CHAPTER 3

CULTURAL ECOLOGY OF THE FISHING COMMUNITIES

This chapter deals with cultural ecology of the three traditional fishing communities of the Barak Valley; viz., Patni, Kaivartya and Mahimal. Each one of the communities is engaged with fishing in the Shonebeel and the Barak river fisheries. In the Shonebeel fishery, they are inhabiting Devadwar, Kalyanpur and Belala. While in the Barak river they are inhabiting Netaji Nagar, Radha Nagar and Balighat respectively. The communities and their cultural ecology have been discussed to understand how the ecological conditions (environment / natural setting and resources) have shaped their culture (way of life) in the Barak Valley, specially under impact of fishing, on the one hand, and how cultural practices and products conceive and modify their environment and occupations. Hence, there is a particular cultural setting of the interactions between the fishing communities and their environment, and the setting determine the nature and range of the interactions. With these views, cultural ecology of the communities is presented in the following discussion.

THE COMMUNITIES

The three communites – Patni, Kaivartya, Mahimal – derived their occupations, lifestyles and social status from the fish resource. In order to understand their cultural ecology the historical origin and interaction pattern of the communities needs to be probed.

The Patni

The word 'Patni' refers to the people coming from Patna. The Patni believe that they moved from Patna (Bihar) to Jaldhup village (Bangladesh) in the 16th century for trading. But in some natural calamity they lost everything and they had to stay permanently in this area. They took up boat sailing for livelihood and have therefore come to be recognized as the boatmen (Majhis) and not as traders. Along with the boat sailing they practised fish catching. In 1874 A.D., the Sylhet district of Bengal was attached with Assam by the British for administration. That time, some Patnis came to Assam. Having developed their expertise in fishing and boat sailing, they inhabited the areas where the fishing opportunities were available. Thus, title 'Patni' seems to be attributed to two reasons. First, as it is believed that they have come from Patna, they are named. Second, after they settled in Bangladesh they gradually took up boat sailing. 'Patni' stands for *par-karani* which means transporting passengers in boats from one side to other side of a river. At that time, they were accorded 'Majhi' title. Soon, in Cachar district, the Patni were awarded Mahishya Das title, After this, they got the right to wear sacred thread. Meanwhile, many of Patnis began to use the titles like Laskar, Bhuiyan, Mazumder, Doloi, Mondal, Purkayastha, Sarkar, etc. During the freedom struggle in 1920s, a Patni freedom fighter, Nirode Bihari Barman, was highly inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's Swadeshi Movement (Das 1996).

The Kaivartya

Kaivartya is the predominant caste inhabiting the beel like areas. Basically they are found in three states; namely, Bihar, West Bengal and Assam. The traditional occupation of this community is fishing. Some

Kaivartyas are agriculturists and they present themselves as agriculturist Kaivartya. There is a strong debate on their social status associated with traditional occupation. In this regard the Mahishya fishermen who became agriculturists claimed a status superior to the Dhibar who continued as fishermen. According to 1931 Census, the agriculturist Kaivartya returned themselves as Mahishya. When the Mahishya Kaivartya distanced themselves from the Dhibar Karivartya in marital relationship, the lattered call themselves Kshatriya Kaivartya to elevate their status (Reseley 1891). The two terms, fishermen and Kaivartya, signify the same. In some regions like Sunderban, they are popularly known as Jaldash. As per the Manu Samhita, the ancient tradition of Kaivartyas, they were boatmen. According to the Brahmma – Baibartya Puran, they descended from the couple of the Kshatriya father and the Sudra mother. Although their origin is contested. It believed that from the very ancient time the Kaivartyas were primarily categorized into three groups; viz., agriculturists Kaivartya (*Chasi*), Fishermen (Dhibar) and Boatman (Patni). However, in many of the traditional texts, it is not clearly mentioned that the Mahishya are the today's agriculturists Kaivartyas because the main occupation of the Mahishya was music and the watch keeping of grains (Risley 1891).

The Kaivartyas are divided into four distinct groups – Uttar Rarri, Dakshin Rarri, Jalio and Tutia. Most of these practise fishing in Chilka lake and live in the nearby villages in Orissa. However, the villagers of Frazerganj and Bokkhali region are used to catch the fish in the sea. The Kaivartya of West Bengal and Assam are catching the fish either in river or in pond. These Kaivartyas by virtue of their tradition are expert fishermen, well acquainted with

the behaviour of fish, tide, water, using of net, etc. It is observed that Kaivartyas of Fulleswar region of Howrah district of West Bengal are not entering into social ties with the fishermen community of Assam. The fishermen of this area belong to Shandilya and Kashyap clans, and patriarchal system. In marriage they avoid mother's brother's daughter (MBD) and Father's sister's daughter (FZD) and descendants of seven generations both from material and paternal sides. Previously, they practised child marriage. Now, the age at marriage has considerably gone up. There is no rule about the dowry in marriage. There is strong solidarity among them. If anybody violates a rule or commits a crime one is punished as per the norms of the caste. The Kaivartyas consider themselves superior to Bagdi, Mahishya, Kalu, Namasudra, etc., but inferior to Nonoshak. The agriculturist Kaivartya, now – a-days hire the services of Brahmans to consider themselves as Mahishya (Risley 1891).

In the eleventh century, during the reign the Mahipal II of Paul Raj, there was a great rebellion popularly known as Kaivartya rebellion in North Bengal, called the land of Barendra. The main leader of this rebellion was Divyak, a Kaivartya. In this rebellion, Mahipal II was defeated by Divyak and finally he became the emperor of the entire Barendra. According to the modern historians such as Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Rai Bahadur, Ramprasad Chandra and Upendra Nath Ghosal, when the people were severely tortured by Mahipal II, Divyak led the common people and was able to throw out the Paul Dynasty and establish a new empire. Divyak organized his empire well and ruled for two generations. Bhim, one of his descendents extended his empire and bought peace in his state. But during the reign of Bhim, one of the descendants of

Mahipal again attacked Barendra and killed Bhim and re-established their dynasty (Risley 1989).

The Kaivartyas, after partition came to India from Bangladesh, (the then East Pakistan) ans searched suitable places where they could continue their traditional occupation of fishing. Their life style was profoundly associated with water and fish. Initially some of them settled in urban areas but they failed to cope with the unfamiliar environment and therefore they had compelled to search again an area to practice their traditional occupation. In course of the search, they reached Barak Valley and they found the beel like water logged areas suitable for their living (Das 1999).

The Mahimal

Mahimals are the Muslim fishermen who occupy a very low social status among the Muslims because they deal with fish. The Muslim's upper strata of such as Khan, Choudhury and Ali do not marry among the Mahimals. The Mahimals observe all the rituals of the Muslim. A few of the Mahimals are coming up socially and economically. For their uplift, they have the Mahimal Welfare Society of Assam (MWSA). Besides, Muslim Federation of Barak Valley (MFBV) is also working for uplift of the community. They are categorized under the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and, now, they are demanding for their status among the Scheduled Castes. In 2008, the Mahimal Welfare Society of Assam (MWSA) demanded development of the areas inhabited by the fishermen community. Their leaders like Musabbir Ali, Haji Nazmul Hussain, Motahir Ali, Junab Ali and others have called for end of the practice of leasing out land for fisheries to those people who are not from this fishing community. They are also demanding below-poverty-line (BPL) cards

for all their families and jobs for unemployed youths under the employment assurance schemes sponsored by the Central Government through Gaon Panchayats. They claim that there are about three lakh Muslim fishermen scattered in the valley and therefore they are demanding reservation of seats in medical, engineering and other educational institutions, a seat in Legislative Assembly of Assam and in government jobs, apart from the status of most Other Backward Class (MOBC) (Bhattacharjee 2008).

HOUSING PATTERN

The Patni generally construct Assam type houses in the western portion of their land. The houses have two doors : one in the front and the other in the backside. The cattle-shed is found in the eastern part and the puja room in the northern part. In front of the puja room, they plant at least one *Tulsi* plant. They organize daily *Hari-Kirtan* called '*Bowla Kirton*'. The following table presents the house types in the two Patni villages under the Shonebeel and the Barak River :

Table 3.1 : House Types of the Patni in the Two Fisheries
(Percentage in parenthesis)

Type of the Houses	*Name of the village*		*Total*
	Devadwar	Netaji Nagar	
Semi-pucca roofed with tin	36 (72)	04 (08)	40 (40)
Kaccha roofed with tin	08 (16)	11 (22)	19 (19)
Mud made house	02 (04)	02 (04)	04 (04)
Kaccha roofed with Thatch	04 (08)	20 (40)	24 (24)
Kaccha roofed with polythene	0	13 (26)	13 (13)
Total	50 (100)	50 (100)	100 (100)

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006.

The table 3.1 reveals that the Patni houses in the two areas reflect economic difference. In Devadwar of Shonebeel they have better houses than in Netaji Nagar. The difference mainly owes to the houses received under the Indira Awas Yojana. In general they have homogeneity in respect of house types in the two villages. All these houses provided under Indira Awas Yojana are semi-pacca houses of 12ft. x 18ft. The mud made houses are small in size and roofed with thatch or *nera* (stalk of the crop).

The house types of the Kaivartya in the two villages are given in the following table :

Table 3.2 : Types of House of the Kaivartya in the Two Fisheries
(Percentage in parenthesis)

Type of the House	*Name of the Village*		*Total*
	Kalyanpur	*Radha Nagar*	
Semi-pucca roofed with tin	16 (32)	21 (42)	37 (37)
Kuccha roofed with tin	10 (20)	13 (26)	23 (23)
Mud house	01 (02)	0 (0)	01 (01)
Kuccha roofed with Thatch	23 (46)	05 (10)	28 (28)
Kuccha roofed with polythene	0	11 (22)	11 (11)
Total	50 (100)	50 (100)	100 (100)

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006.

The table 3.2 reveals that the Kaivartyas of both the fisheries have no much difference of housing pattern. Only 22% people of Radha Nagar are using polythene sheet as roof in their houses. Besides, the rooms and their sizes belonging to *ugar* (warehouse) are also the same as that of the Patni. The houses of the Kaivartya in both the fisheries have atleast two bed rooms and a kitchen. The size of the bed room is very small. Every house has an '*ugar*'. Most of the houses are of 12 ft. x 8 ft. size. Some houses contain '*gola*' (bamboo made long

container where the green rice are kept). Each kitchen contains earthen oven. All the houses contain two doors : one in the front and the other one in the backside. The windows in the houses are very few and small.

The types in the two Mihamal villages have some differences as shown in the following table :

Table 3.3 : Types of House of the Mahimal in the Villages under the two Fisheries

(Percentage in parenthesis)

Type of the House	Name of the Villages		Total
	Belala	Balighat	
Semi pucca roofed with tin	02 (04)	14 (28)	16 (16)
Kuccha roofed with tin	06 (12)	33 (66)	39 (39)
Mud house	06 (12)	0 (0)	06 (06)
Kuccha roofed with Thatch	36 (72)	0 (0)	36 (36)
Kuccha roofed with polythene	0	03 (06)	03 (03)
Total	50 (100)	50 (100)	100 (100)

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006.

The table 3.3 shows that the houses of the Mahimal in the two villages have significant difference of type. The houses in Balighat using tin sheet roof are less than in Belala. In these types the economic difference is perceptible.

The houses in the villages have the doors and windows, mostly made of wood and bamboo or tin sheets which are easily available in their surroundings.

Thus, the housing pattern of the communities is almost the same under the two fisheries. Obviously, some difference of their quality is emerging in the two fisheries. The Mahimal, specially those of Belala seem to be having houses of poor condition. This owes to their poverty and dependence on traditional occupation of fishing. It seems that the poor communities are largely

depending on the local resources in their surrounding environment for housing needs or otherwise. On the whole, their housing pattern is dictated by the environment and the resources in it.

MOVABLE ASSETS

The movable assets owned by the villagers in the Shone beel and Barak river fisheries are radio, television, camera, bi-cycle, boats, tin sheets etc. Some of the villagers are found having mobile sets (cell-phone). The following tables show the movable assets by the three fishing communities of two the fisheries.

Table 3.4 : Movable Assets Owned by the Patnis of the Two Fisheries
(Percentage in parenthesis)

Items	*Name of the Villages*	
	Devadwar	*Netaji Nagar*
Radio	48 (96)	49 (98)
T.V.	05 (10)	09 (18)
Camera	13 (26)	02 (04)
Pump set	01 (02)	07 (14)
Bicycle	15 (30)	41 (82)
Two wheeler	0 (0)	0 (0)
Canoe	50 (100)	12 (24)
Tin sheets	44 (88)	15 (24)
Cell-phone	07 (14)	09 (18)

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006

Table 3.5 : Movable Assets owned by the Kaivartyas in the Two Fisheries
(Percentage in parenthesis)

Items	*Name of the Villages*	
	Kalyanpur	*Radha Nagar*
Radio	50 (100)	36 (72)
T.V.	40 (80)	10 (20)
Camera	40 (80)	24 (48)
Pump set	07 (14)	10 (20)
Bicycle	32 (64)	45 (90)
Two wheeler	03 (06)	09 (18)
Canoe	50 (100)	19 (38)
Tin sheets	26 (52)	34 (68)
Cell-phone	17 (34)	31 (64)

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006

Table 3.6 : Movable Assets Owned by the Mahimals of the Two Fisheries
(Percentage in parenthesis)

Items	*Name of the Villages*	
	Belala	*Balighat*
Radio	42 (84)	26 (52)
T.V.	02 (04)	29 (58)
Camera	07 (14)	17 (34)
Pump set	0 (0)	0 (0)
Bicycle	06 (12)	23 (46)
Two wheeler	0 (0)	15(30)
Canoe	50 (100)	17 (34)
Tin sheets	08 (16)	47 (94)
Cell-phone	03 (06)	39 (78)

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006.

The tables indicate that there is a changing pattern in canoe using in Balighat's Mahimal (34%) because they are now adapting different kinds of occupations. The number of two wheelers are also found (30%) in a good number in Balighat. Briefly, besides the movable assets, the female of Devadwar and Kalyanpur wear gold earrings and *Shaka-shindur* (Conch – Vermillion) if married. A few women are found who wear gold made necklaces. Most of the women wear silver made necklaces and the girls use glass made bangles. A few women are wearing golden ring on their nose. However, in Belala of the Shone beel most of the women wear silver ornaments.

In the Barak River fishery also, the villagers are they wearing the same ornaments as in the Shonebeel. The villagers of Netaji Nagar previously used brass made utensils in their houses. But now they are widely using stainless steel. In Balighat, women are wearing gold and silver ornaments. The villagers have got electricity facility and majority of the houses (58%) have television sets. Radio is almost obsolete. Most of the youths are now using cell-phones. Besides, a good number of two wheelers are also found in the village.

Thus, availability of the basic facility, road, water as well as connectivity with the town does determine the types of their assets also.

HOUSEHOLD ITEMS

The Shonebeel villagers have 2 - 3 sleeping cots one or two wooden chairs, one table, two or three *jalchaki* and four to five *pidis,* made of the locally available woods. The cooking utensils are made of aluminum, stainless steel and clay. In Devadwar and Belala, mostly aluminum utensils are found, although a few of them are now using stainless steel, while in Belala still aluminum utensils are widely used for domestic affairs. But in Kalyanpur, almost all the villagers are using stainless steel. In fact, earthen vessels were widely found a few years ago but all these are being replaced by aluminum and finally by the stainless steel. Earthen as well as steel cup-plates are found both in Kalyanpur and Devadwar. Besides, these utensils, there are found winnowing fans, hand fans, agricultural utensils made of local wood and bamboo. Thus, the materials used for house, furniture, upholdstry and agricultural instruments are obtained from the surrounding of the villages, unhabitated islands and banks of the ponds or the Shonebeel and the Barak river. The roofs of the houses are generally covered with locally available shone, nera, (stalk of the crops), ulu shone etc. (a special type of grass). For trass and beam of the houses, locally available trees or bamboos are used. In Devadwar only 28 households have wooden racks (Alnas) for keeping dress materials. Rest of the households have the racks of locally available bamboo.

In the Barak river fishery, all the villagers are now using stainless steel utensils. For cooking rice, yet *degs* (aluminum made utensils) are widely used. However, more than half the households in Radha Nagar used pressure cooker

for cooking rice. In Balighat also, 24% are using pressure cookers for cooking rice. Distribution of the material possessions of the villagers is given in the following three tables :

Table 3.7 : Material Possession owned by the Patni of the two Fisheries
(Percentage in parenthesis)

Items	*Name of the Village*	
	Devadwar	*Netaji Nagar*
Pressure cooker	01 (02)	02 (04)
Deg	49 (98)	50 (100)
Glass (stainless steel)	35 (70)	31 (62)
Dish (stainless steel)	35 (70)	31 (62)
Glass (Aluminum)	15 (30)	19 (38)
Dish (Aluminum)	15 (30)	19 (38)
Reck (*Alna*) made of wood	22 (44)	18 (36)
Reck (*Alna*) made of Bamboo	28 (56)	32 (64)
Jalchaki / Pidi	50 (100)	50 (100)
Plastic chair / others	0 (0)	02 (04)
Trunk	50 (100)	50 (100)

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006

Table 3.8 : Material Possession owned by the Kaivartya of the Two fisheries
(Percentage in parenthesis)

Items	*Name of the Village*	
	Kalyanpur	*Radha Nagar*
Pressure cooker	04 (08)	26 (52)
Deg	46 (92)	24 (48)
Glass (stainless steel)	46 (92)	24 (48)
Dish (stainless steel)	46 (92)	24 (48)
Glass (Aluminum)	04 (08)	08 (16)
Dish (Aluminum)	04 (08)	08 (16)
Reck (Ulna) made of wood	06 (12)	04 (08)
Reck (Ulna) made of Bamboo	44 (88)	46 (92)
Jalchaki / Pidi	50 (100)	50 (100)
Plastic chair / others	11 (22)	17 (34)
Trunk	50 (100)	50 (100)

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006

Table 3.9 : Material Possession owned by the Mahimals of the Two Fisheries
(Percentage in parenthesis)

Items	Name of the Village	
	Belala	Balighat
Pressure cooker	0	17 (34)
Deg	50 (100)	50 (100)
Glass (stainless steel)	05 (10)	39 (78)
Dish (stainless steel)	05 (10)	39 (78)
Glass (Aluminum)	45 (90)	11 (22)
Dish (Aluminum)	45 (90)	11 (22)
Reck (Ulna) made of wood	41 (82)	0
Reck (Ulna) made of Bamboo	09 (18)	38 (76)
Jalchaki / Pidi	50 (100)	05 (10)
Plastic chair / others	0	37 (74)
Trunk	50 (100)	50 (100)

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006.

The tables reveal that the material possessions in the Shonebeel fishery are much less than those in the Barak river fishery. For keeping drinking water, plastic containers and earthen pots are used by all the villages. Aluminum utensils are now gradually becoming obsolete while stainless steel is entering as an important utensil in all the villages.

DIVISION OF WORK

The division of labour in the three villages; namely, Belala and Kalyanpur of the Shone beel is almost similar. In all the villages, a girl above ten years helps her mother in cooking food, preparing cowdung cakes and doing other domestic works. However, the rate of school going children is found more in Kalyanpur followed by Devadwar and Belala. This is because villagers of Kalyanpur are better off in respect of communication. During the summer, the flood water creates a hindrance in children's school going.

Besides, the schools are also easily available in Kalyanpur in comparison of Devadwar while there is no school in Belala. During the

monsoons a boy of above ten years in the villages goes for fishing with the adult males of the family. The boys are engaged in bailing water from ditches for catching fish. Their catch mainly supplements the domestic consumption. At the age of fifteen years or so, a boy becomes full fledged fishermen.

But recently some changes are observed. The Kaivartya boys of Kalyanpur are mostly going to school in comparison of those from Devadwar during the summer while in the winter both Patnis of Devadwar and the Kaivartyas of Kalyanpur are attending school at Anandapur. However, due to long distance and non-availability of Lower Primary School in the village, most of the children of Belala are not getting even primary education and only a few of the children are coming to high school in Anandapur. The children of Belala, rather, engage themselves in fishing and ferrying. Due to the gradual depletion of the CPR fish the young people of Devadwar and Belala go to town area where they engage in other occupations like rickshaw pulling or wage labour or engage themselves as helpers in shop or in buses or light vehicles. The same scenario is also seen in the Barak river basin villages. The people of Netaji Nagar come to Silchar town and engage them mainly in rickshaw pulling, wage labour while the youngsters of Radha Nagar prefer to engage in goldsmithry in Silchar town area. This is the recent trend that has been observed since last five years. The people of Balighat, on the other hand, are now intending towards the motor garage mechanics or helpers in light vehicles or buses. As there is a good communication between Silchar and Balighat, the women folk of Balighat come everyday to Silchar town and indulge in begging.

Briefly, the nature and distribution of work in the villages is directly related to the environment and the changes taking place in it are reflected in their occupational diversification and changes.

FOOD HABITS

The Patnis in both the fisheries are taking meal (rice) thrice a day by sitting on a *pidi* (on a piece of wooden table which is just one inch above the ground). When somebody visits their house, they offer either *pidi* or *jalchaki* (wooden plank with four legs). Some houses have chairs. Some youngsters like to take their food by sitting on chair and table. But in all social functions, it is mandatory to sit on the ground for taking rice. The same is observed among the Kaivartya and the Mahimal under the two fisheries. However, the Kaivartyas mostly use chairs while the Mahimal put a napkin or a piece of paper on the bed on which they place their dishes (rice) to eat. Thus, the three communities are largely following the traditional way of eating. Yet, a little change is also creeping into their ways of eating.

The Kaivartya and the Patni take rice thrice a day in heavy quantity. The most favourite item is the red chilly powder. Only with the red chilly powder they can consume rice. Wherever they go for marketing, among all the items, most attractive one is red chilly. They also regularly take dry fish or fish and sometimes meat. Moreover, they take locally available medicinal plants such as Thankuni, Aghiajal, Rugunta leafs, etc. as their food items. During winter, when the boro crop is harvested, almost every day they take *koroibhaja* (rice-fry) with tea. Both puffed rice and grind rice are also important food items. The Mahimal also prefer *Koriobhaja* along with tea. They regularly take both fish and dry fish as their daily food and meat occasionally. Both males and females

smoke *bidi*. Most of them are not taking the bidi available in the market. They specially prepare a *bidi* by mixing tobacco dust with line and then rolling up the mixture in a piece of newspaper. While fishing, the adults mostly smoke *ganja* (opium). They also take locally brewed liquor. Women never take *ganja* or liquor but smoking is common among both the males and the females. Recently the consumption of liquor in the young generation is increasing at an alarming rate. The fisherfolk of six villages takes tea irrespective of their males, females, youngsters, adults or old persons.

The Kaivartyas of Kalyanpur and Radha Nagar are mostly the followers of Thakur Anukul Chandra. So, on Friday they take vegetarian food. On the last day of the month of Jaistha (May-June), when the Karma Purush Sankranti is celebrated, all the Hindu people take vegetarian food. Those who go for fasting on this occasion take ground rice, seeds and various types of fruits after breaking the fast. On Kartik Sankranti (the last day of the Kartik month of Bengali calendar) the Patni and the Kaivartya take vegetarian food. Then, on the last day of Chaitra (March – April) also, they take vegetarian food.

Briefly, the environmental conditions, work practices and energy requirement largely determine the way of eating and contents of food among the three communities.

DRESS PATTERN

The Kaivartya and the Patnis are wearing *ganjee* (inner wear for upper portion of the body) and *dhuti* whenever they go out for fishing. *Dhuti* is worn as *loongi*. Some of the fishermen wear *fotua* instead of ganjee as their common dress. Under *dhuti*, they wear undergarment. The fishermen using

mahajal wear the same type of dress for immediate identification of their group members. At home, they wear *dhuti* and *ganjee* while the young generations prefer to wear half-pant at home and jeans and trousers or shirts outside. The old persons prefer to wear *dhuti* and *fotua* (Purkayastha 2000) or *punjabi* along with *ganjee* as inner wears. The women of all the three villages prefer to wear saree. Girls prefer to wear churidars or frocks or tops and scarts. In Belala, the males of the Mahimal wear *loongi* and *punjabi* (a special designed dress for upper portion of the body) or *sherwani* and the women prefer to wear saree. The young males prefer to wear shirt and trousers. The same pattern is found in the Barak river village. Thus, the nature of the work and their environmental conditions play role in determining the dress patterm.

HEALTH AND SANITATION

The overall health condition of the villagers is poor. The Kaivartya of Kalyanpur and the Patni of Devadwar are suffering from gastro-intestine problem by 76% and 70%, tuberculosis by 28% and 20%, Skin diseases by 88% and 68%, ophthalmic by 14% and 10%. Of the female more than 80% are suffering from iron-deficiency diseases (Table No. 3.11). As there is no hospital or better medical facilities, the women at the time of delivery suffer a lot. They completely depend on *dhai* (midwife nurse). Mostly, gynecological problems arise. Most of the villagers go for homeopathic treatment. In emergency, they go to R.M.P. (Registered Medical Practioner). In Belala, 76% peole are suffering from gastro-intenstine problems and 56% from skin diseases. Besides other problems are also found. More than half the villagers are believing in black magic. Generally, all the villagers, except those of Balighat, completely depend upon Homeopathic treatment followed by allopathic treatment. The

villagers of Balighat can easily reach the Silcahr town to take the treatment from Civil hospital. Besides, some allopathic doctors are available in Machimpur, very near to Balighat village. Sometimes, the patients of Balighat purchase allopathic medicine directly from the pharmacy available in Machimpur.

The sanitation problem is found in every village except Radha Nagar. All the villagers of the Shonebeel are hardly conscious about the sanitation. None of the houses in Shonebeel are having a sanitary latrine. Instead, most of the houses have an enclosure outside the house and the excreta is allowed to fall down into the nearby field. They never use the soap to clean the hands, instead they rub their hands with soil to clean them.

Drinking water is one of the factors determining health of the villagers. Sources of drinking water for the villages in the two fishereis are shown below :

Table 3.10 : Sources of Drinking Water in the Villages of the Two Fisheries

Type of wells	Name of Villages and number of Wells or other sources								Grand Total
	Devadwar	Kalyanpur	Belala	Total	Netaji Nagar	Radha Nagar	Balighat	Total	
Ring Well	12	08	00	20	03	00	00	03	23
Kuccha well	00	02	02	04	04	02	01	07	11
Natural Fountain	00	00	00	00	00	01	00	00	01
Total	12	10	02	24	07	03	01	11	35

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 to December 2006

The table reveals that the status of drinking water in Devadwar is much better in Kalyanpur as they take the drinking water from the ring well. The condition of Belala is very poor as there is no good source of drinking water. The table also reveals that in Barak river villages there is no such ring well. However, in Balighat the people are getting the drinking water

supplied by the P.H.E.D. (Public Health Engineering). Besides the wells, the people of Belala are collecting drinking water from the mid portion of the beel. It is the perception that the middle portion of the beel water is free from all sorts of pollutants. The waste materials float and even enter the houses or village premises during the rainy season when the fields are submerged. The open wells of the area are often polluted with all organic matters but the villagers have no option but to drink this water. In Devadwar, the condition of drinking water is much better because the DRDA (District Rural Development Agency) has provided 12 ring wells to the villagers wherefrom they collect drinking water. In Kalyanpur 8 private wells are there. From these wells people are collecting the drinking water.

The animals are also given the same water and when they graze outside they consume water from ditches and streams. The ditches in and around the villages, and even the streams of water stagnated at different places are also contaminated and polluted. Such water is unfit both for human and animal consumption. This water of the Shonebeel except in Devadwar is not pure. In Netaji Nagar, the villagers collect water either from a fountain or from a well. In Radha Nagar and Balighat, the drinking water is supplied by the Public Health Engineering (PHE) Department. Thus, the polluted drinking water leads to create gastro-intenstinal disorders and other water borne diseases. During rainy season they suffer from diaorohea. Thus, incidence of disease is an objective indicator of health. The people in the villages are suffering from various diseases. It is being shown in the following table :

Table 3.11 : Diseases in the Households of the Villages in the two Fisheries
(Percentage in parenthesis)

Type of the Disease	*Number of affected Individuals*								*Grand Total*
	Devadwar	*Kalyanpur*	*Belala*	*Total*	*Netaji Nagar*	*Radha Nagar*	*Balighat*	*Total*	
Alimentary canal diseases	35 (70)	38 (76)	38 (76)	111	34 (68)	34 (68)	26 (52)	94 (45.85)	205 (100)
Tuber Colossi	10 (20)	14 (28)	13 (26)	37	04 (08)	02 (04)	07 (14)	13 (26)	50 (100)
Skin Diseases	34 (68)	44 (88)	28 (56)	106	37 (74)	39 (78)	35 (70)	111 (51.15)	217 (100)
Opthalmic	05 (06)	7 (14)	04 (08)	16	03 (06)	01 (02)	14 (28)	18 (52.94)	34 (100)
Asthma	03 (06)	00	01 (02)	04	02 (04)	01 (02)	00	03 (42.86)	07 (100)
Neuro	02 (04)	01 (02)	00	03	04 (08)	00	02 (04)	06 (66.67)	09 (100)
Artherities	03 (06)	03 (06)	00	06	01 (02)	00	00	01 (14.29)	07 (100)
Others	01 (02)	01 (02)	03 (06)	05	02 (04)	01 (02)	07 (14)	09 (64.29)	14 (100)

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006

The data reveal that in both the fisheries, there prevail mostly alimentary canal diseases followed by skin diseases. Besides, in the beel the patients of arthritis are found more than in the Barak river fishery. One third people in both the fisheries have been attacked by ophthalmic diseases. Thus, the people in the fisheries suffer from various diseases owning to environmental constraints as well as hazards and these affect their health in various ways.

EDUCATION

The overall educational status of the Shone beel is still low. Presently, there are found twelve schools in the area. Devadwar has only one lower primary school; Kalyanpur has two lower primary schools and Belala has no school. Besides lower primary schools, high schools, middle schools are also found in the Shone beel area. The educational status of the Devadwar and Kalyanpur is shown in the following tables :

Table 3.12 : Enrolment and Average Attendance Status of the Students in the Devadwar Schools

(Percentage in parenthesis)

Year	*Number of students enrolled*			*Attendance*					
				Summer			*Winter*		
	M	*F*	*T*	*M*	*F*	*T*	*M*	*F*	*T*
2002-03	48 (47.52)	53 (52.48)	101 (100)	15 (42.86)	20 (57.14)	35 (100)	36 (45)	44 (55)	80 (100)
2003-04	44 (44.44)	55 (55.56)	99 (100)	13 (40.63)	19 (59.37)	32 (100)	40 (48.78)	42 (51.22)	82 (100)
2004-05	49 (51.04)	47 (48.96)	96 (100)	13 (37.14)	22 (12.86)	35 (100)	43 (51.81)	40 (48.19)	83 (100)
2005-06	59 (49.17)	61 (50.83)	120 (100)	28 (47.46)	31 (62.54)	59 (100)	45 (51.72)	42 (48/28)	87 (100)
2006-07	66 (50.77)	44 (33.85)	130 (100)	Not recorded					

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006

Table 3.13 : Enrolment and Average Attendance Status of the Students in the Kalyanpur Schools

(Percentage in parenthesis)

Year	*Number of students enrolled*			*Attendance*					
				Summer			*Winter*		
	M	*F*	*T*	*M*	*F*	*T*	*M*	*F*	*T*
2002-03	104 (50.73)	101 (49.27)	205 (100)	41 (48.24)	44 (51.76)	85 (100)	81 (49.09)	84 (50.91)	165 (100)
2003-04	99 (50.25)	98 (49.75)	197 (100)	31 (37.8)	51 (62.2)	82 (100)	68 (48.57)	72 (51.43)	140 (100)
2004-05	112 (50.45)	110 (49.55)	222 (100)	47 (46.53)	54 (53.47)	101 (100)	85 (50)	85 (50)	170 (100)
2005-06	128 (52.89)	114 (47.11)	242 (100)	54 (48.21)	58 (51.79)	112 (100)	108 (53.47)	94 (46.53)	202 (100)
2006-07	135 (53.56)	108 (44.44)	243 (100)	Not recorded					

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006

The table indicates that the students' attendance in the summer is very low in comparison of the winter. The area gets submerged under water and the students cannot go to school. Moreover, the boys are engaged to carry food for the males, fishing in the beel. During the winter, the water recedes and the fishing activity is also over. This increases attendance of students in the schools. This table also shows a significant changing pattern of enrolment from 2003-04. This is because of the intervention of Sarva Shiksha Abijan Mission (S.S.A.). The average

attendance of the girls is better than that of the boys. The boys are indirectly involved in many family affairs for assisting their fathers. However, the average attendance is gradually increasing year after year due to the interest created by the various teaching techniques introduced by S.S.A. and the mid-day meal (cooked food) distributed among the students which started from 10th April 2005.

In the Barak River villages, viz., Netaji Nagar, Balighat and Radha Nagar each village has one Lower Primary School. The attendance status of students in the schools is given in the following tables :

Table 3.14 : Enrolment and Average Attendance Status of the Students in Netaji Nagar School

(Percentage in parenthesis)

Year	*Number of students enrolled*			*Number of students attendance*		
	M	*F*	*T*	*M*	*F*	*T*
2002-03	21 (43.75)	27 (56.25)	48 (100)	15 (42.86)	20 (57.14)	35 (100)
2003-04	29 (52.73)	26 (47.27)	55 (100)	18 (47.37)	20 (52.63)	38 (100)
2004-05	24 (48)	26 (52)	50 (100)	16 (42.11)	22 (57.89)	38 (100)
2005-06	29 (53.7)	25 (46.3)	54 (100)	19 (48.72)	20 (51.28)	39 (100)
2006-07	31 (46.97)	35 (53.03)	66 (100)	Not recorded		

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006

Table 3.15 : Enrolment and Average Attendance Status of the Students in Radha Nagar School

(Percentage in parenthesis)

Year	*Number of students enrolled*			*Number of students attendance*		
	M	*F*	*T*	*M*	*F*	*T*
2002-03	18 (48.5)	19 (51.35)	37 (100)	14 (48.28)	15 (51.72)	29 (100)
2003-04	21 (55.85)	18 (46.15)	39 (100)	13 (48.15)	14 (51.85)	27 (100)
2004-05	21 (51.22)	20 (48.72)	41 (100)	15 (48.39)	16 (51.61)	31 (100)
2005-06	26 (50)	26 (50)	52 (100)	20 (48.78)	21 (51.22)	41 (100)
2006-07	27 (49.09)	28 (50.91)	55 (100)	Not recorded		

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006

Table 3.16 Enrolment and Average Attendance Status of the Students in Balighat School

(Percentage in parenthesis)

Year	*Number of students enrolled*			*Number of students attendance*		
	M	*F*	*T*	*M*	*F*	*T*
2002-03	20 (45.45)	24 (54.55)	44 (100)	12 (48)	13 (52)	25 (100)
2003-04	16 (47.06)	18 (52.94)	34 (100)	20 (58.82)	14 (41.18)	34 (100)
2004-05	28 (45.16)	34 (54.84)	62 (100)	22 (50)	22 (50)	44 (100)
2005-06	29 (52.73)	26 (47.27)	55 (100)	22 (48.89)	23 (51.11)	45 (100)
2006-07	31 (48.44)	33 (51.56)	64 (100)	Not recorded		

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006.

The tables reveal that the enrollment status is gradually increasing year after year. This significant increase of students enrolment from 2003 - 04 onwards is because of the intervention of Sarva Shiksha Abhijan (S.S.A.) Mission. The primary goal of the Mission is to provide at least elementary education to all the children of the state. Noticeably, the female attendance in the school is better than that of males. Generally, the boys are indirectly engaged in many familial affairs relating to assistance of their male adults either in fishing or cultivation. The same scenario is found in all the villages under the study. The average attendance both for male and female is increasing due to the application of various teaching techniques implemented in class room situation after training of the teachers from Sarva Shiksha Abhijan (S.S.A.) mission. The mid-day meal (cooked food) started in each Lower Primary School from April 2005 has also attracted the children in the Schools of the villages. The people of Netaji Nagar are no more interested in higher education as one Sri Kajal Das has graduated in Commerce in the year 1994 and is still unemployed. However, recently in the year 2006 he has got the job as accountant on contractual basis in Axom Sarva Shiksha Abhijan Mission at

Silchar urban Education Block. It seems that education has not much function in their occupational life.

MARRIAGE

The institution of marriage like any other social institution develops through various adjustments of people with their surrounding environment. Therefore, its periodicity, cultural, ceremonial elements and objects used are determined by the interactions between people and environment. The Patni and the Kaivartya are both Hindus and thereby have the common marriage practices, while the Mahimal Muslims have their own practices. Marriage among the Patnis completes in 10 – 12 days. They marry in their own community. They mostly practice arranged marriages. Pre-marital sex is considered crime in their society. In the following discussion various steps used in solemnizing a marriage of the Hindus are presented :

Bakyadan

The consent of marriage arrived at between the bride and the bridegroom party is called *bakyadan*. If both parties agree to settle the marriage, then the females of both the parties will give *uludhwani* (a typical sound considered holy sound). After *bakyadan*, sweets will be offered among each other and the date for next activity will be fixed. The Patnis practise early marriages. For girls, they generally prefer the age of 10 – 11 years for marriage whereas for boys they generally arrange marriage in the age of 16 – 20 years. In marriage, the Patnis still practice dowry (Das 1996).

Mongal Acharan (Engagement Ceremony)

This is the next step for marriage. A ceremony is arranged in the bride's house where the bride groom's guardians will visit alongwith some ornaments,

dress sets and different kinds of sweets. The guardians of both the parties will offer their blessings to the bride. After that, a formal discussion will be held between the guardians regarding the date of marriage, *panokhili*, *adhivas* and other marriage related matters.

Panokhili

In this phase of marriage the '*Tika*' ceremony is held. The bride will apply *sindoor* (vermillion) on her forehead as the symbol of marriage.

Adhivas

This is considered the most precious ceremony of the marriage. It is held in the eve of the marriage day. In both the houses, songs are sung throughout the night. At the dawn, the bride wears *shakha* (traditional bangle made of conch), *sindoor* (vermillion), etc.

Marriage Day

This is a very auspicious day for the bride and the bridegroom in their life. This function is arranged at bride's home. The bridegroom (bor) arrives at the bride's house along with *borojatri* (wedding party). A warm reception is accorded to the party and with the bor (bridegroom) by the bride's party. Finally, the marriage is solemnized according to the Hindu rituals.

Marriage Ceremony

The marriage rituals are the same in Devadwar as well as in Kalyanpur. Both Patni (Devadwar) and Kaivartya (Kalyanpur) prefer village exogamy. All the three communities prefer early marriage of their children. The following chart depicts the average age – at – marriage in the three communities :

Chart 3.1 : Caste wise Average Age of Marriage

Name of Community	*Average Age at Marriage (in years)*	
	Male	*Female*
Kaivartya	16 – 20	14 – 18
Patni	16 – 22	12 – 17
Mahimal	16 – 22	12 - 18

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006.

Arranged marriages are highly prevalent in the Shone been villages. At the very outset, generally a proposal comes from girl's side, either directly or through responsible person or a *ghatak* (a person who acts as a mediator for both male and female party). If the particulars found compatible then only they will proceed for the next course of action. Generally, in this stage photos of the candidates (male and female) are exchanged by their guardians. If the photos are approved then both parties will sit together for finalization of marriage and other related matters. If both the parties agree then '*bakyadan*; ceremony will be held. All means of marriage related matter will be discussed between the guardians of the two. The date of *Mangalacharan* (it is the first ritual of marriage held in bride's house performed by bridegroom's party), marriage day, time etc. will be fixed. After this ritual both the parties will be allowed to print the invitation cards. About dowry transaction matter will also be specified. In Mangalacharan ceremony, some ornaments (gold or silver) will be gifted to the bride. The bridegroom's party brings sweets to bride's house. How the borjatri (bridegroom's companion) will reach the bride's house is also finalized. To bring borjatri, the entire expenditure will be borne by the bride's party. On the previous day of marriage the *adhivas* ceremony will be preformed, both at the bride's and the bridegroom's house. There will be singing, dancing, *dhamail*, etc. through out night.

On the day of marriage, the '*bor*' (the groom) along with his companion and guardians will arrive at bride's house or the place where the marriage ceremony will be held. On his arrival, there will be performed several rituals. The most important features of such rituals are noted below.

Gate barricade

Basically, this will be done by the bride's party (generallly by the bride's friends and younger sisters). Before entry of the bridegroom, they pose barricade demanding from that the bridegroom something in cash, then and only then, they allow the bridegroom to enter the ceremonial place.

Dadhimangal

In this event, the bridegroom (bor) will have to wear all the dress materials provided by the bride's party. He has to wear a shawl, *ganjee* (inner wear), undergarment, *dhuti*, *punjabi* (a specially designed wear for upper portion of the body) and shoes. After wearing the dress *dadhimangal* ceremony will be performed. On this occasion, the Mother-in-law will offer blessings to the son-in-law by using *durba* (a kind of grass) and curd. Bor's finger will be fastened seven times by white thread and after that this ceremony will end. In the process, a special song called *geet* will be sung.

After *Dadhimangal*, the bridegroom will enter to *Kunja* (a special type of wedding place made by bamboo and decorated with papers or flowers). The bridegroom will sit on a chair already placed in *Kunja*. After that, the bride along with others will enter and then take seven rounds of the groom. Soon after, both, the bride and the bridegroom, will come out from the *Kunja* and will take rest for a while. After taking rest both will again go to the place where *Kanyadan* (gift of *kanya* i.e., daughter) ceremony will be held Father-in-law will

gift his daughter to the son-in-law and officially, marriage function is over. Then, *pasha* game (*dash-pachish* game) will be played between the husband and wife. Next day, both Kaivartya and Patni practice *bashi biya* ceremony. Some of them prefer to perform this in the last part of the same night. After that the newly married couple will sleep on the same bed. Sometimes, even the ceremony of *Chaturthamangal* (4th day function generally held in bridegroom's house) is also performed in bride's house. But it is seen rarely. After the completion of all such rituals both the husband and the wife will go to *basarghar* which is specially allotted room for newly married couple. However, now-a-days various rituals have been reduced due to constraints of time and space.

The males in the Shone beel generally prefer village exogamy marriage and females prefer in a town area. This is because the male wanted to bring their bride from such area so that they can adjust with the localities but the females always want to marry in a town area so that they can escape from their traditional drudgery of work. This scenario is found almost in every village of the Barak valley. The marriage system of Mahimals of Belala in the Shone beel is very interesting. Generally, the Mahimals prefer to marry their girls just after they attain their puberty, i.e., 13 years onwards, while the males are married at the age of 16 years onwards. They married their paternal cousins. Thus, in most of the cases endogamous marriages are practiced.

The marriage system of Barak River villages is also like that of the Shonebeel villages. The village endogamy and exogamy patterns in the communities of the two fisheries are given in the following table :

Table 3.17 : Marital Patterns of the Patni in the Two Fishery (1966 – 2005
(Percentage in parenthesis)

Year	Name of the Village					
	Devadwar			Netaji Nagar		
	Village endogamy	Village exogamy	Total	Village endogamy	Village exogamy	Total
1966–1975	08 (57.14)	06 (42.86)	14 (100)	07 (58.33)	05 (41.67)	12 (100)
1976–1985	11 (61.11)	07 (38.89)	18 (100)	14 (53.85)	12 (61.9)	26 (100)
1986–1995	08 (36.36)	14 (63.66)	22 (100)	12 (42.86)	16 (57.14)	28 (100)
1996–2005	06 (33.33)	12 (66.67)	18 (100)	08 (38.1)	13 (61.9)	21 (100)
Total	3 (45.83)	39 (54.17)	71 (100)	41 (47.13)	46 (52.87)	87 (100)

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006.

Table 3.18 : Marital Patterns of the Kaivartya in the Two Fishery (1966 – 2005)
(Percentage in parenthesis)

Year	Name of the village					
	Kalyanpur			Radha Nagar		
	Village endogamy	Village exogamy	Total	Village endogamy	Village exogamy	Total
1966–1975	07 (58.33)	05 (41.67)	12 (100)	08 (47.06)	09 (52.94)	17 (100)
1976–1985	14 (53.85)	12 (46.15)	26 (100)	11 (57.89)	08 (42.11)	19 (100)
1986–1995	12 (42.86)	16 (57.14)	28 (100)	09 (40.91)	13 (59.09)	22 (100)
1996–2005	08 (38.1)	13 (61.9)	21 (100)	07 (30.43)	16 (69.57)	23 (100)
Total	41 (47.13)	46 (52.87)	87 (100)	35 (43.21)	46 (57.79)	81 (100)

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006.

Table 3.19 : Marital Patterns of the Mahimal in the Two Fishery (1966 – 2005
(Percentage in parenthesis)

Year	Name of the village					
	Belala			Balighat		
	Village endogamy	Village exogamy	Total	Village endogamy	Village exogamy	Total
1966–1975	14 (82.35)	03 (17.65)	17 (100)	08 (36.37)	14 (63.63)	22 (100)
1976–1985	12 (75.0)	09 (25.0)	16 (100)	05 (23.81)	16 (76.19)	21 (100)
1986–1995	08 (40.0)	12 (60.0)	20 (100)	07 (28.0)	18 (92.0)	25 (100)
1996–2005	08 (40.0)	12 (60.0)	20 (100)	06 (33.33)	12 (66.67)	18 (100)
Total	42 (57.53)	31 (42.47)	73 (100)	26 (30.23)	60 (69.77)	86 (100)

Source : Field Survey conducted during January 2005 – December 2006.

The tables reveal the village endogamy and exogamy marriage patterns of the three communities in the two fisheries. In the year 1966 to 1985, majority of the marriages were village endogamous. But after 1986 onwards,

the pattern is reversing and more than half the marriages are exogamous. Kalyanpur and Belala, but, during the period from 1966 to 2005, half the marriages held are endogamous and the other half are exogamous.

Among the Mahimals, the guardians of both the bride and bridegroom communicate their views either directly or through *ghatak* (a person who plays a key role in mate selection). At the very outset, just after the mate selection, Challisha Ceremony will be performed (Challisha is the day fixed for marriage). After fixing the marriage date, the guardians of bride and bridegroom organize Koranpath ceremony separately at their own residence. With their own relatives a get-together party is organized at their own residence in the name of their forefathers. On the day of marriage, the bride's party invites their relatives and organizes a dinner party. At night, the bridegroom along with his companions will go to bride's house. Then, a person will perform the *nikah* (marriage ceremony) where two witnesses will be present for fixing *mehar.* There will be a deed called *Kabilnama* wherein the amount of *mehar* will be mentioned. Besides, another deed will be made to record the other materials gifted to the bride. After performing all the rituals, *mullah* (the officiating priest) will ask the bride whether she agrees to the marriage, and if she replies affirmatively, then the *mullah* will ask the same question to the bridegroom. If both answered affirmatively, then only the marriage will be solemnized. After the completion of marriage, the bride will leave for father-in-law's residence with her husband. Next day, at the bridegroom's residence, a celebration will be held. Almost the same type of marriage is seen in case of the Mahimals of Balighat.

The divorce (Talak) system of the Mahimals is reversible. It is the right of both male and female. If the bridegroom utters the word 'talak' three times in

presence of a witness then immediately divorce will be effective. If the word 'talak' is uttered once, then it is considered as warning. If the bride also utters the same then also talak will effective. If the husband wants his wife back, after 'talak' the divorced woman must marry another male at least for one night and divorce her. Then only the previous husband can marry her again.

The marriages and their ceremonies are performed by accommodating with the seasons and occupational cycles. Therefore, mostly marriages were arranged during the laser time in the winter. With the changes in environment and occupations these are now arranged in the monsoon also.

RELIGIOUS CENTRES AND CEREMONIES

In Devadwar, there found two *Akhras* (centres for puja) – one is called Krishna Kali's *Akhra* and the other is Sannyashi Baba's Akhra. In Sannyashi Baba's Akhra mainly puja of Lord Siva is held. On every Saturday evening 25 – 30 people assemble there and recite devotional songs. Similarly, in the Krishna Kali's *Akhra*, on every Monday, the local people assemble. In the Krishna Kali's *Akhra*, every year, at the time of Rathajatra Ceremony (in the month of Asad (June – July) of Bengali calendar), there held *Asta Prahar* Nam *Sankrirton* (started from dawn and ended in the next day dawn). A fare is held on this occasion and the people from different localities gather. The people also get an opportunity to purchase various articles from this fare. Similarly, at the Sannyashi Baba's *Akhra* also there is held yearly *Nam Sankirton* and a fare is held. Many people come to offer puja and attend the *nam sankirton* from various places of the Shonebeel. Besides, Radha Krishna Grihasta Ashram also hold *kirton* (devotional song) every Sunday.

In Kalyanpur, on every eleventh day of full moon and new moon, the villagers organize at their own houses, or collectively for Satya Narayan Puja wherein *kirton*, and sacred Gita recitation are preferred. It is mandatory for Kaivartya to organize Kalki Narayan Puja before going out for fishing where *siddi laddu* is the main Prasad distributed among the members. They believe that if some body goes for fishing after performing the puja, he will get catch more than his expectation.

Special Puja

Durga puja is the main religious festival of the people of both the fisheries. They wear new dresses during these days. Previously, the Goddess *Monosa* was very popular in every house. Besides, '*Suryabrata*; was also very popular in every house. It is the puja of 'Sun'. Now-a-days, this puja is performed occasionally in view of the occupational constraints under the changing environment. The villagers observe various rituals as given below (as per Bengali calendar).

Baishak (April – May)

Celebrating the 1st day of Baishak as sacred new year of Bengali calendar, they take quality food on this day. It is a perception that if the first day of the new year goes well then the entire year will go well.

Jaistha (May – June)

In this month the married women worship *Sabitri brata* wishing for their husband's long life. Last day of *Jaistha*, *Karma Purush Sankranti* is celebrated by wishing to activate their working ability. The *brata* is performed by the females who go for fasting and after that they take grind rice and fruit seeds and different fruits. *Jamai-Sasti*, another ceremony is conducted by mother-in-

law so that son-in-law would enjoy long and prosperous life. The son-in-law is offered gifts of new clothes.

Ashad (June – July)

They worship Goddess Ganga seeking protection from the dangers from water. Kaivartya especially celebrate Ratha jatra of Lord Jagannath in this month very enthusiastically.

Shraban (July – August)

This month is again a very important month for both Kaivartyas and Patnis. Especially Patnis are the great devotee of Goddess Monosa. It is believed that snake bite can be prevented by performing this puja. In this month, SriKrishna's Jhulan Yatra festival is also observed.

Bhadra (August – September)

In this month worship of the God of Architecture 'Biswakarma' is held. However, intensity of this puja in the Shone beel is very less and it is found more in the urban influence area of the Barak river.

Aswin (September – October)

Durga Puja is widely celebrated by both Patni and Kaivartya. They collect cash, contributed by all households, and commonly celebrate the puja. This puja is celebrated for five days with utmost devotion.

Kartik

Kartik puja is also found very rare in these villages. However, the festival of lights–Deepawali and worship of Goddess Kali celebrated very enthusiastically. In Kalyanpur particularly Kaivartyas mostly worship Goddess Kali.

Agrahayan (November – December)

In this month *nabanna* is made when farmers receive their new harvest, they make mistanna with newly harvested paddy and offer to Goddess Laxmi (the Goddess of Wealth).

Poush (December – January)

On the last day of this month Poush Sankranti or *mera-meri* is celebrated. The villagers erect a temporary hut made of bamboo and hay and spend the whole night there, singing folk songs. They prefer food in groups and eat it there late in the night. It is a kind of picnic party. The next morning, just after the sunrise people take bath in nearby ponds and set the temporary house on fire. In the fire, they prepare special dish called chungapitha made of biryani variety of rice prepared in a bamboo commonly called dolu bans. Then they visit house of their neighbours and exchange sweet dishes generally made of rice, potatoes, wheat, etc. These sweet dishes are known as pithas. Then they visit other villages and perform nam sankirtan commonly called nagar kirtan. In this way, they maintain social ties with each other.

Magh (January – February)

It is socially an important month. In most of the schools and residences of the students, Goddess Saraswati is worshipped. It is believed that with the blessing of Goddess Sawaswati a good academic career will be bestowed upon the school goers. In some parts of the areas and in Kalyanpur, most of the Kaivartyas usually perform this puja but it is observed that the Patnis of Devadwar seem to be ignoring the value of Goddess Saraswati. A meager people are observing this puja in Devadwar.

Falgun (February – March)

In this month, *shiva ratri broto* is celebrated by both the Patni and Kaivartya. They observe the whole day fasting and at night they worship Lord Shiva. In this month, Dool-Purnima of Lord Sri Krishan is observed. Next day Holi – the festival of colours is celebrated by both the Patnis and Kaivartyas by sprinkling coloured water, aabir (a kind of colour) etc. on each other. It is the perception that the aabir is activated to prevent contagious diseases like measles, small pox, etc.

Chaitra

In this month, some families of Kaivartya organize Charak Puja (worshiping of trees). For the puja, full month time is required. The final ceremony is held on the last day of Chaitra. Mainly Lord Shiva, and the Goddesses Kali and Durga are worshiped. The officiating persons will put on a sacred thread like a Brahmin during the puja only. However, they are not allowed to perform any religious activities as the Brahmin do. Both Kaivartya and patnis celebrate the festival and share their happiness among their relatives, friends and neighbours.

The ceremonial worshipping going on round the year have, thus, significance with respect to their occupations and for material achievements to be strived within the given environment.

On every occasion the people are engaged with several rituals. The main rituals observed by the Kaivartyas of Kalyanpur is the worship of Goddess Laxmi. It has been observed that this puja festival is performed just after harvesting. They take the grains in their godowns (ugar) after doing the puja

which is made of twigs, bamboo, etc. Soon after completing the Laxmi Puja in their houses, it is believed that the worship of Goddess Laxmi make the fortune of the owner and satisfied the whole economic condition.

Another important ritual observed by both Patni and the Kaivartya is Durga Puja. Durga Puja is first celebrated commonly in the village. In the last day of the puja, i.e., on *Dashami*, the Goddess Durga's idol will be floated on the water either in river, pond or in beel. This ceremony is called *Bisarjan*. After the *Bisarjan* ceremony, they exchange their love and affection, gratitude. The young members bow down before the elders and take their blessings. People of the same age group and sex embrace each other and express their affection. Various sweets will be distributed, of which *Jilapi* (a kind of sweet) is widely used in this occasion.

In the Shonebeel, the people strongly believe that a person called *phiral* may prevent the cyclonic storm and thundering. They believe that with the *phiral* activity they can save the paddy and lives of the people of the Shonebeel even if there occurs heavy shower, thundering and cyclonic storm. To protect the houses, paddy and lives of the people the *phiral* will go to the roof of the house after putting off all the clothes and then he will be chanting mantras. He also gives the *dohai* of *Saija Badsha*. *Dohai* means to undergo the shelter of *Saija Badsha* who is to help them from the forth coming problems.

There is folk myth about the Shonebeel area. According to it, in 1740 A.D., there has been one Raja Ram Dutta, a trader, in Gopalganj of Bangladesh. His son, Radharam Dutta rendered his best services to a monk. The monk got pleased with Radharam and advised him to massage his polio affected feet with the ash to be taken out from his *dhupti's* (a kind of puja

utensil). Radharam followed his advice and shortly got fully cured. One day, there was a cyclone with heavy thundering and rainfall. But, the monk was sitting quiet and calm under a Banyan tree. There was no rainfall around him. Radharam overwhelmed of his supernatural powers became his disciple. After sometime the monk left Gopalganj for Shonebeel and Radharam accompanied him. They arrived at the western part of the Shone beel. At that time, a renowned Muslim Seer (peer), Saija Badsha had settled at Anandapur of the Shonebeel_(Choudhury; Kar 1995). Actually, he was a son of Muslim Nawab, Sahajada, and just after his first visit to the Sahajalaler Dorga (a Muslim holy place) he became the peer (Muslim Seer / devotee) and renounced worldly attachments in search of Allah. Though he was a Muslim, he was a devotee of the Goddess Kali also. He came to be known as Saija Basha among the people of the Shonebeel. According to another version, the God of Jungle was called Saija Badsha. However, when Radharam arrived at Shonebeel, his Guru handed him over to Saija Badsha who did meditation along with Radharam and since then this area is known as Asanala. After Radharam attained enlightenment he announced that in event of the natural calamities like thundering, storm, etc., the people should take the shelter of Saija Badsha by uttering 'Saija Badsha's dohai', save us, stop the storm, cyclone, etc. Whenever the storm occurs, the boatmen and the common people take the shelter of Saija Badsha. It is a perception that till today Saija Badsha is saving them from all kinds of dangers (Choudhury and Kar 1995).

There was only a single habitation found in the village Devadwar (Shone beel) in the 18th century. It was Radharam who first brought the people from his native place and settled them in Shone beel and gradually extended his

Zamindari. Radharam Dutta had two Kachehries (Courts) for looking after his zamindari. One was located in the south-western part of the Shonebeel called Gulalkandi while the other was situated at Devadwar. It may be noted that in every *Mokam* (site) of Saiha Badsha, there is found a Kali Mandir. After the extension of his Zamindari, Radharam became arrogant and started torturing the common people. Therefore, the people frequently took the shelter of Saija Badsha. Radharam built a Kali Mandir nearby each Mokam and therefore in the Shonebeel area all *Mokams* are seen juxtaposed with Kali Mandirs (Choudhury and Kar 1995).

The Mahimal follow all the rituals of the Muslim though they are considered in low status. They observe the following religious ceremonies :

Moharam

It is the first month of the Arabic calendar. The 10th day of this month is observed as Moharam festival. All the Muslims of Belala belong to 'Sunni' sect. Hence, the day is observed as 'Matam' which meant the day of sorrow and especially the Mahimals pray to almighty on this day for the salvation of those people who lost their lives in 'Karbala' incident.

Rabiul – Aoal

It is the third month of the Arabic Calendar, which is considered to be the holiest month by the Mahimals. In this month, the Prophet Hazarat Mahhammad was born. Edd-E-Miladun Navi is observed in this month. On this occasion, Milad Mehfil – a function of get together is observed. In Milad, religious lecture, song (Gazal), Koran reading competition etc. are observed. In Belala, this activities organize in the Mosque.

Saban

It is the eighth month of the Arabic Calendar. The 15th day of the Saban is observed by all the Muslims by praying the Allah (God) to bestow good luck upon them for the entire year. They observe fasting for the whole day and at night they take *shinni*. *Shinni* is prepared from wheat, dalda and nut called *Tusha*. Besides, other delicious foods are also made in this occasion. The Mahimals of Belala observe this day very enthusiastically.

Ramjan

It is the 9th month of the Arabic Calendar. All Muslims observe fast for the whole month, and take food at night only. It is said that if anybody breaks the fasting called '*Roja*' without having sufficient reasons, then, he/she has to observe *roja* for 60 days more even after the festival of Idd-ul-fitre is over. It is also believed that the holy 'Quaran' came to earth from heaven (*behest*) on 27th day of Ramjan. Hence, this day is observed as holy day as 'Sabe Kadar'. For the whole night of Sabe Kadar the Muslim offer prayers for their betterment. And after the completion of 30th Ramjan, they celebrate Idd-ul-fitre. They enthusiastically observe this occasion by wearing new dress etc.

Jilhaz

It is the 11th month of the Arabic Calendar. This month is celebrated for Haj Yatra. In this month, the pilgrims visit Mecca. Bokra Idd is celebrated in this month. This Idd is called as Idd-Uj-Juha. An animal must be sacrificed by the Muslims in the name of Allah. One who holds more than 7.5 bhari (87.33 gm.) gold then he will have to give its 25%, i.e., (21.83 gm.) to the poor.

The religious ceremonies are closely tagged to impediments and dangers in their environment and the objective of their performance is always to mitigate the hardships by working the mighty, superior forces.

RITUALS OF LIFE CYCLE

The villagers perform the following rituals of life cycle and interact with their environment on those occasions.

Birth

The birth of a new child is always welcome in the family. The female members of the family as well as of the neighbourhood welcome the new born baby by means of uludhani as found in the Chatla Haor (Purkayastha 2000). There is a custom, when a baby is born, the members of the family will follow *jatak asuj* for 30 days. After 6th day of a baby's birth (male or female) *Sasthi puja* will be observed for welfare and long life of the new born baby. At the ninth day, noai ceremony will be held wherein both the baby and mother's nail will be clipped by a barber. On the 30th day, again a barber will be invited to clip the umblical chord of the baby. After this, both of them will be removed from *asuj*. This ritual is strictly followed by Patni while the Kaivartya observe this ritual in a little different manner. In case of male baby, twenty one days for both mother and the baby, the *asuj* will be maintained while for female baby it will be restricted to thirty days. The *asuj* to be maintained by other members of the family is 11 days only.

After *asuj*, a *broto* (fast) called *Rupashi broto,* will be organized. Then, a branch of *Sheora* tree is placed and four other married women along with the mother of the child offer puja to Goddess *Rupashi*. The entire ritual of

performed under the guidance of a purohit (priest). After the puja, the mother can take part in normal activities. On this occasion they generally invite their relatives and neighbours, especially women to a party.

The next important ceremony is *annaprashan*. In case of a male child either sixth or eight month is selected while for female child fifth or seventh month is generally selected for the ritual. Before the child's teeth become prominent, the function is celebrated. In this function, rice eating is introduced to the child. The word *annaprashan* itself signifies its meaning. *Anna* means rice, *Prashan* means 'to take'. Before *annaprashan* the child takes only the breast milk. The *annaprashan* ceremony officiated by a *purohit*. On this day, people and relatives are invited. The child receives gifts from the invitees. The intention of this ceremony is to obtain blessings from the elders and the God.

In the Mahimals if a male child is born, then at the seventh day, the child's head will be shaved. This ceremony is called *noai*. The same ceremony will be performed at the ninth day in case of a female child. Moreover, the mother of the child cannot participate in any of religious activity upto 40 days from the day of child's birth. For the welfare of the child *Akkiha* ceremony is a must. *Akkika* means one animal is to be (*kurban*) sacrificed, either on 7th, 9th, 11th, 16th or 21st day of the child's birth.

Death

The death which is inevitable brings grief among the family members as well as to the nearest and dearest. When a person dies, the family members gather. Hearing the news, the neighbours come as an obligation. They inform other relatives. When everybody has arrived, the nearest relative, mainly the

son and daughter of the dead will give bath to the dead body by messaging mustard oil, turmeric, etc. In case of the death of a married female (*sadhava*), a new dress (generally red saree) will be given to the dead body and in case of the death of a widow (*bidhava*) a white saree will be given. In case of male, generally white dress will be attached to the body. Irrespective of male and female, a piece of gold and silver is also given. A *Tulsi* plant is also put on the body.

One more ritual is also maintained by both Kaivartya and Patni. If a person dies either on Monday or on Friday, then a banana plant must be put on the body. It is a common perception that if banana tree is not given, then the dead body demands another life. After performing these rituals the dead body will be brought to the community cremation ground nearby the beel where purohit (priest) also comes to officiate the cremation. In Netaji Nagar and Rahda Nagar the dead body will be cremated at Boula haor or on the bank of Barak river. At the cremation ground, generally no female will accompany. At the cremation ground, a place is chosen and pyre is made of locally available wood prepared instantly by the relatives and the neighbours. Then, they place the body on the pyre and pull out the new dress to leave the dead body naked. It is only the eldest son who can cremate it. In case of his absence, the younger son takes over the charge. The cremation starts by chanting of mantras by the purohit. During cremation, the branches of mango tree are put on the pyre. After the cremation is over, the elder son will break an earthen pot filled by water before leaving the ground and after that none of the person will look back. Before breaking the pot, the elder son will have to wear an iron ring round his neck. The whole family and the Sagotra (the same clan) relatives will

have to follow asuj for one month. Then they cannot take part in any religious activity. During the period they have to take only vegetarian food. During *asuj*, the sons of the dead person cannot use oil, razors and foot wear. They have to wear special kind of dress and maintain *havisa*. *Havisha* is a practice where they have to take bath thrice a day and feed the crows early in the morning, mid-day and evening known as kak-boli. During that period, they must sleep on the ground.

On the 29th day, a barber comes and shaves the son and takes away the clothes that he had worn all these days. The next day the *purohit* comes and officiates over the *shradha* ceremony (funeral ceremony). On this day, they invite their family members, relatives and especially those who accompanied them to the cremation ground to take food in their house. After the completion of *shradha* the family resumes daily routine and normal life. However, with the son there remains *kal asuj* for one year (*kal asuj* means a period during which one cannot take part in any religious activities).

One important thing is to be noted here that just after the *shradaha* ceremony, they immediately cannot take non-vegetarian food until they perform one more ritual. After *shradha* ceremony, either on the coming Tuesday or Saturday, they have to go through *shak sparsha* in the day time while *mach sparsha* in the night. In *shak sparsha*, the sons of the deceased will take *shak vaat* (i.e, rice with vegetable) while in *mach sparsha* they are to take fish after offering it along with rice to Lord Vairaba. On the occasion, offering of *kalai dal* (a variety of dal) with fish to Lord *Vairaba* is mandatory. After observing the ceremony, the son will turn back to his normal life style. After one year, *bastaranta* (year ending) ceremony will be performed. After that ceremony, the

sons of the dead will escape *kal asuj* and turn back to their normal life, i.e., they can perform the normal religious activities. But due to the lenght of the Shradha ceremony on death. Patni and Kaivartya have reduced the period of shardha from 30 days to 13 days taking the prior permission from their purohit.

The Mahimals also perform some rituals on death. On death of a Mahimal male, the dead body is first bathed by his nearest relative and then three sets of white cloths called kafan will be put on to the dead (male). In case of female, after doing the bath, five new *kafans* will be put on. After that Janajer Namaj will be offered by the Imam. In this special type of Namaj, the prayer will be made to Allah for the dead wishing it the behest - the heaven.

After Namaj, the dead will be taken to graveyard where the body is to be kept in a trench. The trench is prepared with a size of 1.75 x 2 metres. The depth is generally about 3.5 metres. Firstly, a gap is made of about 2 feet from the body by introducing bamboo from the body level and there after the earth is filled. In case of male's death, the wife of the dead has to maintain a confinement for 40 days very carefully. The wife cannot go out from her residence. If she has to go out, then, she must return home before the sunset. On death of a parent, the sons must offer something to the poor at the fortieth day of expiry.

Thus, the Patni and Kaivartya of two fishing systems, being Hindus have almost the same rituals as observed by other Hindus. The Mahimals observe the ritual prevalent among the Muslims. Minor changes are made in the procedures according to the specific requirements of environmental variations. The life cycle rituals are thus cognized and performed in proximity with the

environment by developing a level of consciousness and availing the material objects.

In sum, the cultural practices of the communities are largely eloiteved in the environment of the Barak Valley. Their needs, strategies and actions are defined within the limits of the resources. None the less, the cultural practices also set the parameters of resource exploitation and bring changes, through minutely, in the environment. On the whole it is the environment, whether the original or altered which is still playing dominant role in shaping the cultural ecology of the fishing communities.

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