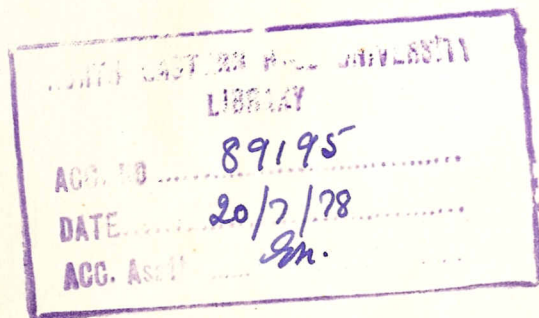


# **SOCIAL RELATIONS IN AN AHOM VILLAGE**

**INDIRA BARUA**



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## FOREWORD

Assam is very often called an 'anthropological museum' for her providing shelter to numerous populations of various ethnic affiliations, having different social structures and cultural heritages. The tribes and communities living in this part of the country from the ancient past and the inflow of new ethnic streams in the historical period have given rise to composite socio-cultural and ethnic patterns by exchanging traits, both cultural and biological, among them. But unfortunately, much of the traditions and customs, habits and manners, aspirations of the various people of this museum are yet to be fully known to the world outside. The Ahoms form such a community who came to Assam in the thirteenth century. We have a large number of works on the historical aspects of the Ahoms, but anthropological studies on them are almost lacking. Therefore, it is heartening to find Dr Indira Barua working among the Ahoms.

Village community studies or studies on certain aspects of socio-cultural life of a people as projected through a particular community, large or small, village or local group, have gained popularity among the anthropologists in recent years. A particular unit should be examined in consideration of its place in the total phenomenon of which it is a part. In a society, the individuals are structured into a set of complex social relations between individuals and groups. The pattern of social relations and interactions among individuals of the same community as well as among groups in an organised way is a very interesting subject of anthropological research. Keeping all these in mind, Dr Barua has made a detailed study of the social relations in the Ahom community of a village, called Moranjan. The study is based on her meticulous and painstaking field work for a reasonable period following standardised anthropological approaches.

In a dynamic world social changes are inevitable. Under changed conditions of life social relations among individuals as well as groups are liable to be affected. Therefore, Dr Barua has rightly discussed the changing aspect of social life of the Ahoms bringing out the recent trends.

Dr Barua deserves congratulations for presenting us some very interesting facts and information about the social relations and the factors involved, that exist in the Ahom as projected by a village community.

Professor B.M. Das

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## PREFACE

Village studies have been undertaken by social scientists in different parts of the country. Unfortunately, no intensive study of village communities has been carried out in the eastern-most region of Assam. Anthropologists are gradually beginning to realise the need of such studies in the Assam plains with a view to finding out how the village society here differs from or approximates the societies in other parts of India.

This is a study of an Ahom village. The Ahoms, who form a distinctive population of Assam, were so far a subject of historical research. Much work has been done in the sphere of Ahom history and cultural traditions. But the knowledge of their past is not adequately supplemented by a knowledge of their present. It remained a desideratum to be filled in by a live interest of the anthropologists in the country. To answer the need, the present author undertook a field study. It is a study of one village community and therefore it is in the nature of a micro-study.

The book is a revised version of my doctoral thesis (1975), entitled, "Moranjan : Social Relations in an Ahom Community of Assam", which was accepted by the Dibrugarh University. It is based on the study of an actual village named Moranjan. Though the name of the village has been retained as such, the names of all the informants and others have been given in pseudonym, lest the use of real names wound the sentiment of them, however unwittingly it may be.

I shall be failing in my duty if I do not express my gratitude and indebtedness to those who have helped and encouraged me in the completion of my work. At the very outset I wish to express my deep sense of gratitude to my revered teacher Dr B.M. Das, Ph.D., D.Sc., former Professor and Head, Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University and at present Professor of Anthropology at Gauhati University under

whose kind supervision this work was carried out. I am deeply indebted to Professor Das for his continuous guidance, encouragement and close supervision of my work at every step. He patiently read through the manuscript and offered many valuable suggestions and criticisms. He has put me further in deep debt of gratitude by kindly agreeing to write a foreword to this book. No word is adequate to express my gratitude to Professor Das.

I express my deep sense of gratitude to Sri J.N. Das (I.A.S. Retd.), Vice-Chancellor of the Dibrugarh University for his constant encouragement and active interest in my work.

I wish to acknowledge my debt to Dr N.C. Choudhury, Professor and Head of the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, North Bengal University for his valuable suggestions and many acts of kindness in the completion of my work.

It is a pleasure to thank Dr M. Bora, Lakshminath Bezbarua Professor and Head of the Department of Assamese, Dibrugarh University for the pains he took, in spite of his busy schedule, in going through the whole thesis and making valuable suggestions for improving the presentation of the data. I am greatly indebted to Dr A.C. Bhagabati, Professor and Head of the Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, for his help and suggestions.

I gratefully remember the active interest of Late Professor M.N. Basu of Calcutta University, in my research for which he offered many valuable suggestions.

Above all, my most sincere thanks are due to the people of Moranjan for their kind hospitality and for extending their full support and cooperation during my field work. But for their ready friendship, it would not have been possible to undertake and complete the study at all. In a very short time the people accepted me as though I was one of them. I place on record my thanks to Mr Girin Phukan, M.A., Lecturer of Moran College, for it was he who invited me to work among his kith and kin.

It is a pleasure to renew my indebtedness to my parents who took full care of our only son during the entire span of my research work. In fine, not only did they cradle their daughter

but they did it for the second time by nourishing their daughter's brain-child.

I do not know how to express my indebtedness to my husband, Dr K.C. Barua, Professor and Head of the Department of Physics, Dibrugarh University for his help, constant encouragement and inexhaustible patience throughout the period of my research work.

I am thankful to Dibrugarh University for granting me a U.G.C. Research Fellowship which made this work possible.

I also wish to thank the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi, for the financial assistance for the publication of this book. The responsibility for any factual errors or any erroneous views, which might have entered into the text of this book, is, however, entirely mine. Last but not the least, I thank Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, for taking the responsibility of publishing the book.

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# CONTENTS

*Foreword* v

*Preface* vii

*List of Tables* xii

*List of Figures & Maps* xiii

## 1

INTRODUCTION 1

## 2

THE PEOPLE 10

## 3

THE SETTING 26

## 4

ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE VILLAGE 53

## 5

THE HOUSEHOLD 70

## 6

RELIGION 89

## 7

SOCIAL RELATIONS : KINSHIP 105

## 8

SOCIAL RELATIONS : COMMUNITY 138

## 9

RECENT TREND : CHANGING  
ASPECT OF SOCIAL LIFE 152

## 10

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS 163

*Appendix : Kinship Terms* 172

*Bibliography* 176

*Index* 183

(PLATES FACING p. 80)

# 1

## Introduction

The present study aims at delineating certain aspects of social relations in an Ahom village, situated far away from the urban area. The Ahoms ruled over Assam for nearly six hundred years, i.e. from 1225 to 1826 A.D. They had a separate entity of their own based on religion, culture, beliefs and customs. At present, the Ahoms form a distinctive population of Assam in terms of certain social and cultural aspects. In terms of economy, they make up a sizeable proportion of the plains peasantry of Upper Assam. In their social and cultural life, however, one can still discern the persistence of many traditional features together with elements that have been incorporated from other sources, primarily from the Hindu socio-cultural system. In a general way, it might be said that the Ahoms as a whole represent a population who have gone through social changes taking place over several hundred years. This, however, is not to suggest that all the Ahom peasant communities of Upper Assam reflect the same degree of persistence of old form or of change. Theoretically, it is possible to imagine groups which have been fully assimilated into the Hindu social fold. At the other end of the scale, it is possible to envisage communities which are still largely traditional in their structure and organisation. A cursory examination, however, indicates that the majority of the communities are in the middle range between these two extremes, i.e. they have retained sufficient traditional elements

to give them their distinctive identity and, at the same time, incorporated certain new features.

This study is an attempt to examine the yet unexplored character of Ahom social life in a rural community of Upper Assam. For this purpose a village is selected from where relevant information has been gleaned and garnered. It is true that a single village cannot represent all the Ahom villages of that region. As a wide range of intermingling and adaptability is seen, it is expected that every village would throw some new light on anthropological study. But it is assumed that detailed and intensive investigations of social, cultural, economic and religious aspects in the context of a single village would provide a general outline of the Ahom society and culture. To this extent, this community study is envisaged as a representative one.

An intensive field study is necessary for understanding a community. Any particular institution, custom and belief of a study should be examined in relation to the total social system of which it is a part.

The aim of the present study is not to test any hypothesis or to examine any problem but to find out the existing social relations in a village community. A social relationship implies the interaction of two or more individuals; and, as such, it is not a separable, isolable, and immediately perceptible phenomenon available for random selection. In social anthropology the ideal sampling is a cluster of unit, which is a community in itself. The unit is selected to generalise the community of which the individual is an integral part. Moreover, social relationship must include the interdependence of people living in a community. A suitable definition of community is given by MacIver and Page. "It is the term we apply to a pioneer settlement, a village, a city, a tribe or a nation. Wherever the members of any group, small or large live together in such a way that they share, not this or that particular interest, but the basic conditions of a common life, we call that group a community."<sup>1</sup> Firth remarks, "the term community emphasises the space-time component, the aspect of living together. It

1. MacIver, R.M. and Page, C.H. *Society : An Introductory Analysis*, p. 9 (1969).

involves a recognition, derived from experience and observation, that there must be minimum conditions of agreements on common aims and inevitably some common ways of behaving, thinking and feelings."<sup>2</sup> A community, thus, is an area of social living marked by some degree of social coherence. Anthropologists prefer to choose a small community like the single village or a part of the tribe. The interest is the intensive study of detailed characters of the systematic observations of the behaviour of the people in group relation. Firth suggested the term micro-sociology<sup>3</sup> for the observation of small unit behaviour. By this process it is believed to carry out the advantage of greater accuracy and reliability of first hand observation. This provides better opportunities for closer observation of day-to-day activities of the people under study and help in studying the parts and the relationship existing between the parts. The anthropologist cannot depend only upon the quantitative data derived from sample survey, but has to rely mainly upon intimate knowledge arising out of a long-standing acquaintance with a few informants. "The anthropologists", Nadel comments, "have tended to become the biographers of single societies; often they chose small groups, where the intensive studies could be more adequately applied; always they had to exclude, or to use merely in an approximate fashion, that most valuable tool of modern sociology-statistics."<sup>4</sup>

Whether the community is small or large, village or local group, the approach should be a structural one, i.e. the particular unit should be examined in considering its place in the total phenomena of which it is a part. People should be studied as personnel, as functionaries of professions and as pacesetters of commitments, leading to the consideration of the systematic interconnection of those functions and commitments within that personnel. All these are necessary for a full consideration of the social process.

2. Firth, R. *Elements of Social Organization*, p. 27 (1971).

3. *ibid.*, p. 17.

4. Nadel, S.F. *The Foundations of Social Anthropology*, p. 6 (1951).

## SELECTION OF THE FIELD

In order to examine the social relations, field work was carried out in a village called Moranjan. The village community was selected after considering several factors, like :

(i) The village is neither too large nor too small in respect of its area and population. The village is comprised of 74 households with a total population of five hundred and ninety-eight. It can be regarded as a model village as it is not too large to confuse with mass of details. At the same time, it is not too small to be scarce of the required data.

(ii) This community is made up of three hamlets which are not merely geographical units, but discrete social groups as well. The day-to-day activities are confined within the boundary of the hamlet.

(iii) It is a homogeneous village, i.e. the inhabitants belong exclusively to the Ahom community. But, at the same time, within a compact area, the village is inhabited by five different groups of the same community, viz. the Mohans, the Deodhāis, the Changmais, the Chetiās and the Bhuyans. They have important status and occupational connotations from the point of view of traditional Ahom social organisations. This necessarily represents good scope to study five different cultures in isolation as well as in the perspective of their interactions.

(iv) It is situated at a reasonable degree of isolation from the main communication links. Though it is cut off from the direct urban influences, yet the people of this village have greater contact and relation with members of other villages and towns. At present, the younger generation have taken different kinds of jobs outside the villages; but, at the same time, they have landed properties at village and agriculture is regarded as their main occupation.

(v) The religious aspect of the villagers can be described as a mixture of the ideals of the Vaisnavite religion and traditional rural practices. In this village the Changmais and Bhuyans have already abandoned their traditional practices, while the other groups represent a melting pot to the extent that they still worship spirits and believe in supernatural

powers, though they have also accepted the tenets of Vaisnavism. From this point of view, it appears to be a subject of great interest for a student of anthropology to study the various aspects of their social life in modern age.

(vi) This village can be regarded as the meeting ground of traditional beliefs and practices on the one hand, and modern ideas on the other, due to different factors. It is expected that social continuity and trend of change can be studied best in such a village. The factors which accelerate such changes can also be observed.

From very early times, villages have been taken by the different social scientists, as a basic and important unit for study, to give a better understanding of the total culture of which it is a part. A village is the smallest and most manageable unit for the study of the social life of a particular locality or community. Therefore, with the help of a good designed study, an attempt has been made to give a vivid picture of an Ahom village.

## METHODOLOGY

For collecting data for the present purpose it was not possible to restrict myself to a particular technique and I had to adopt various techniques side by side. The field worker should always adopt the method according to the requirements of the local cultural scene, because the behaviour of people are different in varied circumstances and it is difficult to follow the method as exact as measuremental experiments in a controlled laboratory.

After selecting the field, for the first few months, I spent in making myself familiar with the villagers, observing their general condition, attending different social and religious festivals, etc. Such a friendly approach and a peripheral identification helped me later on to collect the data with little strain and inhibition. After that I had to spend 10 months collecting the necessary data. I revisited the village and spent about 3 months in the village to check my data and to collect new information. Moreover, I have attended each and every socio-religious festival and ceremony which was performed during 1972-73. People were very friendly, even to the extent of arranging, in

some cases; the ceremonies to my convenience.

Regarding language, I did not face any difficulty. For they speak Assamese and only but rarely in some religious festivals they fall upon Tai language.

To proceed with the investigation, at first, I started with a preliminary census. Along with the census, a detailed survey was made with a sketch map of the village ready at hand.

In collecting the data, I have followed various methods as advocated by different anthropologists. In most cases concrete case-histories were collected following the genealogical method. A requisite number of cases were collected from different individuals, which were subjected to most careful scrutiny before drawing a conclusion.

Quite a good number of genealogies were also collected to observe a wide range of persons under as many varied situations as were possible, since the angle of observation or vision is different from person to person. The genealogical method was useful in collecting kinship terminology, laws regulating descent and inheritance and also to find out the duties and privileges of the kin and lineage members.

The genealogical and the case-history methods were supplemented by the direct participant observation method. I have attended almost all the functions and ceremonies held during my stay in the field. Of course, in such cases, it was not possible to account for the past events. So along with this method, open-ended interview with questionnaire schedule was applied to find out the scientific information. To know the leadership pattern, the sociometric technique was applied, where the conclusion was drawn after calculating the total scores.

The data were carefully checked and are arranged in different chapters in a systematic way. Attempt has been made to obtain the support of concrete facts as far as possible.

#### EARLIER STUDIES

The genre of chronicle-literature, styled as *Buranji* (literally meaning treasure-house of old facts), has captured the minds of historians and scholars in the past. The Ahoms were the first to introduce the art of writing *Buranjis*. They could very well realise the importance of historical records and, therefore,

incorporated every detail of their rule in the *Buranjis*. They started keeping their account since the year 568 A.D., before their migration to Assam. "But it is not until Sukāphā became king in 1228 A.D. that they can be treated as historical records. From that date, however, they are generally very trustworthy."<sup>5</sup>

Invaluable as source-books though the *Buranjis* are, many of these have been translated into English and Assamese by different authors. Thus, we have a good historical account of the Ahoms. In this context, one should be grateful to one of the illustrious sons of Assam, the late Dr S.K. Bhuyan, who devoted most of his time painstaking compilation, editorial musts and publication of some of the important Ahom *Buranjis*. Prior to him G.C. Barua (1898, 1920) published some accounts. Historical accounts by foreign writers, to name only a few, like those of Gait, Wade and Maffatt Mill deserve special mention.

In recent years an Ahom scholar, Dr P. Gogoi has kept himself engaged in revealing the historical truths of the Ahom rule. The works of scholars like K.L. Barua, B.K. Barua, P.C. Choudhury, N.K. Basu are also worth mentioning. Many books and articles in Assamese have also been published by numerous others. Among them, the contributions of Lila Gogoi are to be recognised as substantial. The Tai Historical and Cultural Society of Assam has also contributed its share, as it has brought to light some historical and cultural information found in certain original Tai manuscripts.

Many more works by different authors may be added to make the list longer. But all these works are of historical importance. Unfortunately, no full-length work based on actual field study of anthropological interest has so far been published. This is another reason for selecting the Ahoms as the subject of the present study. From the physical anthropological point of view, the Ahoms, however, have been studied by different workers, and small articles on their physical characters have been published.

Village community studies seem to have gained popularity during the recent past. In India many anthropologists and sociologists have already completed such studies in different parts. In this field the prominent personalities are Srinivas,

5. Gait, E.A. *A History of Assam*, p. xiii (1965).

Dube, Majumder, Makim-Mariot, Bailey, Oscar Lewis, Beteille, etc. In this connection it should be remembered that Indian rural societies present varying spectacles from State to State and region to region, beside projecting similar variances from village to village, in the same State, due to their sociological, economic, religious, ethnic and other peculiarities. So, without intensive field studies in different villages, it is not possible to make any generalisation about Indian rural societies as a whole. Of course, during the last few decades, studies taken by the anthropologists covered a vast geographical area, i.e. from Himachal Pradesh in the north to the Tanjore in the south, from Rajasthan in the west to Bengal in the east. But Assam, which provides an ethno-cultural complex, still remains outside the pale of meaningful scientific study. This is another reason of undertaking the present study. Moreover, change is inevitable in the social world. Changes have taken place quite profusely in all the spheres of social life.

Both the exogamous and endogamous forces play an important role in bringing about change in a particular society. The society cannot exist in total isolation. As it is in contact with various other societies, there is every chance of cultural give and take, which ultimately result in acculturation or cultural change. Hence, it is essential to study and to recover these important matters, lest they get lost in darkness in the process of time, due to various factors of change.

The urgent need of recording vanishing culture is realised by many anthropologists and studies have been conducted in different parts of the country. Of course, the realisation of such need is no doubt as old as the discipline of Anthropology itself. But its importance was formally stressed in the Fourth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Science held in Vienna in 1952, where a symposium was held under the leadership of Professor Heine-Geldern on the "Urgent tasks in the field of Ethnology and Linguistics". Beside giving stress on the study of disappearing customs, the microscopic study of the various processes of transformation from one culture sequence to another can be best carried out within the contemporary changing folk and traditional communities.<sup>6</sup> Srinivas in his essay, 'Village studies and their significance' remarks, "the

studies of village communities which are currently being carried out in different parts of the country provide the future historian with a vast body of facts about rural social life, facts collected not by traveller in a hurry, but by men who are trained to observe keenly and accurately. These studies constitute therefore valuable contributions to the social, political, economic and religious history of our country."<sup>7</sup>

With all these various aims in view the present study was conducted in an Ahom village. It is hoped that through an intensive micro study it will be possible to provide a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the village life.

6. Vidyarthi, L.P. 1969. "Urgent Anthropology for Tribal Bihar." *Urgent Research in Social Anthropology*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, p. 175 (1969).
7. Srinivas, M.N. *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, p. 133 (1962).