditional musicians specially drummers from the Mirda community play their drums.The festival is special for the tea workers as they receive their bonus at that time from which they contribute for the celebration and also buy clothes for themselves and their children.On the fourth day, they visit the river banks for immersion of the idol and nowadays the women folks smear vermillion on each others face like the people of the main stream.Earlier all the tea gardens used to organise Jatras (folk theatres) from the commencement of Durga Puja up to Diwali but nowadays they invite orchestras or watch television sitting in their homes or in the community

halls. Kali Puja is also celebrated in most of the gardens now. Of course the Santals worship the Goddess on the Sora Sohrae which is held for three days. The Oriyas worship Chandi another form of Goddess of Kali.

Tusu Puja is one of the most popular festivals of the Burdwanis. *Tusu* is performed in the month of January, i.e. *Posh* in Bengali. A small variety of dull violet-coloured flowers bloom in bunches on small delicate plants in the month of January. The unmarried women make a small hut with bamboo or sticks of Tusu flower, place some flowers in it and carry it on their head to place it in a sacred corner of the compound where they light candles, camphors and burn incense offer fruits and sweets and sing Tusu songs are sung invoking the Goddess Lakshmi to bless the Tusu maiden with a good and loving husband like Shiva. Prayers and rituals are practised and songs are sung only at night. Nowadays, the hut is made and decorated in a refined manner and idols are also made. The particular variety of Tusu flower blooms till Sankranti, the harvest festival. After a month-long invocation with songs and ceremonies the Tusu hut is finally immersed in a river or stream on the day of Sankranti (13/14 January) (Ghoshal 2006).

Karam Puja was originally celebrated by the Mirzas. Nowadays, it is celebrated even by Gonds, Binjhwars, Monjhwars and Oraons. This is celebrated in the month of August-September with great pomp and full of amusement. The themes of the songs are mostly sexual. They worship the Kalmi branch which is wrapped up in new clothes and at the end of the worship, the men and women drink and dance together to the same tune, to ward off all evil spirits and receive the blessing of Karam especially unmarried girls, married women without children pray to be blessed with children.

Shrikam, Raghubir and Gramdevta Pujas are performed in the month of Ashar (June-July) by the people of Mirza community. These pujas involve animal sacrifice. The Mirzas cannot get their children married off without performing these rites. (Source: Hariprasad Dhobi, Dewan Tea Estate, retired headmaster of Dewan School).

Gramdevta Puja is celebrated in all the tea gardens in the month of May. The people collect money both from the labour lines as well as the managerials and offer fruits and whatever *prasad* (offerings) is possible and every evening they perform *namkirtans* (singing chants) in a Radha-Krishna temple for fourteen days. On the fifteenth day they erect red flags or *Jhandas* outside the garden area by cordoning off the garden to protect it from evil spirits, diseases as well as all kinds of natural calamities. People from all communities take part in it and no one is allowed to wear new clothes during the Puja.Traditionally people from other villages were restricted to enter the village where the puja was organized but nowadays this is not possible. (Source Borakhai tea garden Bodhu Bhakti).In Dolu Tea Estate, the manager and his family were found to participate in the function. The Mundas and the Oraons have their own village deities and spirits namely Hatu Bongako and Chala Pachcho respectively whom they worship for the welfare and protection of the village.

Dural Puja is usually celebrated by the Khols. They dig a tunnel and light fire on it and walk over the burning fire to prove their purity and chastity and also to appease the gods and make penance for their unknown sins.

Maha Shakti Puja is performed by the Santhals, whereby they heat up an iron rod and hit themselves with it, trying to cleanse their sins. This is an act of penance and sacrifice for the common welfare. (Source: Arati Mura Nisthal tea garden).

Sohrae is celebrated in the month of October –November by the Mundas It is a harvest festival. They drink, dance, sing and celebrate the occasion. Threshing and cleaning of the paddy starts only after the villagers have worshiped at the Jaherthan and have offered sacrifice to the Sohrae and Marang Buru, their God.All kind of alliance even licentiousness is accepted during this festival.

Sora Sohrae is celebrated by the Santhals and on that ocassion their cattle are worshipped.They clean the cattle shed, bathe the cattle and offer rice to them. They even smear the horns with oil and vermilion and light up the cattle

shed the whole night. On the second day, they worship the Goddess Kali but no idol is made and a stone is usually used as a symbol of Kali (Mahapatra 1992).

Sarhul is another important festival of the Mundas which is celebrated in the month of March-April; it is a festival of flowers when Sal (Shorea robusta) flowers are offered. (Source: Arati Mura Nisthal tea garden) .

Satbhain Than Puja is performed in the month of April. Seven Siva lingas are made in the name of the seven manifestations of Ma Durga and are worshipped to appease Lord Shiva (from Kathal tea garden co -ordinators).

Parad Parav festival is celebrated annually on Bengali New Year's Day when a ceremonial hunting expedition is undertaken with dogs. This is prevalent in gardens like Ratanpur Tea Estate, Kunchunporc, Nisthal, Koyah, Pathni, etc. They hunt down rabbits, wild hens, pigs etc. Previously they used to hunt wild boars and deer, but nowadays they hunt small game birds (source: Hariprasad Dhobi Dewan Tea Estate, retired headmaster of Dewan School).

Phalupabhas is the practice of abstaining from cooked food the day before Charak Puja. The devotees can take only fruits once a day. On the day of Charak Puja they go fasting for the whole day and do not drink even a drop of water. In the evening they offer Puja in the temple of Lord Shiva.The votaries' fall flat on their stomachs and crawl up to the temple to offer their prayers. Nowadays, many Kaibarta families have settled in the vicinity of the tea gardens and they perform the Charak Puja and some of the tea garden labourers also join in and even participate in the *Charak Dance* in order to earn money (details collected from Joydrath Goala of Rosekandi tea garden).

Ratha Yatra is celebrated in the tea gardens where Oriyas are in majority, they are devotees of Lord Jagannath who make the holy chariot and pull it up to the temple. Bhajanmalas and kirtans are sung (Barsangan Tea Estate).

Shitala Puja is celebrated in the month of January-February. It is performed within the village under a peepal tree, and in the some of the gardens there are special temples for Shitala Mai. The main purpose of this puja is to save the garden from the scourge of epidemics like cholera, small-pox and chicken-

pox. Goats, fowls and pigeons are offered sacrifices. White flowers are offered to the diety.

Fagua or Holi is an important festival of the tea garden people. Fagua is celebrated by all the communities and sometimes it lasts for a week. It is celebrated in a most colourful manner. Both male and female join in the merry making and dancing. The Santhals perform Jhumur and the Bhojpuris and Oriyas perform Dandia dance or Katinach while celebrating Holi. They drink local home made wine which they refer to as laupani, handi or haria (Bharati Santal,a worker of Nisthal Tea Garden).

Manasa Puja is performed mostly by the village medical men. They try to appease the goddess of snakes and pray to her to spare them from her wrath. Animal sacrifices are made and along with songs Ojah nitya (dance performed by snake charmers) is also performed.The Panika who have migrated from Madhya Pradesh do not take help of the Brahmins and they perform all their rites on their own. They make small images of animals like cows and pigeons with flour and offer pindas (small balls made of cooked rice). These idols of animals are made with atta (wheat flour) (Binod Mirdha a folksinger of Labac tea garden).

Baghut Puja is performed by the people of the Mal community.It is also known as Bagh Puja (Tiger worship) and is performed in the forest the day after Sankranti (agricultural festival).White flowers, white hen and fruits are offered to the deity .She is worshipped only by the males.The hen is sacrificed and after the rituals the hen is cooked and eaten in the forest itself, it is not shared with the family members.(Source:Tanu Mal, a 63 yrs priest from Silcoorie tea garden who performs the puja himself).

Gandeshwari Puja is worshipping of the Shakti .Tanu Mal performs this puja along with Sitali Puja .It is held for three days just like Durga Puja.The first day is known as Choto Banan, the second day is known as Boro Banan and on the third day the puja is performed when 50 to 60 pigeons, 4 to 5 goats ,5 to 6 hens are sacrificed and hundreds of people come to see the puja.The villagers believe that if the puja is not performed people of the tea garden suffer from measels and

diarreohea and get affected by all other fatal diseases. (Source: Tanu Mal, a 63 yrs priest from Silcoorie tea garden who performs the puja himself).

Birth Ceremonies

Every community living in the tea gardens, whether the Hindus, the Muslims, the Christians and the Adivasis celebrate the birth of a child in the family. The Hindus have a naming ceremony either on the sixth day or after twenty one days and some perform it after a month which is known as Namkaran.The Santals call this naming ceremony as Narta which is celebrated on the ninth day and the rituals are done by their community headman (Manji) amidst dancing, singing and merrying making.The women belonging to low caste like the Dom or the sweeper caste usually act as midwife who attains a very special position at such times and is handsomely rewarded with clothes and money.The Bhojpuris offer her vegetables and rice also and the midwife dances and sings in front of the house of the new born asking for clothes and money. Traditionally the umbilical cord used to be cut by a thin piece of bamboo or a copper coin specially designed for the purpose but now in case of home deliveries they use blades. Ofcourse it needs to be mentioned here that almost all the women of the tea gardens visit the hospitals for delivery now as they get money from the government as post- natal benefits.

Marriages

Different communities of the tea gardens of Barak Valley have their own marriage ceremony which has been imbibed traditionally.

The Oraons perform their marriage ceremony early in the morning before sunrise. They have a strange practice in which both the parties to the marriage hit each other with broom sticks.

The Santhals also have their own marriage rites like welcoming the bridegroom with new clothes (*Horo Chinnha*) singing songs.The Majhi (headman) is the most respected person at the time of marriage, his feet is washed and is offered food before everybody else.The Santhals like the Mundas consider the calling of deer, Pio-bird, the barking of dogs and seeing of a woodcutter as an

ill omen at the time of marriage. Traditonally they never accepted their daughters marrying outside their tribes and they used to perform the funeral rites of the erring daughter and never allowed her to enter their homes but nowadays they have become less rigid and accept the marriage once the couple pays the penalty.Widow re-marriage is allowed only after their social community gives the permission (Bharati Santal of Nisthal Tea Garden).

The Madrasi girls have to wear gold nose rings on both noses when the boy's party comes to select the bride. They have a special preference for mango leaves which they consider to be sacred and thus decorate the whole house with them.The turmeric and smearing ceremony is known as Nagalu which is performed in both the bride's as well as the groom's house.The maternal uncle plays a crucial role at the time of marriage.At the time of marriage the bride sits inside a basket and the maternal carries her to the arena.Before the commencement of the wedding the family deities are worshipped and Devi Puja is done amidst a lot of songs and dances(Sangeeta Madrasi, a student of Longai Tea Garden, Karimganj) .

The Chasas from Orissa who are mainly agriculturists make the *chowra (Canopy)* more commonly known as *kunja* and place an *ish* (plough) in the centre and both the bride and bridegroom sit facing each other and the marriage is solemnized (Devaki Tanti, a worker of Lalcherra Tea Garden ,Hailakandi).

The Tanti, an Oriya community, takes the help of a barber instead of a Brahmin to perform the puja just before marriage. The Napith (Barber) and the Dhobi (Washerman) have a very significant social value as without them any social function cannot be conducted. So if any family hurts the sentiment of the Napith and Dhobi, they threaten of Napith and Dhobi bandh (boycott) (Pradip Tanti, President Goan Panchayat Koomber Tea Estate).

The Turias who are titled as Rabidas now play the Turia danga, a drum like instrument, and sing to its tune throughout the night. The community has a special marriage custom in which the bride's party shoots an arrow and the bridegroom or his men have to find out the arrow, if he is successful in procuring it the girl's party surrenders before the man and the marriage is solemnized.

The Rikhiasans receive the bridegroom and his men with the beating of their traditional drum (*Mridanga)*. Before the marriage a special sacrificial ritual is performed where they sacrifice a boar. The Gaon Burra or Choudhury is all in all who has to give his consent. Cross-community marriage entails threats, punishment and negotiations and such cultural disorder is settled by the *Gaon Burra* (village headman) (Santosh Akura, Bag-o-bahar Tea Garden).

There are two communities of the Bauris; namely, Thetulia and Goboria. The Thetulia are considered to be of higher caste than the Goboria. Tilak is the first step to their marriage where clothes like dhotis and sarees are exchanged between the bride and bridegroom at the gate. These people believe that the barking of dogs at the time of marriage is an ill omen. If any dog barks at the time of marriage, the ceremony has to be stopped (Binod Mirdha, a 75yrs old man of Dewan Tea Estate) .The Bagdis and Bauris of Bengal are married under an arbour made of branches of the Sal tree (Shorea robusta)(Gandhi 2000).

The labour populace of Mirda, Karmakar and Mal community live together, procreate children and then get married. They marry under an umbrella and they use the jazh as musical instrument (Binod Mirdha).

The Bhojpuris have numerous rites like *tilak, haldi*, kissing, *mehandi* and vermillion ceremony, *kuri bidai* and *phira*.The Bengalis perform the same marriage rituals as all other Bengali people in the valley. The Muslims perform concensus marriage (*Nika)* in front of the Qazi where the bride has to give her approval for acceptance of the man. The father of the bride then formally announces the handing over of his daughter to the bridegroom which is known as *kanya dhan* similar to the Hindus and gifts are exchanged between both the parties. Then feasting takes place and the bride is bid farewell amidst songs and dances. Polygamy is not permitted amongst the caste Hindus and is practiced mainly among the Muslims; Ghonds and Baiga, and widow remarriage is also recognized especially among the Christians. Of course most of the families practice monogamy nowadays Shiv Kumar, Borakhai Tea Garden).

Deaths and Funeral

Funerals are commemorated with great emotion and sometimes in a weird manner.The caste Hindus cremate the dead whereas the Muslims, Christians and most of the Adivasis bury the dead bodies. In almost all the tea gardens there is separate land allocated for performing the last rites of the deceased. Amongst the Mundas commemorative tombstones are erected only in case of males in the burial places (*Sasandari)* and ossuary *(kundi)* is also made only for the males. Some of the people even cremate the dead near the river banks or deep in the forest areas. There are some of the tribes who perform special rites on the demise of a person from their own community. The women of the Oraon community hold a special funeral ceremony and lead a mourning procession to the river ghat wailing in cadence and gliding mysteriously. The entire atmosphere fills with an eerie feeling. On reaching the ghat, they bathe and then regain their normalcy as the weird lamentation stops all of a sudden and then they come back silently and go back to their homes (Pinky Munda, Rukni Tea Garden) .

The tea garden populace of Barak Valley is less modern as compared to the people living in the urban areas as they live far from the cities and are quite removed from all those seats of learning and intellect, yet they are quite happy with their life in spite of all their inconveniences and hardships. They are quite content and relaxed and often cheerful and hilarious. Carnivalism is a part of their life and the various cultural and customary rituals and practices are integrated in lives. Money or no-money they are happy-go-lucky with no tension and are free from overreaching ambition.

Dance, Music and Musical Instruments

Dancing in colorful attires amongst the greenary of the tea gardens is common. Despite poverty and exploitation the tea folks have a zest for life. Almost on all occasions they celebrate with dance. Jhumur, Kati or Dandi dance are common. Songs are sung on almost all occasions relating to different aspects of life from birth to death. Songs are sung during birth, marriage, funeral etc. Tusu and Karma Puja songs, Chatta Puja songs, Manasha Puja songs, Holi songs are main festival songs.

Tusu is an important festival which is celebrated in the month of December –January. The festival is observed mainly by females and Tusu-adarani songs, jagarani songs, Tusu-ghumuni songs. Tusu-bibah, bar- bisara, Tusu-dula, Tusu-bahirkara, Tusu- Jatra and Tusu-bhasani songs are sung by women accompanied by the instruments namely Dhol, Khol, Tal, Dhuluki etc. which are played by male counterparts. Kati or Danda dance is usually performed during Dol-Jatra. Other dances of the tea-folks are *Jahar-nach, Dasai-nach, Pakh-Khol nach, Natuwa-nach* etc. Musical instruments usually used by these tribes are Madal, Dhumsa, Nagar, Dhak, Dhol Timki, Nishān, Daphta, Vimsa, Makati, Jhaj, Kartal, Ghungur, Pairi, Jhutia, Kathi or Danda, Danshi, Pepti, Kaliya or Mahari, Shāhnai, Madanbher, Banam, Bung, Kendora, Chimta etc. (Borthakur 2003:50). Musical instruments, songs and dances add exquisite colour and gaiety to the various festivities of the tea folks.

Dress

Dress of the tea garden people is simple. Men wear dhoti, panjabi and turban on special occasions, otherwise, they prefer wearing shirts, pants and they often roam about in gamchas (light hand made towels) and women most often wear sarees; usually they wear the sarees above the ankles without pleats they simply wrap it up. The women sometimes wear ghagra and full-sleeve choli and a chhadar. The women are fond of tying up their hair with multi-colourd ribbons and colour their lips and make-up their eyes with surma or kajal.The present generation wear all kinds of modern dresses which conforms to a cosmopolitan change. The Christians are more refined the prefer wearing shirts and pants on all occasions and both men and women have special dress code when they go to Church. In Church they usually wear black pant and white shirt and women wear blue saree and blue blouse. Both men and women wear the Holy Cross on chains of various metals or beads dangling from their necks.

Food

Food of the tea garden workers usually consists of rice or roti. These people prefer rice or flattened rice (chira) with red tea .They drink rice beer and are fond of meat, eggs and fish. Fish is often caught from running streams, ponds

and rivers and animals are hunted down for meat.The women workers of the tea gardens before going for work *(kamjari)* take rice or chira (beaten rice) with red tea and a pinch of salt.They prefer to drink boiled water and they usually put some green tea leaves while boiling the water. The women of some of the gardens send their children out for catching small variety of fishes from running streams or rivers and rarely big varieties are consumed. They even collect edible stems, wild potatoes, roots and leaves which they cook for meals apart from vegetables. Meat is a special item on festive ocassions especially during Durga Puja (Pandey 2012).The Bhojpuris prefer Sattu because it is healthy and easy to take; moreover, they get more energy from it and it saves them from the trouble of burning fuel.Yet, nowadays, they take variety of cosmopolitan food.

Games and Sports

While discussing games and sports of the people living in the tea gardens it has to be mentioned that the people are economically disadvantaged and thus cannot afford to spend money in games and sports. Hence, play games which do not involve money. Sri Ashok Verma, who hails from the tea garden in his article 'Cha Baganer Khela Dula' published in Sonali Suprabhat magazine,dated,the 27,April,2003, gives a detailed description of the games and sports of the tea garden people.He tells how football was introduced by the British Sahebs and often they themselves took part in it. Even today football tournament is hoisted amongst different gardens.Other sports are hockey, badminton, carom and cricket which are played by the boys. In the past hockey sticks were made out of crude branches of trees, nowadays the garden welfare committee provides money for the games and sports. Traditional games like Kabadi, Wrestling, Hide and seek, Chuur, Uraphandna, Nandai, Lokochuri, Kuth-Kuth, Bandi, Marbles, Chubi and Lattim Bhujoini are played out of doors. Indoor games like Cards, Nakori, Sulakori, Naguti, Shulagutti, Satghariyia, Duspachish and Taker Khela. Dice playing is still prevalent and they play such games deep inside the gardens as gambling is illegal (it was noticed in course of field visits) yet favourite amongst the tea garden people. Taker Khela is a money game which is played by the women folks. A group of ten to twenty women collect money from the members and draw lottery to give the money to the lucky winner. Every week one of the

members get the money and rotation goes on till all the members get it and then, the game starts again. Cock fighting, hunting and kite flying are other past time games although cock fighting and hunting is almost extinct.Holi is a special occasion when the tribes of the tea gardens go for out for hunting but nowadays due to prohibition on hunting they hunt small game birds and fowls.

Weapons

Many traditional weapons and tools are used for hunting and self defense and also during ceremonies by the tea garden tribes like, tarwal, bow & arrow, kare, balum, bhujali, dao, kachi, jhata, farsa, catapult and fand are used for hunting birds and small animals and defending themselves from wild animals and enemies. At time of marriages of the Santals, Mundas and Orangs the bride groom uses bow and arrow for a special rite of shooting at the water before the bride takes her bath and then shoots arrows all the way up to the house while the bride picks it up with her feet.Farsa is also used during marriages and funerals to make marks on the water before filling water for ceremonial rites. (Maity 1996; Bhattarcharjee1977; Kumar 2006; Culshaw 2004; Bhattarcharje 2004; Chatterjee 2000; Barman 2009; Koiri 2010).

Thus the cultural moorings of the tea garden people of Barak Valley are varied and interesting and throw light on the fact that the tea garden villages are much like any other tribal village in the state with gamut of folk culture rich in tradition and heritage worth preserving. The communities living in Barak Valley have their own traditions and customs, rituals and rites and celebrations and yet there is acculturation amongst them. The process of social change and continuity amongst the different folks of Barak Valley is significant. The tea garden folks are no longer confined within their setting, for many of the tea garden people come to the town for education, jobs, short time trading, socializing etc. There is, thus, a tendency especially amongst the younger generation to follow the behavior and habits of the urban.The social gap between the people of the rural area and the urban people appears to be bridging. People from the urban areas also visit the rural areas for their own political interest and also as government agents for implementation of different projects thus, it brings about contact

leading to social change in the gardens. But here again it can be said that the majority of the tea garden folks work in the organized sector and they are not very much free from the environment of repression. Hence, the scope of change is less as compared to that of town areas. There are a number of educated youths who are employed in the official sector of the tea gardens and also in the urban area. This also helps in acculturation. Just as in the urban areas, so also in the tea gardens the people use mobile phones and many people do have television, radio, scooters and even furniture in their homes. In case of language, the younger generations use more of Hindi and Bengali in their speech than the Bagani language. Even in their festivals and celebrations, they prefer modern Hindi music and songs to their traditional folk songs and music.They wear modern dresses eat varieties of food and are influenced by modernity yet it is certain they follow their traditional religion rites and rituals and at the same the elders still sing and dance in their own traditional manner. The people of the tea gardens of Barak Valley have their own oral literature too which has been taken up in chapter 3 and 4.

In conclusion, it can be said that although the Bengalis are majority in Barak Valley, the region is the home of the different tribes and castes a heterogeneous culture, with a defined sense of collective identity.