

CHAPTER - V

SOCIO-

CULTURAL LIFE

OF THE DHEYAN

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The village and naming of village:-

The Dheyans are the Koch Rajbanshi people in Cachar. They came with Chilarai in his expedition and later settled back in Cachar. Since they were the people of Chilarai who were also the prime minister or Dewan of the Koch King Naranarayan, the local people called them the first people of Dewan Chilarai. In due course of time Dewan was changed to Dheyans. They initially settled in Khaspur and then gradually branched off from there to different areas of Cachar. After Khaspur they settled in a village called Lathigram in the Doyapur area of Udharbond. However, at present they are found in only 9 villages of Cachar. The names of the villages are Japhirband, Thaligram, Leburband, Larsingpar, Digli, Lakhichera, Dewan, Harinagar and Narayanpur.¹ These villages are all situated in the vicinity of the tea gardens. But surprisingly, in spite of their poor economic condition they do not work there. At present each village consists of about 300 Dheyans families and the population of each village is around 2000 (approximately).² Out of the 9 villages 4 of them viz. Japhirband, Thaligram, Leburband, and Larsingpar are under the Udharband constituency. The remaining 5 villages viz. Digli, Lakhichera, Dewan, Harinagar, and Narayanpur are scattered widely among themselves. They come under the Lakhipur constituency. According to the Dheyans they have a legacy behind the origination of the names of each of these villages. These can be studied as follows:-

- a) Japhirband- The palm leaf from which Japhi, a kind of head protector (**Plate - 3**) is made is grown in abundance in this village. Therefore the village has been named as Japhirband meaning a jungle (Ban) of Japhi plants.³
- b) Thaligram – The geographical distribution of the whole village is like a plate i.e., it is round in shape. So, on the basis of the shape of the village it has been named as Thaligram meaning plate like village.⁴
- c) Leburband – Lebu or lemon is grown in abundance in this village. So the village has been named Leburband meaning jungle of Lebu plants. This village was earlier known also as Gorrebond also because all over the village an elevated land was erected like a round fencing or a band.⁵

- d) Larsingpar – This village lies across a stream by the name of Larsing. So, taking the name of the river, it has been named as Larsingpar meaning beyond the Larsing river.⁶
- e) Digli- This village is located near the Digli River. So, the village received its name from this particular river.⁷
- f) Lakhichera – This village is said to have very fertile soil and so whatever was sowed was reaped in abundance. So, the people believed that mother Goddess Lakshmi has directly showered her blessings on this land. Therefore, it has been named as lakhichera meaning strip of land under the blessing of Mother Lakshmi.⁸
- g) Dewan – When the Dheyans first set their foot on the soil of Barak valley they were under the command of a Dewan or Prime Minister. Moreover their campaign to Cachar was also under the guidance of their Prime Minister Dewan Chilarai. So, taking pride in the fact that they were the people of Chilarai, this village has been named as Dewan in order to honour Chilarai.⁹
- h) Harinagar – This village has been named after their village diety Hari Thakur. The Dheyans are a staunch devotee of the diety Sri Hari Thakur and he is worshipped in every Dheyman household.¹⁰
- i) Narayanpur – This village has been named after their famous king Naranarayan whom they regard as the greatest of all the Koch kings.¹¹ and under whose reign the Koch Empire reached the pinnacle of success and glory. The reign of Naranarayan with the aid of his brother Chilarai therefore serves as a glorious history for the Dheyans and the Koch Rajbanshi.

Education, Occupation, Dress and Ornaments:-

The literacy rate is not very high amongst the Dheyman. However at present time, parents are sending their children either to the government schools situated in the villages or private schools in nearby towns. There are at least one to two government schools in the entire Dheyman village. However, the medium of education in all these schools is in the Assamese language. The Dheyman are basically agriculturist and almost every household is engaged in agricultural operations. They

cultivate paddy and it is cultivated twice in a year. Both men and women equally take part in it right from the sowing of the paddy till the harvesting of it. When the paddy gets ready to be reaped, the grains with the stalks are cut with a sickle leaving about one foot of the stump with the earth. The cuttings are then collected into small heaps and then left into the field for three to four days. They are then made into small bales and carried from the field and stacked in the courtyard or in the yard specially set apart for the purpose which is known as Kholan. It may be somewhere in the field or in the outer yard of the cultivator. After the collection from the field has been done then some of the cuttings are taken and uniformly spread on the ground and the grains are separated from the stalks by making two to three cows or buffaloes walk over the spread paddy a number of times in circle. After this when the grain is separated from the stalk, the stalk is removed away and the grains are placed in a pile. The separated grains are then placed on the winnowing fan and thinly spread on the ground and then fanned whereby the dust are blown away by the wind created by the movement of the fan. In this way the paddy is cleaned and then stored in the granary for future use. In case the grain is not properly dried then it is kept in the open under the sun to be dried properly. The straw is kept in the open in a tightly packed heap mounted on a bamboo platform with a long pole of bamboo passing right through.¹² The straw heap is cone shaped and its base rests on a platform of bamboo and the top ends in a point.¹³ This saves the straw from being soaked in the rain. The preserved straw is used as fodder for the cattle. Sometimes it is also used as fuel and for making and repairing the roofs of the huts. The Dheyans commonly use the age old traditional equipments for agricultural purposes but sometimes even a power tiller tractor is also used for ploughing the land and in the process of separating the grain from the stalk. However this practice is not very common as because of the expenses incurred in it. Some of the common agricultural implements are the Nangal, Beda, Karali, Kurshi, Dakhura Moi, etc **(Plate – 4)**

Apart from being agriculturist some of them are also engaged in the cultivation of Endi or Eri muga **(Plate - 5)**. This cultivation however has decreased a lot in recent times. The muga cultivation usually takes place during the rainy season. The muga collected is used on their loom for preparing clothes of their own use. These days they do not sell the muga clothes as its cultivation has reduced a lot and

has remained confined to a few families only. However, weaving among the ladies is found in almost all the Dheyans household.

Apart from being agriculturist and rearing muga, very few of them are engaged in white collared jobs. Otherwise they are mostly engaged as carpenter, mason, petty businessman, tailor etc. Very few of them are also in teaching profession, in the defense and working in some private companies. Some of them are also instrumentalist. They play certain instruments like drum, cymbal, conch shell etc in religious festivals and occasions and earn their livelihood. Some other are also vocalist who sings in such programmes. The Dheyans have a very good hand in bamboo works especially in making basket which is known by other communities as Dheyans basket (**Plate - 6**). These baskets are a basic necessity of the Dheyans because it is used not only in agricultural operations but also in certain rituals relating to birth, marriage and death. It is used to store grain, vegetables, fruits etc in their daily life. It is one of their basic household items. Fishing is also one of the main occupations of the Dheyans. They also make various types of fishing implements namely jakhoi, kholoi, thusi, polo, etc (**Plate – 7**) which is again used by other communities in large number. They are also very famous for making the japhi which is a kind of head protector made with palm leaf, bamboo and cane and which is very compatible in sun and rain in agricultural operation.¹⁴

The women folk have a very good hand in weaving and their daily dresses are procured from their own looms (**Plate - 8**). For their daily wear the male uses Angcha, gamachas and shirts. Angcha is the traditional dress of the Koch Rajbanshi gentleman. It is produced in their loom at home in different colours with 6 feet of length and 3 feet wide. Gamachas are also rectangular piece of cotton cloth which is weaved in the looms and which is usually either yellow or white in colour. In winter they use sweaters and shawls. For festive occasions they wear dhoti and kurta. Pachara is a type of shawl used by both man and women folk and which is again prepared in the looms especially with cotton or Eri silk yarn. (**Plate – 9**) The women wear two pieces of cloth known as dukli which is somewhat like mekhla and chadar. The traditional dress of the women is however known as “Patani” (**Plate - 10**). The youth prefer to dress as per their taste and preferences. But for certain occasions and rituals, they try to be at par with the elders with slight variations.

The women folk love to wear ornaments which are mainly made of gold, silver, copper, brass, shell, etc. **(Plate – 11)** Gold being expensive the rest of the metals are most commonly used by the Dheyans ladies. The different types of earrings are Pat mera, Kan – or – phul and kan – or – koira, dul etc. A very common earring among the dheyans ladies is a ring with little or no design on it. These rings are a complete replica of the earrings worn by the Manipuri ladies known as Nathak Nayin. Other ornaments used by them are bangles which are known as kharu, Bauti, etc, necklace known as nar – laha, har, siki har, chandra har, separi guli har, surya har etc. They also use finger rings which are known as anghthi, armlets known as baju and anklets known as theng Kharu, etc. At present the youth have shifted to ornaments which are readily produced from the nearby markets in cheaper rates and with modern designs.

Religion:-

The Dheyans claim themselves to be Kshatriyas as belonging to the second strata of the four- fold Hindu caste system.¹⁵ However they do not have a priestly class or Brahmins. Therefore they have to depend either on the Manipuri Brahmins or the Bengali Brahmins who are settled in their neighbouring areas. They take Radhakrishna as their worshipping god and Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabu as the Avtar of god.¹⁶ Accordingly, each Dheyans village possess a central worshipping place called Namgarh. **(Plate – 12)** Out of the 9 Dheyans villages in Barak valley 5 of them (Dewan, Harinagar, Narayanpur, Digli and Lakhichera) are under the priestship of Manipuri Brahmin. While 2 of them (Leburband and Thaligram) are under the swaddle of descendents of those Brahmins who their kings brought from outside.¹⁷ Although they are now a day's mixed up with Bengali Brahmins of Barak Valley, they still do their priestly duty among the people of the Dheyans villages. The remaining two villages Larsingpar and Japhirband are under the priestship of both the Bengali and Manipuri Brahmins. It has been found that in each of the village two to three Brahmins are assigned for performing the rites and rituals and it is up to the individuals as to under whose guidance he would like to perform the rituals. Since in most of the villages the Manipuri Brahmins perform the rites and rituals therefore influence of the Manipuri community is largely felt in the Dheyans society. However, at present the roles of both the Manipuri and Bengali Brahmins in the Dheyans society

has declined to a large extent and their role has been limited to only a few rituals. Other rituals are performed among themselves or with the help of the Gyati.

Each Dheyman village possess central worshipping place called Namgarh with the design of the Mandop as found in the Manipuri villages.¹⁸ They perform Bhajan-kirtan of Sri Krishna in brajabali language under the religious guidance of their respective priest.¹⁹ In the villages where they possess the Bengali priest, all their religious performances follow the Bengali way of religious proceedings. There is no trace of castism in the Dheyman community as they all belong to a common caste. The Manipuri or Bengali Brahmins are the exterior caste structure of the Dheyman society, and they generally live in neighboring areas.²⁰ Therefore the Dheyman are mono-caste. However, to maintain the sanctity of a priestly upper class they never take cooked food from the Dheyman families. In all cases, they cook their food all by themselves to offer to God or for their own consumption.

The recreational performance relating to Vaishnavite cults are also performed under the guidance these priests. Sankirtans, Rasalila, Gaudalila (Shri Krishna's game, his association with pastoral boys and yasodas love for her son are portrayed in this dance), Khubak Ishei (dance and song performed to the accompaniment of musical sounds made by the clapping of the hands) and Vasak, a form of Khubak Ishei as it has the same theme with the latter. However, it does not involve the use of clapping hands that khubak Ishei speak about and the artist use mandilla (small sized cymbal). These forms of performing arts are also practiced by the Dheyman. Now – a- days, the Dheyman artists have learnt all these Vaishnavite forms of Sankirtans in connections to marriage, shraddha and other forms of performing arts from the Manipuri teachers²¹ and now they are self-dependent and very rarely seek aid on this matter from the Bengali and Manipuri communities.

The Dheyman are very religious minded group of people. It is also a daily rituals for them to wake up early, have bath and then offer their daily prayer to God in the morning and then in the evening. Every Dheyman house has a tulsi (basil) plant grown in the inner courtyard. **(Plate – 13)** Salutation is also offered to the tulsi plant every morning and evening.

Role of the Gyati:-

Within the Dheyman community itself there is a group of elders whom they refer to as the “Gyati”. These people are very few in number in a village and their primary duty is to act as a priest or supervisor in absence of the Brahmins. The Gyati is an integral part of the Dheyman society because some events cannot be performed without them. There can be an event without the Brahmins but in absence of the Gyati no event can be carried out either it be related to birth, death, marriage or any other important festival. In case of death he is among the first few to be informed. He supervises the rituals of the funeral and is the last man to leave the funeral pyre after completion of everything. At the time of marriage also he holds a very important position. It is only after he receives salutation from the bride and the groom and in turn he gives his blessing that the marriage ceremony commences. At the time of birth of a new born also the blessing of the Gyati is mandatory. Gyati are usually few in number in each village and they occupy a very respectable position. They are usually elders who have sound knowledge of the rituals concerning birth, death, and marriage.

Religious Festivals:-

The Dheyman begin their annual festivals with the celebration of their village diety known as “Sri Hari Thakur”. It is held in the month of April. On this particular day a long procession is carried out in the whole village singing Hari Sankirtan and collecting funds. This fund is later used for celebration of the festival and maintenance of the village temple. However, if in any case a birth or death takes place in the village then the event is not carried out. Once this festival is carried out then the other events follow.

Bihu is their main festival which is celebrated with great pomp and show. It takes place in the month of April. The Bihu festival is a three to four days celebration. During these periods the Dheyans abstain from doing any physical labour and pass the time in merriment. Bihu dance is the highlight of this festival. The different forms of Bihu dance are Hosuri, Mouk Kumuri, Bihu kumuri and Jang Bihu. The peculiarity of Jang Bihu is that only married women takes part in it.

Other form of dance of the Dheyans are the Goalini Nritya, Hudum Nritya, Kushan Nritya, Kartika Nritya, Shatka Nritya etc. **(Plate – 14)** These are the

traditional dance of the Koch Rajbanshi which was at a point of time almost lost within the Dheyman but at present due to a close interaction with the Koch Rajbanshi of their mainland they are gradually reviving their traditional form of dance and music. In this form of dance certain traditional folk musical instruments are used such as the Dotor, Dholuk, Khol, Aktara, Bena, Mukh – Bashi, Sanai, etc. **(Plate – 15)** At present a number of cultural shows and programmes based on the traditional music and dance are being frequently organized in the Dheyman villages which are helping them to establish a strong bond with them.

The Hari Uthan, Snan Yatra, Rath Yatra, Biddai and Soyon of Lord Jagannath are another series of puja carried out in devotion to Lord Jagannath. The Bengali or Manipuri Brahmin performs these series of puja. The Hari Uthan (getting up from sleep of the Lord) is performed in the month of November - December. It is believed that before this period the Lord Hari was sleeping and so no auspicious events were carried out during this particular period. Only after the celebration of Hari Uthan events relating to marriages, entry to new houses etc are carried out. On this particular day a pole is well decorated with flowers and flags (which is weaved in their looms) and then is erected collectively by the villagers near the village Mandir in the morning. After this ritual is performed salutation is offered along with fruits and other offerings by the people gathered.

Snan Yatra is the process of giving bath to Lord Jagannath. Literally it signifies that the Lord has woken up from his long rest and it is the event of giving bath to him by cleaning him up and changing his cloths and ornaments. On this day feast is carried out during daytime and in the evening Khidchri (a mixture of rice and dal) is prepared and offered to God. This puja is held in the month of June.

The Rath Yatra is the main festival in this series of pujas. It is a nine days affair. During these periods of nine days the Rath Yatra (travelling of Lord Jagannath on the cart) is carried out. Offerings in the forms of fruits, vegetables, rice, etc are made. The idol of Lord Jagannath is brought over to the Dheyman village for these periods. During day time feast is prepared and during the evening prayers are offered collectively in the form of songs **(Appendixes - M)** and dance in praise of Lord Jagannath. The Rath Yatra takes place in the month of July.

Next to follow in line are the Biddai and Soyon of Lord Jagananath. Admist songs and dance Lord Jagannath is carried out in procession on a well decorated cart. Offerings are made on the way. After that the idol is taken by the Brahmin and placed back inside the temple, after which it is believed that it again goes for a long period rest a. This usually takes place in the month of August.

Another puja celebrated is in regard to the Snake Goddess known as Manasa Puja. It is usually performed in the month of either October or November. Milk and ripe plantains are the chief items of the offering as it is believed that the snakes are very fond of these food articles. Songs and dance in honour of the Goddess are performed and enjoyed by one and all alike. Offering of the lotus flower to the Mother Goddess during this puja is a very common sight.

The Lakshmi Puja is yet another important festival in almost every Dheyian household. Everyday offerings are made to Mother Lakshmi for the material benefit of the family. The women folk also carry out regular fast as a mark to show their reverence to Mother Lakshmi and to seek her blessings. During the month of November the Lakshmi puja are held with great pomp and show. From the day of Lakshmi Purnima till Raas Purnima (which is according to lunar calendar), the Niyam Palan is being observed by the Dheyians according to which they abstain from taking fish, meat, onion and garlic for full one month. During this period recitations from the Holy books and Sankirtans are carried out every day in the evening. After the completion of a month, the very next day is observed as the “Niyam Bhanga”. On this particular day a feast is organized and all those who had been abstaining from taking non – vegetatrian food items take part in the feast.

Other puja celebrated by the Dheyians with great pomp and show are the Biswakarma puja, Tarpon, Durga puja, Kali puja, Satyanarayan puja, Makar Sankranti, Saraswati puja, Holi, etc. There are also pujas related to the harvesting of paddy. The ‘Agg Dhan Lua’ is a puja which resembles to the first harvesting of paddy. On this day the lady of the house goes to the paddy field along with a sickle and cut a few plant of paddy and brings it back home and keeps it at the entrance of the main house. Another puja related to harvesting is the Nua Bhaat Khawa which is a feast cooked with the newly harvested rice. In this feast the newly harvested rice is cooked and offered to god and then eaten with close relatives.

Besides this some other pujas are celebrated collectively in the village are the Tusuk puja, Bhairav puja, Hasun devata, Mahadev puja, Ranabauli, Chandai Mala, the Naga Devata (**Plate - 16**), etc.

Ceremonies attending Birth:-

The birth ritual of the Dheyans is an important ceremony. The Dheyans society has the norm that a woman in pregnancy should not be physically and mentally tortured and troubled. They have the concept that if a pregnant woman has tension and anxiety, it will badly affect the baby in the womb. They take caution thinking that ghost may affect trouble and torture the women in pregnancy. The belief is that women in pregnancy should avoid seeing bad stuffs, hearing abuses, lifting, heavy things, jumping over cords tied to animals and looking at animals like monkeys and horses as these animals are considered to be bad omens. They put a knife under the mattress and wear amulets in order to avoid ghost and evil spirits. A Bijni (an elderly lady) takes care of a woman at the time of her delivery. These days the women are also taken to a nearby health centre or hospital for the delivery. The birth of child is an occasion of joy. In the Dheyans village once a child is born in a family the members of the same vansh within a gotra are taken to be unclean and they observe ritual impurity for full twelve days. During these periods of ritual impurity they do not perform any auspicious functions, ceremonies or events. They do not even perform their daily rituals of offering morning and evening prayers to God. During this period, the role of an elderly midwife is of great importance. She is known as Bijni and is usually one who knows about the pregnancy and birth of a child. She helps the mother of a newly born baby in rearing up the child in the initial periods. On the 6th day there usually used to be a swasti puja but at present it has been clubbed with the cleansing rituals on the 12th day. On this day also the Bijni performs the initial rituals of cleansing the child. A barber is also present on this particular day for the shaving the hair of the newborn. After this the child is given a bath and a ritual is performed wherein some fruits and rice are given as offering to God, and a bow and an arrow is placed on the child's hand if the child happens to be male. This is not done in case of a female child. This act is a demonstration of the fact that since they belong to a warrior caste the primary duty of a male is to defend his country, home, parent, wife and children. After this the Brahmin who had been invited earlier for the 'shuddhi' chants his mantra and sprinkle water dipped with basil leaves insides and outsides the

house. An interesting act here is on this particular day all the furniture of the house including beds, chairs and table, utensils etc are taken out in the courtyard and cleaned with water. After the cleansing rite is over the ceremony of ear piercing and naming the child is carried out. It is a simple affair and neither the Gyati nor the Brahmins is sought. However when the child attains the age of 6 month then the annaprasan or first feeding ceremony of child takes place. This is not a mandatory function and sometimes not performed at all. Usually Kheer (mixture of rice and milk) is prepared and given to the child as a mark that from that particular day he or she is able to take in semi-liquid substances.

Ceremonies attending Marriage:-

Marriage in the Dheyani society is an affair of great pomp and show. The institution of marriage is considered to be very important among the Dheyani. The marital bond is found to bring together not just two individuals but two families even kindred's and villages. They are found to marry according to the Hindu traditions. People marry within their community but outside their gotra (clan). Altogether there are 10 gotra within the Dheyani society. They are:

- 1) Paras
- 2) Sandilya
- 3) Sravana
- 4) Madhukalya
- 5) Bardhwaj
- 6) Angreya
- 7) Basistha
- 8) Kashyap
- 9) Baishya and
- 10) Kaushik.²²

Arranged marriage is generally preferred but these days instances of love marriage resulting in elope has also become quite frequent. There are instances of intercaste marriage which is lesser in number and not favorable in the Dheyani society. Marriage is generally a two to three day affair. But at present, it is even completed in a single day also. Generally when the search for a bride ends and a girl is found suitable to the groom, a few people consisting of close relatives from both the parties meet at the girl's place to discuss the affair known as "aalaap". Here in this meeting they fix a date for meeting known as the "Hokini". On this day of Hokini the date of the marriage is fixed. Before getting married the initiation ceremony of both the bride and the groom takes place. This is known as "Shoron Lua". In this ceremony both the bride and groom take initiation from their respective Gurus who is the Brahmin under whom their marriage ritual is to be performed. In case of the groom they also take the "Lukun" during this initiation ceremony. Earlier the girls used to take initiation before attaining the age of puberty. But at present times, it is taken just before getting married.

On the day of marriage, a barber cuts the hair and nail of the groom and then he is given a bath by a married woman. The same procedure is followed in the case of the bride also. At the time of marriage the groom wears a white dhoti, kurta and puts on a turban of white colour and a white dupatta folded which is folded and hung over his shoulder (**Plate - 17**). Before leaving for the bride's place he is offered with gift by the invitees. He then seeks blessings from the Gyati and other elders and then proceeds for the bride's place. All this time he is escorted by married women. In the evening at the bride's residence, the groom is seated outside the bride's house and once the kirtans begins then only he is allowed to enter the marriage hall and the marriage takes place. The bride is usually very well dressed. She wears either a dukli (a two piece dress) or a saree along with a red dupatta spread over the head (**Plate - 18**). The dukli these days do not bear their traditional designs rather it is usually made of muga silk yarn with rich modern design almost similar to that of the mekhla – chadar of the Assamese community. Earlier the Dheyani brides used to wear the traditional dress and ornaments of the Manipuris in their marriages which were procured by them on rent. However, at present time this practice has been completely abandoned in favour of their own traditional dresses.

During the marriage all the items that have to go along with the bride to the groom's house are brought inside the marriage hall and kept aside the couple. Once the marriage is over the bride is taken to the groom's house. There are instances where in both the bride and the groom along with some relatives stay back and proceeds the very next day for the groom's residence. The very next day a marriage reception takes place wherein relatives, neighbors and villagers are invited. This practice helps to establish the new bride's identity and social acceptance and be socialized in the new social ambience.

Ceremonies attending Death:-

Death in a family is a matter of great loss and sorrow. With the death of a person all the household activities come to a standstill. Once the person is on the dying bed then the person is given some Gangajal (water taken from holy river Ganga). In absence of this, water dipped with basil (tulsi) leaves is given to the person. Babies who die without arriving at the teething stage are buried. When a person is about to die, devotional songs are sung for the benefit of the person on the death bed. As soon as the person is dead it is publically proclaimed by loud lamentation set up by members of the family. The body is then fully covered with a clean and washed white cloth.²³ If the person dies by late evening then the cremation takes place on the next day. In such case the death body is taken out from the house, kept on the verandah, and a vigil watch is kept on it till morning. In the morning gathering of the villagers take place and preparation of the cremation begins. They cut down trees and bamboos meant for the preparation of the funeral pyre. After the corpse is laid on the courtyard, friends and other relatives prepare a bamboo bier known as "Changra" made of two long bamboo poles with a few split bamboo cross bars tied to the poles firmly with a rope. The length of "Changra" should be a little longer than the length of the corpse. The poles should project sufficiently long beyond the crosses to allow two or more person to carry the bamboo on their shoulders on each side. The body is laid on the bier and fastened with crosses of ropes passed round the body and the poles so that it may not slip during transport to the cremation ground. Normally the sons and very near relatives carry the dead body. The body is then carried to the nearby river. If a river is not found within each reach then cremation may takes place on the bank of a pond or a low land where sufficient water is available.²⁴ The head of the dead body is always placed in the north. Women also

accompany the dead till the cremation ground. But return back once the funeral pyre is set on fire. While the dead body is taken to the cremation ground singing of devotional song also follows. They mostly burn the dead bodies onto their own land and there is no permanent cremation ground for the Dheyans. Upon arrival on the cremation ground the body is untied and kept at the small hut made of bamboos and bananas leaves known as the “Talaash garh”. After sometimes the body is taken out, given a bath and dressed with good clothes. In the meantime the funeral pyre is made ready. The length of the pyre is slightly longer than the length of the dead body. Sometimes a small piece of wood from a fig tree or a small piece of sandal wood whichever is obtainable is also placed on the funeral pyre. The dead body is then laid fully stretched on the funeral pyre with the face towards the sky and laid towards the north. Male and female are all cremated in the same way. If a woman dies without any male issue the husband lights the pyre. When the pyre is ready, the eldest son of the deceased takes a touch of jute sticks and ignites it. He moves round the funeral pyre (10 times in the case of male and 9 times in the case of female). When the dead body is nearly burnt one person from those present there takes a knife or an axe and isolates a portion of the frontal bone (area between the two eyebrows) of the dead from the pyre and brings it out. It is then cooled and placed inside the hollow of a piece of green bamboo, the opening being closed with a chunk of earth. A hole is then dug into the earth and the bamboo cylinder containing the bone is buried. It is left there for four days. After the cremation is over the pyre is extinguished the ashes are collected and buried nearby and the place is cleaned with water. In all this procedure the Gyati is the one who supervises it. Then the party returns back home. It is a custom that all the members take a bath at the river or a pond while returning. As far as possible the party tries to maintain silence on their way back to home. They are then greeted with fire and water into which a few basil leaves have been dipped. Only after this the party can enter the house. Meanwhile before the party had arrived the whole house had been cleaned, cooked food if left is thrown away, the bedding and clothes of the death is washed and every member of family takes a bath. The son who had lighted the pyre usually happens to be the eldest son. After returning back he does not enter the main house. Rather he spreads a mat on the verandah and that becomes his permanent place till the 12th day. In between the other sons of the deceased also can also observe the rituals of mourning. He remains quite most of the times and cooks his own food which is plain rice and boiled vegetables. From the 5th day

onwards he is allowed to consume oil and this continues till the 12th day. Every day in the evening a small gathering of people takes place and recitation from the Bhagawad Gita, Ramayana and Mahabharata takes place. On the 5th day they perform the “Panchasheel Puja’ wherein they go to the side of the river and offer prayer for the departed soul along with offerings of rice, fruits and vegetables. After completion of the puja the son of the deceased brings the asti or frontal bone that had been buried on the cremation day. It is kept hanging on the verandah. On an auspicious day as determined by the Brahmin within one year from the day of the death of the person, the frontal bone had to be immersed into the Ganga either by one of the son or by any near relatives. People who cannot bear the expenses of a pilgrimage to the Ganga do so in some local rivers nearby. On the 13th day, the shraddha ceremony takes place wherein for the first time in all events pertaining to death the Brahmin performs the rituals. He officiates in the performance of rituals of the departed soul. The son who lit the funeral pyre performs the ceremonies under the guidance of the Brahmins. When the chanting of mantras and rituals begins, simultaneously kirtan is also carried out by the kirtan party by playing of cymbal, drum and conch shell. No idol of god or goddess is worshiped in the shraddha puja. At the end of puja, offerings are made to the Brahmins in the name of departed soul. During the shraddha ceremony, the invites are given a mixture of flattened rice and curd (kholi – chira and dholi). In the evening at the end of the puja the widow and sons observing the morning rituals along with other persons, who attended the funeral are feasted with rice and fish. The very next day or on any day as convenient to the householder of the deceased a vaishnav puja is organised. Thereafter till the completion of a year no puja is carried out for the deceased soul. However on the death anniversary, calculated by the lunar calendar the Bashare shraddha or Phira shraddha is organized wherein again the Brahmins are invited to carry out the rituals. In this type of shraddha, the Brahmins bring along with them idols of god or goddesses as per their convenience and offerings are made to it. This puja marks the end of any puja to be given for the benefit of a deceased soul.

Efforts of the Dheyans to maintain their identity:-

The Dheyans of Cachar are also gradually becoming conscious of their identity. Earlier they were happy with their simple life but with the gradual phase of time, they are trying to maintain their district identity. However, the growth of identity consciousness amongst the Dheyans is in a very nascent stage.

They were earlier known as Dheyman and even at present they are popularly designated by other communities in Cachar as Dheyman. However, when their counterparts in North Bengal and Brahmaputra Valley started giving emphasis to the term 'Rajbanshi', they have gradually started to abandon the usage of the term 'Dheyman' as their surnames. Rather, at present they prefer to call themselves as Koch Rajbanshi or only Rajbanshi rather than Dheyman. However, other communities still continue to designate them as Dheyman. This has been one of their earliest efforts to maintain their identity in a region where they are few in number and cut off from their mainland. This shift from Dheyman to Rajbanshi or Koch Rajbanshi is evident from their surnames. Earlier they used Dheyman as their surnames but gradually they have completely abandoned it. This is also proved by the census records of Cachar. Chandra Rajbanshi of Larsingpar was able to give the list of his ten generation which clearly shows this change:

They are as follows in descending order:-

- 1) Mahindra Narayan
 - 2) Udayram Mahapatra.
 - 3) Mathuram Barpatra
 - 4) Arjunram Barpatra
 - 5) Khibangram Dheyman
 - 6) Rubiram Dheyman
 - 7) Gopalram Dheyman
 - 8) Gouracharan Dheyman
 - 9) Gadadhar Rajbanshi
 - 10) Chandra Kumar Rajbanshi
-
- ```

graph TD
 A[10) Chandra Kumar Rajbanshi] --> B[Gopalram]
 A --> C[Narayan]
 A --> D["Rubiram
(Rajbanshi)"]
 A --> E[Arjunram]
 A --> F[Gouracharan]

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Thus, the above names show a clear shift from Dheyman to Rajbanshi.

Secondly, in the social strata being mono caste they had to either depend on the Manipuri or Bengali Brahmin for performance of their rites and rituals as these communities are their immediate neighboring communities in all their settlements in Barak valley. Because of this a large influence of these communities were observed not only in the performance of their rites and rituals but also in their day to day life which includes food habits, dress, ornaments etc. But, slowly they are abandoning such practices. For example, earlier in a Dheyman marriage the bride used to wear poloi( Manipuri traditional dresses worn in marriage) and Manipuri jewellerys which were rented to them. But at present this practices has been completely abandoned. Similarly there are many other instances where the influence of the other communities has been abandoned. The dominance of the Bengali and Manipuri Brahmins on their social life is slowly declining. This is proved by the fact that the forms of recreational performances introduced by the Brahmins like Ras leela, Khubak Ishei, Sansenba, etc are almost non - existent these days. Moreover they are trying to be self dependent by not depending entirely on the Brahmins rather performing some rituals on their own levels with the help of a Gyati. This can also be seen as an attempt of the Dheyman to assert their identity and prevent it from getting distorted. A number of organization and associations are also being set up in collaboration with those based in North Bengal and in the Brahmaputra Valley. They are the Cachar branch of the all Koch – Rajbanshi Students Union, Koch Rajbanshi Samaj Unnayan Samiti, the Bir Chilarai Utjapan Samiti, etc. This organization are working for the all-round development and welfare of the Dheyman community in Cachar and trying to educate them regarding their glorious past. The Mahavir Chilarai Diwas is also being observed every year like that of North Bengal and Brahmaputra valley. It is observed with great pomp and show depicting the life and career of the great hero Chilarai. Being cut off from their mainland they were almost on the verge of losing their distinct identity. But at present they are making all possible effort of reviving with full vigour. They were not in any way related to the Kshatriyazation Movement of the twentieth century nor are they a part of the present Kamatapur Movement. But, they whole heartedly support the present movement for a separate state of Kamatapur. Thus, their moral support to the present Kamatapur movement is an indicator of the fact that even beyond regions and valleys the feeling of brotherhood is still very much alive amongst them.

The study of the socio – cultural life of the Dheyans exhibit a transition which is taking place within their society. The Dheyans came to Cachar as a warrior group in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century under the command of Chilarai who fought against the Kingdoms of north eastern India. Later on, they settled themselves permanently in Cachar. Till then they have been able to maintain their distinct identity without completely merging themselves with other dominant communities of the region. However, due to their lost contacts with the people of their mainland in Coochbehar or the Brahmaputra Valley, the Dheyans were not able to make much headway in the context of their cultural progress. Rather, they had to incorporate certain cultural nutrients from their neighbouring communities (Bengalis and Manipuris) for the sake of their successful survival and development as per the existing necessity without being dominated upon by others and at the same time retaining their distinct cultural identity. At present, their effort of retaining their identity is growing at a rapid pace due to their re – established contacts with their mainland.

### **Notes and Reference:-**

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- 2) Own Survey on 17/11/2014
- 3) Interview with Chandra Rajbongshi of Larsingpar on 10/05/2011.
- 4) Interview with S. Gouridas Singha of Sribar on 20/11/2014.
- 5) Interview with Batu Babu Rajbongshi of Thaligram on 18/05/2011.
- 6) Interview with Mongol Singh Rajbongshi of Jhaphirband on 10/12/2014.
- 7) Interview with Narasingh Rajbongshi of Dewan on 15/12/2014.
- 8) Interview with Dilip Rajbongshi of Naranpur on 17/12/2014.
- 9) Interview with Kunjababu Rajbongshi of Harinagar on 20/02/2015.
- 10) Interview with Kukumoni of Digli on 11/09/2015.
- 11) Interview with S. Gouridas Singha of Sribar on 20/11/2014 and Narasingh Rajbongshi of Dewan on 15/12/2014.
- 12) Sanyal, Charu Chandra, 1965, The Rajbansis of North Bengal, The Asiatic Society, Monograph Series, Vol. XI, p.30.
- 13) Ibid.
- 14) Singha, Th.Baba Chandra, and Biswas, C.K., 1998, Koch - Manipuri relation – A context of Acculturation in Barak Valley, Proceedings of North East India History Associations, Shillong, p.151.
- 15) Ibid. p. 148
- 16) Ibid. p.149
- 17) Ibid. p.148
- 18) Ibid. p. 149

- 19) Ibid
- 20) Ibid.p.150
- 21) Ibid
- 22) Own Survey on 04/08/2015.
- 23) Sanyal, Charu Chandra: op.cit.p.118.
- 24) Ibid.