

CHAPTER IV

Social condition of the people under the Bijni Raj Estate

The topic social condition of people embraces a broad area. If we have to discuss about the social condition of people under a dynasty or within a ruling Estate we should have an idea about the social division, classification or division of different castes, the food habit of general masses, their agricultural condition, their religious beliefs, about the diseases they had to suffer, the condition of education under the ruling dynasty, different customs and beliefs and cultural activities that prevailed among them etc. Under the rule of Bijni *Rajas* the social condition of peasant class was neither very fine nor deplorable. They continued their traditional way of living, their belief and customs and rituals where the ruling authority cannot interfere.

4.1. Population and Social division of people of Bijni Raj Estate:

The indigenous people of Bijni Raj Estate were the Koches, Kayasthas, Rabhas, Bodo-Kacharies, and Meches. A small number of Muslim and Garo population also inhabited in Bijni Estate.¹ Every tribe of Bijni Raj Estate had its own dialect, manner and customs but all these tribes were socially allied to the Bodos. According to Sidney Endle, the Rabhas, the Meches, Dhimals, Koches, Dimasas, Hojai, Lalung, Garos, Hajongs and as such other tribes are within the fold of the great Bodo race.²

The Society of Bijni Raj Estate was a mixture of diverse racial strains. If we divide the population of Bijni Raj Estate on the basis of religion, it creates three broad divisions: the Hindus, the non Hindu tribals and the Muslims migrated from different parts.³ Though the process of 'Hinduization' or 'Sanskritization' has been going on since ancient past, still a large section of society remained outside of the process. In the Hindu social system Brahmans are the first or priestly caste. The majority of the Brahmans of Bijni Raj Estate were the descendants of early immigrants from Central India, Koch Bihar and Kamrup. Although Brahmans constitute less in numbers in the Bijni Raj Estate but they enjoyed high status and reputation in the society.

As the rulers of Bijni dynasty were followers of Siva and Shakti cult the Brahmans served as the priest under the ruling class.⁴

Next to Brahmans the Kayasthas and the *Daivajnas* or *Ganaks* occupied the second position in the Bijni Raj Estate. They adopted the professional occupation like- book keeping, accountancy and astronomical calculations. They occupied important posts of administration under the Bijni Rulers. In the Bijni Raj Estate Kalitas were in huge numbers. The Kalitas were regarded as a high caste and ranked next to Brahmans, *Daivajnas* and Kayasthas. They were an agricultural community who are generally believed to have entered Assam from the west.⁵

In the bottom of Social paradigm the Sudra caste people were included. These lower caste people derived their caste in the name of their profession. Some of them were Barber or *Napit*, *Kamar* or Blacksmiths, *Kumbhar* or Potters, *Tamuli* or Pan sellers, *Barui* or Pan growers, *Mali* or gardeners, *Goala* or *Gop* or Cattle keepers, *Kassari* or Braziers coppersmiths, *Laheri* or Lac workers, *Teli* or oil pressers, *Sutradhar* or carpenter, *Halua Keot* or fishing caste, *Shaloi* or cultivator, *Suri* or *Sunari* or wine makers, *Sonar* or gold and silversmith, *Halwai* or confectioners, *Dhoba* or washerman, *Subrnabanik* or bankers and jewellers, *Kahar* or palanquin-bearers and domestic servants, *Jogi* or silkworm rearers and spinners, *Hira* or potters, *Dhanuk* or domestic servant, *Dom* who were engaged with fishing business, *Kapali* were cotton spinners like the *Tantis*, *Chunari* were lime burners, *Gharami* were thatchers and house builders, *Patiyal* were the mat-makers and labourers, *Jaliya Keot* were fisherman, *Behera* were cultivators and palanquin bearers, *Patni* were ferrymen, *Badyakar* were makers of drums and other musical instruments, *Chamar* or *Muchi* or shoemakers and leather dealers, *Mal* and *Mithar* were sweepers, *Pasi* were toddy makers and finally the *shikari* or Huntsmen.⁶ From this classification of caste structure we can assume about the numerous economic activities of common people under the Bijni Ruling Dynasty.

Other than Hindu some people of the Muslim community also settled in the Bijni Estate from early past. Some Muslim people entered the Bijni region during the invasion of Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyar in 1205 A.D. The Muslim people lived peacefully with the other Hindu communities. Even some Muslims were attracted towards Hindu religion and adopted Hindu customs and practices.

“Gait observed that as for the Mussalmans, who had been brought as prisoner in former times to Goalpara, had chosen to marry in the district and their descendents are exactly in the manner of the Assamese, and have nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with Muslims.”⁷

As the Bijni Raj Estate covered most part of undivided Goalpara district Gait observation is applicable on Bijni Raj Estate also.

Though the substantial population was covered by Hindu and Muslims, still people from other religions like Buddhist, Jains and Christians also inhabited under the Bijni Raj Estate. In the Bijni *Duars* which were under the authority of Bijni *Raja* some Bhutiya people inhabited who make up the Buddhist population.⁸ The Jain people of Bijni Raj Estate were Oswals or Marwaris, who were locally known as *Keya* or *Kainya*.⁹ At first they came for business purposes, but in later period they permanently settled in the Bijni Estate and become the principal merchant community. Some Christian Missionaries also came to Bijni Raj Estate for religious purposes. At that time some Garo population were residing in the boundary area of Bijni Raj Estate and Bijni *Duar* areas. The American Baptist Missionaries converted many Garo people to Christianity. W.W. Hunter mentions about the Christian missionaries' like-

“There are native missionaries stationed at Bijni, in the Eastern *Duars*, but as yet they have not met with much success in their efforts among the rural population.”¹⁰

The society of Bijni Estate had a feudal chapter. In the ranking ladder of society *Raja*, *Zamindar* and Nobility captured the top position. In the administrative machinery *zamindar* was the head of estate. The Estate officials were appointed by the *zamindar* and they addressed *zamindar* as *Karta*.¹¹ *Dewan*, which was also an important post for administrative staff looked after the general administration of the Bijni estate and all the political economic affairs both internal and external of the *Rajbari*. But it is also true that *dewan* could not act independently and he had to obtain formal permission from the *Raja* or *zamindar* for the transaction of his business.¹²

Next to above mentioned posts a second group of middle aristocracy was formed by *Tehsildar* or *Naib*, *Jamanavis*, *Subanavis*, *Kanungo*, *Tankinavis* and *Amins*, *Barkandazes* etc.¹³ *Tehsildar* or *Naib* were the officer in charge of the *Dihi Katchary* area under the Bijni Estate.

Jamanavis was the revenue officer of Bijni Estate who supervised the work in respect of fixation of rent, preparation of *Jamabandi* and *Touzi* and deal with the mutation cases of the *Dihi Kacharies*. *Subanavis* and *Jamanavis* were the officers of Judicial Branch and their posts were created when Bijni *Raja* exercised judicial power during the later Mughal period. The works and functions of *Dihi Kacharies* were supervised by the *Kanungo*.¹⁴ The *Tankinavis* were the surveyors of Bijni Estate and they work under the inspection of *Kanungo*. The *Amins* were adjusted for the maintenance of *noxa*, *khatians* and *chitha*. *Barkandazes* took the lowest grade as estate official and they were retainers of the *zamindar*.¹⁵

The last but important class which falls in the bottom of society were the peasantry, forced labour and *bandi beti*. Peasants performed two roles. At first he was allowed to use Government land as his prerequisites where he was engaged in agricultural work and secondly he also had to give his service as a soldier for his estate in the time of need.¹⁶ According to D.D. Nath, peasants generally enjoyed their land rights without any barrier but his freedom of movement was restricted only when he was on military duty. For the purpose of improvement of their condition peasants were also free to undertake any side profession or craft like weaving, spinning, carpentry, pottery etc.¹⁷

From the Francis Buchanan's Report of 1809 a separate class structure of society came to light. His social divisions include *Sukhowa* who were unwilling for labour and manual work, *Khowa* who worked as traders, workers and *karikars*, Peasants who were engaged in cultivation. According to him peasantry covers almost the whole population of society. In Buchanan words all the artist and traders are here called *Khowas*, while all those of no profession or of liberal education and all those who live merely by service, without being employed in manual labour are called *Sukhas*.¹⁸

From the writings of William Hunter, it is clear that people, who never employed themselves in manual labour, but get land from *zamindar* through agreement and cultivated the land with the help of hired peasants, were called *Sukhowa*. Priest, teacher, Maulavi, Brahmana and Kayastha employees and relatives of landlord were privileged class of the society of Bijni Estate. They cultivated their lands with the help of *Halowa* and *Adhiar*.¹⁹ Thus under the *zamindari* rule society was divided into three sections viz.- *Khowa*, *Sukhowa* and Peasantry on the basis of their social reputation.

4.2. Occupation of the people of Bijni Raj Estate:

The main occupation of general masses of Bijni Estate was agriculture. But along with agriculture, people also engaged in other businesses like trade, manufacture and also personal service. Sometimes a man performed double profession- he became a cultivator and mechanic both. As a cultivator he ploughed his field in the cultivating season and also worked as an artisan and mechanic, and he divided the time between works of agriculture and manufacture.²⁰ Not only agriculture but some people also worked as a tailor, carpenter, gunny maker, blacksmith, *paikar* or broker. Such types of occupations were not confined to any class of the people. But there were some other professions also like *Goalas*, *Napits*, *Kumars*, *Kamars*, *Harijans*, *Domes* which had hereditary pursuit.²¹ These professions did not attract other castes or classes. In the case of some joint family, one member of family was engaged in mechanic work, again one member opened a shop or one member carried on business or a *paikar* or dealer in fibres, while other members attended the fields.²² In this way in a family, every individual might be said to have plurality of occupations. Except *Raja* or *Zamindar* other persons of Bijni Estate were engaged in different professions like- Service, Herdsmen, Pig breeders and dealers, Agriculture including land owners and cultivators, Barbers, washermen, Sweepers and Scavengers, Milk, butter and ghee Merchants, Betel nut growers and sellers, Tobacco manufacturer and sellers, Tailors, Cotton makers, Oil pressers and sellers, *Baniyas* and goldsmiths, blacksmiths, Carpenters, Brass pot makers and sellers, general merchants, Shop keepers etc.²³

In Bijni Estate every person except beggar was a land owner, cultivator or agricultural labourer. At that time cotton weaving was done by both Hindus and Muslims. Generally the Hindu weavers were called *Tanti* or *Tati* and the Mohammedan weavers were called *Jola*.²⁴ The women of Bijni Estate were efficient in the art of spinning, weaving and dying. There are evidences that *Rani* Abhayeswari, wife of Bijni king Kumud Narayan, wore sarees where gold motifs were added.²⁵ Every family of Bijni Estate had a loom. The art of dyeing was also known to the people of Bijni Estate. There was no professional class of dyers in Goalpara district at that time, but the art of dyeing was quite well known to the people from earliest times. It was emphasized by Hamilton that there were no dyers, no printers of chintz in Assam. The women, who wove their clothes, colour it themselves.²⁶

People prepared their own methods of dying. People of that time manufactured dyes from the materials like- Lac indigo, Achu plant, *Manjit* (Indian Madder) and *Kendu*.²⁷ The most important dye used by the people was lac. In Kamrup, Goalpara and Golaghat district *Leteku* was used for the production of red dye. Among the Meches of Goalpara *Nil* or Indigo was also a popular dye. The Meches of Goalpara and Bijni Estate extracted a mordant from the bark of *Tepar Tenga* tree. It was used after mixing it with indigo, madder and turmeric. *Kusum* was used for dying in Goalpara and Bijni Estate.²⁸

The tailors and *Darzis* prepared some fine quality *Sajnis* and *Samianas*. The *Sajni* was a very thin but fine quality quilt with ornamental needle work on it.²⁹ The aboriginal tribes of Bijni Estate were engaged in large business of gathering and selling honey, mahua, fire wood etc.³⁰ In the Bijni Estate and lower Assam a class of people belong to barber profession were popularly known as *Napit* while in upper Assam they introduced themselves as *Nat*. There was no strict rule for the adoption of their profession and for that reason many of them fell upon the agricultural work in course of time.³¹

There was another profession called Washerman or *Dhoba*. The *Dhoba* community occupied the position below the keot, Koch and *Sonari* Kalita. Those *Dhobas*, who washed clothes of other low class people, were recognised as impure and low in the society.³² Hamilton mentions that the washermen refused to perform their office for any person except the royal family and Brahmanas and have been elevated to the rank of purity.³³ There were washermen in the Koch kingdom, according to Darrang Raj *Vamsavali*.³⁴

Pottery, Gold smithy, Black smithy were some craft and industries of Bijni Estate which were adopted as a profession by the people of Bijni Estate. In the Goalpara district and Bijni Estate two kinds of potters existed. One is *Kumar*, they used wheel, another one called *Hira*, they did not use wheel.³⁵ Another industry of that period was oil crushing and *Gur* (Jaggery) making. The professional oil men were known as *Telis*. A small mill, also pulled by cattle was used in crushing sugarcane for the production of *Gur* or Jaggery.³⁶

Bijni Raj Estate was known for wooden and bamboo works also. There were some forest areas in the Habraghat and Khuntaghat *parganas* of Bijni Estate which were famous for valuable woods, bamboo, cane and other natural products. Boat building was carried out by the

Kachari and Rabha people living in the Goalpara district from time immemorial. The Kachari people of Eastern *Duars* received cash in advance from the traders and supplied them boats.³⁷ The elephant catching practice was prevalent in the Bijni Raj Estate and the class of people who were engaged in the elephant catching business were called *Phandis*.³⁸

4.3. Agricultural Condition of the people of Bijni Raj Estate:

Cultivation of paddy was the chief agricultural work done by the people of Bijni Estate and the whole population, who were directly or indirectly engaged with other professions, also cultivated paddy. The staple crop of Bijni Estate was Rice and Rice had three varieties like- *Ahu*, *Bao* and *Sali*.³⁹ The *Ahu* or Bitari Rice is again subdivided into following varieties- *Chample*, *Nilaji*, *Dubechenga*, *Pakrijabeta*, *Bhujsha*, *Gathia*, *Bhimra*, *Kasia Panja*, *Boalidar* and *Kekoya*. The *Ahu* rice is sown from January to April, principally in the two latter months, and reaped in May to August, but principally in June and July. It required somewhat moist land, and is not transplanted.⁴⁰

Bao is a one kind of long stemmed rice and it requires marshy land and is also not transplanted. *Bao* rice is chiefly sown in February and March and reaped in October and November. The third class of rice is the *Sali* or Aman crop, which demands a sandy, moist or clay land, so that the roots of the plants may be always in water. It is sown in May to July, transplanted in July to September and reaped in November to January.⁴¹ *Boka Dhan* is a one kind of variety of *Sali* Rice. It was a favourite mid day meal of peasantry of Bijni Raj Estate. It is eaten with curds or molasses and milk.

The other cereal crops grown in the Bijni Estate were *Gahan* (Wheat), *Jab* (Barley), *But* (Gram), China, Kaon etc.⁴² Wheat is sown upon in the same manner of land as *Ahu* rice, in October and November and harvested in February and March. *Jab* (Barley) is cultivated in a limited extent and the seasons for reaping and sowing of *Jab* is same with wheat. Gram is sown in the months of October and November and reaped in February and March. China is sown between October to December and reaped between February to April. Kaon is planted in November and December and reaped in March to May. *Sariyaha* (Mustard) was also cultivated in a huge number on the *Char* areas of Bijni Estate.⁴³

Different kinds of pulses, fruits and vegetables were also cultivated in the Bijni Raj Estate. The chief pulse crops were Mung bean, Green gram, Lentils, Pigeon pea, Black lentils, Vetches, Lupins, and Sesame etc. Different vegetables like- Gourd, Potato, Onion, Chayote, Wax gourd, Luffa, Cucumber, Pumpkin Charantis, Cabbage, Cauliflower, Carrot, Brinjal, Peas, Radish, Tomato etc were cultivated in large numbers.⁴⁴ The climate of Bijni Raj Estate was also favourable for the production of various kinds of green leafy vegetables namely, Spinach, Asiatic Pennywort, Mint, Brahmi, Coriander, Skunk vine, Mustard green, Sorrel, Fern, Taro Stem, Margosa leaf, White Goosefoot etc. The main fibre crops grown in Bijni Raj Estate were Jute and Hemp.⁴⁵

Cultivation of Jute was popularized by the British and Jute became an important cash crop in last part of nineteenth century. Jute was grown in the most part of lower Assam and Goalpara district was the largest producer of jute. Cultivation of jute was spread after 1871 A.D. in the western part of Goalpara district.⁴⁶ The East Bengal immigrants specially the Muslim population introduced the jute cultivation in the Brahmaputra valley in the colonial period. The *zamindars* of undivided Goalpara district had been encouraging peasants from East Bengal to settle and cultivate jute in *Char* areas (river islands and banks formed by silt deposit). These peasants were mainly tenants and they emigrated from a densely populated land, subjected to an oppressive tenure system which guaranteed them little security of occupation.⁴⁷

Irrigation system was unknown in the Bijni Raj Estate. But the Muslim cultivators tried to introduce it by constructing small 'bunds' along the 'alley' of their fields to retain the rain water and flood water.⁴⁸ Some tenants welcome flood for the fertilisation of their lands. In the month of May or June they expected floods from the neighbouring rivers. They did not consider it much prejudicial to their interest, because the flood waters went down after a few days. But continuation of flood for a longer period, of course created anxieties among them for crop failure.

For the Agricultural Activity, Agricultural Implements are very important. The Agricultural implements used by the people of Bijni Raj Estate were- (1) *Nangal* or wooden plough, (2) *Phal* or iron ploughshare, (3) *Dila*, a wooden rod to connect the plough and the yoke, (4) *Joyal*, wooden yoke (5) *Sayel*, pegs or nails to which the ropes are attached (6) *Mai* or harrow, for levelling in land after it has been ploughed (7) *Mai Jari* or *Mai Rasi*, a rope attached

to the harrow (8) *Lari* or *Chari*, a goad for driving the oxen (9) *Dolibari*, a wooden mallet for breaking the clods (10) *Kolbani* or *Jalka*, a rake to gather the refuse and sweepings (11) *Bida*, a large rake with iron teeth, passed through the rice plants to clear them from weeds, and to thin the plants (12) *Pagha* or *rasi*, a rope for binding the cattle (13) *Jari*, ropes used for various purposes (14) *Kodali* or Mattock (15) *Dao*, a long knife or bill hook to cut bamboos or clear jungles with, also used for domestic purposes (16) *Kachi*, a reaping sickle (17) *Khanta*, an instrument used for weeding and for loosening the earth around the plants (18) *Kuthar*, an axe (19) *Hulabari* or *bankha*, a pole slung across the shoulder for carrying burdens (20) *Ukhani*, used in threshing (21) *Pachhi*, *Khorahi* and *Dala*, various sorts of baskets used for stowing rice (22) *Kula*, a winnow for cleaning the rice (23) *Chalani*, a sieve (24) *Don*, a basket measure containing five sers (25) *Katha*, a smaller measure (26) *Phanati* or *Phanta*, a sandal or shoe used by agriculturists (27) *Chanch*, an adze (28) *Batal*, a chisel, used by agriculturists in making or repairing implements (29) *Tokan* or *lathi*, a stick used by agriculturists in watching their fields at night (30) *Barsha*, a spear (31) *Dheki*, a mortar worked by a pedal used in cleaning rice (32) *Thora*, the pestle of the mortar (33) *Katora*, connected with the same (34) *Khubli* or *Pakhli*, the vessel in which the paddy is husked (35) *Ural*, a wooden mortar for pounding rice etc.⁴⁹

4.4. Condition of Education in the Bijni Raj Estate under the Royal patronage:

The ruling family of the Bijni Raj Estate played a momentous role for the improvement of education in their estate. Queen Abhayeswari who herself had not received any formal education was the torch bearer for the development of education in the Bijni Raj Estate. It is worth mentioning here that the former rulers of the Bijni Raj Estate did not give much magnitude for the advancement of education in their estate as they were pre-occupied in debate over the throne, *zamindari* and tenant struggle as well as peasant agitation. Thus we can say that the full acclaim for the development of education in the Bijni Raj Estate goes to Queen Abhayeswari, King Jogendra Narayan and King Bhairebendra Narayan. It is because of their

pertinent effort as well as their far sightedness that the subject of Bijni Raj Estate could see the light of education and were able to connect them with the present world.

When Abhayapuri acquired the distinction of being the newly established capital of Bijni *Rajas* it was void of any educational institution. After that Queen Abhayeswari demonstrated an example by establishing a high school at Abhayapuri by the name of 'Abhayeswari High School'.⁵⁰ It is one of the rare case in the history of not only Assam but also India, that an uneducated lady had the indomitable will and zeal for bringing the light of education among the common masses and to eradicate the curse of illiteracy and ignorance. The boarders of Abhayeswari High School received free education as the queen exempted them from payment of educational fees. The queen also constructed hostel for those students who had come from far flung areas of the Bijni Estate for receiving education. The royal treasury took the responsibility of the salary of the teachers and the workers who were engaged in the maintenance of school hostels.⁵¹ As a result of such initiative being taken by the rulers of Bijni Raj Estate, students from far off places came to Abhayapuri for receiving education.

A Sanskrit *Tol* was also established by Queen Abhayeswari in 1907 A.D. However due to scarcity of students, the *Tol* had to be closed down within few years.⁵² Such was the importance given to education by the Bijni *Zamindary* that for the comfortable stay of the teachers, they constructed quarters which were allotted to them free from any kind of rent. Such efforts have been taken by the rulers of Bijni Raj Estate so that the teachers could devote their complete time and attention towards their pious responsibility of providing education to the pupils. Construction of good quality school building was another significant contribution of the Bijni *Rajas*. The doors and windows of the school building were specially designed by the Chinese carpenters. The carpenters were brought from Calcutta also for the the construction of building of Abhayeswari High School.⁵³

It is worth mentioning here that although boys could receive free education and was wholly promoted by the rulers of the Bijni Raj Estate, however girl education received a set back as they were prohibited from receiving education. It is quite strange due to the fact that girl students were not given admission in schools which was established by a Queen herself. The cause of this problem can be attributed to the do's and don't of the society and the prejudices towards girl education affecting members of the society.⁵⁴ Conservative and narrow minded

societal members were totally against the system of co-education and considered it morally unacceptable.

However later on Queen Abhayeswari established 'Abhayapuri Balika Vidyalaya' in 1910 A.D. for providing and promoting girls' education. During that period, this school was the only institution for female education in the Bijni Raj Estate. In the later period, this school was recognised as primary and M.V. School.⁵⁵

The benevolent Queen Abhayeswari, whose contribution in the development of education in Bijni Raj Estate is unparalleled and undisputable, died in the year 1918A.D. She was succeeded by her adopted son Jogendra Narayan. But he was a handicapped ruler as he was suffering from mental illness. Taking advantage of the prevailing situation, the administration of the Bijni Raj Estate was taken over by the Court of Wards.

In this system of Court of Wards, the administrative head which was earlier termed as *Dewan* was given the title of Manager. Mr. Berculi was appointed as the first manager under this system. As Mr. Berculi was an agent of the British government, he was not impressed with the administrative mechanism under the *zamindari* system and thus introduced many changes in the administration of the Bijni Raj Estate. One of the major changes that he implemented was that he abolished the system of 'education without any fee' and introduced the system of collecting 'half fee for education'. However there was widespread dissatisfaction showed by the people of Bijni Raj Estate towards these changes brought by Mr. Berculi.⁵⁶

Apart from these changes, there were some praiseworthy initiatives being implemented by Mr. Berculi for the development of education in the Bijni Raj Estate. Free studentship was given to meritorious students and stipends were provided to poor but intelligent students. In addition to these, the Bijni *zamindari* contributed immensely towards the development of higher education. Post Matriculation scholarships were given to those students who have passed the Matriculation examination with flying colours.⁵⁷

However till that time no initiative had been taken for the promotion of higher education for girls in the Bijni Raj Estate. It is evident from the fact that there was not a single girls' high school in the Bijni Raj Estate. We have already mentioned about the establishment of a Girls' M.V. School by Queen Abhayeswari. Realising the importance of higher education for girls, in

the year 1938 A.D. a Girls' High School was established. This school was named as 'Jogendra Narayan Memorial High School'.⁵⁸ It was the responsibility of the rulers of the Bijni Raj Estate to provide free food, lodging and education of the girl's students who came to study in this school. *Raja* Bhairabendra Narayan was the pioneer in the establishment of this school. In later times, a Principal and a Superintendent was appointed by the *Raja* for smooth functioning of the school. It was due to the efforts being put in by the Bijni *Raja* along with constant cooperation and support of the school staff, this high school succeeded in earning good name and reputation for itself. The great educationist of Assam, late Sarat Chandra Goswami, who was also the school inspector at that time, wrote in 1939 after visiting the school that he has very glad after finding improvement of its finance and at the instance of the manager, the Bijni Raj has resumed its old interest in the education of its subjects.⁵⁹ Such words of appreciation by an eminent educationist and a impartial school inspector proves that the Bijni *Rajas* were genuinely concerned and gave prime importance to the education of their subjects.

There are a number of primary schools which were established by the Bijni *Rajas*. In 1908, Dharmapur Primary School was established by the *Rajas* which fulfilled the need for primary schooling in the area.⁶⁰ In 1926 A.D., another school namely 'Pachduar Primary School' was established which was situated in the western boundary of Abhayapuri and saw a rush in the admission of students. When it was seen that the intake capacity of the school had crossed its limit, at the behest of *Raja* Jogendra Narayan, a part of the school was shifted and a new school named 'Balak Vidyalaya' was established. The royal treasury bore all the expenses of this primary school.⁶¹

Raja Bhairabendra Narayan (the last ruler of Bijni Dynasty) thought about the importance of the establishment of a college for higher education at Abhayapuri. In this regard in the year 1945, he initiated the process of constructing a college in Abhayapuri, the last capital of Bijni Raj Estate. But soon after the independence of India, there occurred a significant change in the political condition of the *zamindari* estates of India. Such wave of change could also be seen in the Bijni Raj Estate which diverted the attention of Bhairabendra Narayan from his future public welfare schemes. However, later on the Abhayapuri College was established as a result of public initiative. But we can not altogether neglect the contribution of the Bijni *Rajas* towards the

establishment of college as it was they who have donated thirteen bighas of land for the construction of college as well as forty four bighas for the construction of college hostel.⁶²

4.5. Temples and Sacred Places in the Bijni Raj Estate during the time of Zamindari rule:

The rulers of Bijni Raj Dynasty were religious by heart. Though they were followers of Shiva and Shakti cult they also patronized Neo Vaishnavism. But they were very much attached with Shaivism. It is proved after scrutinization of their Royal emblem. In the royal emblem of Bijni Raj Estate two words “*Naamah Shivaye*” was written which means reverence to Shiva or Mahadeva. As a result of royal patronage many temples and *satras* were established in geographical area of Bijni Raj Estate. The rulers of Bijni dynasty issued many *Devottar*, *Dharmottar* and *Brahmottar* grants for religious purposes.⁶³ *Bijni Rajas* granted many tax free lands to the temples and *satras* for their development. Most of the inhabitants of Bijni Estate were followers of Hinduism and many temples and *satras* were established at that time as a result of liberal grants from the *Bijni Rajas*. A short analysis about the different temples and *satras* in the Bijni Raj Estate are as follows-

4.5.1. Ganesh Temple:

A Ganesh temple is situated near Abhayapuri, the last capital of Bijni Raj Estate, which is considered as one of the oldest temples of Assam. This temple has an idol of lord Ganesha and other Gods like lord Jagannath and lord Mahadeva. This temple has *Devottar* lands which were granted by the *Bijni Rajas*.⁶⁴ Historical and Antiquarian department of Assam discovered the remains of this temple, following which an excavation work was undertaken. After a study, archaeologists concluded that the carvings, images and idols of the temple belonged to the ancient period, following which excavation works were undertaken. The historicities of the images are yet to be ascertained. But after a study of the stone carving and modes related to the carved idols, archaeologists opine that the temple and images belong to 8th to 10th centuries A.D.

4.5.2. Sengkal Mahakal temple:

The Sengkal Mahakal temple established by the *Bijni Rajas* is situated at the centre point of Abhayapuri town. It is a temple of lord Shiva and there are two *Barsha* or *Trisul* present in the

temple as a symbol of God. It is known that originally the deity worshipped in the temple belonged to Bhutan's *Raja*. In later period a war took place between Bhutia *Raja* and Bijni *Raja* and at the end of the war a treaty was held between them in Bhaolaguri. As a result of this treaty the *Raja* of Bijni obtained the God and *trisula* from the *Raja* of Bhutan and in return Bijni *Raja* gave dried fishes to Bhutiyaraja. The Bijni Raj Dynasty considered this Sengkal Mahakal God as very lucky and *siddhidata* (fulfilment of wishes) and they carried the deity seated on a high pedestal at the front of religious procession or rally.⁶⁵

4.5.3. Bagheswari temple:

The Bagheswari temple is situated at the Bagheswari hill of present Bongaigaon town which was earlier a part of Bijni Raj Estate. There is no idol, as a symbol of Goddess a sword is worshiped in this temple. This sword is placed upon a *Singhasan* which was given by the Bijni *Raja*. As a symbol of Shakti, the sword is worshiped by giving sacrifices of animal till now. Upto the Abolition of *Zamindari* by the government of Assam in 1956, the Bijni Raj Dynasty presented a pair of Buffalo for sacrifice in every year to this temple. The Bijni *Rajas* granted *Devottar* land to this Bagheswari temple. There is a copper *Nagara* and *Ghanta* (musical instrument used in the time of *puja*) in the temple which was donated by Queen Abheyeswari (wife of Bijni King Kumud Narayan) in 1904 A.D.⁶⁶

4.5.4. Tukreswari temple:

At two or three kilometres from Krishnai town, there is a temple named Tukreswari temple, which was earlier under the geographical boundary of Bijni Raj Estate. There are lots of controversies about the establishment of this temple. Some people opine that a part of Sati Devi's body dropped here and thus it became great Sakti Pith. On the other hand some people are of opinion that the *Raja* of Bijni constructed the Tukreswari temple after getting the order to do so in dream. The Bijni *Raja* granted *Devottar* land to this temple.⁶⁷ This temple is famous for monkeys. There are kings and queens among the monkeys also. According to oral sources it is known that when there were changes among the Bijni kings there were also change among the kings and queens of monkeys also.

4.5.5. Chila Thakurani's temple:

Chila Thakurani's temple is situated in Chotaki village which is about four kilometres away from Abhayapuri town. In this temple there are two stone cut idols of mother Goddess and one lotus wheel which is curved on stone. In the forehead of mother Goddess there are two *tilaks*, one is in Gold and another is in Silver. This temple was constructed by the Bijni *Rajas* in ancient time.⁶⁸

4.5.6. Dudhnath Devalaya:

On the North bank of Brahmaputra river there are two *Devalayas* namely Dudhnath *Devalaya*. One is situated on the Chanddinga hill near Bilasipara and another one is situated on the plains of Jogighopa hill. Queen Abhayeswari of Bijni constructed this *Devalaya* and issued *Devottar* grant for this temple.⁶⁹

4.5.7. Unnumbered Sivalingam in Mahadeva hill:

This *Sivalingam* temple is situated in Mahadeva hill of Salmara village near Abhayapuri. This temple is a kind of cave which is excavated by cutting stone. People of Bijni Raj Estate worshipped the *Sivalingams* as idols in this temple. King Kumud Narayan of Bijni Dynasty granted *Devottar* land and issued cash money for the construction of this temple.⁷⁰

4.5.8. Nandeshwar Devalaya:

Nandeshwar *Devalaya* is situated on the North of Dudhnoi River, which is one of the tributaries of Brahmaputra. Nandeshwar is one of the thousand names of Mahadeva. On the mountain there is a statue made of stone which resembles Lord Siva. There is a belief among the local people that if somebody pours milk on the Shiva statue, the milk merges with the river water. So the river is known as Dudhnoi (milk means *Dudh* in local language). According to an ancient *Akhyan*, one day someone drank the falling milk from the statue on account of his thirstiness and by the curse of Lord Siva it stopped falling in the river since then. During the tenure of Bijni king many people gifted land and wealth to this *Devalaya*. The *Sivaratri*, *Durga puja* and *Daul utsava* is celebrated with great pomp and pleasure here.⁷¹

4.5.9. Cave temple of Pancharatna:

On the banks of Brahmaputra River there is Jogighopa hill and Jogighopa village. In this Jogighopa hill there are six cave temples where *Rishi Munis* performed prayer and meditation. In the Pancharatna hill also, there are some cave temples.⁷²

Along with the above mentioned temples there are some other temples also like-*Devalaya* of Abhayamata, Pagla baba's *than*, Bura Buris *than*, Bhojmala Siva temple, Maroi *than*, Bhumishwar Siva temple, Bhairav *than*, Garam Pani Sivashram, Aaisakhatir *than* etc in the Bijni Raj Estate area.⁷³ From the above discussion we understand that Bijni *Rajas* were very liberal in case of religion. They issued *Devottar* land to many temples, *Devalays* and *Thans* which was made tax free. The rulers of Bijni Dynasty were known as *Shivabanshi* means follower of Saivism, but at the same time they also performed *Shakti puja*. In the palace of Bijni *Rajas* which is situated in Abhayapuri town *Durga Puja* was celebrated with great pomp and enthusiasm untill the abolition of *zamindari* by the Government of Assam.

Though the Bijni *Rajas* were followers of Shiva and Shakti cult they also issued liberal grants to Vaishnava *Satras*. Most of the general masses of Bijni Estate were followers of Vaishnavism and performed *Nam Kirtana* in *Namghars* and *Satras*. As a result of all these many *Satras* were established in Bijni Raj Estate. Here is a discussion about the different *Satras* established in Bijni Raj Estate.

4.5.10. Dharmapur Satra:

The Dharmapur *Satra* is situated in the village Dharmapur of Abhayapuri, the last capital of Bijni Raj Estate. There is a history about the establishment of this *Satra*. As a result of Burmese invasion of 1822-1826, many people of Barpeta *Satra* moved towards Bijni Raj Estate to save their life from Burmese incursion. After getting permission from Bijni king Amrit Narayan, these people settled down in Merchar *Mouza* and established a *satra* there.⁷⁴ After the treaty of Yandaboo (1826) many of them wanted to return back to Barpeta. But after getting this news the Bijni king became sad and so some people decided not to return back. But the devastating earthquake of 1897 A.D. brought misery to these people and with the help of Queen Abhayeswari these people shifted their *satra* to Dharmapur village. Thus due to the untiring effort of the people and helping attitude of Bijni rulers which led to the foundation of the *satra* at Dharmapur village by setting up the original *Shyamray Vighraha* in *Manikut*. Amrit Narayan, the

king of Bijni Dynasty granted *Devottar* land in the name of *Shyamrai Vighraha* through a *Chanad*.⁷⁵

4.5.11. Bishnupur Satra:

Bishnupur Satra is situated in Bishnupur village, which is 12 kilometres away from Abhayapuri town. This *satra* is located near the Tamranga *beel* (lake) and it was established by Chaturbhuj Thakur, grandson of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva. On the way to Koch Bihar Srimanta Sankardeva visited this *Satra* and stayed there for a few days. The Bishnupur *Satra* had a great socio-cultural impact upon the surrounding people of Bijni Estate. The Bijni king Mukunda Narayan Deb donated a plot of revenue free land for establishing this *satra*. But in later period, the Assam government procured all the landed properties of Bishnupur *satra* except three *bighas* of land where the present *Satra Namghar* and its courtyard is located.⁷⁶

In spreading the vaishnavite culture among the inhabitants of Bijni Raj Estate the Bishnupur Satra played a great role. Some sacred and historical articles are still preserved in the Bishnupur Satra. One among these assets is two pairs of wooden *Paduka* (slipper or footwear). Local people believe that these two pairs of *Paduka* belongs to Srimanta Sankardeva and Chaturbhuj Thakur. Another valuable article preserved in the Bishnupur Satra is a piece of '*Padasila*' (footprint). According to the oral sources, this *Padasila* belonged to Mahapurush Sankardeva. Fourteen different manuscripts popularly known as '*Sanchipaat*', written by Sankardeva and Madhabdeva are also preserved at Bishnupur Satra.

4.5.12. Naokata Satra:

Naokata *Satra* is situated in Naokata village which falls on the left side of Brahmaputra river. It is known that Naokata *Satra* was founded by Doityari Thakur, the elder son of Ramcharan Thakur, the nephew of Mahapurush Madhabdeva. This *satra* is situated inside the territory of Bijni kingdom. Bijni king Balit Narayan granted 14 *bighas* of *Sali* land to this *Satra* in lieu of 2¹/₂ *Narayane* Rupees. This *Satra* occupied a unique position to spread the Vaishnavite culture among the general masses.⁷⁷

4.5.13. Lengtisinga Para Khakha Satra:

The Lengtisinga Para Khakha *Satra* is situated on the Eastern side of Abhayapuri town of Bijni Raj Estate. There is an interesting story behind the establishment of this *Satra*. After the death of King Amrit Narayan his son Kumud Narayan became the king of Bijni Estate. As a result of frequent attacks of Bhutias, Kumud Narayan was compelled to shift his capital from Bijni to Dumuria. The neighbouring villages of Dumuria like Lengtisinga, Na-Satra and Piradhara had a good communication with the place Rangapani. Rangapani also had a remarkable means of communication with Barpeta, Jania, Gajia and Rangapani Satra maintained a friendly relationship with Barpeta Satra which had a great impact in the Lengtisinga area. On the model of Barpeta *Kirtanghar*, a *Kirtanghar* was established in the Lengtisinga village. When Queen Abhayeswari ascended the throne of Bijni kingdom, the devastating earthquake of 1897 A.D. took place which badly damaged Dumuria, the second capital of Bijni Raj Estate. The earthquake was followed by a great flood which caused total destruction. People who fled and settled in the new place started to introduce themselves by the name of their original village.⁷⁸ Those people who fled from Lengtisinga area, again established their previous village at Lengtisinga Para village. Thus Lengtisinga Para Khakha Satra was established in 1888-89 A.D. People established a *Kirtanghar* and brought the fiery flame from the Barpeta *Satra* after establishing the new village.

4.5.14. Rangapani Satra:

Rangapani *Satra* is located in the Rangapani village, which is 15 kilometres away from Abhayapuri town. The founder of Rangapani Satra is Narayan Das Thakur Ata, who was one of the prominent disciples of Srimanta Sankardeva.⁷⁹ With the able efforts of Rangapani *Satra*, the socio-cultural condition has improved and Vaisnava tradition flourished in the Bijni Raj Estate.

4.5.15. Gossainbari Satra:

Gossainbari *Satra* was one of the important *satras* of Bijni Raj Estate which is located in the Gossainbari village, near Dudhnoi town. It is actually a Damodaria *Satra*. According to the oral version of the inhabitants the actual name of Gossainbari village was 'Barigaon'. When the Vaishnava *Gossain* (preacher) came and settled in Barigaon for the purpose of establishing a satra it came to be known as Gossainbari. During the period of Bijni *Zamindari* Queen Abhayeswari donated 85 bighas of land to the Gossainbari *Satra*. As a result of natural calamity

that took place in 1977, the main building of this *satra* was damaged and some valuable *Sanchi-Puthis* were also spoiled.⁸⁰ During the reign of Bijni *Rajas* the Gossainbari *Satra* played a significant role in spreading vaishnavite culture in the socio-religious life of the people.

4.5.16. Kathalmuri Satra:

On the northwestern side of present Dhupdhora and Dhanubhanga the Kathalmuri *Satra* is situated. Raja Kumud Narayan of Bijni Estate granted a plot of land to this *Satra*. Kathalmuri *Satra* performed a great role in spreading Damodaria Vaishnava faith in the society of Bijni Raj Estate. In 1961 A.D. the government of Assam had taken over the *Satra* land and reserved forest land except the area where main building of the *Satra* was situated.⁸¹

Along with the above mentioned *Satras* there were some other *Satras* also like- Bijni *Satra*, Raghunath Prabhu *Satra*, Madhav Gossain *Satra*, Kesedubi Shyamrai *Satra*, Dolgoma *Satra*, Amguri *Satra* etc., which played a great role in the religious life of common people of Bijni Raj Estate. These *Satras* were established on the land donated either by *Raja* of Bijni Estate or by the local people. The *Satra* institution served as a milestone for the unification, mutual understanding and spirit of co-operation which binds the common population by a bond of friendship, brotherhood and unity. In some cases *Satra* and *Namghar* served as a financial institution to help the poor or distressed.

Apart from the above mentioned *Devalayas* and *Satras* which have been granted funds by the *zamindars* of Bijni Estate, there were numerous other temples and *satras* established locally by the people of the Bijni Raj Estate. These small temples and *namghars* (*satras*) also made contribution towards the socio-cultural development of the Bijni Estate. But their existence in the present day is hardly traceable. So these temples and *satras* are not included in the present discussion.

Along with the existence of Hindus in the Bijni Raj Estate, it also contained a small population of Muslims. In order to preserve their religious beliefs and customs the Muslim community established *Masjids* and *moktaps* which were very few and far between. But in this

discussion we are mainly concentrating on the religious beliefs of the majority of population residing in the Bijni Raj Estate and hence few practices and beliefs are unwillingly left out because of the comprehensiveness of this study.

4.6. Major Festivals Celebrated in the Bijni Raj Estate:

Bijni *Rajas* introduced the festival of Durga *Puja* in their estate, which they celebrated with great joy and pomp. After establishing the centre of administration of Bijni Estate in Abhayapuri the rulers of Bijni Estate started to perform Durga *Puja* under royal patronage. During the period of Queen Abhayeswari, Durga *puja* was celebrated every year with a huge arrangement. After the death of Abhayeswari Devi the administration of Bijni Raj Estate was handed over to the Courts-of-Wards, as a result of which the rulers of Bijni Dynasty could not spend lavishly in the name of religious festivals. Still it was a big affair and visitors from outside the Bijni Estate also came to enjoy *puja*.⁸²

In the Bijni Raj Estate, Durga idol was prepared by the artisans of Bengal. The Bijni *Rajas* invited musicians from Daulpur, situated in the Pabna district of present Bangladesh, for the occasion of Durga *Puja*. Those musicians were expert in playing *Shehnai* and *Dhol*. Local *Dhol* players also joined the musicians of Daulpur and they combinedly played *Dhol* and *Shehnai* upto Diwali festival in front of *Rajbari*. The last ruler of Bijni Estate, king Bhairabendra Narayan took out a rally from Raj palace to *Puja* pandal where he covered the distance sitting on the back of elephant.⁸³

Along with the *puja* celebration the occasion was marked by setting up of a *mela* (local fair), which was crowded by the people of Bijni Estate. On the both side of Durga *Puja Mandap* (tent) two stages were set up where *Jatra* parties staged their performances. These *Jatra* parties attracted people from all over the Bijni Raj Estate and were a major source of attraction of the Durga *puja* festival organised by Bijni *Rajas*.

One of the religious beliefs practiced in Bijni Raj Estate during Durga *Puja* was the sacrifice of buffalo. Sacrificial animal was offered to the Goddess Durga in the belief that it will

invigorate her violent retribution against the buffalo demon. Thus a culture of animal sacrifice as offering to God and Goddess was started by the Bijni *Rajas* and attracted huge crowd to witness such sacrifice.⁸⁴

Another occasion performed at the conclusion of Durga Puja was '*Dhap-Salami*'. On *Vijaya Dashami* after the immersion of Durga idol *Dhap-Salami* ceremony was performed where local officer and important subjects offered presentation to the Bijni *Raja*.⁸⁵ Dr. Anima Guha (writer and social worker of Assam) while sharing her experience about Durga puja in an interview has mentioned that the main attraction of Durga *puja* in the Bijni Raj Estate was the Chinese Circus.⁸⁶ Notably Anima Guha's father was an assistant *dewan* of Bijni Raj Estate during the ruling period of *Raja* Bhairabendra Narayan.

Thus the celebration of Durga *Puja* festival generated felling of unity and brotherhood among the subjects of Bijni Raj Estate. One of the religious beliefs followed by the people of Bijni Estate during the time of Durga *Puja* festival was hanging of *Kodom-Phul* (one pair of decorative artificial flower) in the main entrance door of their house as a mark of prosperity and good luck.

Another religious festival which was also celebrated by the rural population of Bijni Raj Estate was *Monosa Puja* or *Maroi Puja*. *Monosa Puja* is dedicated towards the worship to Serpent Goddess *Devi Monosa* (also known as *Bishori Devi*). The rulers of Bijni Dynasty did not perform this puja, but it was very popular among the people of different communities residing in Bijni Raj Estate.⁸⁷ In *Monosa Puja* animal sacrifice took a great role where goats were sacrificed. Nevertheless *Monosa Puja* could also be celebrated without sacrifice of animal, which is popularly known as *Phul Puja*. Appeasment to the God is done by the practice of *Deodhani* and *Ojapali* dances together with traditional folk songs based on the legendary quarrel between *Monosa* and *Chando-Sadagar* and the destiny fell upon *Sati Beula*.

This *Puja* was initiated to obtain blessings against fell and fatal diseases, natural calamities and also to allay fears from serpents during the year ahead. The *Monosa Puja* or *Maroi Puja* could be observed at any time of a year, either individually or publicly. But the fifth lunar day in the dark half of the *Srabana* month in Assamese calendar, which is also known as '*Nag Panchami*' is considered as appropriate time for this puja. Though it was a community

festival, it was also performed sometimes privately for the fulfilment of any particular wish or desire. In this way people of Bijni Raj Estate performed *Monosa Puja* or *Maroi Puja*.⁸⁸

The Bijni Raj family venerated the *Ambubachi* festival also. It is a popular festival celebrated in the Nilachal Hill of Kamrupa which is abode of Maa Kamakhya. The Kamakhya temple remains closed during the time of *Ambubachi* and a *mela* is arranged in temple premises. Likewise the Bijni Raj Estate too, the *Ambubachi* festival holds special significance. The Bijni *Rajas* worshipped the royal family deity 'Abhaya' in this festival. Goddess 'Abhaya' is believed to be an incarnation of Goddess Parvati, wife of Lord Shiva. This festival was celebrated with active participation of the people of the Bijni Raj Estate. The affluent *ryots* of the Bijni Raj Estate supplied all the necessary articles for performing the puja. These articles included fruits, vegetables and other necessary *puja* materials.⁸⁹

Kati Bihu or *Kati Puja* was another time-honoured festival of the peasant class of Bijni Raj Estate. It was observed in the first day of Assamese month *Kati*. It is also called *Kangali* which means penniless or poor. So during this time there is no provision of feast and merry-making. *The Kati Bihu* or *Kati Puja* is performed by lighting lamps or *saaki* in the paddy fields, granary and in front of *Tulsi* plant. People specially the females worship Goddess Lakshmi in the auspicious day of *Kati Bihu*. In the Bijni Raj Estate people lightened a special type of lamp in their paddy field which was called *Akash Banti* (Sky lamp). Thus the peasants of Bijni Raj Estate prayed to the God for the healthy growth of their crops through the festival.⁹⁰ This tradition is still followed by the peasant class of Assam.

One of the outstanding sacred festivals performed by the Bodo-Kachari people of Bijni Raj Estate was *Kherai Puja* or *Kherai* Worship.⁹¹ Normally it was practiced in the *Kati* and *Aghan* month, to obtain blessings from 'Bathou Brai' (Siva) and 'Mainao Buri' (Lakshmi) for the purpose of bright cultivation and wellbeing of the villagers. In the *Kherai Puja*, Siva and Parvati was worshiped alongside other deities. Oblation were accessible to the Gods and Goddess by a *Daodini* (female shamen), who also perform shamanistic dance. *Daodini* plays a significant role in *Kherai Puja* and she also speaks divinations.⁹² The puja was continued for whole night where people from different villages of Bijni Raj Estate came and took part.

Among the other major festivals observed by the Bodo-Kachari peoples of Bijni Raj Estate, *Bwisagu* and *Domasi* were important. *Bwisagu* is actually a New Year festival which is observed in *Bohag* month by the people with great joy and pomp. Another festival *Domasi*, which is known as *Magh Bihu* in Assamese is a harvest festival. During the time of this festival woman of Bijni Raj Estate irrespective of their caste prepared different kinds of *pitha*, *laru*, pancake and other food items.⁹³

Kartik *Puja* was also a kind of festival performed by the women folk of Bijni Raj Estate. It was exclusive for females only and male members were not allowed to participate in this *puja*. Even the males were restricted to visit the place of worship upto the end of *puja*. It was performed towards the end of the month of *Kati* (October-November). ‘God Kartik’ was considered as provider of sons and crops by the rural population of Bijni Raj Estate. Women, specially who does not have any child performed this *puja* along with other women of the village during night time.⁹⁴

Along with these festivals *Shiva Puja* and *Shivratri* was also celebrated in Abhayapuri with great pomp and grandeur. The reason for this was that Lord Shiva was considered as the royal deity of the Bijni Raj family. Also the Raj family considered itself to be ‘*Shivabanshi*’. Apart from a variety of rites and rituals that were performed during this *Shiva puja*, a peculiar and astonishing belief was associated with this *puja*. It was termed as ‘*Shiva Bhog*’ or offering of food to Lord Shiva.⁹⁵ The *Gandhi Maidan* (field) which is situated in the present day Abhayapuri town was covered by dense forest during those days. As per the belief, in the middle of the night a group of people from the *Bijni Rajbari* would visit the place *Gandhi Maidan* and offer *bhog* (food) to the jackels. The *bhog* consisted of a variety of delicious food items like sweet pudding, vegetable curry, *puri* (bread), *rasgulla* (sweet meat) etc. They would return by same path which they have undertaken. The belief was that they should not look back while returning. It was believed that Lord Shiva in the form of jackel would accept the offered food or *bhog*. Adjacent to this dense forest there was the ‘Sengkal Mahakal’ temple where the Bijni Raj family worshipped Lord Shiva.⁹⁶

4.7. Miscellaneous aspects of Socio-cultural life of individuals of Bijni Raj Estate

4.7.1. Dresses and Ornaments:

People of Bijni Raj Estate used different kinds of dresses. The male dresses were *Dhuti*, *Churia*, *Gamusa*, while the women wore *Mekhela*, *Chador*, *Riha*, *Dokhona*, *Patani*, Saree etc.⁹⁷ The clothes were made of *pat*, *muga*, *eri*, cotton etc. The Royal or *Zamindar* class wore *pat* and *muga* while the common people wore cotton and *eri* (*endi*). All the clothes were locally made and every family had a loom. One important aspect about the dress code of women of Bijni Estate was that they wore Saree (a piece of long cloth worn by women) along with *Riha mekhela*. At that time women of Upper Assam wore only *Mekhela Chador* and they considered Saree as a Bengali Dress. But the culture of wearing Saree was common in Koch Kingdom. In the 16th century, the Koch king Naranarayan sent a few pieces of Saree to the Ahom king along with other presents.⁹⁸ In the Ahom kingdom saree was totally unseen and Ahom women preferred to wear only *mekhela* and *riha*. Saree was also popular among the Queens of Bijni Dynasty. It is known that Queen Abhayeswari (wife of King Kumud Narayan) wore Saree where gold motifs were fixed. In the Bijni Raj Estate many indigenous tribal peoples also lived who wore their traditional costumes.

Women of Bijni Estate wore ornaments made of both gold and silver. They used different kinds of earrings namely- *Makori*, *Phulkori Anti*, *Kanpasa*, *Kanbala*, *Jhumkapasa*, *Jhumkadul* etc., Designing necklaces like- *Chandrahara*, *Puspahara*, *Gotahara*, *Bisahara*, *Gulkancha*, *Motormala* etc.⁹⁹ Women of Bijni Estate also wore nose rings, namely- *Gotaphul*, *Tiaphul*, *Panphul*, *Taraphul* and different kinds of bracelets like *Gotakhar*, *Katoli*, *Bala*, *Baju* etc. They wore a special type of bracelet called *Muthakharu*.¹⁰⁰ There was a tradition among the married women of Bijni Estate to wear *Sakha* and *Pola* in their hands which was not so popular in the other parts of Assam at that time. Bodo women of Bijni Estate also used their traditional ornaments like- *Doula* (ear ornament made of gold), *Mwthi Achan* (a kind of bracelet), *Naful* (nose ornament), *Jinjiri* (necklace) and *Lw* (a kind of beaded string) etc.¹⁰¹

The Garos of the Bijni Estate have their own unique set of traditional ornaments which includes- *Nadongbinr sisha* (ear ring made of brass), *Nadiring* (brass made ring worn in the upper part of the ear), *Natapsi* (string of beads worn in the upper part of ear), *Jaksan* (bangles), *Ripok* (a kind of necklace made of long beads), *Jaksil* (iron made elbow ring), *Seng'ki* (waist band), *Pilne* (hand ornament) etc.¹⁰²

4.7.2. House Building:

A typical rural house of Bijni Estate consisted of a *Choraghar* (reception hall), *barghar* (living room), *gohalighar* (cowshed), *gosaighar* (place of worship), *bhoralghar* (granary) and *dhekisal* (room for *Dheki*, an indigenous form of the pestle and mortar used for pounding grains). A significant feature of the house building of the people of Bijni Raj Estate was that they constructed houses in four directions with a *chotal* (courtyard) in the midst. Most of the houses were built of bamboo and reeds available locally with thatched roofs. Walls of the houses were made of *birina* and *ikra* (reed) and plastered with mud and strengthened by bamboo or wooden posts. There was a general belief among the people that cow-dung purified their houses and so they usually plastered their floors with cow-dung.¹⁰³

Along with the thatched house there were some concrete houses that were built by the people of Bijni Raj Estate in later period. These concrete structures were usually designed in Assam type house pattern which consisted of a living room, a bedroom, a guest room, a kitchen along with a store room. The walls of these houses were made of locally available bamboo, coated with a layer of sand stone mixed with clay. The pillars of the houses were made up of locally available wood. These structures were made up of materials which could be easily procured and locally available. Design of Assam type house was introduced in Bijni Raj Estate when it came under the domination of British rule from the Mughals.¹⁰⁴

Every house of Bijni Raj Estate had a small kitchen garden. Usually it was situated outside of the living house. It was fenced with bamboo lattice on all sides. Here the family members cultivated their vegetable food like, potato, onion, brinjal, raddish, garlic, ginger, chilli, *lafa* and *lai sag* (a mucilaginous plant) etc.¹⁰⁵

4.7.3. Provision of Medical facilities in Bijni Raj Estate:

The native population of Bijni Estate suffered from different diseases and epidemics like cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery, fever, cough and cold, malaria, various kinds of skin and stomach diseases and occasionally few cases of small pox.¹⁰⁶ Cholera had repeatedly made its appearance in Bijni Estate and whole of Goalpara District in an epidemic form and killed many persons.

Cholera made its appearance in the Dhubri subdivision and spread along both banks of Brahmaputra River in October, 1868 A.D. People suffered from this disease up to July of the next year and again made its appearance in November of the same year on the North bank of Brahmaputra. There is no information available about how many people suffered from this disease and how many people died from it, but it is stated that more men were affected than women. The poor and ill-fed people suffered more. From Calcutta, the civil station native doctors were sent for the treatment of the affected people and they distributed medicines among the villagers.¹⁰⁷

Another disease which created havoc among the common people of Bijni Estate and undivided Goalpara district was *Kala-azar* (black fever). *Kala-azar* was only a local name of malarial fever. It first came into prominence in 1833 in the southern banks of Brahmaputra river in undivided Goalpara district. The fatality rate due to *Kala-azar* was recorded so high in the district that a special medical team was rushed to the affected villages to administer medical relief. During the year 1869, the epidemic of *Kala-azar* spread to the Bijni estate and low and densely inhabited Garo hills which led to high rate of mortality there.¹⁰⁸

There was no proper medical facility and hospitals in the period of early rulers of Bijni Dynasty. People suffering from any disease preferred to go to the *Kaviraj* and *Ojha*. The principal naturally procured medicines used by the people at that time were Areca Catechu, Cannabis Indica, Caesal pinia, Calatropis gigantea, Croton tiglium, Gynocardia odorate, Ricinus Communis etc.¹⁰⁹ The native practitioners or *Kaviraj* prepared different types of herbal medicines from the seed, leaves, bark, stem, shoot, rhizome, flowers and fruits of different plants and trees. The *Kaviraj* and *Ojha* of Bijni Raj Estate used different kinds of medicinal plants and trees like, *Tulsi* plant (*Ocimum sanctum L.*), *Sewali* (*Nyctanthes arbortristis*), *Bhedai lota* (*Padaraea foetida L.*), *Arjun tree* (*Terminalia arjuna*), *Kuji Thekera* (*Garcinia cowa roxb*), *Narasingha* (*Murraya koenigii spreng*), *Bor Manimuni* (*Centella asiatica L.*), *Maha Neem* (*Azadirachta indica A.Zuss*), *Brahmi* (*Baccopa monnieri L.*), *Nayan tora* (*Catharanthus roseus L.*) etc.¹¹⁰ Above mentioned medicinal plants and flowers (along with their botanical names) were found abundantly in the geographical area of Bijni Raj Estate.

After establishing the capital of Bijni Raj Estate in Abhayapuri rulers of Bijni dynasty started the process of development in the medical field. The first dispensary of Bijni Estate was

established in Abhayapuri under the royal patronage. At the private dispensary of Abhayapuri 2444 persons were treated and 10 operations were performed.¹¹¹ During the period of King Bhairabendra Narayan, he took many steps for the development of this dispensary. King invited renowned doctors of Assam and even from Calcutta. One of the eminent doctors Anukul Chatterjee was brought from Calcutta to extend his service in the private dispensary of Abhayapuri. He was a very experienced doctor and different people from the locality consulted him for various diseases. Another famous doctor Manibrata Shyanal of Dhubri was appointed by the king Bhairabendra Narayan. Along with these two doctors there were three Pharmacists also in the dispensary of Bijni *Raja*.¹¹² Though they were Pharmacist only, but they had a very good medical knowledge and the rural people of Bijni Estate consulted them for various diseases.

4.7.4. Language and Dialect used by the people of Bijni Raj Estate:

Commonly the inhabitants of Bijni Raj Estate used Goalparia language in their day to day life, but Assamese and Bengali language were also in practice in schools and offices. Along with the Assamese people some Bodo Kachari, Rajbangshi, Garo and Rabha people also lived in Bijni Estate who used their mother languages. The Bodo language remained confined in its spoken form till the latter half of 19th century. The Bodo language was introduced as the medium of instruction in the primary schools from 1963 A.D. The Garo people lived in Bijni bordering areas used Garo language and according to G.A. Grierson this language has evolved from the greater Tibeto-Burman family.¹¹³

Language researcher separated the main Assamese language into three divisions- Assamese used in Upper Assam, Kamrupi language which was in circulation in undivided Kamrup district, and Goalparia language of undivided Goalpara and lower Assam. Dr. Banikanta Kakati has stated that the spoken dialects of the people of Goalpara district has been mixed up with different dialects and transformed in a new shape under the domination of the Koch kings of Koch Bihar.¹¹⁴ On the otherhand Dr. Upendra Nath Goswami mentioned that Goalparia language is just a spoken language of undivided Goalpara and its neighbouring places.¹¹⁵ Here we can conclude that in the Bijni Raj Estate though the Assamese language was used as a formal language different castes used their mother tongue e.g. Bodo people spoke Bodo language, Garo people spoke Garo language and Rabha people spoke Rabha language. Overall Goalparia language was understood and spoken by all caste of people.¹¹⁶ Sanskrit language was also used

by some people of Bijni Raj Estate. We have already mentioned that in 1907 A.D., Queen Abhayeswari established a Sanskrit *Tol* in Abhayapuri (last capital of Bijni Raj Estate). From this example we understand that Sanskrit language was also welcomed by the people of Bijni Estate.

4.7.5. Food Habits of the people of Bijni Raj Estate:

The food habits of people of Bijni Raj Estate depend on three chief factors.

- (a) Geographical, environmental and climatic conditions.
- (b) Availability and accessibility of food grains.
- (c) Health conditions as well as tastes of people.

The climatic condition of the Bijni Estate was conducive for rice cultivation since there was abundance of rainfall throughout the year. There were three varieties of rice grains which were sown in Bijni Raj Estate namely *Ahu*, *Sali* and *Bao*.¹¹⁷ Thus we can say that rice was one of the important agricultural products of the Bijni Estate and also the staple food of the people. Apart from rice there were different products made out of rice grain like- *Chira*, *Muri*, *Akhoi*, *Pithaguri*, *Xandoh* etc., which the people of Bijni Estate consumed. During special occasions or celebrations sweet delicacies made from rice was prepared and offered during community feast. These rice delicacies were *Til pitha*, *Tekeli pitha*, *Kheer pitha*, *Patichepta pitha* etc. Also *laru* made from *Til*, Coconut, Rice powder with jaggery were some of the local delicacies which were made by the local people of the Bijni Estate. The ability to make these sweet meats was a sign of Assamese women expertise. Due to strong influence of the Bengali culture which could be seen in the Bijni Estate and also due to its close proximity with Bengal, the food habits of the people of the Bijni Estate was greatly influenced by Bengali culture and cuisine.¹¹⁸ It has been seen that the *zamindars* of the Bijni Estate used to hire special *Karikars* to prepare various food dishes as well as sweet meats from Bengal. On special occasions like marriage ceremonies the *zamindars* of Bijni Estate served the people with special sweet delicacies prepared by Bengali *Karikars* and which became very popular in this part of Assam. Some of the *karikars* settled down in Bijni Estate and gradually the common people also relished the sweet meats and other milk products prepared by them.¹¹⁹

Tamol Pan (Betel Nut and leaf) was an indispensable part of food habit of all caste of people of Bijni Raj Estate. It holds an important position in the society and culture of Bijni Estate. *Tamol Pan*, as it is popularly known among the people, is a combination of two ingredients namely, Tamol which implies arecanut or betel nut and Pan which means betel leaf.¹²⁰ It was considered as first food to be offered for every socio-cultural and even religious and marriage ceremonies.

Like Assamese people another major group of people in Bijni Estate was the Bodos whose staple food was also rice. As a main diet rice was eaten in various ways such as roasted, grounded, boiled or just soaked. Bodo people of Bijni Estate were very much fond of meat. Generally Bodo people eat the flesh of pig, ducks, chicken, pigeons, deer etc. The favourite beverage of the Bodo people of Bijni Estate was *Jau* or *Jumai* (Rice Beer). *Jou* or Rice Beer had great importance in Bodo Society which was prepared by steeping rice in water for two to three days.¹²¹ *Jou* was also used in social function as well as it was offered to the chief God of Bodos i.e., *Bathou Brai* and other Gods and Goddesses.

Onla wngkhrwi was also one of the popular dishes of Bodo people of Bijni Raj Estate which was being prepared with rice powder and some special herbs, plants, edible roots or flowers. *Napham* was a unique dish in the Bodo cuisine of Bijni Estate. It was prepared by grinding smoked fish, specific leafy vegetables, grounded powder, and the mixture was allowed to age in a sealed bamboo cylinder. *Sobai* (black lentil) and *Samo* (snail) were other favourite food items of the Bodo-Kachari people which they cooked together.¹²² Along with the above mentioned foods different kinds of vegetables were also consumed by the Bodo people of Bijni Estate.

In the Bijni Duar areas many Garo people lived whose staple food was also rice. The Garos used earthen pots and bamboo tubes for cooking rice. Apart from rice the Garos preferred food items like maize, millet and occasionally tapioca roots. A variety of dry fishes called *Nakam* was one of their favourite delicacies.¹²³ Another delicacy for them was a curry prepared from bamboo shoots. The Garos preferred boiled food items and the use of oil or ghee was kept to minimum while preparing their dishes. They also used a kind of Potash which was obtained from the ashes of burnt plantain stems while preparing their curries. The favourite drink of the Garos

was Rice beer. The Rabhas unlike Garos also preferred eating rice along with dried and powdered fish, pork and rice beer.¹²⁴

4.7.6. Folk Songs and Dances of Bijni Raj Estate:

The Bijni Estate had a rich culture of folk songs and dances due to its diversity in existence of various tribes and castes. Each tribe and caste had their own unique folk songs and dances which were related to harvesting and other ceremonies which were performed in their day to day life. Some of the types of folk songs which were commonly sung by the people of the Bijni Estate were- *Bhaoiya geet, Chotaka geet, Dehotottar geet, Bhatiali geet, Naokhelor geet, Moisali geet, Hati Mautor geet, Moynamotir geet, Maroi pujar geet, Padma puranor geet, Bashi puranor geet, Bishharir geet, Bhasan yatra, Sonaray geet, Hudum Deor geet, Aori Moga geet, Bash pujar geet, Kati pujar geet, Nayanaswari geet, Monai yatra geet, Satyapir geet, Biyar geet, Dhuoni geet, Aai naam, Gupuni naam* etc.¹²⁵ The later rulers of Bijni Dynasty invited *Jatra* Party (group of people who perform songs and dances for commercial purpose) at the time of *puja* or any religious ceremony.

Every song (*geet*) had its own peculiar dance form associated with it. *Kushan* dance was popular among the Rajbangshi people of Bijni Estate. In the same manner five popular dances of the Bodos of Bijni Estate were, *Kherai* dance, *Haba Janai* dance, *Bagurumba* dance, *Bwisagu* dance and *Raijw Janai* dance.¹²⁶ *Kherai Mwsanai* is the most popular dance form among the Bodos. *Bagurumba* dance is a traditional dance of the Bodos and the young boys and girls of Bijni Raj Estate practiced it. *Bwisagu Mwsanai* is a seasonal dance which is performed during the *Bwisagu* festival or *Bohag Bihu* festival. *Haba Janai mwsanai* is a dance performed in the marriage ceremonies. Thus the Bodo-Kachari people of Bijni Raj Estate had a very rich culture which contains different types of colorful dances from time immemorial.¹²⁷

Singing and dancing were integral parts of the cultural life of the Garos of Bijni Estate. The Garos performed most lively dance during the performance of their harvesting festival called *Wamgla* which is known as the festival of hundred drums.¹²⁸

4.7.7. Law of Inheritance:

From the earliest time joint family system was prevalent in Bijni Raj Estate. The Hindu society is patriarchal, where father is the head of the family. In the absence of father, son became the head of family and owner of property. Gunabhiram Barua says that the law of inheritance is determined in Assam according to the rules laid down in the *Shastras* (scriptures). In the absence of a son, a grandson etc., kinsmen became the heir of the property of the deceased person.¹²⁹

The procedure of taking an adopted son (*dattaka*) was prevalent in Bijni Raj Estate. A man can take someone from his own family or clan, or from a different family or clan, as his adopted son in the absence of natural son and thus can make him the heir of his property. At the time of adoption, the question of performing any ceremonial function according to the scriptures or the question of the age of the boy does not arise.¹³⁰ Whether a male or female, he or she can accept an adopted son. A widow can take an adopted son with the approval of her family members. Even the Royal members of Bijni Dynasty adopted their inheritance in many instances in the absence of natural heir.

Thus in the final analysis, it may be said that the society of Bijni Raj Estate was essentially a feudal society consisting of different classes, castes and tribes. The rulers of Bijni Estate spread their influence in different spheres of society like religion, education, medical facility, agriculture etc. But they did not interfere so much in the social life of common people. All the classes of people were given the liberty to continue their socio-cultural life in the traditional way or as they wished to live.

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