



## Barman Tribes Culture and their Interactions with Forest Resources

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**Abstract:** Socio-economic and cultural practices are unique among the different ethnic groups, especially in the tribal community. The Barman tribes are one of the major tribal groups in Assam. Most prominently, they live as scheduled tribes in lower Assam and the Barak Valley. Dimasa Barman people are dispersed throughout the Cachar district, inhabiting in small groups in several villages. The Joynagar Forest village is one of the largest Barman living forest villages in the Cachar district. The Barman is distinct from the other ethnic groups in Assam's forest settlement because of his own socioeconomic practices, cultural practices, and traditions. They engage in a variety of productive activities while living in the forest and rely on forest resources for their family's survival and earnings. Additionally, they encounter a variety of life-threatening issues as a result of their way of life. The article primarily outlines the Barman culture and their interaction with forest resources among Barman tribes residing in a forest village, namely Joynagar forest village in Assam's Cachar district. Furthermore, the study explores the socioeconomic factors, the cultural backdrop, and the features of the forest that support the life and family income of the tribe. For this study, authors have relied on primary sources and data has been collected from 50 respondents who are actively engaged in forest resources in Joynagar forest village with the help of an interview schedule. Apart from this, insights on cultural practices and forest resource uses were gathered through Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) with key individuals from the Joynagar forest community, including the Mother group, Youth Club, Bandhan Group, Anganwari worker, Helper, ANM, ASHA, Head Teacher, and Goan Bura. In light of

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this context, the article also discusses the implications for future research and practice.

**Keywords:** Barman tribe, culture, forest village, forest resources, socio-economic life.

## Introduction

The Barman tribes are one of the prominent tribal groups in Assam's Cachar district of Barak Valley. In general, the Barman tribes are a peace-loving community of straight, polite, and soft-spoken people who live in Cachar's rural-urban region with the non-tribal community. Within the Kachari kings of Khaspurthe, the cultural shift among the Barman community happened very rapidly. The Barman people celebrate nearly all Hindu festivals, and their lives are in some ways inaccessible to non-tribal people such as Hindus. They observe festivals such as Duga puja, Laxmi puja, Saraswati puja, Kalipuja, Manasa puja, Doljatra, and Basanti Puja, among others, in honour of their tribal gods and goddesses. In general, Barman tribe villages located near land used for shifting cultivation, agriculture, and especially rural areas, play a critical role in women's economic life (Tiwari, 2013; Barman 2014). According to the 2011 census, the total population of Assam is 3,12,05,576. Among them, 12.45 percent of people are from Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the state. However, among the Schedule Tribe (ST) of the Barman Kacharis are 24,237 persons as per census 2017. Out of total people, 12,555 are male and 11,503 are females. The male literacy rate is 2.5%, while the female literacy rate is 1.5%. Four percent of the total population is estimated to be literate. Nonetheless, the Barman in the plain and hills of Cachar have a distinct identity in terms of social-cultural practices and forest resource utilization when compared to the other scheduled tribes in the Barak valley. There are a number of Barman villages in different legislative assembly constituencies of the Cachar district. Joynagar forest village is one of them, located in Assam's Dholai Lok Sabha Constituency. In terms of linguistic minorities, the speaking of Dimasa's identity is complicated and distressing in Cachar among the Bengali speaking majority and as of the Assamese state's official languages. It was crucial for the gap that existed between other ethnic groups' identity and cultures, in particular with the Dimasas (Barman, 2014; Daulagajau, 2015).

In the forested areas of Assam, the local forest resources serve multiple purposes for people, particularly with regard to their earnings and subsistence. They have access to all of these facilities, including fuel wood, food, medicines, construction materials, and shelter, which are all harvested from forests. They

are also getting some facilities indirectly, like fresh air, control of climate and rainfall, restraint of drought, and receiving greenery. Furthermore, the population that lives in the forest has distinct cultural practices and lifestyles from non-forest inhabitants (Dutta, 2011). Thus, from the above, it is understood that the Barman tribe's social-cultural way of life is entirely different from the rest of mankind. Their isolation is encouraged by a number of factors, including their proximity to water, rivers and streams, and forests. The most common issues that Barmanians face are identity crisis, language, cultural conflict, and Bangla influences (Longmailai, 2017). It is noted that the majority of studies are undertaken outside of India and Assam. It is unknown if there is any existing research on the Barman tribe in the Cachar region of Assam with regard to the Joynagar forest settlement in particular. In this study, the authors would like to close this existing gap.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To explore how socio-economic conditions vary amongst the Joynagar Barman tribes in the forest community.
- To gain an understanding of the cultural practices of the forest Barman tribes.
- To understand the nature of interaction with forest resources by the forest tribes dwellers for their livelihood.

### **Methods and Procedures**

The study described the Barman culture and its interconnections with forest resources using a range of approaches. The study took place in a forest village, Joynagar forest village, in the Dholai Lok Sabha Constituency of Assam's Cachar district. The study is exploratory in nature. Joynagar forest village has a population of approximately 500 people and 62 families. A total of 50 respondents from 50 families were interviewed using an interview schedule. Additionally, the researcher participated in group meetings to collect information about cultural practices and forest resources by conducting Focused Group Discussions (FGD) with key individuals such as Youth Club, Bandhan Group, Anganwari worker, Helper, Auxiliary Nursing Midwife (ANM), Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), School Head Teacher, Goan Bura or Village Headman of the Joynagar forest village and through direct observation. Besides that, a brief review of the secondary literature is undertaken to offer insight into the findings. Finally, a thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2018) procedure

was used to distribute themes reflecting the tribes' cultural practices and their interactions with forest resources in forest villages.

## Results and Discussion

### *A Glimpse of the Barman Tribes of Joynagar Forest Village*

There are forest settlements in the Cachar district of Assam located underneath the inner line reserve. Joynagar is a forest village in Assam's Dholai Lok Sabha Constituency. It is located on the border side of Assam-Mizoram. The settlement of Joynagar is located under the Shewrarthal Goan panchayat. The village is located approximately 46 kilometers away from Silchar town. In 2017, the Shewrarthal forest dwellers celebrated the Golden Jubilee for the 100 years running of their village. Mrs. Pramila Barmah, Assam's forest minister, was the chief guest at the golden jubilee event. Joynagar forest village is home to around 62 families and 500 inhabitants. The village is composed of people from the Dimasa, Khasia, and Bengali ethnic groups. Forest poverty is one of the most severe among Inner Line reserve's forest dwellers due to inadequate infrastructure, low agricultural output, poor communication, and a lack of basic amenities such as education, health, income, and safe drinking water, among others.

In Assam's Cachar district, the Dimasa Barman are a Scheduled Tribe. They are a group of people who are spread over the area but still remain a micro village in various interior locations. Dimasa Kachoris is a significant tribal community in Assam. They established a sizable ethnic group in North Eastern India. Today, Assam is inhabited by a large number of Kachari tribes, including the Bodo Kacharis in the Kumrup, Barpeta, Dhubri, Goalpara, Darrang, and Sonitpur Districts, the Sonowal and Thengal Kacharis in upper Assam, the Dimasa Barman in Cachar District, the Mech Kacharis who live in small groups throughout the plains Districts, and the Dimasa Kacharis in the Autonom (Daulagajau, 2015). The Barman is a vibrant tribe with a long history, a rich cultural heritage, a distinct language, and an indigenous way of life that includes food habits, dress, weaving, and handicrafts. Culture is expressed through action and interaction, as well as material and non-material products and practices, and it varies across societies. Housing, family structure, village system, clans/lineage, customs, religious system, marriage system, dress and ornaments, dance and music, food and drink, festivals, and language are all practiced by Barman people. As we all know, the forest is a critical resource for sustaining livelihoods, particularly for forest villagers. Tribal peoples living

in forest villages gathered to collect their food and other necessities, as well as clothing and shelter for everything they rely on from their forest (Dutta, 2011). Even today, they rely on the forest for a variety of purposes, including fuelwood, fencing, windbreaks and shelterbelts, fodder, soil erosion control, and soil improvement. Furthermore, they use forest products such as timber, cane, fruit, fiber, bamboo, grasses, medicinal applications, floss, and essential oils, which have a significant impact on their socioeconomic life.

### ***Socioeconomic Circumstances of the Barman Tribes***

Socio-economic conditions are important indicators for a community's well-being. This is an overarching representation of the whole community and is the social setting. Socioeconomic factors such as age, sex, family size, occupation, and education all have a significant impact on the individual and his or her family life.

**Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Gender**

<i>Gender</i>	<i>No of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>Male</b>	20	40
<b>Female</b>	30	60
<b>Total</b>	50	100

Source: Fieldwork by the researcher

According to Table 1, 60% of respondents who actively employed forest resources for the Barman tribe are female, whereas 40% are male. Additionally, the majority of respondents (65%) are in the age range of 20 to 39, while 25% are in the age group of 40 to 59, and only 10% are in the age group of 60 and beyond. Furthermore, it was discovered that the vast majority (85%) of them are married couples involved in forest activities for a livelihood, with only 15% of respondents being unmarried.

**Table 2: Educational Status**

<i>Education</i>	<i>No of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentages</i>
Illiterate	20	40
Lower primary	28	56
Upper primary & above	2	4
<b>Total</b>	50	100

Source: Fieldwork by the researcher

Referring to Table 2, the majority of respondents have only a primary level of schooling. Whereas 40% are illiterate and only 4% have completed the upper primary level of schooling and beyond.

**Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Family Types**

Type of Family	No of Family	Percentages
Nuclear family	40	80
Joint family	10	20
<b>Total</b>	50	100

Source: Fieldwork by the researcher

The above data demonstrates that the majority of the Barman tribes are from a nuclear family that is 80 percent, while 20 percent are from the joint family system. Additionally, it has been discovered that 65% of the Barman tribes have a small family size of 1 to 4 members, 15% have a medium family size of 5 to 8 people, and 20% have a large family size of 8 or more individuals.

**Table 4: Distribution of Respondents by Housing Pattern**

Houses Types	No of Respondents	Percentages
Assam type with full brick wall	18	36
Assam type with half brick wall	25	50
Bamboo with Tin	7	14
<b>Total</b>	50	100

Source: Fieldwork by the researcher

Thus, according to table 4, a substantial proportion of respondents' residences are Assam type with a half wall (50%), Assam type with a whole brick wall (36%), and bamboo with tin (14%).

**Table 5: Distribution of Respondents by Source of Family Income**

Occupation	No of Respondents	Percentages
Daily wage laborer	15	30
Handicraft/weaving	35	70
<b>Total</b>	50	100

Source: Fieldwork by the researcher

It has been observed that 70% of the respondents were involved in handicraft/weaving or forest resource collecting, while 30% were daily wage laborers. Apart from that, they engaged in job card work, agricultural labour,

and sold cattle such as pigs, goats, and cattle. Therefore, the forest tribes and their socioeconomic activities have profoundly influences on their livelihood and cultural existence.

## Understanding the Barman Tribe's Culture

Culture is, at its most fundamental level, a way of life. Society has different cultural systems and structures from one place to another. It is the combination of man's activity and interactions as well as the consequences of such conduct and interaction. The Barman tribes have their own cultural practices; current changes in the system and shape of culture, such as the family system, village system, food and drink habits, marriage system, dress and ornaments, dance and music, and so on, are influenced by other cultures. Therefore, a few contributing aspects that influence of tribal culture are highlighted-

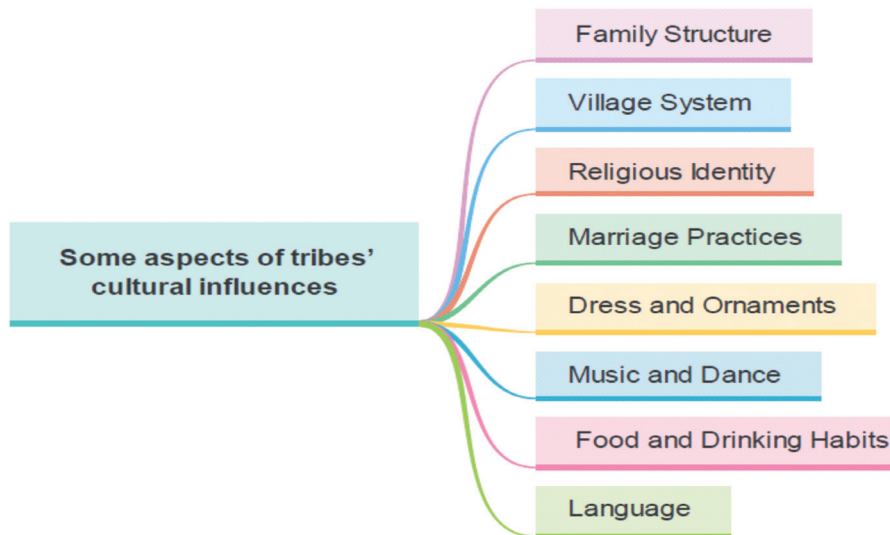


Diagram 1: Some aspects of tribes' cultural influences

### Family Structure

The Barman tribe generally adheres to a nuclear family system, with married couples cohabiting with their unmarried offspring. Among Barman tribe communities, they are more involved in Jhum cultivation and forest resource allocation. Male members serve as the family's leaders, such as husbands or fathers. However, Barman women have the same social standing as their male counterparts. Both women and men labour to support their families and provide

for their livelihoods. Among the Barman Tribes, the joint family arrangement consists of two or more couples and their unmarried children sharing a home under one roof. Though, the joint family system is becoming increasingly rare nowadays. Jaynagar's Barman tribes are rapidly shifting away from traditional Jhum Practicing livelihoods and toward agricultural cultivation and trading. Recent changes in the Barman Tribes' family structure and economics are a result of non-tribal neighbors' influences.

### ***Village System***

The Joynagar community in a large village system is affected by environmental factors and woodland of the Barman tribe's immediate surroundings. They adhere to the traditional village method of appointing a 'headman' named '*Goan Bura*'. The headman wields supreme administrative authority inside the village structure. In Barman, the village system is comprised of clusters of dwellings, and its inhabitants are referred to as '*Khunang*'. The Barman of Cachar districts are plain tribes' people who inhabit the plains. They constructed the dwellings in two parallel rows. However, they now have a contemporary system of Assam-style buildings and have constructed separate cowsheds, duck sheds, goat sheds, and piggery, which are widely found in villages.

### ***Religious Identity***

The Barman tribes of Jaynagar are similarly devout in their devotion to Hindu religious activities such as *Duga puja*, *Laxmi puja*, *Kali puja*, *Saraswati puja*, *Ganga puja*, *Jhulan Jatra*, *Savtratri*, *Janmashtami*, and *Bipodnashini*, among others. However, the Joynagar Barman tribes believe in *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, and *Siva*. They emphasised *Siva* and Goddess *Durga* over the other two. Barman tribes also worship three goddesses, named *Ranachandi*, *Kachakanti*, and *Kamakya*, who are all manifestations of Goddess *Durga* in their religion. Each year on January 27th, Barman of Jaynagar celebrates the event known as "*Basu Dima*." Apart from that, they perform birth rites (*hegochujaba*), the *annaprasana* ceremony of offering the first rice to their child, and death rituals. However, changes are occurring in the religious system today as a result of the impact of urban contracts, modern facilities, education, and the influence of non-tribal ceremonies, among other factors.

### ***Marriage Practices***

Marriage exists in every human society. The Barman tribes have a traditional system of marriage. In Barman tribes, village adult females are regarded to



be of marriageable age. In Barman tribes, the marriage process begins with the boy, never with the female. According to the Barman's rules, husband and wife cannot be of the same patricians, and boys and girls cannot be of the same matriclan in the marital system. Today, many marriages occur out of love, elopement, or mutual acceptance of village girls and boys, and later on, society accepts cases where all prescriptive laws are maintained by Barman tribes, albeit they prefer negotiated marriages within Barman tribe villagers.

### ***Dress and Ornaments***

Among Barman tribes in the Joynagar forest community, ladies wear 'Righu' and 'Chador' named 'Rijhampaibu' while men wear 'Dutti' and 'Risa'. They employed traditional weaving machines to weave these garments at home. Young Barman ladies also employed sari in their everyday life. In terms of ornaments, while they have traditional ornaments such as 'Poal' or silver coins and costly sea-shells made necklaces, 'Eansidam' or silver made nose ring, 'Rongborsa' or silver coins made necklaces, and so on, Barman tribe women prefer to wear contemporary gold and silver jewelry that non-tribe women wear. A somewhat similar example of a non-tribal cultural impact may be found in the ladies of the Joynagar Barman tribe.

### ***Music and Dance***

The Barman tribes' traditional dances include *Baidima*, *Baurunjla*, and *Jaubani*. The Barman tribes' dance is quite complicated. They rely entirely on instrumental music. The traditional musical instruments of the Barman tribes are named 'Kharam' or drum, 'Muriwasthisa' or bugle as flute, 'Supin' or flute, etc. This traditional Barman dance and musical instrument is almost unutilized nowadays by the Barman tribe, who instead use instruments like *Khol*, *Flute*, and *Cymbal*, etc., but they still tried to maintain their traditional dance, music, rituals, culture, and believes it in their level.

### ***Food and Drinking Habits***

Rice is the staple food. They simply eat three times a day rice and vegetable curry with little oil and largely boiled vegetables, regardless of their age or gender variations. 'Dried fish' (*Nagrain*) and 'sidol' (*Napham*) are frequently included in the meals of Barman tribes. Barman Tribes of all ages and sexes commonly consume their traditional 'Rice beer' or 'Judima', 'milk' and 'sugarless tea'. Bidi and cigarette smoking are two new practices that have emerged among the

Barman tribe's younger generations. They're 'fishing' rivers and streams and 'hunting' forest 'animals'. These are the most delicious foods for them.

### **Language**

Their mother tongue is Dimasa and they know the Bengali language to manage their daily interaction with their surroundings. Despite the fact that Dimasa is their native tongue, they enroll their children in a nearby Bengali medium school. Due to schooling, employment, and a lack of exposure to traditional arts and music, among other factors, they utilized Dimasa language exclusively at home. For example, the barman tribe families sometimes train their little children in the home to speak Bengali or other languages to make them eligible for Non-Dimasa Medium School in their locality. Thus, the environment itself constrains their ability to communicate in their mother tongue.

Therefore, the lack of development and exposure within social, cultural and personal constraints and practices resulted in an even closer relationship between the native forest for their survival and earnings and the next segments to be described.

### **Interaction with the Forest Resources by the Barman Tribes**

The residents of Joynagar forest are primarily day laborers. Therefore, if they are unable to find a job/work, they usually travel to the jungle and spend an average of three/four hours a day collecting materials from the forest to supplement their daily income. The majority of households (88 percent) earn their living from fuel wood, fruits, nuts, honey, agriculture products, medicines, leaves, silk, weaving, vegetables, and wood for furniture, while around (12 percent) of families earn their living from other sources.

- Forest dwellers in Jaynagar, particularly women, benefited directly from the forest by producing goods such as *Reyma Jhadu* (broom), baskets, and *dala* from readily available raw materials in the forest, in addition to fuel wood, food, medicines, and shelter materials. They also benefited indirectly by selling forest vegetables and fruits, and the surrounding community benefited as well.
- As said in those women's groups, the Forest enables women to give something to the family while collaborating with their male spouses to run the family more effectively. This enables them to address family issues with their husband, such as child education, health, and daughter's marriages.

- Those women stated that when they go into the forest as a group, they share their feelings and thoughts about their daily lives with their coworkers. These all contribute to the development of women's sense of community, interaction, and communication for problem solving and amusement.
- They cultivate various items in the forest such as Rayma, Banana tree, Jhum practicing for vegetables, fruits, and so on, and they occasionally hunt in the forest for food such as jungli chicken, jungli pig, deer, and so on.
- They utilized forest trees such as *arjun*, *neem*, *chirota*, and *don kolos* to make remedies for household diseases like as fever, cough, and cancer, and these trees also expand their products' commercial potential. The forest community is extremely beneficial for medical purposes, and many traditional healers, as well as forest dwellers, collect medicines.
- The difficulties encountered by forest dwellers on various levels include mosquito bites, a lack of light, a lack of a proper road or lane, a lack of safe drinking water, and having to walk long distances to purchase groceries. They used the words 'to live and to work in the jungle. It's not so easy'. Jaynagar village is located on the border of Assam and Cachar district, which means that development has been largely neglected, and there are no facilities for utilizing forest productive resources.

Henceforth, the benefits avail by the forest dweller is regulated or ban much activity to preservation of the forest under the forest department. Further, they exercise, indeed control in preservation, conservation, and management without any absolute involvement of the forest department. The residents, on the other hand, have historically developed a sense of ownership and belongingness to their forest village. The researcher noticed a significant gap in that there are currently no Self Help Groups (SHGs) or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) assisting those ladies in obtaining bank loans or developing their abilities in order to grow more effectively and actively. Of course, they are less developed than they should be. The lack of development is due to the lack of GO-NGOs facilities in the forest village.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The Barman tribes enjoy a vibrant traditional culture in the Joynagar forest village. However, its rituals have diminished or been eliminated as a result of naive acceptance of modern society, the influence of non-tribal indigenous

culture, and cultural assimilation, other factors described in the article. The traditional family, village, religious system, marriage system, dance and music, clothes and jewellery, food and beverages, and so on, all have their own significance within the Barman tribe, although the majority of these practices are disregarded by the younger tribe generation. Though, the Barman tribes speak Dimasa as their mother tongue. However, the language's future preservation and maintenance are a long way off (Nair *et al.*, 1979; Vidyarthi, 1972). All of this necessitates the emergence of a conscious mind to advocate for the preservation of traditional culture and practices.

The empowerment of women as well as their economic well-being relies on the engagement of forest resources. It empowers them to make decisions about their families, children's education, marriages, health, saving, and the environment, so establishing their independence (Dutta, 2011). However, they require additional efforts from both the government and non-government sectors to flourish. There should be the formation of SHGs and NGOs to assist those women in achieving greater development and obtaining all available benefits from government sources in order to maximize their energy and resource use. Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) can also take the initiative to strengthen this group of women by participating in women's reservation and representation in democratic processes that enable them and others to fully flourish. NGOs can contribute significantly to the development of forest residents' abilities by giving training on resource management, resource efficiency and awareness rising. Above all, the mass media can also play a crucial role in the promotion of cultural practices and to save the uses and interactions of natural resources.

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