

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE  
OF  
THE SCHEDULED CASTES OF ASSAM : A CASE STUDY  
OF  
THREE SCHEDULED CASTE VILLAGES  
IN  
HOJAI SUBDIVISION**

**BY  
MR. GORKEY BORGOHAIN**

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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The thesis is worthy of being considered for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy in Economics.

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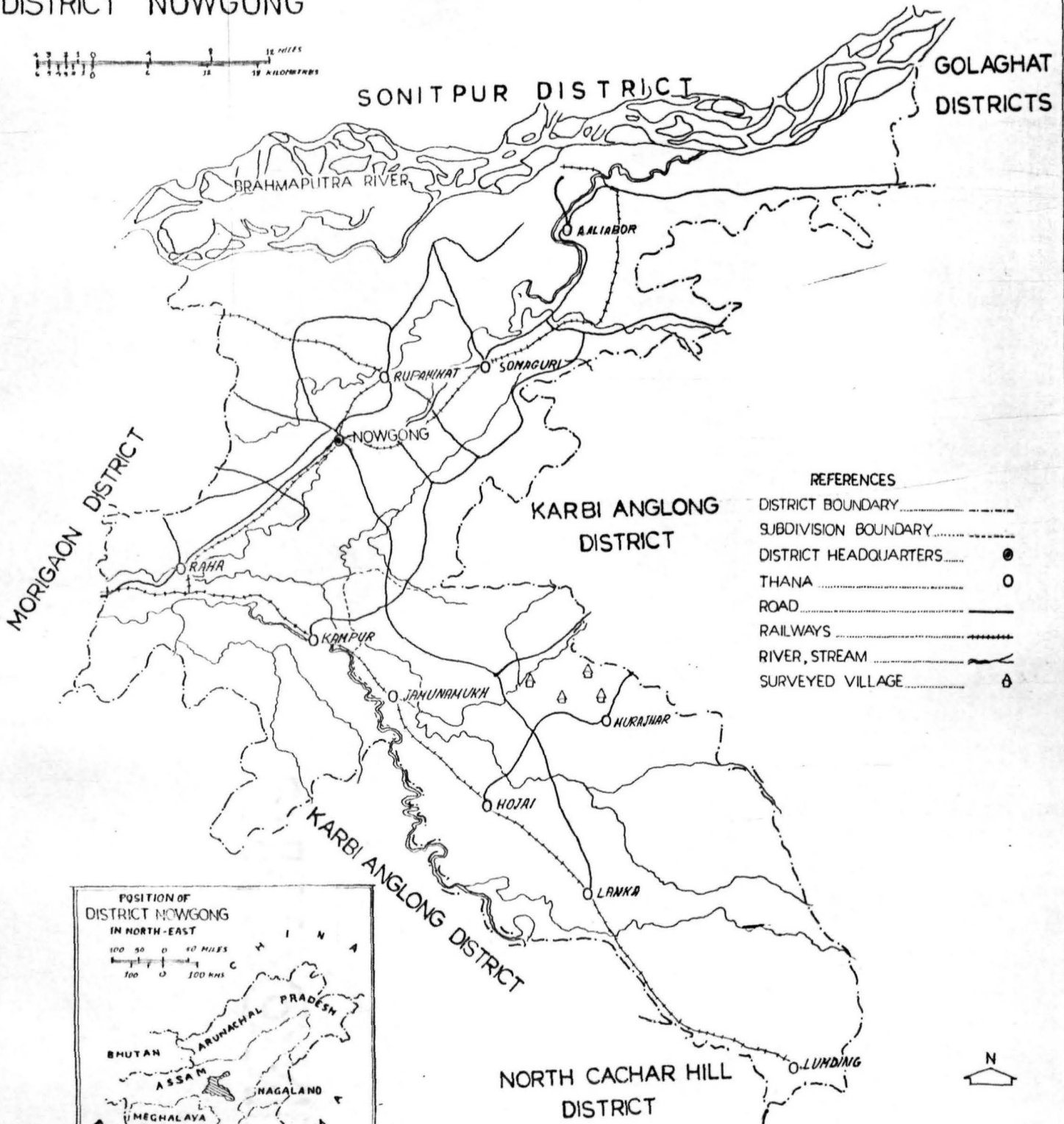
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May 28, 1990

*Gorkey Borgohain*  
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# LOCATION MAP OF DISTRICT NOWGONG



### REFERENCES

- DISTRICT BOUNDARY ..... - - - - -
- SUBDIVISION BOUNDARY ..... - - - - -
- DISTRICT HEADQUARTERS ..... ●
- THANA ..... ○
- ROAD ..... ————
- RAILWAYS ..... —+—+—+—+—+—
- RIVER, STREAM ..... ————
- SURVEYED VILLAGE ..... ⬢



Chapter I

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Introduction, Methodology and Geographical Background

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Different disciplines of social sciences have their own respective approaches to the study of the various aspects of the social structure of various societies. The economists, for instance, study the economic aspect of the society. It is well known that the Indian society is characterised by the multiplicity of castes, creeds, languages and regions which are responsible for a variety of social structures and economic levels in the country.

The group of people known as scheduled caste is one of the most backward societies in India including Assam. The scheduled castes forming the fifth order of the four-fold society of Hindu concept of caste, have, in the republican constitution of India, been provided with special privileges not only in the matter of recruitment to services but also in the matter of reservation for representation in the legislative bodies.<sup>1</sup> 'Scheduled Caste' is an expression standardised in the constitution of the Republic of India. The term perhaps owes its origin to Section 309 of the Government of India Act, 1935. In accordance with this enactment some of the undefined depressed castes were singled out in 1936 and listed in a Schedule in order to ensure certain concession and privileges to them because of their disadvantageous

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1 G.S. Ghurye, Caste and Race in India (1969), p.307

position in the social hierarchy. Since their names had been shown in the "Schedule", they came to be known as Scheduled Castes although Mahatma Gandhi had, through his weekly 'The Harijan' and his Harijan Sevak Sangh, designated these classes as 'Harijans'.

According to Article 341 of the Constitution of India, the President, after consultation with the Head of a State and by a public notification may specify the castes, races or tribes or groups within castes, which shall for the purpose of the Constitution, be deemed to be "schedule castes" in relation to the concerned state or the Union Territory. The Constitution empowers the parliament to pass a law to include in or exclude from the list of the scheduled castes by the President of India, any caste, race or tribe. It is interesting to note that under Article 341, the Constitution has provision for the inclusion of even a tribe into the scheduled castes.

The scheduled castes are characterised by their lowest status in the Indian society. From time immemorial the scheduled castes have been suffering from social injustice and exploitation. They were denied entry into better occupations and the field of their activities was restricted to unclean and menial jobs. They also had no access to education. The road to knowledge was closed to them. They suffered from suppression at the hands of upper castes for

centuries. Even if the scheduled castes have made some educational achievement, they are not treated on an equal footing with the high castes having the same educational qualification. This is so because in India the status of an individual is influenced not only by his individual wealth but also by the social status of the group to which he belongs. Thus the scheduled castes remain socially, educationally and economically backward.

Very few social workers honestly care to improve the lot of the down-trodden people who may perish if casteism does not go. The main cause of their sufferings is their economic inequality and poverty. Nearly 70 to 80 per cent scheduled castes are living below the poverty line as per 1971 census. They have to be urgently lifted above the line. It is for this reason that our government has started a special plan meant specifically for the economic upliftment of the scheduled castes people. Under the Sixth Five-Year Plan, many schemes for the economic welfare of the members of this community, were taken up and it was the endeavour of the Government to bring at least 50 per cent of the total population of the scheduled caste above the poverty line. But provision for their economic welfare only is not the real answer. Education and creation of an atmosphere in the country where people of the upper castes treat them equally in social life is most required.

India has the largest population of depressed class or untouchables. After 42 years of freedom and with the constitution which prescribes equality and justice to all irrespective of castes, colour, creed or sex, casteism still prevails in India with 150 million untouchables being neglected. They live in constant fear and with inferiority complex. Before independence the upper caste Hindus were blaming the Britishers for the wretched condition of the untouchables. Now after 42 years of India's Independence the poor and slavish condition of the untouchables persists.

Under the leadership of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as the first Prime Minister of Independent India, many social reformers and social workers have been fighting casteism with a much greater determination. But casteism continues. Atrocities against Harijans in the country continue to mount up notwithstanding the various measures adopted by the Government. The makers of the Indian Constitution were aware of the problems faced by the scheduled caste people and they, therefore, provided various safeguards in the Constitution as already referred to above. Large amount of funds have been spent for implementation of the various schemes for the upliftment of the scheduled caste. But the desire of the framers of the Indian Constitution to socially and economically upgrade this community has not yet been fulfilled. The general picture of implementation of the schemes is not

encouraging. Reservation of seats in the State Assemblies and the Parliament have been fully enforced, but the condition of the large mass of the Scheduled Caste remains unchanged. They are still at the bottom of the social hierarchy characterised by poverty, discrimination and deprivation as their lot. Untouchability was practised even against a person who had climbed to a very high level of his political career. That person was late Jagjivan Ram who once inaugurated a temple whose idols had later to be washed with holy waters from the Ganges<sup>1</sup>. To safeguard the interest of scheduled castes and tribes in India, the Central Government instituted the Scheduled Castes and Tribes Commission whose recommendations remain unimplemented. The scheduled caste community has been an offspring of the Hindu religion. The members of the scheduled caste have now tended to embrace other religions including Christianity because they feel that this is the only way to free themselves from the harassment of the Upper Caste Hindus. But they are facing a problem on this front also besides creating a problem for the members of other faiths as well who accept the Scheduled Castes within their fold. The greatest problem of the scheduled castes is, therefore, the question of being accepted by the members of the Upper Castes with equal rights and privileges in all aspects of life. The scheduled castes do not like to be regarded as objects of charity. They must

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1. B. Das, "A Glimpse of the Scheduled Castes and their Socio-economic Development in Assam", p.10.

have the right to equal opportunities. A scheduled caste should first be treated as a human being. His caste must be a secondary thing. Their aspirations should not be frustrated otherwise the reservation and other special privileges granted to them would be considered as a mockery. All these special rights and privileges provided by the Government will have little meaning unless the members of the community are allowed to take advantage of the same. All recommendations and suggestions made for their upliftment remained on papers only. Thus the members of the scheduled caste continue to be socially, educationally and economically backward.

According to 1971 census, the population of scheduled castes in India was 8.25 crores which works out to 15.04% of total population of India. As per 1971 census the scheduled castes population in Assam was 9.13 lakh accounting for 6.24% of the total population of Assam. The scheduled castes population of India as per 1981 census was 10.48 crores excluding Assam. There was no census in Assam in 1981, but the projected scheduled castes population of Assam would be 12.42 lakh in 1981. In Assam the following 16 subcastes were recognised as the scheduled castes on the basis of the Poona Agreement and the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950(a) Part (II) Assam :

1. Namashudra
2. Kaiborta
3. Patni
4. Muchi (Cobbler)
5. Hira (Potter)
6. Sutradhar (Carpenter)
7. Jhalo/Malo
8. Bania (Tradesman)
9. Bhuimali or Mali (Flowers gardening)
10. Dhubi/Dhoba (Laundry)
11. Mehtar/Bhangi (Scavenger)
12. Jalkeot/Jalia
13. Bansphor
14. Dugla or Dholi
15. Mahara (Palkibearer)
16. Lalbegi.

Among the Scheduled Castes of Assam, Namashudras and Kaibortas are dominant which respectively accounted for 32.97 and 32.31 per cent of the total scheduled castes population in Assam. The Lalbegi has the lowest population which contains only 0.01 per cent of the total scheduled castes population in Assam as per 1971 census.

The scheduled castes people in Assam are not settling in concentrated pockets. They usually live interspersed with the general population of the state in widely scattered areas.

There are, however, isolated pockets where these people are predominant. According to 1971 census, Nagaon District has the largest scheduled castes population numbering 167,263 (18%) followed by Cachar with 128,176 (14%) scheduled castes population. North Cachar has the lowest scheduled castes population, i.e. 826 only (0.01%).

### Objectives of the Study

Studies on socio-economic life of the scheduled castes of Assam have assumed great importance in recent times in view of their active involvement on social change and economic development in other parts of the country. Studies on scheduled castes in India have so far been mainly conducted at the national level which tend to conceal the distinctive social, economic and environmental patterns at the sub-national spatial levels. Such macro level studies tend to overlook the regional peculiarities of the scheduled castes. Our present study is designed neither to substantiate nor to refute the existing theories of social and economic change and development among the scheduled castes living in other parts of India. Ours is a humble attempt to supply or provide such information which may find relevance in discussing these concepts. Here we are basically concerned with examining the impact of social systems such as the family, religion and cultural on the socio-economic life of the scheduled castes of Assam specially in the rural areas.

Keeping this fact in view the study would be carried out in order to depict their socio-economic life. The study was done by making a sample survey of three selected villages in the Hojai sub-division. In view of the growing attention being paid to the village economic studies, the selection of this topic is very relevant.

Indian villages, particularly the scheduled castes villages continue in a state of backwardness in spite of the planned development programmes in the country since 1951. Agricultural productivity has been miserably low due to lack of proper implements, educational training and scientific knowledge that have now been widely applied in agricultural production elsewhere in the country and the world.

The present governmental efforts have laid great emphasis on rural development. This is another important aspect that needs in-depth study in order to see how the scheduled castes have been benefitted from the state endeavours for uplifting the poor and the down-trodden people in Assam.

### Methodology

To furnish a scientific report of research in any branch of knowledge requires a detailed account of the methods

and techniques employed in getting the relevant data presentation. In other words, methodology is a pre-requisite to the understanding of the value and significance of the results achieved. It is important to realise that the selection of specific field techniques depend not only on the types of problem and the specific condition of the community, e.g. whether a community is literate or illiterate but also on the concepts utilized as guidelines in the study.

For the purpose of this study, both the primary and secondary data were collected mainly from the Assam State Development Corporation for Scheduled Castes Limited, Gauhati; Report of the Committee on Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes; Census of India 1961 and 1971, Vol. I; as well as relevant government reports both published and unpublished. Besides, an interview schedule was prepared for the collection of the primary data from the selected villages.

#### Selection of Villages

The three villages were selected for field investigation. These are Gonispar, Bongaon and Tangiagaon which are under Namati Mouza of Hojai circle and all the inhabitants in the three villages are Namashudra, a major scheduled caste community of Assam.

Table 1.1 below gives the number of households in the three villages surveyed.

Table 1.1.

Location and Number of Households in the Three Villages,  
Surveyed - 1989-90

Village	Mouza	Sub-division	District	No. of households
1. Ganiapar	Namati	Hojai	Nagaon	109
2. Bangaon	Namati	Hojai	Nagaon	113
3. Tangiagaon	Namati	Hojai	Nagaon	65
Total				287

At the preliminary stage of investigation, a complete list of all the households of the three villages was prepared and particulars of the total landholding and family holding sizes were also collected. The households were classified according to the size of total landholding. Table 1.2 below gives the results of this preliminary listing of family size according to size of total landholding in all the three villages.

Table 1.2

Distribution of Households and Population of the three surveyed Villages by Size of Landholding, 1989-90

Sizes of Landholding (Acres)	Ganiapar		Bangaon		Tangiagaon	
	No. of household	No. of persons	No. of household	No. of persons	No. of household	No. of persons
0-1	20	98	12	63	10	46
2-3	4	12	12	62	5	26
4-5	4	9	5	24	6	41
6-7	15	80	22	115	24	133
8-9	16	90	30	176	12	68
10-11	6	28	6	46	3	17
12-13	8	43	12	71	4	24
14-15	25	195	11	72	-	-
16-17	3	23	1	13	-	-
18-19	4	39	-	-	-	-
20 and above	4	25	2	20	2	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>742</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>662</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>370</b>

(Note : The minimum landholding reported was 0.05 acres while the maximum size of landholding reported was 27.1 acres).

However, as a result of drawing the sample for each size class of landholding and for each village, the total number of household samples aggregated to 96 which gives us 33.33 per cent as the ultimate size of the total sample. Table 1.3 shows the distribution of surveyed households by size of landholdings in the three villages.

Table 1.3

Distribution of sample households by size of landholding  
1989-90

Size of Landholding (Acres)	Number of households			
	Ganiapar	Bangaon	Tangiagaon	Total
0-1	7	8	3	18
2-3	2	5	1	8
4-5	1	1	3	5
6-7	4	4	6	14
8-9	6	4	4	14
10-11	1	3	3	7
12-13	4	5	1	10
14-15	6	4	-	10
16-17	1	2	-	3
18-19	1	-	-	1
20 and above	3	2	1	6
	36	33	22	96

The collection of village data was conducted by means of an interview schedule containing seven Blocks of information :

- (1) Respondent's Social Background;
- (2) Family Background;
- (3) Economy and Occupation;
- (4) System of Marriage;
- (5) Political System;
- (6) Cultural System;
- (7) Religion and Health.

The collected data were also analysed with the help of suitable statistical technique.

#### Geographical Background

All the above three villages selected for our study belong to Hojai subdivision of Nagaon district of Assam. This subdivision was created on the 15th August 1983 which comprises two administrative revenue circles. From very ancient time Hojai subdivision has been a land of agriculturists where important crops like paddy, pulses, jute, sugar-cane, mustard, coconut, etc. are produced regularly.

Hojai subdivision is almost surrounded by the Karbi Anglong district of Assam except for a narrow neck which connects it with its parent district of Nagaon. It is located between latitudes  $27^{\circ}60'$  and  $26^{\circ}50'$  North and longitudes  $92^{\circ}51'$  and  $93^{\circ}40'$  East. The land area comprising Hojai subdivision is 1224 square kilometres which works out to 22.13 per cent of the total land area of Nagaon district as per 1971 census

report.<sup>1</sup>

The three villages are situated in very interior place of Hojai subdivision. But the communication system of Ganiapar and Bongaon is comparatively better than Tangiagaon. Both Ganiapar and Bongaon are located at Namati mouza at a distance of four kilometres from the P.W.D. main road. There is good transport service which helps the villagers to communicate with the outside world. On the other hand, Tangiagaon is situated by the side of river Jamuna under Namati mouza at a distance of more than 11 kilometres from the P.W.D. road. Moreover, the village is connected with the road by a muddy village footpath which is not suitable for proper communication. The table 1.4 below gives the location and land area of the three villages :

Table 1.4

Location and Land Area of the three villages

Village	Mouza	Subdivision	District	Land Area (in acre)
1. Ganiapar	Namati	Hojai	Nagaon	770 acres
2. Bongaon	Namati	Hojai	Nagaon	710 acres
3. Tangiagaon	Namati	Hojai	Nagaon	315 acres
Total				1,795 acres

1. Important Statistics of Nagaon District, 1985-86, pp. 1-2.

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### Topical Organization

The work has been divided into six chapters. The Introductory chapter contains a brief explanation of the constitutional status of the scheduled castes in India, the objective and methodology of the survey and the geographical background of the Hojai subdivision where the survey was undertaken. The second chapter describes the social structure of the scheduled castes of Assam in all its aspects including the physical features, food and dietary system, dress and ornaments, culture and craft, village system and dwelling houses, religion, festivals and language. In the third chapter we have depicted the marriage custom and family pattern of the scheduled castes in Assam. The fourth chapter gives a description of the socio-political institutions of the villages. The fifth chapter deals with the occupational pattern of the castes, their landholding system and other economic statuses. The concluding chapter summarises the findings and gives the conclusions that emerge from the study.

Chapter II

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**Social Structure of the Scheduled Castes**

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The concept of "social structure" is paradoxically so fundamental to social science as to render its uncontested definition virtually impossible. Basic concepts in particular seem likely to suffer from this difficulty, since their primordial character demands that they provide an effective link between the field of inquiry and the philosophy of the individual scholar. Various controversies, both apparent and real, are thus especially likely to surround the use of such concepts. In the case of "social structure", some of these difficulties are purely terminological while some are derived more fundamentally from disagreement over the basic philosophical assumptions appropriate to social research. However, the concept has now been broadly defined as "the totality of patterns of collective human phenomena that cannot be explained solely on the basis of human heredity and/or the non-human environment."<sup>1</sup>

Based on this definition, the social structure of the scheduled castes of Assam has been studied on the basis of their physical features; food and dietary system, dress and ornaments; culture and craft; village and dwelling house system; religion; festivals and language. We shall therefore

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<sup>1</sup> David, L. Sills (ed.), International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 14, p.489.

devote this chapter to the discussion of these aspects of life of the scheduled castes in Assam.

### Physical Features

The Chandalas were the origin of the scheduled castes. "The Dharma sutra writers<sup>1</sup> declare the Chandalas to be the progeny of the most hated of the reverse order of mixed unions, that of a Brahmin female with a Shudra male."<sup>2</sup> This proves that the scheduled castes are of Aryan origin. There was a similar influx of tribes of Mongolian origin to India where a mixture of races took place. The scheduled castes may possibly be the progeny of the Aryan and Mongolian origin and therefore it is very natural for them to expect to bear the basic physical features of both the Aryan and Mongolian races.

In general the scheduled castes are black in skin colour and having extremely muscular and developed limbs while their hair is generally straight and black. The growth of the face is scant and an eye brow is scanty. The cheek bones are moderately prominent, lips are of medium thickness and the eyes are oblique. The scheduled castes are also quite strong and stout physically. The scheduled castes of Assam bear similar physical features.

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1. Dharma sutra Writers include Baudhyana, Gautama, Vasistha, Manu and others.

2. Ghurye, G.S., "Caste and Race in India", p.304.

### Food and Dietary System

Food and shelter are the two primary necessities of life. They determine the fundamental nature of man's relation of his environment. The scheduled castes are predominantly non-vegetarians. The dietary habits of the community is the result of a long period of experiences and adaptations to the environment and the resources available to them. As such, habits like dietary habits are hard to change very fast. Hence, it is not surprising to find that the dietary habits of the people of the scheduled castes is found to be more or less the same everywhere in India including Assam.

Their daily diet consists of varieties of food items like rice, flour, fish, chicken, mutton, vegetables, different type of pulses, egg and milk. etc. Some of them also like to eat roasted fish. Most of them consider mutton and chicken to have higher quality of all food items. Rice is the major food item and it is taken twice in a day with some meat, fish, vegetables or pulse.

Among the scheduled castes of Assam, tea is the main item of drinks on account of the fact that Assam has been the principal home of tea plants. In every scheduled caste family a cup of tea is offered to every visitor as a gesture of friendliness and hospitality. Tea is always taken with milk and sugar. They also provide betelnut to every visitor as a token of hospitality.

Most of the people do not take spicy food all the time. They prefer to take their food prepared in the Assamese way of cooking, i.e. boiled food. A normal daily diet consists of boiled rice, fish vegetable, pulse and sauces. A few of them also use mutton, chicken and flour.

An important finding of their food habit is that every one takes two major meals in a day, morning meal and evening meal. There is a near uniform timing in the pattern of taking food. In the morning from 05.00 to 07.00 hours, tea is taken; then they get busy preparing their morning meal which is taken around 08.00 to 11.00 hours. Later in the afternoon, tea is taken with some cake made of rice or any kind of snacks at around 13.00 to 15.00 hours. Then evening meal is taken around 19.00 to 21.00 hours. Of course, there is light variation in the food timing among some families. There is no variation in the food timing of taking food. They fix the timing of taking food according to their own convenience. However, to most of them the timing is nearly uniform.

One of the general features of their food habits relates to the fact that they are non-vegetarian and consume rice, fish and vegetable in large quantity and most of them do not want to change their traditional food habits.

The following table 2.1 shows the number of respondents who want to change and those who do not want to change their present food habits in the three villages surveyed :

Table 2.1

**Reaction to the Question of Change  
in Food Habits**

Sl. No.	Name of village	No. of respondents who want to change present food habits	No. of respondents who do not want to change present food habits	Total No. of respondents	% of respondents who want to change present food habits	% of respondents who do not want to change present food habits
1	Ganiapar	5	31	36	13.89%	86.11%
2	Bongaon	9	29	38	23.69%	76.31%
3	Tangiagaon	7	15	22	31.82%	68.18%
<b>Total</b>		<b>21</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>21.88%</b>	<b>78.13%</b>

From the above table it is clear that more than 78 per cent of the scheduled castes in Assam do not want to change their traditional food habits. The pattern of food habits which is the result of adaptation to the environment, takes a long time to change.

However, it has been discovered that changes in the quantity of certain food items consumed as well as in the method of preparation of food have taken place. Moreover, many people have taken to wheat flour instead of rice. Another important change that has taken place is the increasing use of oil, sugar and tea. One informant who is a house-wife said that 20 years ago all the villagers used home-made molasses instead of sugar. But now the

villagers feel honoured if tea is served with sugar and milk.

Despite these changes, rice, fish, meat and vegetable still remains the major food item. On the whole, their dietary and food habits have remained more or less the same.

### Dress and Ornaments

The dress of a man discloses his personality and the culture of the nation to which he belongs. Dress in itself combines a motive of protection from the hazards of climate and the display of physical charm derived from primitive instinct.

The dress and ornaments of the scheduled castes in Assam is a part of modern Assamese dress and ornaments. Thus in this aspect they have been influenced by the Assamese culture. However, their traditional dress can be described under two broad heads :

- 1) Essential clothing and 2) Ornamental or decorative.

**Essential clothing :** In essential clothing are included all articles used mainly for the purpose of covering human body.

**Ornaments :** The ornaments include all articles used for personal distinctiveness and physical charm.

The original dress of the menfolk consists of Dhoti and Panjabi shirt, Dumer, Tongali, Chador (wrapper), Gamusa (Napkin), wooden-sandal, etc. But at present most of the modern young group of scheduled castes also use long-pants and shirts, coat, neck-tie, trousers, banian, jayegia, pyzama, halfpant, sweater, woolen-clothes, muffler, glove, cap, belt, sandal, shoe and stocking, etc.

Like the menfolk, the women also have their own original dress, i.e. Mekhela (petticoat), chadar (scarf), sari, riha, etc. But in recent time they also use blouse, chemise, trouser and shirt, mini-skirt, maxi, frock, woolen-clothes, sweater, glove, muffler, sandal, shoe and stocking, etc.

Formerly, the members of the community used home-made dress decorated with embroidery. But now they use mill cloth with the latest designs of dresses according to their own convenience.

Earlier, both men and women among the scheduled castes used all sorts of ornaments and cosmetic for beauty's sake. Their inevitable ornaments were Kamphuli (ear-ring), Galpata (Necklace), Keru, Anguthi (Finger-ring), Nak-Phuli (ear-studs) (Nose-studs), Kharu (Bracelets), Gamkharu, anklet, wrist-watch etc. which were made of gold or silver in accordance with their own convenience. But now-a-days men-folk use only finger rings and wrist-watches, while other items of ornaments are

considered to be that of women. Thus, from time immemorial the scheduled castes people have been using different types of ornaments made of gold, silver and copper.

### Culture and Craft

Culture has been defined in more than one ways. In common parlance, the word 'culture' is understood to mean beautiful, refined or interesting; but this interpretation does not constitute its scientific definition.

According to Taylor, "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."<sup>1</sup>

In the words of MacIver and Page, "This is the realm of styles, or values, of emotional attachments, of intellectual adventures. Culture then is the antithesis of civilization. It is the expression of our nature, in our modes of living and thinking, in our everyday intercourse, in art, in literature, in recreation and enjoyment."<sup>2</sup>

From the above two definitions, it becomes amply clear that culture cannot be defined in one word. It has many varied specific meanings and characteristics.

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1. David, L. Sills (ed.) International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 3, page 527.

2. Ibid., p.528-29.

However, it is discovered that the basic culture of the scheduled castes in Assam owes its origin from the Hindu culture. The Hindu culture, as it exists today, is not merely based upon the rules and traditions of Aryans alone, but it is a mixture of more advanced rules and traditions of the Aryans, Sakas, Humas, Kusanas, Muslims, Christians, etc. and other races who migrated to India from time to time in the past. The first stage of Hindu culture was made by the mixture of rules and traditions prevalent among the Aryas and Anaryas. All the great men, whether Aryas and Anaryas, must have equally been respected for their contributions.

Like the Hindu culture, the scheduled caste culture is also a mixture of the culture of different castes and communities of India including Assam. However, two aspects of culture are found among the scheduled castes in Assam which may be analysed on two broad bases, namely, material culture and non-material or spiritual culture.

The material culture includes dwelling, tools, eating and drinking, dress and ornaments, and social requirements, etc. The non-material culture on the other hand includes religion, belief, feasts and festivals, issues like mental construction, the form of universe etc.

The art of changing the spiritual and material forces for the best of social life may be called 'culture'. From this view-point, the culture of the scheduled castes in Assam has a

distinctive meaning. It contains a harmony between spiritual and material aspects of life.

Efforts were made in the past to include the social institutions in the spiritual aspect of culture. Consequently, people became inactive. In other words, social institutions were made complex by covering them with spiritual gown. Besides, Varna (caste) and varna relations were sought to be included in religion in order to satisfy the interest of the dominating groups.<sup>1</sup> In due course, this mixing of social institutions into dharma became a major hurdle in social development and consequently, the scheduled castes lagged behind in both the aspects of their life.

The material aspect was mostly ignored in comparison to spiritual life. That is why the scheduled castes remained socially, educationally and economically backward. When the spiritualism and materialism mixed with each other, no caste of India could touch the real spiritual aspect. They do not achieve anything either in the field of science or in the sphere of religion.

The scheduled caste people have been using various types of machines and hand-made tools and craft for various purposes and activities. In agriculture they use plough, harrow, yoke, spade, sickle, weeding hook, shovel, rake, hatchet, dao (big knife), etc. which are home-made. In fishing, they use

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1. Sagar, S.L., Hindu Culture and Caste System in India (1975), p.30.

fishing nets, Longthrai, Juluki, Pala, etc. In household weaving, they use loom, reel for winding thread on contrivance for winding, spinning wheel etc. and make various beautiful items of dress. They are very skillful in cane works. They make cane and bamboo baskets, box, mat, plate, spoon, ladle, dala, salani, fan, cot, chair, murha, almirah table, etc. They can also make wooden box, tub, chair, table bed. The Hira<sup>1</sup> community of scheduled castes is very talented in making various types of earthen pots. All fishing equipments including fishing nets are also manually made at home. The Bania community is very efficient in making different types of ornament of gold, silver and copper which have their own disposition.

All these handicraft works of the scheduled castes have been handed down by their forefathers to their present day culture.

#### Village System and Dwelling House

The scheduled caste villages are not scattered in nature. They are rather compact settlements. The villages are big and named after the name of its founder or after the name of any prominent geographical object that exists in the locality. A study of location of the three villages selected for this study substantiates this principle that guided the

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1. See List at p. 7 of Chapter I.

scheduled castes in selecting the location of their respective village.

The first need being water and fishes and hence villages are located near a river, Beel (lake) and Khal (Tank) to ensure consistent and dependable supply of drinking water facilities and fishing.

The second need being security the main consideration for selection of a village site is to ensure natural protection and a good defensive position against surreptitious attacks.

The third important factor which has to be considered was the availability of a suitable <sup>land</sup> for cultivation, residential purpose and pasture.

The site selected for residential purpose is generally of a high level ground with possibility of easy water supply. The villages are usually located in the midst of the agricultural fields all around. The villages are usually approachable from all sides. Several hamlets used to combine into one village.

The houses are built with bamboo, or woods. But now-a-days even cement concrete buildings are erected. Every house has a big kitchen garden around it. The houses are generally built in two rows facing each other leaving sufficient space in between as the main approach to the houses.

The houses are of three main types. They are as follows :

- 1) Bamboo-walled huts with thatched roofs;
- 2) Bamboo and wooden-walled houses with thatched roofs;
- 3) Brick-walled houses with thatched or iron sheets roofs.

The first type of huts are strongly built on bamboo posts on a raised platform and for the super-structure, bamboo is used. Thatch is used for roofing purpose. The walls are made with bamboo. This type of huts are small one-roomed structure with two main doors, one in the front and the other in the back side, and without windows. Sometimes an incomplete partition may divide the room into two parts. One part is used for sleeping and the other part is used for cooking and storing things. Generally, this type of huts are used by the very poor people of the rural area.

The second type of houses are larger than the huts. They consist of three to six rooms depending upon the size of the family and its economic status. The majority of the villagers live in this type of houses. This type of houses are constructed with bamboo and wood and with thatched roofs. The houses are strongly built on bamboo and wooden posts on a raised platform and for the super-structure bamboo and woods are used. Thatch or iron-sheets are utilized for roofing

purposes. The walls are made of bamboo which are plastered with mud and cowdung. In such type of houses, there are one door and one or more windows for each room according to their capacity and necessity.

The third type of houses are strongly built on concrete posts on a raised platform. The walls are constructed with brick and the iron-sheets are used for roofing. But this type of houses are very costly for which very few people avail this type of house.

The table 2.2 on the next page illustrates the number and percentage of families using different types of houses in the three surveyed villages.

The table clearly shows that most of the people have been using the second type of houses. Out of 96 families, 54 have been dwelling in such type of houses which account for 56.25 per cent of the total 96 households under survey. The first and the third pattern of houses are used by 33.33% and 10.42% respectively of the total families under survey. This reveals the poor economic condition of the scheduled castes of Assam.

**Table 2.2**

**Number and percentage of the family using different pattern of houses of the three surveyed villages**

Sl. No.	Name of village	Number of families who use Bamboo-walled huts	Number of families who use Bamboo/wooden-walled houses	Number of families who use Brick-walled houses	Total number of families who use different types of houses	% of family who uses Bamboo-walled huts	% of family who uses Bamboo/wooden-walled houses	% of family who uses brick-walled houses
1.	Ganlapar	12	19	5	36	33.33%	52.78%	13.89%
2.	Bongaon	11	24	3	38	28.95%	63.16%	7.89%
3.	Tanglagon	9	11	2	22	40.91%	50.00%	9.09%
<b>Total</b>		<b>32</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>33.33%</b>	<b>56.25%</b>	<b>10.42%</b>

### Religion and Festivals

The Scheduled Castes are essentially religious people. The 1931 Census Report of Assam states that the religion of the scheduled castes (untouchability) is of a very crude and vague character. The statement seems to be correct. The scheduled castes follow both their traditional Hindu religion, and Vasinavic Hindu religion of Assam. They do worship the heavenly bodies and also the spirits of earthly bodies and the departed souls of their respective families. But at the same time they worship the Hindu Gods and Goddesses and offer worship to them. The scheduled castes people now identify themselves with the Hindus and revere cow as a sacred animal. They have also accepted the Kalsanghati system (one of the doctrine of Shri Shankar Dev's Vaishnavism), as part of their religion.

"Religion is a process of adjustment to the intangible, unseen, unknown and uncontrolled forces believed to be present in the social situation."<sup>1</sup>

Since their present religion is an outcome of Hinduism, the main principles of their religion are the belief in the theory of Karma, birth and rebirth or transmigration of the soul. The four main objects of life are Karma (work); Artha (money); Dharma (religion); Moksha (salvation). Besides, it

1. David, L. Sills (ed.), International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 13, p. 398-399.

includes two more concepts, namely the doctrine of 'Maya' and the doctrine that the world is divine. The doctrine of Maya is supposed to repudiate the reality of the world thus makes all ethical relations meaningless. The world of nature is said to be unreal and human history illusory. But according to Radhakrishnan, this theory cannot be regarded as representing the main tendency of Hindu thought. Hindus do not regard that life is a mere dream and all experienced events are illusions.

Regarding the second doctrine that the Hindu ethical rules are meaningless because the world is divine is also not correct in the strict sense of the term. Moksha, which is the ultimate object of life is to be attained by three means known as Karma, Bhakti and Jnana. These means are to be made use of in accordance with dharma. "The four Ashrams - the varna organisation; education, marriage, family, personal and social conduct - are means to one end, and must be followed, in accordance with dharma."<sup>1</sup>

The main theme of the religion of the scheduled castes of Assam is based on the above mentioned principles of Hinduism which have influenced their socio-economic life. Hence caste and sub-caste systems among the scheduled castes of

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1. Prabhu, P.N., Hindu Social Organisation, (1958), p.67.

Assam originated from Hinduism which later on become part of their socio-economic life. According to Hindu tradition the caste system owes its origin to the four varnas which were derived from the person of the supreme creator Brahma. The Varnas are respectively the Brahmana, who sprang from the mouth of the Brahma, the Kshatriya who was created from his arms, the Vaishya who came from his thighs, and the Sudra who was born from his feet. The Sudras are now known as scheduled castes. They have accepted this unfavourable belief and practices of the Hindu social order. This is indeed surprising. Like the high caste Hindus, the scheduled castes extend the same treatment to the castes which they think, are still below them in the hierarchy. Perhaps the 'Karma theory' has exerted greater pressure than anything else with the scheduled castes people.

Nearly 75% of the respondents give their positive view about Karma. By and large they have similar belief regarding the existence of hell and heaven. Only 15% respondents have reported as not having any such beliefs.

They also believe that human illness, health and welfare of their family depend on the favour of supernatural power or God. The following table gives the attitude about God of the people in the three surveyed villages :

Table 2.3

## Attitude Towards God

Sl. No.	Name of the village	No. of respondents who believe in God	No. of respondents who do not believe in God	Total No. of respondents	% of respondents who believe in God	% of respondents who do not believe in God
1.	Ganiapar	27	9	36	75.00%	25.00%
2.	Bongaon	17	21	38	45.00%	55.00%
3.	Tangiagaon	19	3	22	86.36%	13.64%
Total		63	33	96	65.63%	34.37%

From the above table, it is apparent that most of the people believe in supernatural power which is an outcome of Hinduism as well as their ignorance. About 65.63% of the people believe in God while only 34.73% of the people do not believe in God or supernatural power in case of illness, health and welfare of the family.

Every scheduled castes village has its own 'Namghar' or temple. The annual religious functions of the village community are celebrated in Namghar. There is a daily or a weekly prayer system among the scheduled castes people.

**Table 2.4**

**Attitudes Towards Nanghar**

Sl. No.	Name of the village	No. of respondents who regularly go to Nanghar	No. of respondents who occasionally go to Nanghar	No. of respondents who never go to Nanghar	Total number of respondents	% of respondents who regularly go to Nanghar	% of respondents who occasionally go to Nanghar	% of respondents who never go to Nanghar
1.	Ganispar	22	13	1	36	63.16%	31.58%	5.26%
2.	Bongson	24	11	3	38	63.16%	28.95%	7.89%
3.	Tanglagaon	11	9	2	22	50.00%	40.91%	9.09%
<b>Total</b>		<b>57</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>59.38%</b>	<b>34.37%</b>	<b>6.25%</b>

Table 2.4 indicates the attitude of the respondents towards Namghar or the place of worship in the three surveyed villages. From the table it is clearly seen that most of the people are regular in performing their religious affairs while very few people are not conscious about their religion. Out of the total number of the respondents, 59.38 percent regularly visited, 34.37 per cent occasionally visited, while 6.25 per cent <sup>never</sup> visited the Namghar. Almost all the people perform their religious function in Namghar. In all their religious ceremonies, they offer rice, milk, fruits, pulses, fish, betelnut, etc. to the idol. Elaborate ceremonies connected with the religious functions, cost people and even the state exchequer huge sums of money besides loss of man-hours. Such influence of religion on the economic activities in the society has been clearly brought out by Max Weber in "Protestant and the Spirit of Capitalism". It is argued that traditional Hindu outlook of the people has really discouraged productive process thereby exerting great strain on the economy of the nation.

### Festivals

The festivals of a nation have manifested the social integrity and the nature of religion and culture of that nation. From time immemorial the different communities of

Assam have been observing some common festivals which are now considered as the national festivals of Assam. The festivals observed by the scheduled castes of Assam form part of Assam's national festivals. The community have a number of festivals connected with different gods and goddesses worshipped by them. Some of the festivals held in honour of the great traditional gods and goddesses, by those who follow Hinduism, are also observed by the scheduled castes people of Assam. Some of the festivals of the scheduled castes are related to agricultural processes while some other festivals are concerned with their social institutions.

The festivals of the scheduled castes can be divided into three broad categories (1) Religious Festivals; (2) Agricultural Festivals and (3) the Festivals relating to social institutions, for example, marriage, birth and death ceremonies, etc.

### Religious Festivals

The scheduled castes people of Assam celebrate various types of religious festivals. They are Janmashtmi; Durgapuja; Dasera; Diwali; Vishwakarmapuja; Ganesh Chaturdashi; Shivaratri; Holi; Karma ekadasi, etc.

Literally the meaning of Janmashtami is "Birth Eight" of Lord Krishna. Janmashtami commemorates the birth of Lord

Krishna on the eighth day of the first fortnight (Krishna Pakash) of Bhadon (August-September). All the scheduled caste communities in Assam observe this great traditional festival every year.

The Durga Puja is annually performed from the first (Peruwa) to the 9th day (Naumi) of Asin (September-October). This is one of the most important festivals of the Hindus including scheduled castes of Assam and hence elaborate arrangements are usually made for the celebration of this festival in every village. On the first day of the celebration, the recitation of the scriptural texts concerning with Durga Devi (Durga Path) is ritually commenced. An earthen pot containing holy water (Kalsa Asthapan) is installed nearby by the temple priest. On the fifth day, the priest perform Panchami puja for the arrival (Awahana) of Durga Devi. On the sixth day, the Belvarni Puja under the bad fruit tree is performed by the priest to impart life (Pranpratishtha) to the image (Murti) of Durga Devi. The image is ceremonially installed in the Devi Mandir on the Seventh Day (Saptmi) where the goddess is worshipped and ritually washed (adiwash) in the evening. The villagers observe fast on the eighth day (ashtmi) and participate in singing the special hymn called Aarti. On the ninth day (Naumi), a complete set of vermilion clothes, comb, mirror and betel leaf are offered to the goddess. The priest worships the five gods (Pancha Devata-Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, Ganesh and Surya). Nine planets (Naukarh-Ravi, Son, Mangal,

Budh, Birhaspat, Sukra, Kahu and Ketu) and 64 female ascetics (Jogini) of Durga Devi.

The tenth day's festival in Asin (September-October) known as Dasera is the culmination of the Durga puja. A he-goat bought from the village fund is ceremonially sacrificed in the Devi Mandir. The image of Durga Devi is worshipped. A Pujari (a man performing the Puja) gets possessed and predicts the future about the harvests and other matters of public importance. In the evening, the image of Durga Devi is carried around the village in a procession and immersed ceremonially in the village pond or in the river that may flow by the village. The water in the earthen pots installed on the first day by the priest is sprinkled on the people to mark the end of the festivals.

Diwali, the festival of lights, is celebrated on Asnavasya (no moon day) of Kartik (October-November) by all the subcastes of scheduled castes of Assam. Laxmi, the goddess of wealth, is worshipped by the Bania caste at night. The Bania families place the instruments of their trade before the goddess and offer sweets, money and flowers for increasing prosperity in their business. Ganesh is also worshipped. All the people may not worship Laxmi and Ganesh, but they may illuminate their houses with the light on small earthenware lamps.

The Viswa-Karma puja is held for one to two days in Bhadon (August-September). Viswakarma is the divine architect. The people celebrate it collectively.

Ganesh Chaturdashi is the festival in honour of the elephant god, Ganesh is celebrated by the scheduled castes on the fourth day of the second fortnight of Bhadon (August-September).

Shrivaratri, literally meaning 'Night of Shiva' is celebrated on the thirteenth day of phalgun (February-March) in honour of Shiva, by all the scheduled castes families of Assam. It is a day of fasting and nothing should be eaten before worshipping the Phallic symbol (linga) of Shiva. The priest bring it to the patron's house where it is ritually cleansed with milk and sandal wood-paste. The phallic symbol is worshipped by the devotees and thorn apple, flowers, wood apple leaves, bad and Cannabis sativa drugs (bhang, ganja) are offered to Shiva. The priest chants sacred canons (Mantra) during the worship. Some people worship Shiva linga individually in the Devi Mandir in the evening.

Holi is celebrated on the full-moon day of phalgun (February-March). It is the spring festival symbolising the victory of good over evil. In the morning the men and women smear coloured powder and drench each other with coloured

water. Generally people of approximately equal status rub each other with the powder and embrace in the spirit of brotherliness and friendship. In the evening they sit together to sing hymns and holi songs.

Karma Ekadashi festival is celebrated by the women of all subcaste of scheduled castes on the tenth and eleventh day of the second fortnight of Bhadan (August-September). The festival is probably of tribal origin. On the tenth day, the women fast and worship the Karma twig and offer cucumber (Khira), rice and sweet. After the night is spent in chanting hymns, the twig is ceremonially immersed in the village pond on the eleventh morning.

The Hiras community worship their potters' wheel (Chak) individually on the eleventh day without the participation of priests.

### Agricultural festivals

The main agricultural festival of the scheduled castes of Assam is Bihu and Bhatheily.

Bihu festivals is observed by almost all the communities of Assam including scheduled castes. Originally, the festival was celebrated to perform some religious activities related to agriculture. The people worshipped the sun, the moon, the

by the illumination of houses by lighting on the small earthenware lamps at night time. The lamps are also kept in their paddy fields. This festival is monthly observed in evening time of the day.

Magh Bihu festival is observed after the harvest on the last day of Push (January). This Bihu is also called bugali (full of food) bihu. During this bihu people worship fire.

Bahag bihu is celebrated from the last day of Shait (April) to the seventh day of Bahag (April). The festival is also called Rangali bihu since it is observed with great joy and merriment just at the beginning of the agricultural operation.

Bathelly : Another festival observed by the concerning agriculture and scheduled castes of Assam is Bathelly. It is specially observed in Kamrup, Goalpara and Sonitpur districts of Assam in the month of Bahag (April) for one or two days.

#### The Festivals relating to Social Institution

Every scheduled caste family observes marriage, birth and death ceremonies very elaborately.

Among the different types of social institutions, marriage is the most important ceremony among the people everywhere. In other words, marriage is an essential institution of man for the procreation of future generation. Hence the scheduled castes people of Assam celebrate marriage ceremonies like all other communities with due solemnity and pompousness.

The other two important festivals observed by the scheduled castes are the birth and death ceremonies. Whenever a baby is born the family would arrange birth ceremony two days after the birth of the child. The second ceremony is

observed after 15 or 30 days. In such ceremonies all friends and relatives particularly the neighbours are invited to share in the happiness of the family.

Like the birth ceremony, they also observe death ceremony whenever a member of a family dies. Generally, Tilani ceremony is observed three days after death but the last ceremony is held eleven or thirty days after death.

To sum up it may be said that every festival of the scheduled caste people is related with their religious functions although we have broadly divided the festivals into broad categories.

### Language

The key role of language in all human activities has made it perhaps inevitable that the field of linguistics should represent a mingling of several streams of interest. "The anthropologist has long recognised the importance of language, not only as a tool for more effective field work, but as a critical element of the cultural fabric which he studies."<sup>1</sup>

But despite this fact, the scheduled caste people of Assam have no problem with the language. They are adaptable to the language of the majority with whom they are living and

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1. David, L. Sills (ed.), International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 9, p.56.

sacrifice their original language. Hence the scheduled castes people of Assam adopted the Assamese language in the Brahmaputra valley while those living in the Barak valley adopted Bengali as their mother tongue. Of course, most of the Bengali speaking scheduled castes have no problem with the Assamese language. According to 1971 census, about 77.1% of the total population of scheduled castes in Assam speak Assamese while 22.9% speak both the Bengali and Assamese language. The Assamese and Bengali languages are two major languages recognised under Indian Constitution.

In the end of our analysis of the Social Structure of the Scheduled Castes in Assam, it may be said that it is agreed on all hands that social and cultural institutions are a great hindrance to economic development and growth of many societies in the world. The scheduled castes of Assam are not exempted from these hindrances. Nevertheless, they still cling to their age-old institutions. Unless they are motivated suitably by a strong political will, they are bound to remain backward socially and economically.

Chapter III

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Marriage Custom and Family Pattern

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Marriage has been regarded by most societies as a sacred sacrament and union between a man and a woman. In India it has been treated as an alliance between two families rather than a mere union of two individuals. The basic aim of marriage is the procreation of the progeny for the perpetuation of the race. Married couples rear up their offspring with care and affection for their welfare. They provide education to their children for enhancing the prestige and gradual improvement of their community.

According to Kapadia, "Marriage is a stable relationship in which man and woman are socially permitted without loss of standing relationship of the community, to have children."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, marriage is an essential institution of the society for the procreation of its future generation. Again, the regulation of sexual life through some particular institutions is also very essential for the society. It also decides the rules of residence, i.e., it decides whether the brides are going to reside in the groom's house or vice-versa.

The conception of marriage changes with the cultural development of a society. It has not only a biological significance, but also a psychological as well as a cultural significance. Marriage is the starting point of a new chain

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1. K.M. Kapadia, Marriage and Family in India (1958), p.45.

of relationships which are likely to emerge through the vital processes of marriage. The main purpose of marriage consists in the formation of cultural nuclei in a family. This is possible only when marriage is based upon profound and intense love between the couple. Love is the most subtle expression of life which finds its fulfilment through marriage. Marriage is the most profound experience in the life of an individual. The purpose of marriage is not merely the perpetuation of the race, but also the enhancement and enrichment of culture of the future generations.

The scheduled castes in Assam have adopted more or less the above ideals of a Hindu marriage system. In the Hindu society, marriage is obligatory for every individual. Both unmarried adult male and female are not respected in the society. To die before getting married is a sin for an adult. Therefore, unmarried man and woman are seldom to be found among the scheduled caste community of Assam. The Assamese word for marriage is yiyaha which literally means 'carrying away' the bride by the bridegroom from her father's house. Among the scheduled castes of Assam, the father of the bride gives away his daughter in marriage to the bridegroom who takes her away to his home. In this society a man does not freely choose his bride. Marriage is settled by the parents and relatives of the bride and the bridegroom. The bride and

the bridegroom cannot refuse to get married to each other after their parents have arranged their marriage. Their opinion is not taken into consideration in the matter of their marriage. The decision of their parents in the matter of their marriage is final and unchangeable. Most of the scheduled caste parents support this view except a few of the younger generation.

In our present study, out of 96 respondents more than 90 percent supported the traditionally arranged marriage while only 9 or 9.38 per cent of them do not support the tradition. Thus most of the parents feel that their sons and daughters should not be given complete freedom in selecting their better halves in marriage.

But when asked whether the sons and daughter should be given freedom in respect of their marriage, the number of respondents who agreed to the freedom being given to their children increased from 9 to 15. This should not confuse us. The 6(six) respondents who were against waiving the traditional arranged marriage would perhaps agree to give freedom to their sons and daughters at least in the matter of selecting their better halves in marriage which would subsequently be regularised by arrangement between the parents.

Table 3.1, on the next page, reveals the attitude of the respondents regarding the freedom of boys and girls in respect of marriage in the three scheduled caste villages under study. The table discloses that most of the respondents do not allow freedom to their sons and daughters regarding their marriage; they rather oppose such freedom. In our present study, out of 96 respondents only 15 (i.e. 15.63%) have supported the freedom to sons and daughters in respect of their marriage and 63.54 per cent of respondents do not encourage it. So love marriage is rare among the scheduled caste community of Assam.

The scheduled caste parents of Assam also follow the traditional Hindu norms while getting their sons or daughters married. The Hindu norm always emphasizes progeny, whereby the fathers and their ancestors are assured of a happy after-life and the continuance of the ancestral line to the future members who are yet to be born. Therefore, in selecting a bride, the parents of the groom certainly consider such things as the girl's family background, economic position, general character, family reputation and other family matters.<sup>1</sup> Of course, at present the acceptance of these norms of marriage depends on the attitude of bride and the groom as well. Many educated youths among the scheduled castes of Assam do not adhere to these norms at all. They have refused to follow

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1. V.V. Prakash Raw, Marriage, The Family and Woman in India (1982), p. 15.

Table 3.1

Different Views about Marriage

Name of village	No. of respondents who support freedom of boys and girls regarding their marriage	No. of respondents who do not support freedom of boys and girls regarding their marriage	No. of respondents who are indifferent regarding freedom of boys and girls in case of marriage	Total No. of respondents	% of respondents who support freedom of boys & girls regarding their marriage	% of respondents who do not support freedom of boys & girls regarding their marriage	% of respondents who are indifferent regarding freedom of boys & girls in case of marriage
Ganl apar	5	15	16	36	13.89%	41.67%	44.44%
Bongaon	4	32	2	38	10.53%	84.21%	5.26%
Tanglagaon	6	14	2	22	27.27%	63.64%	0.09%
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>15.63%</b>	<b>63.54%</b>	<b>20.83%</b>

them as being old and obsolete tradition. Now-a-days economic status, education and personal character of a person have been considered as more vital norms for arranging a marriage between the parties.

A Namasudra scheduled caste in Assam can marry within his own subcaste, but he cannot marry a woman within his own gotra or clan. Marriage between members of an exogamous group is prohibited. The closer is the relationship between the members of an exogamous group by blood, the greater are the restrictions of marriage between them. Persons are debarred from inter marrying within the same line of descent. If persons are married in the same gotra they are treated as outcastes and condemned by his society.

It is usually found that the Namasudra people do not support intercaste marriages. In other words, they must marry within the subcaste. Of course, in recent times inter-subcaste marriages are taking place among the educated group. But most of them do not encourage inter-subcaste marriage because they still consider it as a taboo against their religion and age-old practices. Table 3.2 reveals their attitude towards intercaste marriage.

Table 3.2

## Attitude towards inter-caste marriage

Name of village	No. of respondents supporting inter-caste marriage	No. of respondents who do not support inter-caste marriage	Total No. of respondents	% of respondents supporting inter-caste marriage	% of respondents who do not support inter-caste marriage
Ganiapar	16	20	36	44.44%	55.56%
Bongaon	9	29	38	23.68%	76.32%
Tanglagaon	7	15	22	31.82%	68.18%
Total	32	64	96	33.33%	66.67%

The above table shows that most people do not support inter-caste marriage. More than 66 per cent of the respondents resist inter-subcaste marriage while only about 33 percent of respondents encourage it. It is very interesting to find that the percentage of those supporting intercaste marriage is much more in Ganiapar which shows that this scheduled caste village is educationally more advanced than the other two villages. We may safely conclude that about one-third of the scheduled caste villages in Assam have not become more educationally

advanced than other villages. In the case of intercaste marriage, boys are allowed to marry a girl of lower social status but girls are generally not allowed to do so.

### Types and Forms of Marriages

As to types of marriages it may be said that both the monogamy and polygamy are prevalent among the scheduled castes community of the three villages under study.

Monogamy is a type of marriage in which one male marries only one female during his life-time. This type of marriage has been prevalent since the earliest times. "Monogamous marriage is socially approved on ethical grounds. In a monogamous family, the parents usually take greater care of their children. Monogamous family promotes the sentiment of affection between its members. It provides a better atmosphere for the protection and care of the young ones. The domestic life of the members of a monogamous family is usually happy and peaceful."<sup>1</sup> This has been true with the scheduled castes of Assam as our study has corroborated. Generally, the people of the three villages prefer monogamy as against polygamy.

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1. A.K. Sinha, "Principles of Sociology", p.122.

Polygamy, on the other hand, is a form of marriage in which one male marries several females at the same time. Sometimes polygamy cannot be easily distinguished from the system of concubinage. Polygamy was practised in India even during the vedic period. It was practised by persons who held high positions in society. The well-to-do persons also practised polygamous form of marriage. The polygamous form of marriage, it was believed, increases a wealthy person's material comforts.<sup>1</sup> But among the scheduled caste community of Assam, very few people have practised polygamy. The women among this community do not prefer polygamy. A female tends to ignore her husband, if he marries another woman. This type of marriage is the root of many evils in the family life. Troubles frequently take place between the co-wives of a person.

Our present study amply indicates that most people do not support polygamous marriage. They rather prefer monogamous marriage. In the three villages under study, out of 96 respondents, 95 respondents have given their views in favour of the monogamous marriage while the lone respondent has not given any coment at all. It is also discovered that out of 86 married male respondents, only 3 respondents have married more than one wife while the remaining 83 respondents

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1. A.K. Sinha, Principles of Sociology, p. 122.

have married only one wife. Thus, monogamy is favoured as against polygamy.

Marriage among the scheduled castes of Assam can also be divided into two categories according to forms : (1) Formal marriage and (2) Informal marriage.

1) Formal marriage : In the case of Namasudra Scheduled Castes a man does not freely choose his bride. Marriage is settled and arranged by the parents and relatives of both the bride and the bridegroom. In this case the proposal is advanced by the boy's side. The boy's parents and relatives go to the girl's parents proposing their son for marriage to the daughter of the latter along with the presentation of betel-nut and leaf. If the girl's parents accept the proposal, then together they would fix a convenient date for the marriage ceremony. In most of the cases, the views of both the boy and the girl is considered first. The bride and the bridegroom cannot refuse to get married with each other after their parents have settled the marriage. Their opinion is hardly taken into consideration in the matter of their marriage. The decision of the parents of both sides in the matter is final and unchallengeable in the case of formal marriage.

2) Informal marriage : The other form of marriage is informal marriage, which is also known as 'Gandharva vivaha'. This form

of marriage has been interpreted in different ways by different scholars. Dr. P.V. Kane says, "In the Gandharva form, the principal object was the gratification of carnal desires."<sup>1</sup> J. Jolly describes it as "the love-marriage without the consent of the parents."<sup>2</sup> Georoodas Banerjee says, "marriage in this form, which depends merely upon the agreement of the contracting parties, resembles to some extent what are called Gretna-Green marriages, that is runaway marriages by persons governed by English law at Gretna-Green and elsewhere in Scotland, to evade the provision of law against ill-advised and clandestine marriage."<sup>3</sup> John D. Mayne says, "the Gandharva marriage springs from desire and has sexual intercourse for its purpose."<sup>4</sup>

From the above evidences we can say that the informal marriage is a form of love marriage. The lover has to take a girl of the same or different caste in this form of marriage. But this form of marriage is not socially recommended in Namasudra community. Yet some boys and girls among the

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1. P.V. Kane, History of Dharmashastra, Vol.II, Pt. I, p.519, quoted by Nilakshi Sengupta in Evolution of Hindu Marriage, p.93.
  2. J. Jolly, Hindu Law and Customs, p.111, quoted in Ibid.
  3. G. Banerjee, Hindu Law of Marriage and Stridhana, 2nd Ed. p.81, quoted in Ibid.
  4. John D. Mayne, A Treatise of Hindu Law and Usage, p.121, 11th Ed. quoted in Ibid., pp.93-94.

Namasudra scheduled castes have adopted this form of marriage. However, when such form of marriage takes place, the parties to the marriage would be fined by the village council simply to regularise the marriage.

### Widow Remarriage

Earlier widow-remarriage is not common among Namasudra scheduled castes. The people of the villages blindly believed that a woman committed a sin if she got married for the second time after the death of her first husband. Manu also opposed to widow remarriage. In his view, a woman cannot be regarded as a virtuous person if she marries for the second time after the death of her first husband.

Widow remarriage is also disapproved on the ground that it raises the problem of transference of the departed husband's property to the new husband who is wedded to the widow. That was probably one of the reasons why widow remarriage was not common among the villagers in the past. But at present, most of the villagers support widow remarriage. "Isvarachandra Vidyasagar was one of the pioneers who pleaded for widow remarriage. In 1856, the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed and the Hindu widows including the Namasudra community's widows got the legal sanction for remarriage".<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless,

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1. A.K. Sinha, Social Structure of India, p.236.

in spite of the fact that the Act was passed, the social attitude of the common people did not change in the beginning, and widow remarriage was not socially approved. Hence, in many Hindu community the widows did not remarry because such marriages are not favoured in the society. Later in course of time due to the persistent efforts of some social reformers and the development of education, the attitude of the people regarding widow remarriage is also changed and they have socially approved it. Most of the respondents of the three villages under study, encourage widow remarriage. Table 3.3, in the next page, shows the attitude of the respondents regarding widow remarriage.

The table discloses that about 82 per cent of the respondents support widow remarriage while only 17.71 per cent of respondents do not encourage widow remarriage. The number of supporters of widow remarriage is the highest in Bongaon, i.e. 84.21 per cent whereas in Ganiapar it is 80.56 per cent. In Tangiagon 81.82 per cent of respondents do not support it. In case of widow remarriage the noticeable point is that the matter of widow remarriage is mostly depended on the age of the widow. Generally, young widows are highly encouraged for remarriage while the aged widows are not similarly encouraged for remarriage.

Table 3.3

## Attitude of the respondents regarding widow remarriage

	Villages			
	Ganiapar	Bongaon	Tangaigaon	Total
Number of respondents who support widow remarriage	29	32	18	79
Number of respondents who do not support widow remarriage	7	6	4	17
Total number of respondents	36	38	22	96
% of respondents who support widow remarriage	80.56%	84.21%	81.82%	82.29%
% of respondents who do not support widow remarriage	19.44%	15.79%	18.18%	17.71%

Child Marriage

In Namasudra scheduled castes the system of child marriage is not prevalent. It is not supported by the villagers, rather they have considered the system of child marriage as a social evil.

Divorce

Like other Hindu communities, the scheduled castes of Assam who adopted Hinduism are also governed by the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955. The Act has provisions for divorce by either party to marriage.

But in ancient time the orthodox Hindus did not believe in separation of husband and wife even after their death. Marriage could not be dissolved at will by either the husband or the wife because it is regarded as a sacrament. Hence separation between Hindu married couples was not possible during their life time. But there have been some changes in the attitude of the people towards marriage with the spread of education.

Divorce is now gradually recognised by educated people. Some educated persons who do not have happy married life seek divorce. In most cases of unhappy marriages, one of the partners seeks divorce on some of the following grounds : physical disability of the husband or the wife, occasional quarrels between married couples, lack of willingness of the wife to live with her husband, fraud practised by one of the partners, faithlessness of one of the partners, cruelty of the husband towards the wife and so on. Some married women feel that it is better to dissolve their marriages than enduring torture in the hands of their tyrannical husbands. The attitude of Namiasudra Scheduled Caste women towards the old conception of marriage is changing with the spread of education and after the Hindu Marriage Act was passed in 1955. Nevertheless, many women who are unhappy in their married life are not in a position to seek dissolution of their marriage because they are economically dependent on their husbands.

The Scheduled Castes of Assam have a negative view towards divorce rather they believe that married couple should pass their conjugal life without resorting to divorce but by solving their problems with mutual understanding. Most of the villagers look down upon the practice of divorce. Thus divorce is rare among the scheduled castes of Assam. In our present study 95.83 per cent of the respondents oppose the practice of divorce while only 4.17 per cent of them support it.

#### Marriage Ceremony and Dowry System

The Namasudra Scheduled Castes of Assam are following the Hindu religious ceremony during marriage. Before the marriage ceremony is performed the father of the bride and the father of the bridegroom enter into a mutual agreement that their son and daughter would be married. This is done in a betrothal ceremony. After the betrothal ceremony the parents of the bride and the bridegroom fix an auspicious day for the actual performance of the marriage ceremony. Astrologers are consulted for the appropriate selection of the day. A few days preceding the marriage ceremony sprouts of plants are planted in earthen pots while music and dance are performed in the respective homes of the bride and the bridegroom.

On the day of marriage, the invitees assemble at the houses of both the parties. Both the houses are nicely decorated with twigs, leaves of betel and flowers. The limbs of the bride and the bridegroom are annointed in yellow colouring substances with the paste of the turmeric roots and mustard oil. This is followed by nuptial bath and many other ceremonies which is followed by lot of music and dancing all through. The specially invited guests are entertained with tea, snack, milk, rice, etc. and in return they offer presents to the bridegroom with greetings according to their ability. The bridegroom's party reaches the bride's house in the evening time. The bridegroom's party are received at the residence of the bride's father and are served with tea, snack, milk, betelnut, etc. After this Kanyadana or the ceremony of giving away the bride by her father to the bridegroom is performed through some religious activities. A fire is lit and the bridegroom and the bride are made to go round the fire according to the advice of the priest. After a few other subsidiary ceremonies are performed the bride is taken to the bridegroom's house in the following morning. The couple put on new clothes and they are received at the bridegroom's house by an elderly woman, particularly bridegroom's mother. Their feet are washed by the bridegroom's sister and both of them are taken inside the house. The bride washes the feet of all elderly

persons of the family and bow-down her head to them. Then a big feast follows. Thereafter the bride and the bridegroom becomes the husband and wife to lead their married life for the procreation of humanity.

### Dowry system

Among Namasudra scheduled caste of Assam there is no hard and fast rules governing the dowry system. Therefore, it is neither obligatory nor refutable. The father of the bride willingly offers some gifts to his daughter at the time of her marriage as a token of love and affection to her. The gift consists of a number of utensils, complete set of bed materials, ornaments, decent clothes and certain other items of daily necessity. Gift in terms of money may also be presented to the bride. The value of all gifts depends on the economic and social status of the bride's father. Rich person may offer handsome dowry to his daughter at the time of her marriage. But no formal or informal demand for dowry is usually made by the bridegroom's parents. The system is condemned among the scheduled castes of Assam. In our present study of the three villages nobody gives support to the dowry system. The following table 3.4 shows the attitude of the respondents about the dowry system :

Table 3.4**Attitude of the Respondents about the Dowry System**

<b>Name of village</b>	<b>No. of respondents who support dowry system</b>	<b>No. of respondents who do not support dowry system</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>% of respondents who support dowry system</b>	<b>% of respondents who do not support dowry system</b>
Ganiapar	Nil	36	36	Nil	100
Bongaon	Nil	38	38	Nil	100
Tangiagaon	Nil	22	22	Nil	100

The above table discloses that all the respondents oppose dowry system. In fact it is non-existent among the people of Assam including the scheduled castes.

Traditionally, it was customary for the rich and royal families not only to give the bride a gift at the time of marriage in the form of cash, land and ornaments. These gifts are hardly called dowries as they are presented at the marriage purely as a symbol of affection and love on the part of bride's parents. But in course of time, unfortunately, the dowry system has become a vital part of the marriage custom among some other Hind communities in spite of the criticisms against it as being a social evil.

roof, who eat food cooked in one kitchen, who hold property in common and are related."<sup>1</sup> It is a self-sufficient unit socially, economically and culturally. The father is the head of the joint family and his sons are supported to live jointly with their spouses.

A joint family consists of a cluster of families which is tied by blood relationship. In a joint family all brothers, their grand parents, their adult and married sons and their grand children live together. A joint family may also accomodate some distant kinsmen and relatives. Property in joint family is jointly owned by all members of the family.

The above mentioned types of family are found among the Scheduled castes of Assam. But joint families are few and far between. We find that such joint families are prevalent in the villages among the land-owning families. Thus nuclear families are mostly in vogue among the scheduled castes of Assam.

In our present study, out of 96 families only 9 families or 9.38 per cent of the families are joint, while 90.62 per cent are nuclear families. Thus the Scheduled

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1. I. Karve, Kinship Organisation in India, (1965), p.8.

Castes of Assam prefer a nuclear family as an economic necessity. Joint family is highly unfavourable for economic development as each member of the joint family being assured of food, clothing, etc. loses the incentive to work and save. Under the joint family system, most of the members stay at home indulging in petty quarrels and jealousies thereby reduce the mobility of the people and hamper the process of economic development. The joint family system hinders saving because of the fact that its income has to be utilized among the earning and non-earning members. The joint family property also hampers economic development because it cannot be utilized without the free consent of all the members of the family. Owing to these factors most of the scheduled castes in Assam do not encourage joint family system in recent times. The majority of them prefers nuclear family since it has some advantages over the joint family system. The nuclear family helps to reduce the number of non-working labour force and encourages the increase of production thereby leading to economic development. The following table 3.6 gives us the number of respondents with their attitudes towards joint family system and nuclear family system :

Table 3.6

**Attitude of the Scheduled Castes towards Joint Family and  
Nuclear Family System**

Name of village	Number of respondents who prefer joint family system	Number of respondents who prefer nuclear family system	Total	% of respondents who prefer joint family system	% of respondents who prefer nuclear family system
Ganiapar	2	34	36	5.56%	94.44%
Bongaon	1	37	38	2.63%	97.37%
Tangaigaon	1	21	22	4.55%	95.45%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>4.17%</b>	<b>95.83%</b>

The above table reveals that the majority of the Scheduled Castes prefer nuclear family system. In our survey, out of 96 respondents 92, i.e. 95.83 per cent of the respondents support nuclear family while only 4.17 per cent of them prefer joint family system. The survey also reveals that some respondents have reported that in course of time, the joint family system is bound to collapse among the scheduled castes community of Assam.

The distribution of the two family types is shown in Table 3.7 on the next page.

Table 3.7**Family Patterns of the Scheduled Castes Villages (Village-wise)**

<b>Name of village</b>	<b>No. of nuclear families</b>	<b>No. of joint families</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>% of nuclear families</b>	<b>% of joint families</b>	<b>Total of percent</b>
Ganiapar	32	4	36	88.89%	11.11%	100
Bongaon	35	3	38	92.11%	7.89%	100
Tangaigaon	20	2	22	90.91%	9.09%	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>90.62%</b>	<b>9.38%</b>	<b>100</b>

Size of Family

The sizes of families of the villages under survey have been classified into four categories. These are: (a) small family consisting of one to three members, (b) medium-size family consisting of 4 to 6 members, (c) the large family consisting of 7 to 9 members, and (d) very large family consisting of 10 or more members.

Table 3.8, in the next page, gives the distribution of 96 families according to their size in the three villages.

Table 3.8

Distribution of Families according to their  
Sizes

Name of village	Sizes of family				Total
	1-3 (Small)	4-6 (Medium)	7-9 (Large)	10 and more (Very large)	
Ganiapar	11 (30.56%)	12 (33.33%)	8 (22.22%)	5 (13.89%)	36
Bongaon	9 (23.68%)	15 (39.47%)	10 (26.32%)	4 (10.53%)	36
Tangaigaon	5 (22.73%)	8 (36.36%)	9 (40.91%)	-	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b> (26.04%)	<b>35</b> (36.46%)	<b>27</b> (28.13%)	<b>9</b> (9.37%)	<b>96</b>

(Figures in bracket denote percentage)

**Note :** The minimum number of family members reported was 2 while the maximum number of family members reported was 15.

It is seen from the above table that the number of medium sized families having 4 to 6 members are predominant in Ganiapar and Bongaon villages while in Tangaigaon village the number of

families having 7 to 9 members are predominant. Thus it is clear that more than half of the families among the scheduled castes are of medium and small sizes.

In the end, we would say that the marriage system among the scheduled castes of Assam is of wasteful nature and tells upon their socio-economic life. On the other hand, considering the importance of small size family in accordance with the National Population Policy, the family sizes among the scheduled castes of Assam warrants control and check so as to prevent the country's population from raising its ugly heads against the economic welfare and prosperity of the people.

Chapter IV

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**The Socio-Political Institutions**

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Before India's independence the scheduled castes villages were in isolation from the national political scene. The village headman (Gaon-Bura) was the main socio-political institution in every village. The village headman of a village belonged to the dominant family in the village and his post was hereditary. He was the chairman and spokesman of the village. He was of course assisted by several influential men of the village in settling any matter of disputes in the village. The village headman and a number of village elders consisted of a traditional village council or Panchayat. This system continues till today.

After independence, many legislations have been enacted with the result that the old village panchayat is now relegated to the background. It can now manage only minor affairs like solving individual disputes regarding inheritance and partition of property, sexual misdemeanours, thefts and robbery, land boundary disputes and village festivals. The village panchayat also regulates the behaviour and activities of the villagers so as to ensure harmony and peace in the village.

The place of traditional village panchayat system is gradually occupied by the new panchayat raj system after independence. The new panchayat is now a statutory body constituted by elected representatives. Thus, the panchayat

membership is now opened to all. It is no longer a monopoly of influential men belonging to dominant families. Members of the village panchayat are popularly elected through secret ballots. Thus the village panchayat is no longer a hereditary office.

In order to bring about democratic decentralization and to instil in the people a sense of participation in community development programme and to provide opportunities to the people to manage public affairs, the Government of Assam enacted the Assam Rural Panchayat Act 1948. The Act aims at development of local self-governing institution on sound democratic lines. These reorganised panchayats represent the social and political life of villagers. Under the Act every revenue village or a group of villages having a population of not less than 1,500 but not more than 10,000 will have a panchayat. This new system has brought the villages politically conscious.

Unlike the traditional village panchayat, whose duties were to arbitrate on disputes arising among individuals, the new panchayat has to perform several obligatory duties like construction, repairs and maintenance of village roads, public wells, tanks, sanitation, etc. Besides, there are certain discretionary duties like cooperation, promotion and development of economic activities with special reference to agriculture, establishment and maintenance of dispensaries,

maternity and child welfare centres, etc. while discharging these functions, the village is now directly linked to the state and is politically an open system. It is also a political and administrative unit.

The Nammasudra Scheduled Caste community are given special representation in the panchayat where they are in a minority. The village panchayat has a chairman and a vice-chairman, who are elected through secret ballot from among the elected members. The panchayat is assisted by a trained secretary, who is a salaried government employee.

The political system of modern India has its rural ramification in the form of the Gaon Panchayat. The villagers participate in the elections but they are not familiar with it. As they prefer the traditional panchayat to the gaon panchayat, the latter has not become an integral part of the village political organisation. In our present study, most of the villagers prefer their traditional village panchayat (council) for settling disputes in the village and managing some other important matters. Out of 96 respondents, 77 or 80.21 per cent do not want to give up their traditional village council in favour of modern panchayat system while only 19.79 per cent of respondents are ready to give up their old panchayat system.

Regarding the working of new village panchayat system, most of the respondents are dissatisfied with the activities of new village panchayat. The main reason is that most of the development plan and programmes of the village panchayat remain mostly in papers and hardly is any programme implemented. Though there are many special socio-economic development programmes for the Namasudra Scheduled Caste community in the rural area yet the people of this community do not get any significant help from the new village panchayat as reported by the villagers. In settling the disputes in a village the new panchayat has an inactive and insignificant role.

The following Table 4.1 shows the attitude of the respondents about the working of new Gaon Panchayat :

Table 4.1

**Attitude towards the New Gaon Panchayat System**

Name of village	No. of respondents who are satisfy with the work of New Gaon Panchayat	No. of respondents who do not satisfy with the work of New Gaon Panchayat	Total no. of respondents	% of respondents who satisfy with the work of new Gaon Panchayat	% of respondents who do not satisfy with the work of the new Gaon Panchayat
Ganiapar	12	24	36	33.33%	66.67%
Bongaon	10	28	38	26.33%	73.67%
Tangaigaon	5	17	22	22.73%	77.27%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>28.13%</b>	<b>71.87%</b>

The above table reveals that most of the Scheduled Caste people are not satisfied with the present activities of the New Gaon Panchya. More than 71 per cent of respondents are not satisfied with the present work of the Gaon Panchayat while only 28.13% of the respondents are satisfied with the present Gaon Panchayat.

However, the local self-governing authorities of the modern system are the best agencies for undertaking development work in the grass root level. They are fully in the know of things in the actual field. Since the economy of the state is basically agrarian, and since these authorities are in a position to draw cooperation from the village people in preparing development plans and implementing the same, emphasis should be given in carrying out agricultural improvement programme through the Gaon Panchayat and Mahkuma Parishad. These authorities should not be saddled with too many functions as co-operation of various departments and co-ordination of their activities may not be forthcoming in local level in proper form. Further, these agencies may not afford to maintain adequately qualified staff for manning such activities. But the functions in the sphere of civic amenities should be made mandatory and any authority found neglecting such functions should be penalised.

Local self-government or the Panchayat institutions are the only answer to a decentralised democratic system. But in India specially in Assam and its rural areas where ignorance and illiteracy are predominant feature of society, total freedom for self-government may not produce desired results. Some amount of coercion and supervision from a higher authority is essential.

#### Nature of Politicization

In the past, in every scheduled castes village of Assam, all problems, grievances and views of the community were normally ventilated through the headman. He was the spokesman. "The internal problems were looked after by the traditional elites. But with the introduction of adult franchise and new panchayati raj system, a modern political system has penetrated the community. Its political life tends to be articulated and implemented through formal and legal structures, rather than informal, traditional ones based on kinship and status groups".<sup>1</sup> The adult franchise has generated divisiveness in the villages and is not held as conducive for village unity. In other words, periodical elections at the village level and above have

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1. Ralph, H. Ratzlaff, Village Government in India, 1965, p.15.

disturbed the peace in the villages, by dividing them into factions. The common man is distressed at the new political activities which tend to divide a village into factions. While adult franchise has replaced the traditional consensus procedure, it has not helped the villagers to solve their problems in a democratic way. Though franchise has cut across caste boundaries in this area, it has not succeeded in upholding the unity of the villages. Instead the elections have given a new lease of life to factions in the villages.

A brief illustration of the village activities would throw some light on the role of factions in particular and politicisation in general.

Those who think that conflicts are inevitable in the process of political modernization may say that factions are inevitable and are necessary to bring changes in a democratic manner. But our study shows that factions are a hindrance to change and progress. In Bengaon one faction is interested to work for the welfare of the village. But the opposite faction does not co-operate thereby flops the welfare activities.

But the position in Ganispar is different. In Ganispar there are two factions involved in the village common affairs. The village tank is used by both factions for irrigating the

lands without any conflict. Thus even though factions exist in Ganiapar, they have not, however, led to any open conflicts between them so far as the common interests of the villagers are concerned. That is, the common interest of the larger community is never sacrificed. If there is at all any aggrieved section in the village such section is more concerned about the caste affiliations rather than the class interest. Hence, though there was no conflict of common interest yet there is no progress because of the caste system in the Ganiapar village.

In Tangaigaon there is no faction worth mentioning. But the government has not provision about any development work for the villagers.

Another consequence of politicization due to panchayati raj is the ramification of political activities at the local level. The higher level political leadership are just tangential in nature. Thus any linkage between the leaders and the villagers is not based on ideological commitment, but mainly to gain political support. This process is going on as the villages go to periodical polls for electing representatives to the Hojai scheduled castes development board, village panchayats and state legislature.

In the national political system the participation of the three villages are not significant yet we may however roughly indicate their electoral behaviour. Almost all the voters in the villages cast their vote in the previous general elections although they are not fully conscious in the political field. Different group supported different political parties in the elections to elect suitable candidates to the state assembly or the parliament. It is reported that they elected their candidates mainly on the basis of caste and religion, friendship and the candidate's quality. There were of course a few voters who voted on the basis of the political ideologies. In our present study, out of 96 respondents, 90 respondents disclosed their view on this matter while 6 respondents did not give any comment as they did not cast their vote in any election. The following Table 4.2 gives the number of respondents according to the bases of selection of a candidate in any election in the country.

**Table 4.2**

**Number of Respondents according to the Main Bases of Selection of a Candidate in any Election**

Name of village	Main Bases of selecting a Candidate				Total
	Caste & Religion	Political ideology	Friendship	Candidate's quality	
Ganiapar	9	8	3	14	34
Bongaon	7	15	5	8	35
Tangaigaon	6	5	1	9	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b> (24.44%)	<b>28</b> (31.11%)	<b>9</b> (10%)	<b>31</b> (34.45%)	<b>90</b> (100%)

The above table shows that most of the respondents accounting for more than 34 per cent cast their vote by considering a candidate's quality; while 31.11 per cent selected their candidate according to the political ideology of the parties; 24.44 percent selected on the basis of castes and religion, and 10 percent selected their candidate on the basis of friendship.

### Leadership

While studying the political aspect in the scheduled caste villages, reference to leadership is important because both democratic decentralization and adult franchise have given a chance to the people of this community for an exposure to modern leadership experiences.

The qualities attributed to the village traditional leaders can be divided into four categories viz. 1) wealthy and influential, 2) interested in socio-religious matters of the village, 3) Patronage, 4) enthusiastic. This shows that the traditional leaders by and large are wealthy and influential. Further, they invariably belong to the dominant family in the scheduled castes community.

Unfortunately, the choice of leaders among the scheduled castes shows that the traditional elites still enjoy the old prerogatives. Although democratic decentralisation has paved

the way for emerging leaders, the old elites still act as the village spokesman both in traditional and modern set up. The new system of democratic decentralisation has not yet devoured the traditional basis of power, namely, wealth, family prestige and the like. But this has introduced a new element into village life. As a few of our informants said, "It has brought politics to the doorstep of the villages".

Thus the egalitarian ideology of the new panchayat system has yet to be translated into reality because the situation in the villages still remains unchanged even after forty-three years of independence of India.

The new political set up has politicised the traditional society. But this has not affected the social structure of the villages. The dominant scheduled caste families still have the prerogatives. The scheduled caste villages are linked with wider political system and people have become politically articulated. Politics has led to the formation of interest groups, yet the new Panchayat leaders still invariably belong to the dominant families in the community. Their only difference with the traditional leaders is that the latter were less self-interested and corrupt.

Chapter V

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**The Economic Status and Occupational Pattern  
of the Villagers**

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Our survey reveals that the economic activity of the Scheduled Castes of Assam who mostly live in village, centres round agriculture. Many own lands though some families do not possess agricultural land. Those who do not own land, work on rented lands or as agricultural labourers. Besides agriculture, the people are also engaged in craft works and other professions. Like many other villages, a scheduled caste village was in the past, a self-sufficient economic unit and produced almost all the commodities needed by its residents. But now-a-days a village depends for its need on the products of other villages also.

Agriculture in the scheduled caste villages is primarily based on rice cultivation although subsidiary crops are also produced. The major crops are paddy of various varieties like sali, baw, baru and ahuj; pulses like Matimah (Black pulse), Moeng and Kalamah. Besides, peas and other vegetables are also grown in large quantities. The chief commercial crops are mustard, jute and sugar cane. Wheat cultivation is also being increasingly taken up in recent years. Since rice is their staple food, it is their first concern to produce enough paddy for personal use during the whole year round. Mustard and

other crops are produced mainly for commercial purpose. Agriculturists among the scheduled castes of Assam suffer from the effect of the great earthquake of 1950 just like many other agriculturists in the state. Two varieties of paddy namely the summer paddy (sali, baw, etc.) and winter paddy (baru and ahu) are mainly grown by the Scheduled Caste farmers. It may be noted that before 1950, the scheduled castes of Assam never produced winter paddy. Formerly, they were raising only a single crop of paddy. But now-a-days a double cropping of paddy is being raised. The rapid rise in population has reduced the amount of cultivable land. The land which was formerly devoted to cultivate commercial crops have now been used for paddy. This has adversely affected the production of the commercial crops like mustard, pulses, potato, jute, sugar-cane vegetables, etc.

Although they have utilised almost all the cultivable land for producing paddy but the total production of paddy has been declining due to primitive method of cultivation. The usual occurrence of floods also has reduced the total production. In our present survey, out of 96 families 68 (i.e. 70.83%) are solely dependent upon agriculture as the main source of their income. The remaining 28 families also partly depend on agriculture. But most of the cultivators

are not self-sufficient. Our survey has shown that out of 96 families only 35 families (i.e. 36.46%) are able to produce an amount for self-sufficiency. Thus most of the Scheduled Castes in Assam are following subsistence agricultural economy.

The following Table 5.1 shows the monthly income of the Scheduled Castes of Assam :

**Table 5.1**

Distribution of population according to monthly income in the three surveyed villages (1988-89)

Income group (in Rs.)	Ganispur		Bongaon		Tangaigaon	
	No. of respondents	% of respondents	No. of respondents	% of respondents	No. of respondents	% of respondents
101-350	10	27.78%	11	28.95%	2	9.09%
351-550	16	44.44%	15	39.47%	11	50.00%
551-750	8	22.22%	9	23.69%	8	36.36%
751-950	1	2.78%	1	2.63%	1	4.55%
951-1150	1	2.78%	-	-	-	-
1151-1350	-	-	1	2.63%	-	-
1351-1550	-	-	-	-	-	-
1551-1750	-	-	1	2.63%	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100.00</b>

**Notes:** The minimum income reported was Rs.200.00 while the maximum income reported was Rs.1700.00

It is seen from the above table that the income of the people in the three villages are very low. In the three villages most of the respondents belong to the income group of Rs. 351 to 590 i.e. 44.44% at Ganiapar, 39.47% at Bongaon and 50% at Tangaigaon.

It may also be seen that Tangaigaon has the highest percentage of population in the income group of Rs. 351-950 among all the three villages. While in Tangaigaon the percentage of population in this income group is 90.91, in Ganiapar and Bongaon it is 69.44 and 65.79 respectively. On the other hand, Tangaigaon has the lowest percentage of population in the lowest income group of Rs. 101-350. It has only 9.09 per cent of its population in this income group, while Ganiapar and Bongaon have 27.78 per cent and 28.95 per cent respectively. Thus it can be concluded that in general the scheduled caste people of Tangaigaon is better off than those of Ganiapar and Bongaon. Of course, it is significant to find that Ganiapar has 2.78 per cent in the higher income group of Rs. 951-1150 and that Bongaon has 5.26 per cent in the income group of Rs. 1151-1750.

The survey has made an important revelation that the income of a government employee is higher than that of persons working in business, agriculture and its allied occupations.

The following Table 5.2 shows the lower and upper limits of income with the corresponding occupation of the respondents in the three villages :

**Table 5.2**

**Number of Persons According to Income from their Corresponding Occupations**

Sl. No.	Main source of income	Range of income	Number of respondents belonging to different type of occupation	% of respondents belonging to different type of occupation
1	Service	960-1700	3	3.12%
2	Business	360-1000	10	10.42%
3	Agriculture	300-800	70	72.92%
4	Handicraft	200-600	3	3.12%
5	Fishing	200-500	9	9.38%
6	Wage labour	200-300	1	1.04%
Total			96	100.00

A study of the economic status of the rural people revealed that in all the three villages under survey, only 2 female members reported as 'earner' whereas about 50.91 per cent of the total "Earning dependents" comprised of females. Table 5.3 below gives the economic classification of village population classified by sex :

Table 5.3

Economic status of village population (All the three Villages combined)

Economic status	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
Earners	94 (97.92%)	2 (2.08%)	96	15.03%
Earning dependents	135 (49.09%)	140 (50.91%)	275	43.10%
Non-earning dependents	133 (49.81%)	134 (50.19%)	267	41.85%
<b>Total,</b>	<b>362</b> <b>(56.74%)</b>	<b>276</b> <b>(43.26%)</b>	<b>638</b>	<b>100.00</b>

(Figures in the bracket denote percentage)

"Dependents" include children below working age (i.e. 0-15 years) and school-going students. Besides, persons who are old, infirm and physically disabled have also been included in this category. The dependents or non-working population, in this sense, therefore, accounted for 41.85 per cent of the total population. Generally, children of the age-group of 10-15 assist their parents in household domestic work and in agricultural activities.

The classification of population by economic status, separately for the three villages is shown in the table 5.4 :

Table 5.4

Economic Status of Village Population (All the three surveyed villages)

Sl. No.	Economic status	Villages					
		Ganiapar		Bongaon		Tangiagaon	
		Persons	% of persons	Person	% of persons	Person	% of persons
1	Earners	36	16.00%	38	14.67%	22	14.29%
2	Earning dependents	85	37.73%	98	37.84%	78	50.65%
3	Non-earning dependents	104	46.22%	123	47.49%	54	35.06%
<b>Total</b>		<b>225</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>259</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>100.00</b>

The above table reveals that about 46.22 per cent of population comprises 'non-earning dependents' in the case of Ganiapar village and in Bongaon about 47.49 per cent is of this category whereas in Tangiagaon only 35.06 per cent population is of this category. In all the three villages the percentage of earners is very low as compared to the percentage of earning dependents and non-earning dependents.

#### Occupational Pattern and Landholding System

The Scheduled Castes of Assam having followed the Hindu way of life belong to the Namashudra community. Strictly

speaking, in a Hindu society, occupation and caste are co-related. Just as an individual is born into a caste so he is assigned with certain specific role, within which he has to function. This is because each caste has a specific occupation, which is predetermined, and each caste is a specialized occupational group. Member of one occupational group was not allowed to take up other occupation in a Hindu society. However, this tradition has no longer been strictly followed now.

This happens to the Namasudra Scheduled Castes of Assam as well. Their traditional occupation in Assam was fishing and boating, but most of them have now shifted to agriculture which has become their main occupation while their traditional occupations are regarded as part-time or subsidiary occupation.

Table 5.5, in the next page, shows the changing occupation pattern of the scheduled castes in Assam :

**Table 5.5**  
**The Changing Occupation Pattern**

Sl. No.	Name of village	No. of residents who have given up traditional occupation	No. of residents who do not give up traditional occupation	Total No. of residents	% of residents who have given up traditional occupation	% of residents who do not give up traditional occupation
1	Genjapar	28	8	36	77.78%	22.22%
2	Bongaon	33	5	38	86.86%	13.16%
3	Tanglagaon	17	5	22	77.27%	22.73%
<b>Total</b>		<b>78</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>81.25%</b>	<b>18.75%</b>

In the above table we see that most of the people have left their main traditional occupations of boating and fishing. As a matter of fact, the scheduled castes of Assam have been deprived of their fishing rights over rivers, beels, khals and even over Dobas as these are now auctioned by the state Government and the panchayats. On the other hand, the Scheduled Castes have now considered fishing as a very low type of occupation which has been responsible for their social backwardness. They feel that if they cling to fishing and boating, their social status would be affected. Therefore, fishing has become detestable to them. So most of the scheduled castes of Assam have now adopted agriculture as their main occupation.

Rather it may be said that at present the scheduled castes of Assam have adopted all types of occupations including white-collared jobs other than fishing and boating. Now, they go in for agriculture, trade and commerce, handicraft, wage-labour, government and private service, etc.

People in rural areas generally engage themselves in more than one or two occupations for subsistence. Usually such occupations, are complimentary or supplementary to each other. Hence, classification of occupations of the Scheduled Castes population in Assam becomes very difficult. For our

purpose we have classified them according to their principal occupation. We have, however, tried to find out the extent to which the working population is engaged in different subsidiary occupations besides the principal occupation.

The following table 5.6 gives the relevant information on the above aspect and shows the occupational patterns of the scheduled castes of Assam who mostly live in rural areas :

**Table 5.6**

**Distribution of families according to occupation**

Sl. No.	Occupation	Villages			Total No. of families	% of families by different occupation
		Ganiapar	Bongaon	Tangiagaon		
1	Cultivators	27	27	16	70	72.92%
2	Animal Husbandry	-	-	-	-	-
3	Trade & Commerce	1	4	2	7	7.29%
4	Handicraft	2	2	1	5	5.21%
5	Fishing	3	4	1	8	8.33%
6	Government & Private service	2	1	1	4	4.17%
7	Wage Labour	1	0	1	2	2.08%
<b>Total</b>		<b>36</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>100.00</b>

The above table clearly discloses that agriculture is the principal occupation providing employment to 72.92% of the total families under survey. Only two families reported 'wage labour' as their principal occupation, seven families (i.e. 7.29%) reported 'trade and commerce', five households reported 'household and cottage industries' (Handicraft), while eight families informed 'fishing' as their main occupation. Four families reported their principal occupation under the categories of government service and private business. Thus only 19.79 percent of the total families is engaged in different occupations and services while 81.25 per cent is engaged in agriculture and its allied activities.

So far as subsidiary occupations are concerned, household and cottage industries are commonly reported. Bamboo and cane work and poultry farming are the most frequently reported household cottage industries. The products of these industries are mostly meant for domestic use rather than for sale in the market. It is found that those engaged in their traditional occupation of fishing are the only people who are working on commercial basis whether they treat it as their principal or as subsidiary occupation.

Table 5.7 below shows the subsidiary occupations of the scheduled castes of Assam :

**Table 5.7**

**Distribution of Different Subsidiary Occupations (Excluding Household Domestic Work)**

Occupation	Total population	Percentage
1. Household and cottage industry		
a) Bamboo and cane-work	72	38.71%
b) Handloom weaving	13	6.99%
c) Carpentry and Tailoring	6	3.23%
2. Poultry farming and fishing	64	34.41%
3. Trade and commerce	12	6.45%
4. Service		
a) Government	-	-
b) Private	3	1.61%
c) Wage labour	16	8.60%
<b>Total</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>100.00</b>

In the above table it can be seen that more than 48.93 percent of population (having subsidiary occupation), is engaged in household and cottage industries. A fairly large percentage of the population is also engaged in poultry farming and fishing.

Since we are interested in studying the family economy as an enterprise, it may be said that we have failed to get a

definite information regarding the classification of occupation of the family as a whole. However, an attempt is made to classify the households by principal/subsidiary occupations. Table 5.8, in the next page, gives the relevant information regarding this aspect :

It will be seen from the above table that taking all the three villages together, about 28.12 percent of the surveyed households have agriculture as the principal occupation with non-agriculture as subsidiary occupations whereas only 17.71 per cent of the households have non-agriculture as principal occupation with agriculture as subsidiary occupation. More than 31 percent of households have reported agriculture as their principal and only occupation while only about 9.38 percent of households have reported non-agriculture as their main occupation with no subsidiary occupation. About 14 percent of households have informed agriculture as their main occupation with its (agricultural) allied activities<sup>1</sup> as subsidiary occupations.

From the foregoing discussion on the occupational pattern of the scheduled castes of Assam, it follows that their majority depend upon agriculture. Most of the people

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1. Agriculturally allied activities include poultry-farming, Handloom weaving, Bamboo and Cane-work.

Table 5.8

Percentage (%) of households having different combinations of occupations

Name of the village	Total No. of households	Agriculture as principal with non-agriculture as subsidiary occupation	Agriculture as principal with its allied occupations as subsidiary	Agriculture as principal with no subsidiary occupation	Non-Agriculture as principal with agriculture as subsidiary occupation	Non-Agriculture as principal with no subsidiary occupation
Ganiapar	36	8 (22.22%)	6 (16.67%)	13 (36.11%)	7 (19.44%)	2 (5.56%)
Bongaon	38	12 (31.58%)	4 (10.53%)	11 (28.95%)	6 (15.78%)	5 (13.16%)
Tangiagaon	22	7 (31.82%)	3 (13.64%)	6 (27.27%)	4 (18.18%)	2 (9.09%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>27 (28.12%)</b>	<b>13 (13.54%)</b>	<b>30 (31.25%)</b>	<b>17 (17.71%)</b>	<b>9 (9.38%)</b>

(Figures in the bracket denote percentage)

have not retained their traditional occupation of fishing and boating rather they have shifted to agriculture and other occupations. On the whole they are not able to maintain their livelihood through their traditional occupation. They either totally give them up or continue along with other occupations. Thus occupational shift among the Scheduled Castes of Assam took place from fishing to agriculture. Job in government services also absorb many of them who are educated. Thus it can be said that the economy of the scheduled caste people of Assam centres round agriculture, though some families have adopted other activities also as their main occupations.

#### Landholding System

In the preceding discussion we have seen that the economy of the scheduled castes of Assam centre round agriculture. Hence land is the most important economic resource for them.

Land in Ganiapar and Bongaon is in great demand because of the existence of irrigation facility. Unfortunately outsiders have gradually grabbed their lands as absentee land-lords while they have become hired cultivators in their own villages. In contrast to Ganiapar and Bongaon, land in Tangiagaon is less in demand due to lack of irrigation facility and the frequent occurrence of floods.

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Irrespective of the productive capacity of the land, villagers have the desire to own land. And in many cases, lands are held in succession by members of the families and they attach greater sentiments to the ancestral landed property. The ownership of land gives social status and economic security. And the villagers prefer to invest in land because it can be mortgaged at times of need and its value will not decrease. In our present study, 71 respondents out of 96 have indicated their interest to purchase land in addition to what they hold.

Ganiapar village has an area of about 871 acres of land<sup>1</sup>, where only 770 acres are owned by the villagers. Almost 30 acres are cultivable wasteland meant for cattle grazing. The remainder is owned by outsiders. About 89.64 per cent of the village population have their own land and only 10.36 per cent have not owned land. The average size of landholding per family among the landowning families is 8.56 acres. But landholding is concentrated in a few families only. The distribution of land among different households in the three villages under survey is shown separately in the paragraphs that follow. The distribution of landholdings in the Ganiapar village is given in the following table 5.9 :

**Table 5.9**

**Distribution of Land Among the Different Households in  
Ganiapar**

Size of land- holding (in acres)	Number of households	% of households
Landless	3	8.33%
0.50 - 1.50	4	11.11%
1.51 - 2.50	2	5.56%
2.51 - 3.50	1	2.78%
3.51 - 4.50	7	19.44%
4.51 - 6.50	6	16.67%
6.51 - 8.50	1	2.78%
8.51 - 10.50	3	8.33%
10.51 - 12.50	5	13.88%
12.51 - 14.50	1	2.78%
14.51 - 16.50	1	2.78%
16.51 - and above	2	5.56%
<b>Total = 343 acres</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100.00</b>

**Note:** The minimum holding of land reported was 0.5 acre while the maximum size of landholding reported was 16.51 acres.

The above table shows that out of 36 households, only 3 (i.e. 8.33%) are landless and 33 have their own land. In this village 27 households owned between 0.5 to 10.50 acres, while only 9 households owned above 10.50 acres. Although the average landholding in Ganiapar is 11.30 acres (among 33 families) but the individual landholding of the villagers is very low. Out of 33 landholding families, 24 households owned less than 8.51 acres, while only 2 families have more than 16.50 acres of land. The table also reveals that most households own land although large part of land is concentrated only in a handful of families. Only about 33.3 percent families possesses more than 8 acres of land per family.

The Bongaon occupies an area of about 710 acres where 670 acres are held by the villagers and almost 20 acres are cultivable wasteland for cattle grazing. About 93.21 per cent of the villagers have their own land while 6.79 per cent of the villagers have not owned land. The average size of landholding of the families having their own land is 6.67 acres.

The distribution of land among the different households in Bongaon is shown in table 5.10 :

Table 5.10

Distribution of Land Among the Different Households  
in Bongaon

Size of Landholding (in acres)	Number of households	% of households
Landless	2	5.26%
0.50 - 1.50	6	15.79%
1.51 - 2.50	5	13.16%
2.51 - 3.50	1	2.63%
3.51 - 4.50	4	10.53%
4.51 - 6.50	4	10.53%
6.51 - 8.50	3	7.89%
8.51 - 10.50	5	13.16%
10.51 - 12.50	4	10.53%
12.51 - 14.50	2	5.26%
14.51 - 16.50	-	-
16.51 and above	2	5.26%
<b>Total = 280</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Note : The minimum holding of land reported was 0.07 acres while the maximum size of landholding was about 17 acres.

In contrast to Ganiapar and Bongaon the Tangiagon is a small village having 315 acres of land area where about 310 acres are owned by the villagers and only 15 acres are cultivable wasteland for cattle grazing. The average size of landholding among having land in the village is 5.43 acres. About 86.36 percent of total families have their own land while only 13.64 percent of the villagers are landless.

Lastly the distribution of land among the different households in Tangiagon is given in table 5.11.

It is seen from the table that land is mostly held in 0.50 to 6.50 acres. Only 3 households owned more than 6.50 acres. Out of 22 families 18 families owned below 6.50 acres of land. About 4.55 per cent households of the village are landless while 95.45 per cent have owned land. The average holding per individual family is less as compared to that in Ganiapar or Bongaon.

In order to see the pattern of landholding, the distribution of households and population of the three surveyed villages by size of landholding should be analysed.

Table 5.11

Distribution of Land Among the Different Households in  
Tangiagaon

Size of Landholding (in acres)	Number of households	% of households
Landless	1	4.55%
0.50 - 1.50	2	9.09%
1.51 - 2.50	3	13.63%
2.51 - 3.50	6	27.27%
3.51 - 4.50	4	18.18%
4.51 - 6.50	3	13.63%
6.51 - 8.50	1	4.55%
8.51 - 10.50	-	-
10.51 - 12.50	-	-
12.51 - 14.50	1	4.55%
14.51 - 16.50	1	4.55%
16.51 and above	-	-
<b>Total = 115</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Note : The minimum holding reported was 0.50 acres while the maximum size of landholding reported was 16 acres.

Table 5.12 on the next page shows the pattern of landholding among the three villages under survey. The table discloses that most families in the three villages own land

Table 5.12

Distribution of Households and Population of the Surveyed Villages by Size of Landholding

Size of Landholding (in acres)	Ganiapar		Bongaon		Tangiagaon	
	No. of households	No. of population	No. of households	No. of population	No. of households	No. of population
Landless	3	16	2	10	1	3
0.50 - 1.50	4	22	6	28	2	11
1.51 - 2.50	2	8	5	32	3	6
2.51 - 3.50	1	2	1	4	6	39
3.51 - 4.50	7	28	4	30	4	30
4.51 - 6.50	6	34	4	24	3	29
6.51 - 8.50	1	4	3	22	1	7
8.51 - 10.50	3	14	5	33	-	-
10.51 - 12.50	5	35	4	31	-	-
12.51 - 14.50	1	7	2	14	1	8
14.51 - 16.50	1	8	-	-	1	6
16.51 and above	2	13	2	17	-	-
<b>Total = 738 acres</b>	<b>36</b>		<b>38</b>		<b>22</b>	

which is heavily concentrated in a few hands in Tangiagon while it is not so much concentrated in the other two villages of Ganiapar and Bengaon. On the whole, it can, however, be said that there is inequitable distribution of land among the Scheduled Castes themselves.

**Chapter VI**

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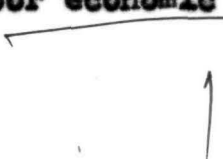
**Summary and Conclusion**

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In our discussion regarding the social structure of the community, it is clear that the scheduled castes of Assam bear similar physical feature with those found in other parts of India. In general, they are non-vegetarian and do not want to change their traditional food habits. However, it has been discovered that there are changes in the quantity of certain food items consumed as well as in the method of preparation of food. Many have also taken to the use of tea, sugar and milk. They have been influenced by Assamese culture in regard to dress and ornaments.

The scheduled castes of Assam like others in other parts of India have adopted by and large, the Hindu culture. Hence, efforts were made to mix up social institutions with spiritual aspect of culture. The consequence is that the caste and religion play their role as a major hurdle of social and economic development and consequently the scheduled castes of Assam lag behind other communities.

The majority of the scheduled castes in Assam have been living in houses made of bamboo and wooden-walled houses with thatched roof. This reveals the poor economic condition of the scheduled castes of Assam.



As Hindu culture influences the scheduled castes, so also the Hindu religion influences their socio-economic life. Caste and subcaste systems arise among the scheduled castes of Assam. Hence some groups of the scheduled castes consider themselves as having occupied a higher status than other groups.

The Karma theory of the Aryan Hindus has, therefore, exerted the same influence on the scheduled castes who have created similar social strata among themselves. Besides, the influence of caste system the Hindu believe that human illness, health and welfare depend on the favour of supernatural power of God. However, the Vaishnavic Hindu religion of Assam has brought about a change which has been accepted by the scheduled castes also. Hence, every scheduled castes village has its own Namghar where they hold their daily or weekly prayer. However, their traditional Hindu outlook still persists which discourages productive process among the community.

The various festivals of the scheduled castes form part of Assam's national festivals. These related to religious, agricultural and other festivals. One distinctive festival observed in connection with their agricultural processes is the Bihu festival. The scheduled castes of Assam are adaptable to the language of the majority with whom they are living and sacrificing their original language. Hence, the scheduled

castes people of Assam adopted the Assamese language in the Brahmaputra valley while those living in the Barak valley adopted Bengali as their mother tongue.

## II

So far as marriage customs are concerned, the Scheduled castes of Assam have adopted the Hindu marriage system. The scheduled castes parents also follow the traditional Hindu norms while giving their sons and daughters in marriage. The majority still support the traditionally arranged marriage even today. Thus most parents feel that their son and daughter should not be given unlimited freedom in selecting their bride or bridegroom. But many educated youths do not adhere to the traditional norms at all. Inter-subcaste marriage is not encouraged but among the educated group such marriage is taking place. But in most of such cases, boys are allowed to marry a girl of lower sub-caste, but girls are not allowed to do so.

Both monogamy and polygamy are prevalent. Generally the people prefer monogamy as against polygamy.

The scheduled castes of Assam are not against widow remarriage. However, it depends on the age of a widow. Younger widows are encouraged for widow's remarriage but the

older widows are not. Child marriage is looked down upon as a social evil. Divorce is rare among the scheduled castes of Assam. Most of them oppose the practice of divorce.

In the case of formal marriage, all arrangements in the settlement of the marriage are made by the parents of both the bride and the bridegroom. But in the case of informal or love marriage the parties to the marriage are fined by the village council simply to regularise the marriage. The scheduled castes of Assam are following the Hindu religious ceremonies in marriage. Hence the marriage ceremony is performed elaborately followed by a big feast.

Unlike other Hindu communities, the scheduled castes of Assam do not follow the dowry system. There is no demand for dowry being made <sup>by</sup> the bridegroom's parents. The system is rather condemned among the scheduled castes of Assam. Gifts are, however, exchanged between the families involved in a marriage. Such gifts may consist of utensils, bed materials, clothes, ornaments, etc. However, the marriage system of scheduled castes of Assam is an expensive affair as is the case with other Hindu communities. The approximate amount of expenditure involved in a single marriage ranges between Rs. 10,000 and Rs. 20,000. The present generation do not approve of such expensive ceremony.

Nuclear families are mostly in vogue among the scheduled castes of Assam, while joint families are few and far between. Medium-sized families having 4 to 6 members predominate in the two villages under study, while in Tangiagon large families having 7 to 9 members are found.

### III

In our study regarding socio-political institutions of the scheduled castes of Assam, one of the important findings is that their traditional village council is gradually replaced by new panchayat system. But most of the scheduled caste people do not want to give up their traditional village council and most of them are dissatisfied with the activities of the new village panchayat.

In the state and the national political system the participation of the three scheduled caste villages are not significant. However, it may be said that they are not fully conscious of their political function and very few of them voted for their candidate on the basis of ideology of a political party. The panchayat system of democratic decentralization has politicised the traditional society. But it has not affected the social structure of the villages. The dominant scheduled caste families still have the prerogatives.

## IV

The study of the economic status of the scheduled castes of Assam shows that their economic activities centre round agriculture. But their agricultural productivity has not improved beyond subsistence level due to primitive method of cultivation. As regards occupational pattern, most of the scheduled castes of Assam were formerly fishermen. But they have been deprived of their fishing rights over rivers, beels, khals and even over dobas as these are now suctioned by the State Government and the panchayats. At the same time, they have considered fishing as a very low type of occupation which has been responsible for their social backwardness.

The monthly income of the three villages under study is very low. The income of a government employee is higher than that of person working in business, agriculture and its allied occupations. It is discovered that in the three villages, most of the people belong to the monthly income group of Rs.351-Rs.550. In general, the scheduled castes people of Tangiagaon is better off than those of Ganiapar and Bongaon.

Land is the most important economic resource for the scheduled castes people of the three villages. It is found that land in Ganiapar and Bongaon are in great demand

than in Tangiagon because of the existence of irrigation facilities. Most of the families in the three villages own land which is heavily concentrated in a few hands in Tangiagon while it is not so much concentrated in the other two villages, i.e., Ganispar and Bongaon. On the whole, it can, however, be said that there is inequitable distribution of land among the scheduled castes themselves.

### Conclusion

In the end of our inquiry<sup>of</sup> the scheduled castes of Assam it may be said that social and cultural institutions are a great hindrance to their social<sup>and</sup> economic development and growth. Nevertheless, they still cling to their age-old institutions. It is felt that unless they are motivated suitably by a strong political will, they are bound to remain backward socially and economically.

The nature of social stratification has not changed to any extent. The hierarchy of power relations coincides with the subcastes in the three villages. From time immemorial the scheduled castes of Assam have been suffering from social injustice and exploitation which prevent them from catching up with the level of other communities in the country. Officially, untouchability was abolished, but in practice it is raising its

ugly head . It is still in the mind of progressive class. Formerly, the scheduled castes were denied entry into several occupations and the road to knowledge was closed to them. Although facilities and privileges have been provided for the scheduled castes of Assam, yet the social distance between them and the rest of the communities is still wide specially in the rural areas.

The marriage system among the scheduled castes of Assam is of wasteful nature and tells upon their socio-economic life. On the other hand, considering the importance of small-sized family in accordance with the National population policy, the family size among this community warrants control and check so as to prevent the rapid increase in the country's population from retarding the economic welfare and prosperity of the people.

The study of the political structure of the community has made us to conclude that there is continuity of both traditional and modernity in this respect. The political structure has been modernised in the sense that it is now based on adult franchise. But this has not affected the social structure of the villages. The dominant scheduled caste families still have the prerogatives. The scheduled caste villages are linked with wider political system and people have become politically articulated. Politics has led

to the formation of interest groups, yet the new panchayat leaders still invariably belong to the dominant families in the community. Their only difference with the traditional leaders is that the latter were less self-interested and corrupt.

The survey reveals that the economic activity of the scheduled castes of Assam who mostly live in villages, centres round agriculture. Most of the villagers have left their traditional occupation of fishing and boating and take up agriculture. The desire for occupational shift is a sign of modernization. But the agricultural productivity has not improved beyond the subsistence level. Besides, there is inequitable distribution of land among the community.

During the 42 years of independence, the living conditions of the scheduled castes of Assam leave much to be desired. The government development schemes taken up under the various five-year plans for all-round development of the scheduled castes have not been able to wipe out the economic disparity between the scheduled castes and other communities of Assam.

The makers of the Indian Constitution were aware of the problems faced by the scheduled castes people and provided

various safeguards in the constitution. Records shows that large amounts have been spent for the implementation of various schemes for the upliftment of the scheduled caste. But the desire of the government and the framers of the constitution to upgrade these people socially and economically has not yet been fulfilled. The general picture of implementation of the schemes is not encouraging. Reservation of seats in the state Assemblies and parliament have been enforced fully, but the socio-economic conditions of large mass of the people remains unchanged. They live in constant fear and inferiority complex.

The educated sections among them should motivate the members of their own community for self-assertion. The change should come from within the community. It is hoped that the scheduled castes of Assam shall get full opportunities of self-assertion and this should be properly directed and utilized for bettering their socio-economic status. Given the opportunities, we can reasonably hope that the scheduled castes of Assam would forge ahead to catch up with the rest of the communities in the state and in the country.

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**Interview Schedule**

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**Block A : Respondent's Social Background**

1. Name :
2. Age :
3. Sex : Male/Female
4. Marital status : Married/Unmarried/widow/Divorce
5. Educational qualification, if any :
6. Occupation :
7. Pattern of House :

**Block B : Family Background**

1. Nature of the family : Joint/Nuclear
2. What type of family do you prefer most ? : Joint/Nuclear
3. Number of members in the family : (a) Male  
(b) Female
4. What should be the maximum limit of issues for a couple?  
One/two/three/four or more
5. Do you think that women are accorded :  
superior/inferior/equal status in your society
6. Do you approve the ideas of taking independent occupation  
by your women folk ? Yes/No.
7. Do you like to send your children for higher education ?  
Yes/No.
8. If yes what type of education you prefer your sons and  
daughters ?  
General/Medical/Engineering/Law/Any other

Block C : Economy and Occupation

1. What is your present occupation ?  
Agricultural/Fishing/Business/Government Service/  
Any other.
2. Do you have an additional occupation ? If so, what it is ?
3. Do you have your own land for cultivation ? Yes/No.
4. If 'yes' how much ?
5. Do you produce sufficient crops for your family or  
your own land ? Yes/No.
6. Do you know any improved method of cultivation ? Yes/No.
7. Which of the modern means of implements you like to  
apply in your agriculture system ?  
1, Irrigation, 2. Use of Fertilizer, 3. Improved  
seeds, 4. Use of Tractor, 5. Any other.
8. Do you give up your traditional occupation ? Yes/No.
9. What type of occupation do you prefer most ?  
Business/agriculture/govt. service/private  
concerns.
10. What kinds of crops do you produce regularly ?
11. Do you get all what you cultivate in the field ? Yes/No.
12. If 'No' what caused the loss incurred ?  
Due to damage by flood/animals/carelessness.
13. What is your monthly income from all sources ?  
Rs. \_\_\_\_\_ to Rs. \_\_\_\_\_

14. What are your main sources of income ?  
Agriculture/Livstock/Business/Service/Any other
15. Is your present monthly income sufficient for your family ?  
Yes/No.
16. If 'No' how do you manage your financial shortage ?  
Borrowing/Selling domestic property/going for wage/  
labour/Any other.
17. Economic status : Self-supporting/Earning Dependent/  
Dependent/Non-Earning Dependent.

**Block D : System of Marriage**

1. Do you prefer the present system of marriage prevalent in your community ? Yes/No.
2. Do you think marriage should be arranged by the parent of the children ? Yes/No.
3. If 'No' do you think that boy's and girls' should be given complete freedom in respect of their marriage? Yes/No.
4. Is there any dowry system in your community ? Yes/No.
5. Do you support it ? Yes/No.
6. Do you approve inter-caste marriage ? Yes/No.
7. If 'No' why ?  
1) Against religion, 2) Problems of adjustment  
3) Out of practice.
8. Is there any divorce system in your society ? Yes/No.
9. Do you like widow marriage ? Yes/No.

10. Do you want to change your present marriage system ?  
Yes/No.
11. If 'Yes' for what reasons ?
12. Which type of marriage you prefer most ?  
Monogamy/Polygamy/Polyandry.

**Block E. Political System**

1. Do you like to give up your traditional village council in favour of modern panchayat system ? Yes/No.
2. Are you satisfied with the working of the present panchayat system in your village ? Yes/No.
3. Do you ever participate in any political affairs in any one of the following ?
4. 1. Casting of vote, 2. Organisation function,  
3. Canvassing, 4. Attending meetings.
4. On what consideration you support a candidate in the election ?  
Kinship/Caste/Religion/Political ideology/Friendship/  
Candidate's quality.
5. Are you a member of any political party ? If 'Yes' what?

**Block F : Cultural System**

1. Do you like to adopt cultural practices of other tribes or communities ? Yes/No.

2. Which of the following cultural items do you like ?  
a) Bihu, b) Modern songs and dance, c) Western music and dance, d) Durga Puja.
3. Do you like to use modern man's and woman's dresses as follows :  
a) Trousers and shirts; b) Mekhela, Sari, Blouse;  
c) Dhoti and Panjabi; d) Coat and tie; e) Mini skirts, etc.
4. Do you like to use modern furniture in your house ?  
a) Chair and Sofa, b) Almirah, c) Dressing glass, d) Dining set, etc.
5. Do you want to change in your food and dietary system ?  
Yes/No.

**Block G : Religion and Health**

1. Do you believe in supernatural power, spirits, ghost?  
Yes/No.
2. Do you go to place of worship ? Regularly/Occasionally/  
Never.
3. Is there any idol worship in your society ? Yes/No.
4. Is there any christian community/muslim community in your neighbourhood ?
5. Do you like dislike them ?
6. Do you believe in effectiveness of (a) magic treatment; (b) medical treatment; (c) ritual actions ? Yes/No.

7. Which of the following you give more priority ?  
 a) Magic treatment; b) Indigenous treatment;  
 c) Medical treatment; d) Rituals factions.
8. Do you think that health and welfare of your family is mainly depending on ?  
 a) Blessing of the departed; b) Supernatural power; c) Your personal efforts.
9. Do you think that human illness is caused by spirits of God/Supernatural power? Yes/No.
10. Do you believe in medical treatment ? Yes/No.
11. What in your attitudes towards your present religion ?  
 Favourable/Unfavourable
12. What do you think about Karma in Hinduism ?  
 Believe/Disbelieve.

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7. Which of the following you give more priority ?

a) Medical treatment; b) Psychological treatment;

c) Physical treatment; d) All these factors.

8. Do you think that health and welfare of your family

is mainly depending on ?

a) Health of the doctor; b) Appointment of

doctor; c) Your personal efforts.

9. Do you think that human illness is caused by spiritual

causes? Yes/No.

10. Do you believe in the evil spirits? Yes/No.

11. What is your attitude towards our present religious

practices? a) Supportive; b) Opposed

12. What do you think about Karma

belief? a) Supportive; b) Opposed

