

CHAPTER 2

THE *MECH* TRIBE

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2.1. Who are Tribes?

The word '*tribe*' was used by English speakers to refer to inhabitants with distinctive social, cultural and possibly physical characteristics and it occurs interchangeably with other words denoting some kind of collection of people (Dash Sharma 2006). The contrary meaning of '*tribe*' is separated from 'nation' emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, when early anthropologists and sociologists connected it with the conception of 'primitive society' (Fried 1966, 1975).

An understanding of the concept of "indigenous and tribal peoples" is contained in Article 1 of the 1989 Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, No. 169, which is adopted by the International Labour Organization. There is a lot of debate in the definition of "indigenous peoples". Noteworthy debate on the subject has been detained within the circumstance of the preparation of a Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Stamatopoulou 1994) by the Working Group on Indigenous Populations since 1982. The working definition is: "Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them".

Risley (1891) defined the word '*tribe*' as "it is a collection of families or a group of families, bearing a common name which as a rule does not denote any specific occupation, generally claiming common descent from a mythical or historical ancestry, occasionally the name is derived from an animal but in some parts of the country, the tribe is held together only by the obligation of kinship, member speaking the same language and occupy a tract of the country."

2.2. Tribes/ Indigenous Peoples in India

The group of autochthonous people, popularly known as the Tribal people is particularly numerous in the Indian states. Officially recognized by the Indian government as 'Scheduled Tribes' in the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution of India, has often been categorized as being

indigenous (United Nations 2004; World Bank 2005). The Indian Government identifies those communities as scheduled tribes on the basis of community's "primitive traits, distinctive culture, shyness with the public at large, geographical isolation and social and economic backwardness" (Anonymous 2004), with substantial variations in each of these dimensions with respect to different scheduled tribe communities (Basu 2000). While 'Scheduled Tribes' is an administrative term adopted by the Government of India, the term '*Adivasi*' has become the popular term for India's indigenous or tribal peoples. '*Adivasi*' is a Sanskrit word meaning '*Original Inhabitants*'. Indian tribals are also called *Atavika* (forest dwellers, in Sanskrit texts). The term '*Adivasi*' is often used to describe the different communities those belong to scheduled tribes. Contrary to the official government position, this term reflects the widely recognized fact that the people are thought to be the earliest settlers and the original inhabitants of the Indian peninsula before the settlement of the Aryan Colonization (Thapar 1990). The distinct identity of *Adivasis* has many aspects: language, religion, a profound bond linking the individual to the community and to nature, minimal dependence on economic pattern, a tradition of community-level self-government and an egalitarian culture that rejects the rigid social hierarchy of the *Hindu* caste system (Anonymous 1999).

The Indian subcontinent is inhabited by over 84 million people belonging to 698 communities are identified as scheduled tribes (Anonymous 2004), constituting 8.2% of the total Indian population (Anonymous 2001b). According to a constitutional mandate (Anonymous 2004), formulated in 1950, scheduled tribes have been formally recognized as tribals in India. As a result, there exist clear governmental policies for confirmatory actions targeted towards scheduled tribes (Anonymous 1950) and their members are regularly enumerated in national surveys (Anonymous 2000) and censuses (Anonymous 2001b). As the 1950's formal recognition of scheduled tribes, the proportion of individuals of scheduled tribes in the total population has increased from 5.3% (1951) to 8.2% (2001) (Anonymous 2004).

The concentration of indigenous and tribal people varies substantially between the Indian states (Anonymous 2001b). In northeastern states, tribals constitute 65 % or more of the total population; in Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan this proportion ranges between 13% and 32% of the state's population. There are smaller numbers of tribal people in south India, western India and in the union territories of Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. About 1% of the populations of Kerala and Tamil Nadu are tribal, whereas about 6% in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka are members of tribes.

2.3. The Mech Tribe

The *Meches* or the *Bodos* (Boros) are regarded as the oldest settling Indo-Mongoloid tribe of Northeast India and that of the Northern part of West Bengal (Plate I, Figs. A – G). They are found in large numbers in Assam. During the time of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and in other Hindu scriptures the present day *Meches* were known as *Danavas*, *Asuras*, *Kiratas* and *Mlechhas*. According to N.N. Vasu (1922) *Meches* and *Kiratas* belong to the *Asura* dynasty. Grierson (1909) maintained that, in the history of Assam the *Mlechhas* or the *Meches* ruled Pragjyotispur or Kamrupa for four thousand years and began to decline from the 11th century.

Burling (1959) has divided the *Proto Bodo* group (Fig. 2.1) into three sub-groups: (i) *Koch*, (ii) *Garo* and (iii) *Bodo proper*. According to Burling *Mech*, *Dimasa* and *Boro* belong to the “Bodo Proper Group”.

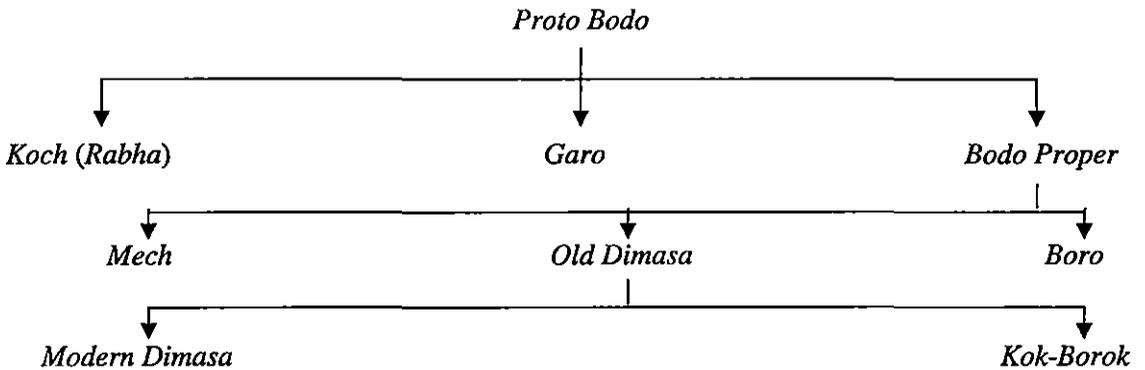


Figure 2.1. Classification of *Proto-Bodo* by Robbin Burling

Before the starting of caste *Hindu Assamese* ethnicity, the *Bodo* kingdoms were extended throughout the modern Assam. After dominating Gauda and Nodiya, the Turks under the leadership of Muhammad-bin-Bakhtiyar Khalji invaded Kamrupa with a view of conquering Tibet. In the same period Kamarupa was occupied by the *Koches*, the *Meches* and the *Tharus*. The author of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Minhaj-ud-din wrote that “In the different parts of those mountains which lie between Tibbat and the country of Lakhanawati are three races of people, one called *Kunch*, the second the *Mei* (*Meg*) and the third the *Tiharu* and all have Turk countenance.” The Mech King of Kamarupa resisted Muhammad-bin-Bakhtiyar Khalji. According to S.K. Chatterjee, the Turkish was resisted by the ruler of Kamarupa under the leadership of Lunar dynasty of Vallabha-deva, and fell into the hand of Bakhtiyar Khalji. He accepted the Muhammadan faith and was known as ‘Ali the Mech’. Historians are of the opinion

that 'Ali the Mech' was suspected to be Vallabha-deva who became the ruler of Gauda (Narjeenary 1985).

2.3.1. Etymology of 'Mech': There are three different opinions about the origin of the generic term 'Mech' as follows:

VIEW I: *Mlechha*>*Mech*: The word 'Mech' is simply a corruption of the Sanskrit word 'Mlechha' which means 'barbarian' or foreigners. The name *Mech* or *Mlechha* that 'Welsh' or barbarians was given to the *Bodos* of North Bengal by their *Bengali* neighbours (Basumata 2001).

VIEW II: *Mech*> *Mlechha*: According to Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee (1951), due to progressive Sanskritisation of the various Pre-Aryan or non-Aryan people in their culture, their outlook and their ways of life, the 'Mech' might have been Sanskritised as 'Mlechha'.

VIEW III: The *Bodos* one of the Tibeto-Burman speaking Indo-Mongoloid Tribes migrated into India through Patkoi Hills between India and Burma and gradually spread themselves into the whole of modern Assam, North Bengal and parts of East Bengal or present Bangladesh. One part went along the river Bramhaputra and established themselves in the whole of modern Assam upto Goalpara and parts of the districts of Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar in West Bengal under the name of *Bodo*.

The third part went towards the west along the foot of the Himalayas upto river *Mechi* between India and Nepal and settled on the north bank of the said river as *Mech* or *Mechia*. So the *Bodos* who settled on the bank of the river *Mechi* were known as *Mech* (Sanyal 1973).

Binoy Khungar Bwisumuthiary in his article 'The Origin of the Bara' proposed that the appellation 'Mech' is the shortened version of Meshek, son of Japhet and grandson of Noah (Basumata 2001).

Another hypothetical proposition made by N.N. Vasu (1922) in his 'The Social History of Kamrup' in which we also get Biblical reference as to the origin of the 'Mech'. Vasu observes, in the Vedic Age the *Asuras* became separate from the Aryans and having crossed the borders of India settled in Persia or Turkey. They founded the kingdom of Asur or Assyria about 200 miles to northwest of Babylon and founded the Capital of Asur on the bank of Tigris. Their possessions extended from Asia Minor to Caucasus Mountain. In the Old Testament mention is made of a Royal Priest in the name of Melclu-Zedek. After his name 'Mekhi' came to denote king and priest in Syrian and Assyrian languages.

This is an ascending task to say which of the above propositions about the origin of appellation '*Mech*' is historically more acceptable. However Dr. Sunity Kumar Chatterjee's (1951) proposition that '*Mlechha*' is the Sanskritisation of *Mech* seems to be more acceptable on the following grounds:

- i. '*Mech*' is a *Bodo* word which means human being. '*Mech*' is formed of the root '*Me*' and '*ch*'. Here '*ch*' is the shortened form of '*shi*' or '*chi*' which means '*soul*' in *Bodo* language. So '*Mech*' means the being with soul i.e. human being.
- ii. Had the appellation '*Mech*' been derived from '*Mlechha*', there would have obviously been more than one *Mech* community at present in India because in Chapter 175 of *Adiparba* of *Mahabharata Pundras, Kiratas, Yavanas, Barbaras* etc all are included in the *Mlechha* race.
- iii. Both the propositions that the appellation '*Mech*' might have been the reduced edition of Biblical Characters '*Meshak*' and *Melchi-Zedek* do not seem to have historical footings but the propositions enhance the possibility of long settlement of *Mech* people in Babylon before their transmigration to India with the great Mongol group. The *Samhita* portion of the *Vedas* testifies this prospect.

Finally, we may say that the modern *Mech* entered India as '*Mech*' and were later Sanskritised as '*Mlechha*' (Chatterjee 1951).

2.3.2. Habitat and Distribution: The *Meches* are migrated into India through Patkoi Hills, which is situated between India and Myanmar and gradually spread themselves into the whole of modern Assam, North Bengal and parts of Bangladesh. It is probable that they marched towards three directions. One part went south along the river Brahmaputra and established themselves in the modern Assam up to Goalpara and in some parts of Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar districts of West Bengal.

The third part went towards the west along the foot of the Himalayas up to the river *Mechi* running between India and Nepal and settled on the north bank of the said river as *Mech* or *Mechia*. They crossed the river and established themselves in the deep forests of Darjeeling Terai and Baikunthapur of Jalpaiguri. Again they marched eastwards, crossed the Tista and spread in the Duars, Jalpaiguri. After that, they moved further east, crossed the river Sankosh and went towards Goalpara in Assam (Sanyal 1973).

2.3.3. Population Structure: According to some anthropologists, the *Meches* or the *Bodos* are the descendants of the great *Kachhari* tribe of North-East India and they have been living in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal since 7th century together with their counterparts throughout Assam. It has been known from Census surveys that 90% of the *Meches* of West Bengal are the Jalpaiguri-*Meches*. A few members of the tribe however, are found in Siliguri sub-division of the district of Darjeeling and elsewhere. According to 1991 and 2001 Census report (Anonymous 1991a, 1991b, 2001c & 2001d), the total population of *Meches* or *Bodos* in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal and Kokrajhar district in Assam against the total population and total tribal population of West Bengal and Assam are mentioned in Table 2.1:

Table 2.1. Population of *Meches* in Jalpaiguri district and West Bengal (Anonymous 1991a & 2001c)

Year	State/ District	Total Population	Total Tribal Population	Total Mech Population
1991	West Bengal	68077965 Male: 35510633 Female: 32567332	3809000	29904
	Jalpaiguri	2800543 Male: 1453194 Female: 1347349	589225	26987
2001	West Bengal	80176197 Male: 41465985 Female: 38710212	4406794	Not available
	Jalpaiguri	3401173 Male: 1751145 Female: 1650028	641688	Not available

Table 2.2. Population of *Bodos* in Kokrajhar district and Assam (Anonymous 1991b & 2001d)

Year	State/ District	Total Population	Total Tribal Population	Total Bodo (Mech) Population
1991	Assam	22414322	2874441 Male: 1461560 Female: 1412881	1267015 Male: 642443 Female: 624572
	Kokrajhar	808730	329461	318432
2001	Assam	26655528 Male: 13777037 Female: 12878491	3308570 Male: 1678117 Female: 1630453	1352771
	Kokrajhar	930404	313546	Not available

2.3.4. The Faith and Religion among the Meches: Before the access of Aryans and much latter of Britishers in North-East India *Meches* were worshippers of *Bathou* religion. Only after Aryan's influences few *Meches* were converted to different sects of *Hindu* religion. And after the annexation of earlier Assam and West Bengal by East India Company, some *Meches* were converted to Christianity. But, in general, *Meches* are still believers and worshippers of *Bathou* religion. *Meches* could have had its distinct language, culture, custom and tradition built on *Bathou* religion. *Bathou* religion is based on one God, *Bwrai Bathou*, who is almighty Supreme Being and creator.

About creation, believers in *Bathou* religion preaches that *Bwrai Bathou* created five matters – earth, water, air, heat (Sun) and universe. *Bwrai Bathou* created these matters first and latter other creation followed continuously. Who has created these matters, also created all living beings and plants including men through evolutionary process. Hence he is creator (*Swrjigiri*) and the *Meches* obey and worship Him for the well being of all creatures. These are the myths in *Bathou* religion. The *Bathou* worshippers could not leave their relation with the nature, because, they earn their livelihood from amongst the natural resources. Besides, along with *Bwrai Bathou* as others they perform different rites in the name of different Gods for their protection and prosperity. Generally before the performances of *Kherai* and *Garja*, they performed *Absha* and *Salami* Puja where everybody has to confess. Along with *Bwrai Bathou*, *Bathou* religion attaches special importance to purity or sacredness in personal as well as in social life (Suba 2000).

2.3.5. Economy and Education in Mech Society: Until the end of the twentieth century, the *Meches* practiced '*Jhum*' (*Hadang*) i.e. slash and burn method of cultivation. They were also found to earn livelihood through weaving, fishing, making bamboo articles etc. Now, they have transformed themselves from '*Jhum*' to settled agriculture (*Hal-wai-nai*) with the bullocks and the plough. Along with paddy cultivation, other cash crops like jute (*Corchorus capsularis* Linnaeus), mustard seeds (*Brassica nigra* Koch), areca nut (*Areca catechu* Linnaeus), arum [*Colocasia esculenta* (Linnaeus) Schott], various pulses and vegetables are also cultivated in large scale by the *Meches*. They are also known for their age-old cottage industry, *Eri-culture*. The *Mech* women are traditionally skilled in rearing of silkworms, spinning and weaving (Plate I, Fig. H). *Mech* family rear fowls, cows, pigs, ducks and goats. These constitute as source of income especially for the women. 18 DEC 2012

In 1880, Hodgson wrote that "the *Mech* have no education in the modern sense. Their language and numerals are complicated. They count up to seven". Gait in 1891 and Grierson in

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1909 wrote that “they can count up to ten and could make a small collection of their numerals” (Sanyal 1973). Now-a-days, the *Mech* people have received and are receiving modern education. Some of them have gained the highest degree of the University. At present, a good number of the *Meches* are found as government servants, teachers, doctors, nurses, drivers and businesspersons. Many have joined in military and Para-military forces. The *Meches* have shown a good deal of progress in the development of formal education among them in comparison with the other tribes. In West Bengal they have even initiated a movement and have asked the government for the introduction of *Bodo* language as the medium of instruction in primary schools.

2.3.6. Residence:

2.3.6.1. Homestead - Selection of Site: Having selected the new site, the head of the homestead goes there with a *Deusi*. Four wooden posts are drilled on the four border junctions of the proposed site. They are joined by jute strings forming a fence. The *Deusi* places two rice grain side by side on a leaf at night uttering incantations over them. It is covered with another leaf. This is done at the four corners of the proposed site. If in the next morning they are found unmolested they feel assured that there is no evil spirit on the spot and the house may be built. But now, this custom is rare.

2.3.6.2. House: A house is called ‘*Na*’ (Plate II, Figs. A – D); some pronounce it as ‘*No*’. A living hut is generally 18’-24’ long and 12’-8’ wide. The huts with mud plinths are erected so as to enclose a quadrangle or a nearly square yard. The huts are made of straw or jungle grass (*Vetiveria zizanioides*) supported by bamboo trellis (*Bambusa sp.*) or of strips of bamboo. The thatched roof resting on a bamboo (*Bambusa sp.*) or wooden (mainly *Shorea robusta*) framework, projects considerably beyond the walls. The walls are mud-plastered. There is one open space for door (*Duar*) and sometimes one or two small openings in the wall for window (*Janala*) but in most huts there is no window. Formerly an opening in the front wall was the door and the small space between the roof and the wall served as a window. A piece of jute cloth hung over the opening served the purpose of a door cover. Now reed or wooden door covers are used. All huts have mud floor raised about 2ft from the ground.

There is a separate cooking hut (*No-a-ghar*) and sleeping huts are separate. The northern hut (*Na-ma* i.e. house for the mother) is generally the bigger hut where resides the goddess *Mainou* (the goddess of wealth). At the north eastern corner of the yard there is a *Euphorbia royleana* plant enclosed in five layers of bamboo trellis. This is their Great God, ‘*Bathou*’. The cattle byre (Plate II, Fig. E – G) is a thatched lowly hut and is always built outside the inner yard.

At present well-to-do *Meches* have built wooden houses on wooden polls (*Shorea robusta*) about 7ft height from the ground, with wooden floor, wooden wall and corrugated iron or tiled roof. Brick floor has also been found in some houses. The cooking hut has a mud floor about 3ft high with thatched roof. In Assam, some families construct pucca or semi-pucca Assam type houses with C.I. sheet roofing. Every house has a well of its own. It was, previously, simply dug into the earth but now concrete ring wells are becoming popular. The well is called 'Doi-khur' (water dug-out). The Local Self-Government Department of the district and Village Anchals are establishing many concrete ring wells to supply drinking water to the villagers. Cast iron pipe wells there are but not favoured.

Some portion of homestead is covered with different plant species like *Artocarpus heterophyllus*, *Neolamarckia cadamba*, *Gmelina arborea*, *Lagerstroemia reginae*, *Callicarpa arborea*, *Bambusa spp.* etc. Each house is surrounded by a ditch and fence. The fence is usually made of split bamboo (*Bambusa nutans*) and trunk stripe of *Areca catechu*. Some plant species are used for fencing like *Jatropha curcas*, *Gliricidia sepium*, *Justicia adhatoda* etc.

2.3.7. Furniture: A moderately monied cultivator has a bamboo made bedstead (*Machang*). Some of them have wooden bedsteads (Plate II, Fig. H). A rich man has a wooden bedstead. They use modern chairs, tables and benches also. Moderately affluent families use low wooden seats for sitting.

2.3.8. Beddings: Bedding is called 'Iyem'. It is composed of a layer of jute sticks spread on the bedstead (*Changra*). This layer is called 'Chirin'. On this layer a jute mat is spread (*Phatusla*), on this a cotton cloth is spread (*Iyem-hi*). But many families use mattress, which is made with cotton of *Bombax ceiba* and *Gossypium arboreum*. They use pillow (*Gandu*), it is made with cotton pressed into a jute or cotton bag (*Iyem-shi-phung*). In winter they use a thick cloth to cover the body, this they call 'Modon-jum-nai-ni-hi'. They use woolen or cotton blankets (*Khumshi*) and also cotton 'Kantha' (*Khitab*).

2.3.9. Utensils: For cooking they use iron, brass or bell-metal utensils. Now aluminium or enameled pots are becoming popular. They use earthen vessels or bamboo cylinders (*Ha-chung*) carrying and storing water. For eating they use earthen or wooden or metal plate (*Thursi*). They use wooden mortar (Plate III, Fig. A) and husking tools, which is made with *Shorea robusta*, *Artocarpus heterophyllus*. For sieving and drying the grains or another things they use bamboo

made utensils. They make nice broom (*Hasib*) from *Vetiveria zizanioides* (*Gigab*) (Plate III, Fig. B). They make wide-mouthed baskets and also winnowing fans and sieving materials for keeping or cleaning grains (Plate III, Figs. C – E).

2.3.10. Lighting Implements: When going out they pierce a few fruits of *Ricinus communis* (*Eri*) and *Jatropha curcas* (*Enda*) in a bamboo sticks or jute sticks or some weeds use as a torch (*Banzar*). Kerosene lamps and electric torches are also available.

2.3.11. Dress: The women are spinning and weaving by their traditional homelooms. The loom they use is put inside a pit in the earth. The pit loom is called '*Chanchhali*'. Spinning is usually done with a spindle is called '*Takuri*' (Plate III, Fig. F).

The children put on a small piece of cloth called '*Nangti*' spun and woven by the ladies. When ten to twelve years old they wear a larger cloth '*Gamcha*' that turns between the legs and buttocks and hangs down to the knees from the loins. Young and old people also put on a '*Gamcha*' of a slightly bigger size (Plate III, Fig. G). During winter they use to wrap the body with a wrapper (*Modomni Gamscha*) of cotton or *Endi* spun and woven at home. The cotton is obtained from *Gossypium arboreum*. *Endi* is made from home raised worms fed on leaves of *Ricinus communis* (*Eri*). They also use a banian, a sort of coat, of cotton or *Endi*. The one without button but tied with two small threads of the same materials is called '*Bushta-bhoto*' or '*Bodo-bushta*'. The one with a row of buttons and eyes in front along the chest and abdomen was called '*Bandia*' or '*Bandia*'. A piece of hand woven cloth covered with flowery design is also used by *Mech* men around their neck, which is called as '*Arnai*'. An *arnai* is about 3 – 3.5 ft in length and 8 – 10 inch in breadth.

The women tie a cloth round the chest just below the armpit that hangs to the knees. It is called '*Dakhna-thinhai*' (when plain) and '*Dokhna-ashar*' (when ornamented). Yellow is the favourite colour of *Mech* women. Now-a-days a lot of changes have occurred in the dresses of *Meches*.

2.3.12. Foot Wear: Advanced *Meches* use leather shoes that they buy from the market. Sometimes they use wooden (mainly *Alstonia scholaris*) sole cover with a knob to pass between the great toe and the second finger. This they call '*Nak-thung*'.

2.3.13. Head Cover: The *Meches* use a headgear of fabricated bamboo strips and leaves of *Phrynium pubinerve* (*Laihu*), that protects the head and the back from the rain and the sun. It was called 'Ghum' (Plate III, Fig. H). It had no handle. It was simply put on the head. Many of the *Meches* have started using modern umbrellas but the men engaged in cultivation adhere to the old head-cover for convenience.

2.3.14. Fishing and Hunting: *Meches* are non-vegetarian and to fulfill their requirements of food, they are dependent on fishing and hunting.

I. Fishing (*Na-sangou-thamang-gou*):

Mech men and women, carry out fishing singly or in groups during all seasons. They use cast nets and different other bamboo-made indigenous fishing and trapping implements for this purpose. Fishing is also done by poisoning the water.

A. Fishing Equipments:

Jakhoi:

This is made from strips of *Bambusa nutans* (*Ooa*) and fibres of *Sterculia villosa*. They also enjoy a dance with this trap (Plate IV, Fig. A).

Burung:

This fishing trap is made from *Bambusa nutans* (Plate IV, Fig. B).

Tepai:

This trap catches mainly small fishes. It is made from *Bambusa nutans*. It is placed at streams (Plate IV, Fig. C).

Koka:

This is also a bamboo made fishing trap (Plate IV, Fig. D).

***Ze-ma* (Cast net):**

The cast net is called *zal-gedet*. It is used for catching fish in rivers, streams and ponds. The net is made of special twine thread and they are knitted this net using two bamboo made (*Bambusa nutans*) instruments, called *Kangkila* and *Chemper* (Plate IV, Fig. E). This net is to be tanned by the fruit juice of *Diospyros malabarica* (*Gab Bingfang*) for long lasting.

Khobai:

This is used for keeping fishes when fishing is done (Plate IV, Figs. F & G). This is also made from strips of *Bambusa nutans* and fibres of *Sterculia villosa*.

B. Fish Poisons:

Meches poison fish in water by some plant parts. Due to its poisonous effect, the eyes of fishes start burning. Hence, fish travel to the surface of water. In addition, on eating the plant parts, their speed is reduced and can pick up the affected fishes without much effort.

II. Hunting:

The *Meches* are very good hunters. Formerly bow and arrow were the only weapon (Plate IV, Fig. H) for hunting. Even now they adhere to it. *Bambusa nutans* (*Ooa*) is split into two. The split half is cut to the requisite length and thickness, and then it is rubbed lengthwise to smoothen edges. At the two ends, grooves are carved. This is called '*Zilit*' and the bowstring is '*Phanic*'. The arrow shaft is made of young culms of *Bambusa nutans*. This is called '*Bla*' or '*Thir*'. The arrow tip is made of a metal blade, this is called '*Singi-muri*'. Sometimes they poison the arrow tip with *Capsicum annum*. At first chillies are pounded and smeared on arrowhead and then burnt it on fire. They also use spear (*Zang*). The wooden handle of the spear is called '*Zang-ni-danthe*'.

Owing to stringent forest laws for preservation of animals and birds, they hunt in the fields and in small jungles.

2.3.15. Musical Instruments: This ethnic group has a large number of musical instruments.

Among those, the popular instruments are *Siphung*, *Kham*, *Khamwang*, *Serja*, *Jotha*, *Tharkha*, etc (Plate V, Fig. A). *Siphung* is a long bamboo-flute having five holes (Plate V, Fig. B). A long drum made by wood and skin of goat, is called *Kham* (Plate V, Fig. C). *Khamwang* is a pair of round metallic plate, hangs to each other by a jute rope. A violin-like instrument having a round body is known as *Serja* and *Jotha*, basin-like instrument of brass, beaten together in pair. *Tharkha*, for clapping it is used, made by bamboo split into two halves (Plate V, Fig. D).

2.3.16. Food-Habit: Rice is the staple food of the *Meches*. Now, many families are cultivating wheat (*Triticum aestivum* Linnaeus) but they are not used to take flour or atta. They also take maize, fish, meat, vegetables and milk. Normally they take boiled green vegetables and among them some are wild species. Some of which are useful for curing diseases. They also drink milk and use mustard oil for cooking food. Ghi is eaten; also dahi (curd). Corn is eaten both raw and cooked. Plantains, papaya, oranges and other fruits are eaten. *Sesamum indicum* Linnaeus (*Sibing Bigodh*) are grown round the cotton plant. The seed is crushed in the wooden mortar and mixed

with vegetable curry as a whet to the appetite. An alkaline salt (*Khardoi Bedai*) is made by burning twigs of *Vigna mungo* (*Sabai Gwchhwu*). The ash is collected in a pot. This is added to the curry.

They take meals thrice in a day – early morning meal (*Kham-go-zang*), midday meal (*Sanja-phu*) and evening meal (*Bi-ni-mi-kham*). Early morning meal consists of stale rice cooked at previous night with salt, chillies, onion etc. But wealthy families take hot rice. For mid day meal they take rice, vegetable curry, meat or fish. The evening meal is same as at midday. They are used to take the following meats: of pigs (*Oma Bidor*), of fowls (*Dau Bidor*), of ducks (*Hangsha Bidor*), of pigeons (*Pharau Bidor*), of goats, etc. The poultries and pigs are not only reared for household consumption but these also constitute as source of income especially for the women.

2.3.17. Games and Sports:

2.3.17.A. *Daubo Atheng Gele-nai*:

A group of children gather at a ground. Each player takes two hard branched bamboo poles. The players then walk with the support of that branched pole by the foot at some distance above the ground, just like the stilt. At that time the players sing the following song –
“*Daubo daubo/Gang rabo rabo/Gaungbou kani rath rath*” (“Oh crane, oh crane/White wings with open;/Let us with you to go/Take a pause, take a pause – be slow”).

2.3.17.B. *Gilathakuri-Kanni*: In this game, a hole is made on the ground. Each player has a seed of *Entada rheedii* (*Gilathakuri*) which they throw into the hole from some distance by twisting the fingers.

2.3.17.C. *Maklau-Manay*: One boy lies on the ground holding tightly one bamboo pole. The other boy holds his leg tightly. Thus about 5-6 boys form a line on the ground representing a sweet gourd ‘*Maklau*’ (*Cucurbita maxima*) creeper; their heads represent the sweet gourds. Another boy stands at a distance representing the thief. The thief runs along the line, observing carefully if the last boy has loosened the grip, then he suddenly pulls legs of the last boy. If the boy is separated, he becomes a companion of the thief. Thus, if the all boys excepting first boy can be brought out the thief wins. Otherwise he loses the game.

2.3.17.D. *Goy-Kanni*: In this game, six small holes are made side by side in a line on the ground. Two players stand at some distance with young fruits of *Areca catechu* (*Goy*) in hand. One player throws his fruits into the holes. Fruits fall into some and some remain empty. Then another player takes his chance. If he can throw into those holes where the other player had already put in his

fruits, the second player gets all the fruits of those holes. He also tries to put fruits into the empty holes. The first boy again takes his turn. Thus the player who wins the maximum number of fruits becomes the winner.

2.3.17.E. Dausi Gele-nai: About 5 – 8 children gather at a place. They run like a bird and sing “*Ada bola mailam daung/Jaung maun jaudang ji-joy*” (“Brother Kala has harvested the crops/So we are being feed, how fine?”)

2.3.18. Mech Language: The *Meches* refer their dialect as *Bodo*. This speech has been classified as a dialect of the Assam-Burmese group of language belonging to the Sino-Tibetan language family. They are not having their own script, although they were using Roman and Assamese scripts in the past. Recently *Bodo* has been transcribed into Devnagari script. In West Bengal, *Mech* literature is written in Bengali script (Bhattacharya 2004).

2.3.19. Culture

2.3.19.A. Music and Dance: *Meches* are traditionally fond of music and dance. Dance is known as *Mosanai* in their community. This community is very rich in culture and has varieties of folk dances like *Kherai* dance, *Bagurumba* dance and *Baishagu-methay* as their artistic wealth. These dances are related to marriage, religious matter, seasons, hunting, fishing etc. Accompaniments of the traditional musical instruments like *kham*, *siphung* and *jotha* make this dance more exquisite. Girls and boys perform this dance together, sometimes by the girls alone. Songs are related with these dances.

i. *Bagurumba*:

The *Meches* traditionally dance the *Bagurumba* (Plate V, Figs. E & F). It is a vital part of *Mech* culture and depicts the beauty of nature. It is usually performed during the spring season. This attractive folk dance resembles the movement of birds and butterflies. It is basically a female oriented dance, in which the female dancers clad in colorful attires gently move their feet alongwith outstretched hands while dancing in the tunes of the traditional instruments. This dance is accompanied by the *Bagurumba* song which goes like this

Bagurumba, Hai Bagurumba
Bagurumba, Hai aio Bagurumba
jat nonga bwla khun nonga bwla

thab brum homnanwi bamnanwi lagwmwn kha
hwi lwgw lagwmwn kha...

ii. Baishagu:

This is continued usually three days from the first day of *Baisakh* (mid-April), the Bengali New Year. The main God, *Bathou* is worshipped daily in every household during this festival. The boys and girls move from house to house with music and dance, raise donations and rice and on the last day, the dancing and singing party eats the offerings and some of the offerings are distributed to all the villages.

iii. Kherai Mosanai:

The *Kherai* dance is strictly restricted to the womenfolk. Men are allowed to play on various musical instruments, yet they have to maintain the respective distance within the precinct. The dance represents the activities and behaviours of the gods and goddesses. The dances are essential and inevitable part of the *Kherai* worship and they are exhibited in items serially and chronistically. The dances are initiated, guided and controlled by the *Doudini* who is the central figure of the dances.

iv. Nagur Nou:

It is a fishing dance (Plate V, Figs. G & H). It has a vital role in *Mech* society. It is usually held in the river or any other streamlets when fishing is done. This dance is performed by the both sexes with own hand made bamboo implements, *Jakhoi* (for trapping the fishes) and *Khobai* (for keeping the fish).

v. Dong-fang Badari:

Meches are heavily dependent upon forest. At the time of entering a forest to gather wood the male and female folks are performed this dance.

vi. Endi-lunai:

The *Meches* have a tradition of weaving. *Mech* women are traditionally expert in rearing of silkworms, spinning and weaving by their traditional home-looms. The *Endi-lunai* dance is performed for this purposes.

vii. Mai-jainou Mosanai:

At the commencement of the paddy sowing, this dance is performed.

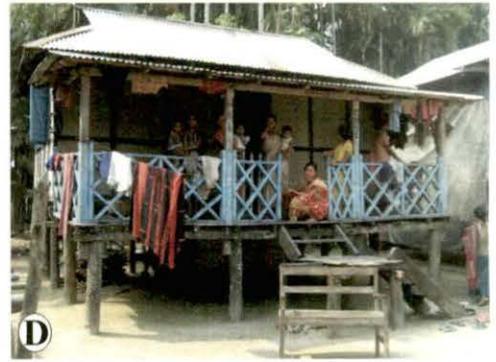
Besides the aforesaid dances, in the marriage ceremony some elderly ladies and girls dance *Mashanay* (peacock dance) in front of the *Bathou* (*Euphorbia royleana*) accompanied with bamboo flute, stringed instruments and small metal cymbals.

PLATE I



Figs. A. *Mech* family, B. Old man making ropes from jute, C. An old lady is working, D. An old man and his daughter removing covers from corns, E. A lady fashioned her with *Dokhna* (Traditional dress), F. Two *Mech* boys, G. A man is busy his *Ruya* (Axe), H. *Mech* women are spinning and weaving

PLATE II



Figs. A. D. Different types of *Na* (House), E. G. Pigeon nest box & cattle sheds, H. Bedstead

PLATE III



Figs. A. *Ooal*(Wooden mortar), B. *Hasib* (Broom), C. *Dhola* (grain keeping basket), D. The lady cleaning grains with *Chhongrai* (Winnowing fan), E. *Chhandrai* (Grain-siever), F. A lady spinning with a *Takuri* (Spindle), G. An old man with their traditional *Gamcha*, H. *Ghum* (Head-cover)

PLATE IV



Figs. A. *Jakhoi* (Fishing equipment), B. *Burung* (Fishing equipment), C. Fishing equipment *Tepai* is set for fishing, D. *Koka* (Fishing material), E. *Kangkila* & *Chemper* two equipments for knitting fishing net, F. *Khobai* the fish keeping basket, G. *Zilit* & *Bla* (Bow & arrow), H. A lady fishing with *Jakhoi* & *Khobai*

PLATE V



Figs. A. Musical Group, B. *Siphung* (Bamboo made flute), C. *Kham* (Musical instrument), D. *Jotha* (Brass-made instrument) & *Tharkha* (Bamboo-made clapping musical instrument), E. & F. *Bagurumba* dance, G. & H. *Nagur Nou* the fishing dance