

SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS OF BODOS



PREMALATA DEVI



About the Author

Dr. (Mrs.) Premalata Devi (b.1959) obtained her MA degree in Philosophy from North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. She did her PhD in the University of Gauhati, Guwahati (India). Besides her doctoral research, she was also involved in a research project, entitled 'Communalism in Assam: a Civilizational Approach' under North-Eastern Hill University. She started her service career as a Lecturer in Philosophy at Morning Star College, Shillong. Then she joined as Research Associate in the State Resource Centre, NEHU, Shillong in 1994. Further, she has extended her research work in the field of Tribal areas of North-East India and prepared a number of Teaching and Learning materials for Adult Learners. She has to her credit 25 research papers published in various journals and books. Being a life member of North-East India Council for Social Science Research she is at present closely associated with research activities of the Council.

About the Book

The Bodos of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam are 'sons of the soil' (*bhumi putra*). In other words, they are the earliest settlers in the Brahmaputra Valley and are believed to be the migrants from Bod country of Tibet. Some of the names of the rivers of Assam and epics like *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* strongly support the evidence of settling down of Bodos in this Valley region since time immemorial. In the *Vedas* they are mentioned as *Kirātas* and Anthropologists include them under Indo-Mongoloid stock.

The Census of India reveals that the Bodos are the single largest tribe of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. Beginning with the geographical location of the study area, the book provides a brief account of the entire Bodo speakers in Brahmaputra Valley. The book explains the traditional socio-religious institutions of the Bodos from philosophical point of view. Man, society, ethics and gods as believed by the Bodos have been discussed in detail. Though there have been socio-religious transformation among the Bodos with the introduction of *Brahma dharma*, Hinduism and Christianity through ages, still it seems that their rich traditional culture is the backbone of their identity.

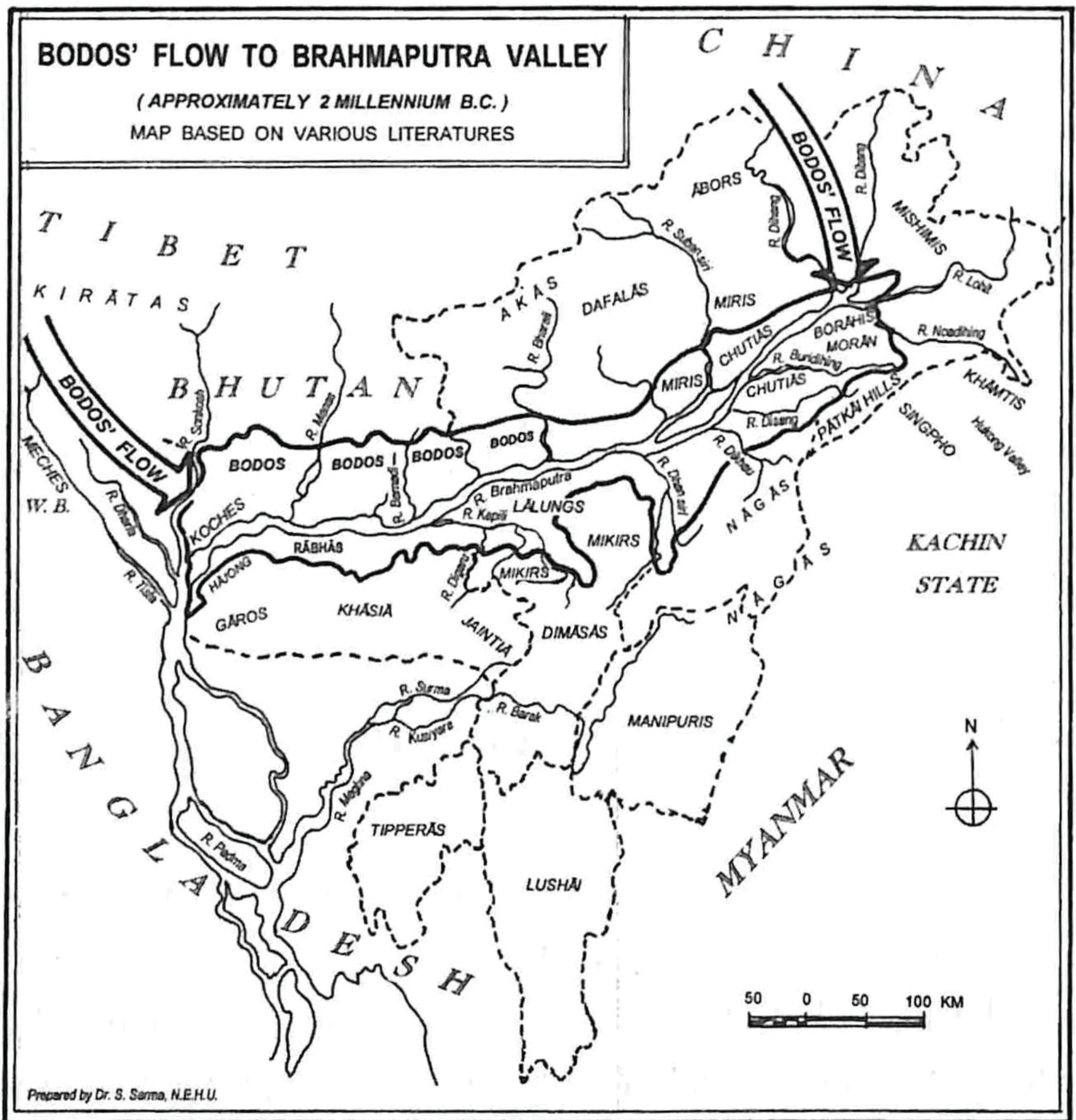
CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	v
<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>List of Plates</i>	xiv
<i>List of Maps</i>	xiv
Chapter 1	1
ORIGIN OF THE BODOS	
Chapter 2	15
GODS	
Chapter 3	41
ETHICS	
Chapter 4	63
MAN AND SOCIETY	
Chapter 5	91
rites, rituals and festivals of Bodos	
Chapter 6	131
BODO RELIGION	
Conclusion	155
<i>Glossary of Bodo Terms</i>	160
<i>Appendix I, II, III, IV, V, VI</i>	169
<i>Index</i>	175

1

ORIGIN OF THE BODOS

The Bodos 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 Bodos of Brahmaputra Valley. With distinct Tibeto-Burmese marks in their language, the Bodos started to settle in the plains of Assam since the second millennium B.C.



Map 1 : Flow of Bodos into the Brahmaputra Valley

Rev. S. Endle observed in his book *The Kachāris* that the Bodos 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 western Assam via North-East Bengal through the valley of Tista, Dharla, Sankosh River and it founded the powerful kingdom of Kāmrupa. The **second flow** was through the Subansiri, Dibang and Dihang valley into eastern Assam and it established a powerful Chutia Kingdom (Map 1). The western migrants who settled in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal and Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, and Goalpara districts of Assam are known as *Mech*. It is guessed that the Bodos living by the bank of the river *Michi* flowing through Nepal call themselves *Mech* or *Meche*. The same flow of migrants who settled in Barpeta, Nalbari and Kamrup districts is known as *Boro-Kachāri*. The eastern migrants are known as *Chutiā*, *Morān* and *Borāhis*. Outside the Brahmaputra Valley, Bodos are found in the contiguous areas of North Cachar (as *Dimāsā Kachāri*), Tripura (as *Tipperā* or *Barman*), Garo Hills (as *Gāro*, *Hājong*) 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 by B.M. Das³ and study on Bodo language and literature by P.C. Bhattacharya⁴ clarify the fact that the Bodos are the descendents of *Kirātas*, latter known as *Boro-Kachāri*. According to P.C. Bhattacharya, Bodo is a large linguistic group of *Kachāri* tribes, closely related to *Tiwā (Lālung)*, *Rābhā*, *Hājong* and *Koch* languages. He, along with Robin Burling, found 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 (see Appendix I).

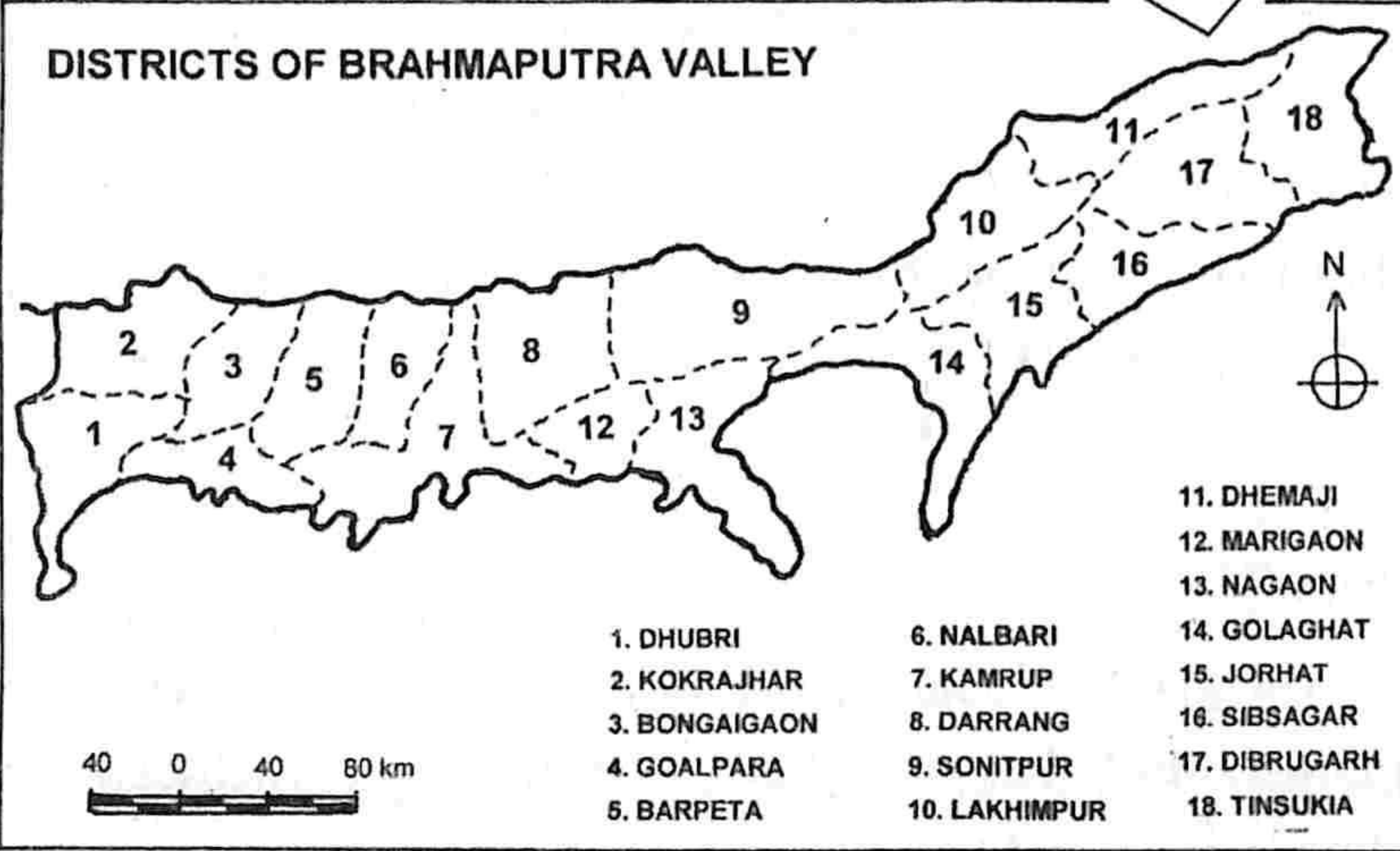
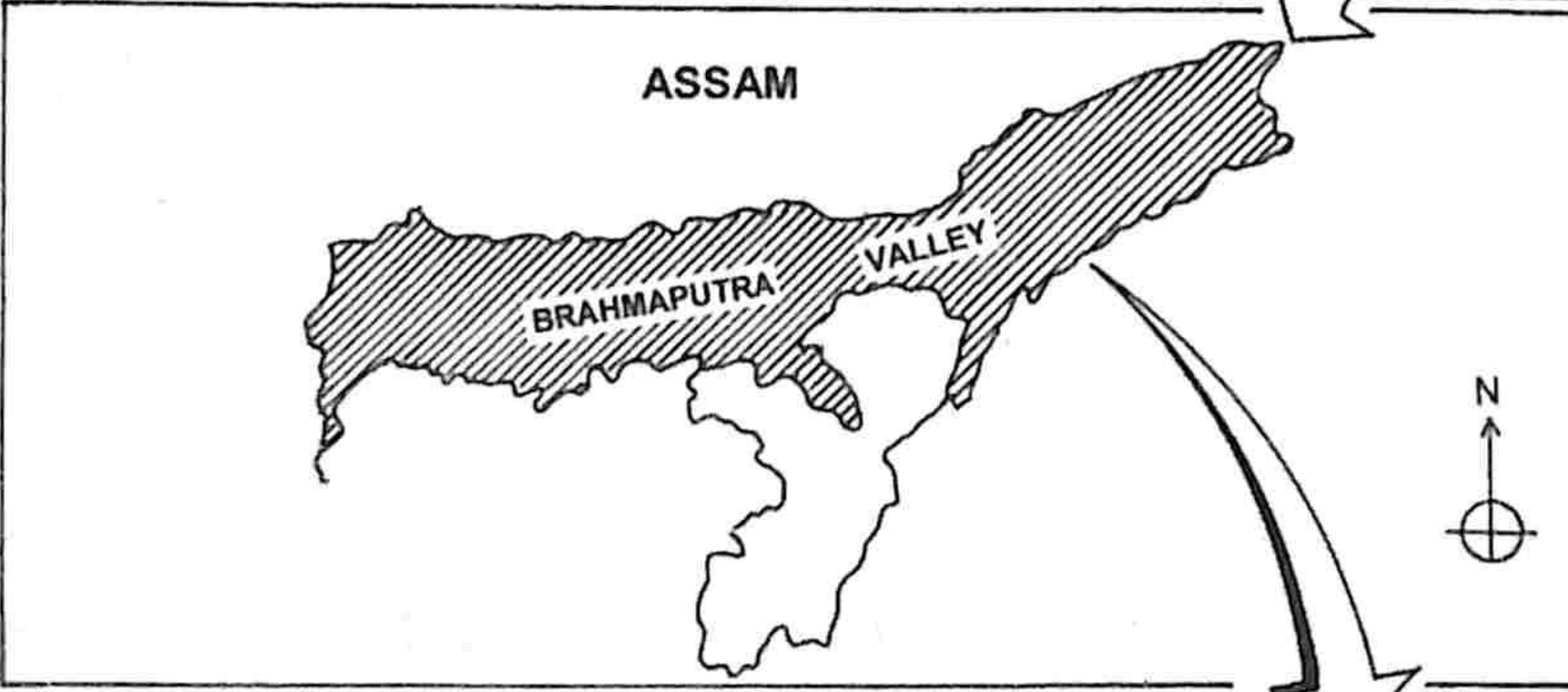
Many authors justified the view that the *Kachāris* were in earlier days the dominant race of Assam, because almost all rivers, rivulets and streams name of the then Assam start with *Kachāri* syllable ‘*di*’ (means water). They are *Dihang*, *Dibang*, *Dikrang*, *Disāng*, *Dibru*, *Digāru*, *Dikhau Dimu*, *Digboi etc.*

The form of religion practiced at *Kāmākhyā* of *Kāmrupa* is admitted by *Yogiñtantra* to have *Kirāta* association. The word *Kirāta* derives from Sanskrit word ‘*Kaksaka*’ which means a frontier dweller.⁷ Bani Kanta Kakati studied the cult of the Mother Goddess. The Mother Goddess 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 'Bodo', R. M. Nath says that Bodos 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 *Boro-Kachāri* language, the etymological meaning of the term *Boro* is 'men' by which *Bārā* or *Bārāphisā* (children of the *Bārā*) could be justified. *Boro* is a word still prevalent among the non-tribes. The tribe that domesticates 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 the letter 'R' with strong sound. For example, the word *Biri* and *Kannara* are respectively written as *Bidi* and *Kannada* in English.¹⁰ Bhaben Narzi,¹¹ being a member of plain tribes, rightly used the word *Boro-Kachāri* in his book *Boro-Kachārir Samāj Āru Sanskriti*. Thus, the term *Boro* (anglicised pronunciation 'Bodo') refers to all the Tibeto-Burman speaking group of Sino-Tibeto origin (see Appendix II).

Study Area

The geographical area of the study is confined within the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam (Map 2). Physiographically, the Valley is plain and homogenous in character. It covers an area of 56,216 square kilometre with the total population of 19,109,302 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 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 Bodo speaking tribes form major group. The overall percentage of Bodo speaking population in Brahmaputra Valley is 7.71 (Census of India 1991). The highest percentage of Bodos is 39.57 per cent in Kokrajhar district followed by Bongaigaon district with 16.53 per cent, Nalbari district with 13.80 per cent and Darrang district with 10.64 per cent (Map 3). On the other hand Marigaon, Jorhat and Sibsagar districts shows negligible percentage of the Bodo speaking population in the Valley (Table 1).

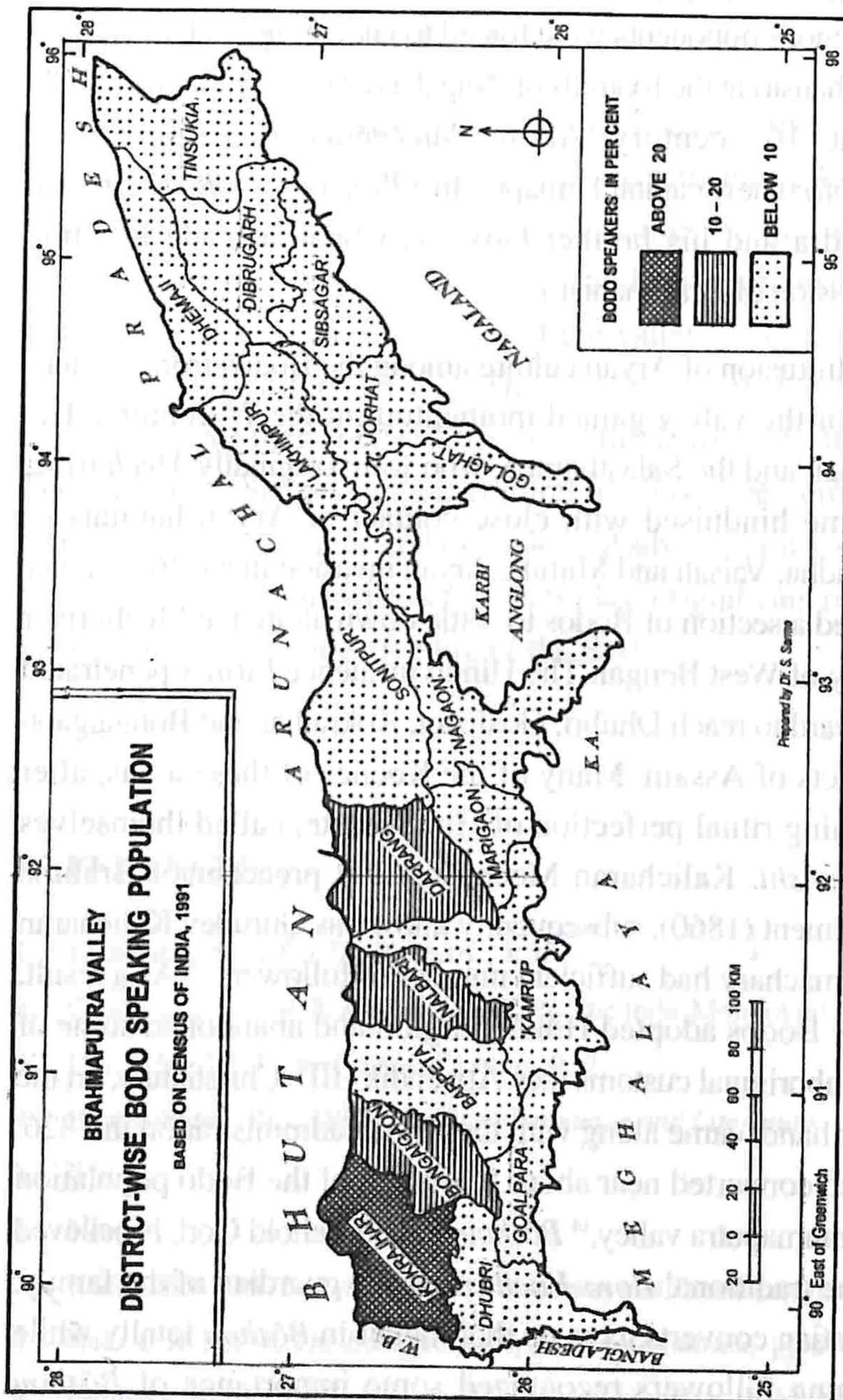
The Bodos, were once the dominating race of the epic and *tāntric* eras. They now suffer from fear of losing their traditional identity of religion and culture. The eastern branch of *Kachāri* race of Chutia kingdom had to surrender to the Ahoms, a section of great Shan (*Tāi*) race who crossed the Patkai 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

Table 1. District-wise Bodo Speakers* of the Brahmaputra Valley 1991

Serial No.	District	Total Bodo Speakers	Percentage of Bodo Speakers to the total population
1.	Dhubri	22, 963	1.72
2.	Kokrajhar	3, 16, 835	39.57
3.	Bongaingoon	1, 33, 507	16.53
4.	Goalpara	31, 823	4.76
5.	Barpeta	1, 04, 493	7.54
6.	Nalbari	1, 40, 211	13.80
7.	Kamrup	77, 722	3.89
8.	Darrang	1, 38, 221	10.64
9.	Sonitpur	1, 00, 525	7.06
10.	Lakhimpur	6, 667	0.89
11.	Dhemaji	32, 482	6.78
12.	Marigaon	Negligible	Negligible
13.	Nagaon	10, 764	0.57
14.	Golaghat	12, 936	1.56
15.	Jorhat	Negligible	Negligible
16.	Sibsagar	Negligible	Negligible
17.	Dibrugarh	2, 076	Negligible
18.	Tinsukia	2, 000	0.21
	Total	11, 33, 225	7.71

Source: Census of India, 1991, Assam State District Profile.

*As per the Census of India concept, each language is a group of mother tongues. The census questionnaire collects information on the mother tongue of each person and mother tongue is defined as the language spoken in childhood by the person's mother to the person. The mother tongues returned by the respondents in census were classified and grouped under appropriate languages according to their linguistic characteristics.



Map 3 : District wise Bodo Speaking Population in Brahmaputra Valley

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. However, 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 Bodos from western side of the valley gained momentum in the 7th century. The Varman and the Salasthamba, who were originally *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 Bodos to settle down along the Mechi river valley of West Bengal. The Hindu influence further penetrated eastward to reach Dhubri, Goalpara, Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts of Assam. Many of the Koches of these areas, after attaining ritual perfection of Hindu caste, called themselves *Rājbanshi*. Kalicharan Mech, the first preacher of Brahma movement (1860), subsequently known as Gurudev Kalicharan Brahmachary had sufficient number of followers.¹³ As a result, many Bodos adopted Hindu religion and abandoned some of their aboriginal customs (see Appendix -III). Christianity, on the other hand, came along with the British administration in 1826, which converted near about 5 per cent of the Bodo population of Brahmaputra valley.¹⁴ *Bāthou*, the household God, is believed by the traditional *Boro-Kachāri*, as the guardian of the family. Christian converts gave up their belief in *Bāthou* totally while Brahma followers recognized some importance of *Bāthou* worship in their religious life. However, both Christian and

Brahma followers, now a days, would like to retain socio-cultural identity for survival of the race, *i.e.*, Bodo.

The Bodos 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".¹⁵ The Bodos 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 advancements, social customs and traditions with core values play a significant role in the individual and collective life of the Bodos.

REFERENCES

1. Endle, Rev. S., 1975, *The Kachāris*, P.3.
2. Chatterji, S.K., 1928, *Kirāta-Jana Kriti*, The Indo-Mongoloid .
3. Das, B.M., 1987, *The People of Assam*, P.37.
4. Bhattacharya, P.C., 1992, *The Boro Language and Literature*.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Idem.*
7. Kakati, B.K., 1972, *Assamese, its Formation and Development*, P.42.
8. Nath, R.M., 1948, *The Background of Assamese Culture*, pp.6-16.
9. Daimary, Bijoy., 1987, *Boro and Bodo; Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Kohima, P. 528

10. *Ibid.*
11. Narzi, Bhaben., 1985, *Boro-Kachārir Samāj Ā ru Sanskriti.* (in Assamese Language)
12. *Census of India*, 1991.
13. Chattopadhyaya, M.M., *et al.*, *Bhraman Brittānta of Srimat Param Hansa Sibnārāyan Swāmi*, (in Bengali).
14. Devi, P., 1990, *Christianity and its Impact Among the Boros of the Brahmaputra Valley.*
15. Endle, Rev. S., *op.cit.*, P.XVI.