

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

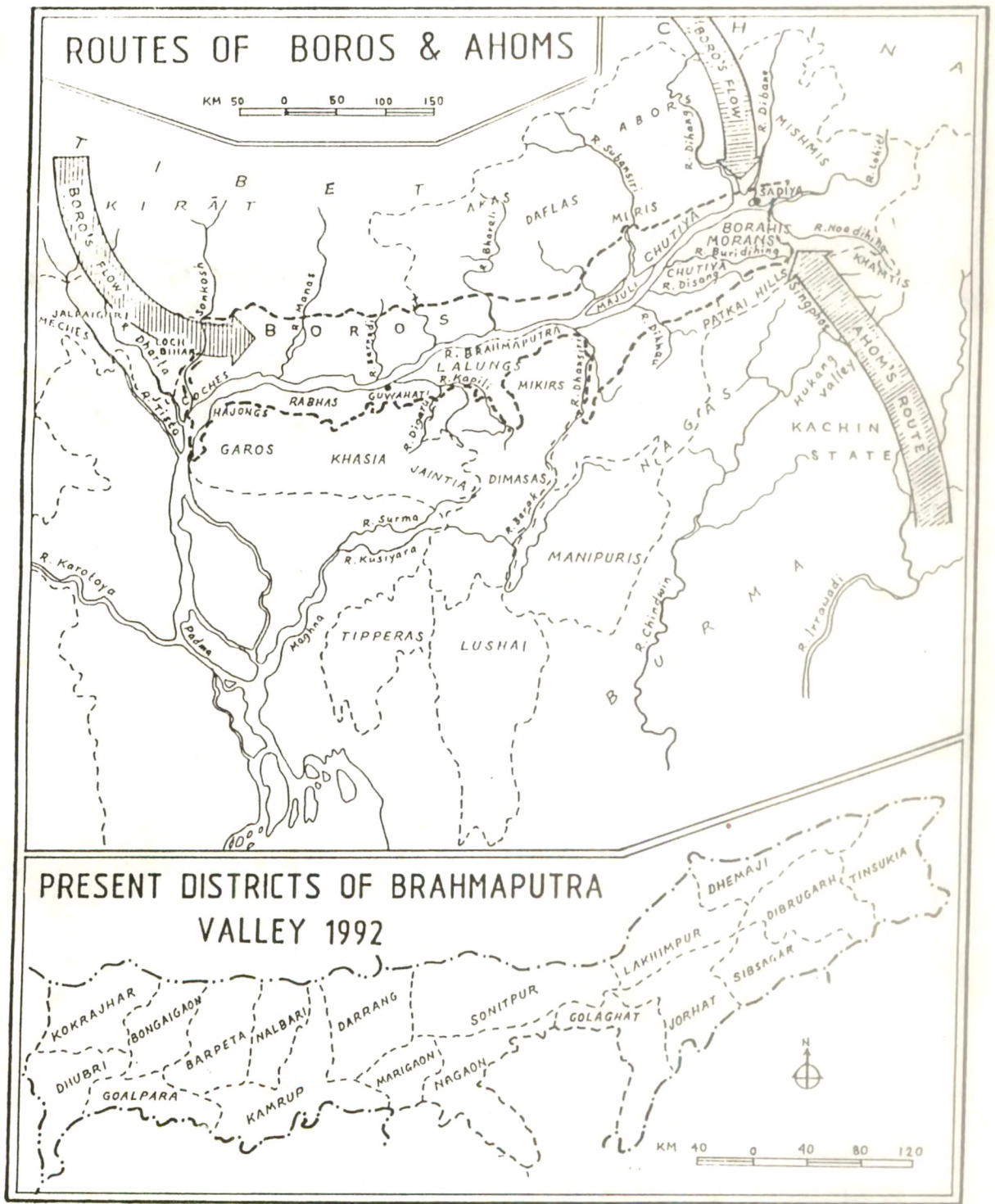
INTRODUCTION

The Boros constitute a large group among all other tribes of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. They are the earliest inhabitants of Indo-Mongoloid stock to settle in the valley. The physical features of Indo-Mongoloids of great Mongoloid race are yellow or yellowish brown skin, square set face with broad nose, strong cheek bones, flat nose, almond shaped black or dark brown eyes, black stretches (sometimes wavy) and coarse head hair, scanty beard and moustache. These physical traits are found among the Boro-Kachāris of Brahmaputra valley. With distinct Tibeto-Burmese marks in their language, the Boros started to settle in the plains of Assam since the second millennium B.C. Rev. S. Endle observed in his book The Kachāri that the Boros migrated to the valley from their homeland Tibet and China.¹ He pointed out the possibilities of two major migrations from the north and north-east into the rich valley of the Brahmaputra. The first flow was into the western Assam via North-East Bengal through the valley of Tista, Dharla, Sankosh river and it founded the powerful kingdom of Kāmrupa.

1. Rev. S. Endle, The Kachāri, 1975, p. 3.

The second flow was through the Subansiri, Dibang and Dihang valley into the eastern Assam and it established a powerful Chutia Kingdom (Map 1). The western migrants settled in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal and Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, and Goalpara districts of Assam are known as 'Mech'. It is guessed that the Boro-Kachāris living by the bank of the river 'Michi' flowing through Nepal call themselves Mech or Meche. The same flow of migrants settled in the Barpeta, Nalbari and Kamrup districts is known as Kachāri. The eastern migrants are known as Chutia, Moran and Borahis. Outside the Brahmaputra valley, Boros are found in the contiguous areas of North Cachar (as Dimāsā Kachāri), Tripura (as Tippera or Barman), Garo Hills (as Garo, Hajong) etc. They all belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group, as stated by Anthropologists and Kirātas as mentioned in the Vedas. The term Kirāta was mentioned in Yajurveda (XXX.16) and Atharvaveda (X.4-14). These people were dependent on collection of fruits, roots and tubers. The colour of their skin was yellow (golden). They used fierce weapons, and were cruel. S. K. Chatterji's research work² based on the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana supported the evidences that the Boro-Kachāris belong to Indo-Mongoloid race known as Kirāta. The extensive work on racial elements in Assam

2. S.K. Chatterji, Kirāta-Jana-Kriti, The Indo-Mongal-loid, 1928.



MAP 1

by B.M. Das³ and study on Boro language and literature by P.C. Bhattacharya⁴ clarify the fact that the Boros are the descendants of Kirātas later known as Boro-Kachāri. According to P.C. Bhattacharya, Boro is a large linguistic group of Kachāri tribes, closely related to Tiwā (Lālūng), Rāvā, Hājong and Koche languages. He along with Robin Burling find that "Boro and Garo separated from a common ancestral language each other about two thousand years ago".⁵ Their "glotto-chronical or lexico-statistic count shows that Boro and Dimāsā separated from each other about one thousand years ago. Thus, Dimāsā is nearer to Boro than Garo".⁶

Rev. S. Endle compiled a manual of the Kachāri language.* He justified the view that the Kachāris were in earlier days the dominant race of Assam, because almost all river names of then Assam start with Kachāri syllable di (means water). They are Dihang, Dibang, Dikrang, Disang, Dibru, Digaru, Dikhau, Dimu, Digboi etc.

The form of religion practised at Kāmākhyā of Kāmarūpa is admitted by Yoginitantra to have Kirāta association.

3. B.M. Das, The People of Assam, 1987, p. 37.

4. P.C. Bhattacharya, The Boro Language and Literature, 1992.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

* Manual of the Kachāri Language published in 1884 by the Assam Secretariat Press.

The word Kirāta derives from Sanskrit word Kaksāka⁷ which means a frontier dweller. Bani Kanta Kakati studied the cult of the Mother Goddess. She symbolises a fusion of the Aryan and extra Aryan religious practices. The worship of the Mother Goddess in her fearful aspect with wine and flesh shows the influence of the aboriginal tribes. Worship of Kechāi-khāti, the tutelary deity, with animal sacrifices bears sufficient evidence of tribal religious culture.

From the point of view of origin of the term 'Boro', R.M. Nath says that Boros were the emigrants of 'Bod' country of Tibet. They were known as 'Boddo-Fichā' or Boddo-chā which means children of 'Bod' country and later known as the 'Boddo' or 'Bodo'.⁸ Brian Hodgson⁹ was the first author to confer the generic name 'Bodo' on the Boros or other cognate tribes belonging to the same language family. In Kachāri language, the etymological meaning of the term 'Boro' is 'men' by which 'Bara' or 'Baraphisā' (children of the Bara) could be justified. 'Boro' is a word still prevalent among the non-tribes. The tribe who domesticates

7. B.K. Kakati, Assamese, Its Formation and Development, 1972, p. 42.

8. R.M. Nath, The Background of Assamese Culture, 1948, pp. 6-16.

9. Reference from Bijoy Daimary in 'Boro and Bodo', Proceedings of History Association, Kohima, 1987, p. 528.

pig (Bārā in Assamese) is termed as 'Bārā' and is later known as 'Baro'. 'Bodo', however, is an anglicised form of 'Boro'. It is seen that British writers often used the letter 'D' in place of an Indian word 'R' with strong sound. For example, the word 'Biri', 'Kannara' are written as 'Bidi' and 'Kannada' in English.¹⁰ Bhaben Narzi,¹¹ being a member of plain tribes rightly used the word Boro-Kachari in his book Boro-Kachārīr Samāj Āru Sānskṛiti. Thus the term 'Boro' refers to all the Tibeto-Burman speaking group of Sino-Tibeto origin.

The geographical area of my study is confined within the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Physiographically, the valley is plain and homogeneous in character. It covers an area of 56,216 square kilometre with the total population of 1,24,56,477 persons.¹² The valley extends from 25°44' north to 27°55' north latitude and from 89°41' east to 96°02' east longitude. The length of the valley from west to east is about 720 kilometres while its width varies from 130 kilometres in the western part to about 80 kilometres in the eastern part. The Brahmaputra valley is surrounded by Arunachal Pradesh in the north and east, by

10. Bijoy Doimary, op.cit.

11. Bhaben Narzi, Boro-Kachārīr Samāj Āru Sānskṛiti, 1985.

12. Census of India, 1971.

Nagaland, North Cachar hills, Karbi Anglong and Meghalaya in the south and by West Bengal and Bangladesh in the west. The mighty river Brahmaputra flows through the plain with about 725 kilometres to reach the Bay of Bengal. Brahmaputra valley is the natural mosaic of different habitats of tribes and non-tribes. Among all tribes of the valley the Boro speaking tribes form major group. The share of Boro speaking population is 4.99 lakh of total 124.56 lakh. The overall percentage of Boro speaking population is 4.01. The highest percentage of Boros is 26.88 per cent in Kokrajhar district followed by Nalbari district with 10.87 per cent and Darrang district with 9.56 per cent. All other districts of the Brahmaputra valley support less than 5 per cent and significantly the proportion of Boro speaking people in the southern districts of the Brahmaputra is highly insignificant. These are the statistical records taken from the statistical Hand Book of Assam, 1988, (Table 1). Another microlevel study of S. Sarma¹³ indicates that Sidli, Kokrajhar and Udalguri Thana shows the highest Boro speaking population with the percentage of 35.57, 32.28 and 31.57 respectively. Some other Boro speaking pockets may be mentioned with their percentage. They are Barama (24.17%), Bijni

13. S. Sarma, "Distribution Pattern of Boro Population of the Brahmaputra Valley: A Geographical Study", Social Research, 1991, p. 25.

Table 1 - Speakers of Language in the Brahmaputra Valley.

Sl. No.	Districts	Total Population	Boro	Percentage of Boro	Deuri	Dimasa	Rava	Lalung	Mishing
1.	Dhubri	8,51,045	13,525	1.59	-	8	5,298	-	-
2.	Kokrajhar	7,10,066	1,90,841	26.88	-	-	6,840	-	6
3.	Goalpara	6,63,992	28,171	4.24	-	-	17,471	-	-
4.	Barpeta	9,71,737	45,897	4.72	-	-	1	-	1
5.	Nalbari	6,80,904	74,020	10.87	-	-	930	-	-
6.	Kamrup	12,06,900	19,844	2.66	-	-	1,253	906	17
7.	Darrang	8,34,574	79,761	9.56	-	-	36	-	-
8.	Sonitpur	9,01,614	18,068	2.00	-	-	459	1	8,418
9.	Lakhimpur	7,11,600	18,207	2.56	9,030	-	39	1,012	1,27,597
10.	Dibrugarh	14,11,119	36	0.00	317	-	-	-	3,435
11.	Sibsagar	6,54,336	11	0.00	1,782	2	-	-	4,166
12.	Jorhat	6,46,445	11	0.00	1,060	-	-	-	69,633
13.	Golaghat	5,36,608	1,991	0.37	-	-	1	-	65,558
14.	Nagaon	16,75,537	8,511	0.51	-	1,300	35	1,649	3

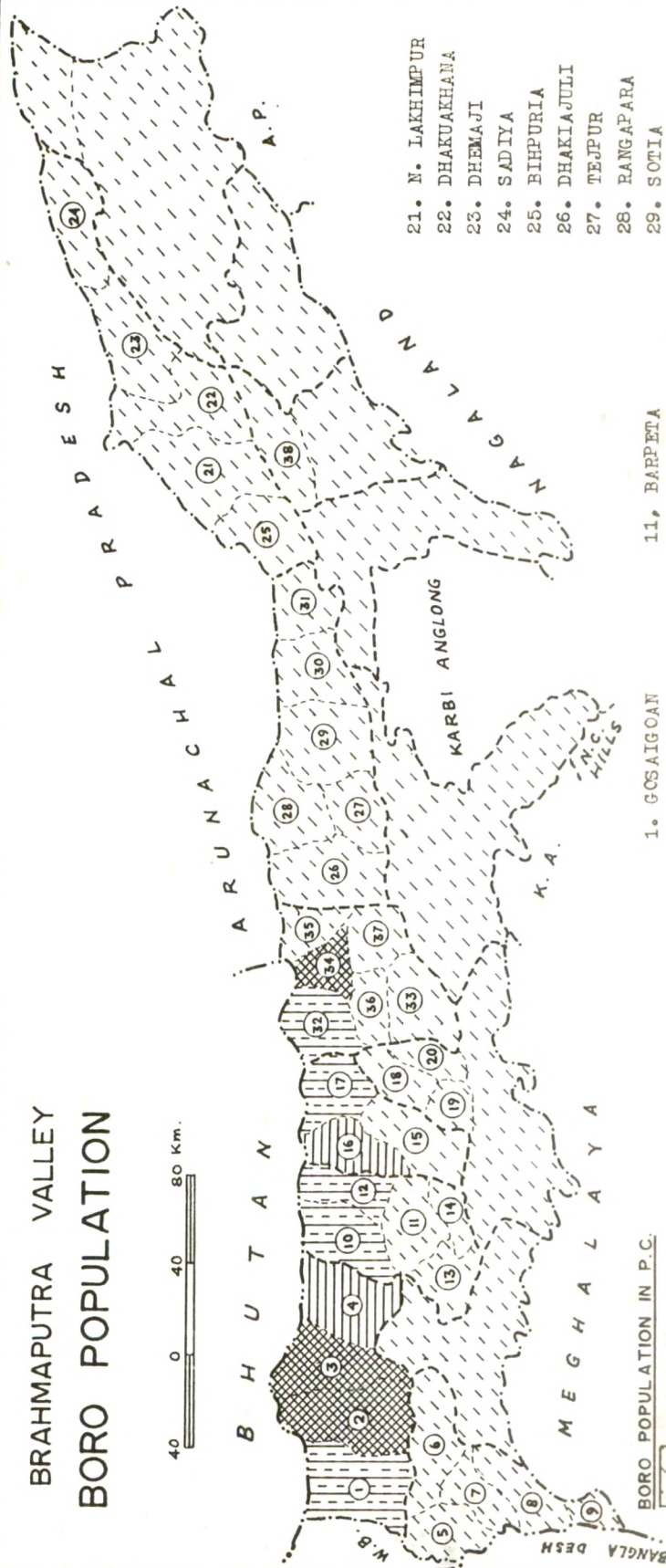
Source: Statistical Hand Book, Assam, 1988, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, Data Based on Census of India, 1971.

(20.86%), Paneri (19.92%), Tamulpur (15.20%), Patacharkuchi (11.38%), and Sorbhog (10.01%). Out of the total 37 Thanas of Brahmaputra valley, as many as 23 Thanas contain less than 5 per cent Boro population (Map 2) scatteredly settled here and there.

the Boros, once the dominating race of the epic and tāntric eras are reducing day by day. They now suffer from fear of losing their traditional identity of religion and culture. The eastern branch of Kachāri race of Chutia kingdom had to surrender to the Ahoms, a section of great Shan (Tāi) race who crossed the Patkoi Hill from the south and east about 1228 A.D. The Ahoms could not eliminate the cultural identity of Morāns, Borāhis and other Kachāri tribes living near the northern slope of these hills. ~~But~~ during the slow process of invasion of Ahoms for 200 years the indigenous opponents were forced to take refuge in Dimapur on the Dhansiri at the foothills of Nagaland. And in the middle of the 16th century Ahoms succeeded to capture their (Kachāri) new capital Dimapur. In 1790, the then Rājā Krishna Chandra and his brother Govinda Chandra made a public profession of Brāhmanism.

Intrusion of Aryan culture among the Boros from western side of the valley gained momentum in the 7th century. The Varman and the Salasthamba who was originally

BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY BORO POPULATION



BORO POPULATION IN P.C.



N.B. ALL DISTRICTS OF THE SOUTH BANK HAVE
LESS THAN 5 P.C. BORO POPULATION

1. GOSAIKOAN
2. KOKRAJHAR
3. SIDLI
4. RIJNI
5. GOLAKGANJ
6. BILASIPARA
7. DHUBRI
8. S. SAIMARJ
9. MANKACHAR
10. SOBHOH
11. BARPETA
12. PATACHARKUGHU
13. BAGHEAR
14. TARABARI
15. NALBARI
16. BARAMA
17. TAMULPUR
18. RANGIA
19. HAJO
20. KAMALPUR
21. N. LAKHIMPUR
22. DHAKUAKHANA
23. DHEMAJI
24. SADIYA
25. BIHPURIA
26. DHAKIAJULI
27. TEJPUR
28. RANGAPARA
29. SOTIA
30. BEHALI
31. GOHPUR
32. PANERI
33. MANGALDOI
34. UDALGURI
35. MAJBAT
36. KOLAIGAON
37. DAIGAON
38. MAJULI

Mech tribe became Hinduised with close contact of Aryan habitats of Magadha, Vaisali and Mithila. Aryan invasion in the 16th century pushed a section of Boros to settle down along the Mechi river valley of West Bengal. The Hindu influence further penetrated eastward to reach Dhubri, Goalpara, Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon district of Assam. Many of the Koches of these areas, after attaining ritual perfection of Hindu caste called themselves Rājbansi. Kalicharan Mech, the first preacher of Brahma movement (1860), subsequently known as Gurudev Kalicharan Brahmachary had sufficient number of followers.¹⁴ As a result, many Boros adopted Hindu religion and abandoned some of their aboriginal customs. Christianity, on the other hand, came along with the British administration in 1826, which converted near about 5 per cent of the Boro population of the Brahmaputra valley.¹⁵ Bāthou, the household God, is believed by the traditional Boro-Kachāri as the guardian of family. Christian converts gave up their belief in Bāthou totally while Brahma followers recognised some importance of Bāthou worship in their religious life. But both Christian and Brahma followers, now a days, would like to retain socio-cultural identity for the survival of the race i.e. Boro.

14. M.M. Chattopadhyaya, et al., Bhraman Brittānta of Srīmat Param Hansa Sibnarayan Swami, (in Bengali).

15. P. Devi, Christianity and Its Impact Among the Boros of the Brahmaputra Valley, 1990.

The Boros are numerically and sociologically one of the most important tribes of North-Eastern India, particularly Assam. J.D. Anderson observed, "The river names of the whole Brahmaputra Valley are Bodo names, and it is demonstrable that the Bodos were the aborigines of the Valley".¹⁶ The Boros are mainly agricultural people. They dwell near rivers. Their religion reveals their mode of life and attitude towards nature. Though rapid changes in their cultural life have been brought about by modern scientific and technological advancement, social customs and traditions with core values play a significant role in the individual and collective life of the Boros.

16. See 'Introduction' to S. Endle, op.cit., p. XVI.
