

# CHAPTER-I

## INTRODUCTION

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### 1.0 Introduction

Bodo is a Tibeto-Burman language mainly concentrated in the northern and southern parts of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, North Bengal in West Bengal, in the border areas of Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh of North-East India and in the country of Nepal. According to Sailen Debnath, the Bodos are *“the largest in the Tista-Brahmaputra valley comprising western Assam and a pervasive tract of North Bengal specially the Dooars of Jalpaiguri, northern part of Cooch Behar and the plains of Darjeeling districts”*. (Debnath, 2010:81)

The Bodos were known by different names in different provinces. In North Bengal of West Bengal they are well known as Mech, in the vast area of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam they are known as Boro and in the country of Nepal as Meche. In this aspect, Sir Edward Gait commented that *“they are identical with the people called Mech in Goalpara and North Bengal..... In the Brahmaputra valley, the Kacharis call themselves Bodo fisa (sons of the Bodo)*. (Gait, 2008:299) According to Endle, *“In Assam proper the Hindus call them Kacharis; in Bengal they are known as Meches. Their own name for their race is Boro or Bodo.”* (Endle, 1911: xv) About Meches or Kacharis, Edward Tuite Dalton says –*“All the authorities agree in considering the Mech and Kachari as the same people.”* (Dalton, 2016:88)

As the Bodos of North Bengal, especially in the districts of Jalpaiguri, Alipur Duar, Darjeeling and Cooch Behar of North Bengal are well known as Mech and the Government record of West Bengal also identified them as Mech, so, in this study the term ‘**Mech dialect**’ is used to denote the language variation of Bodo found in North

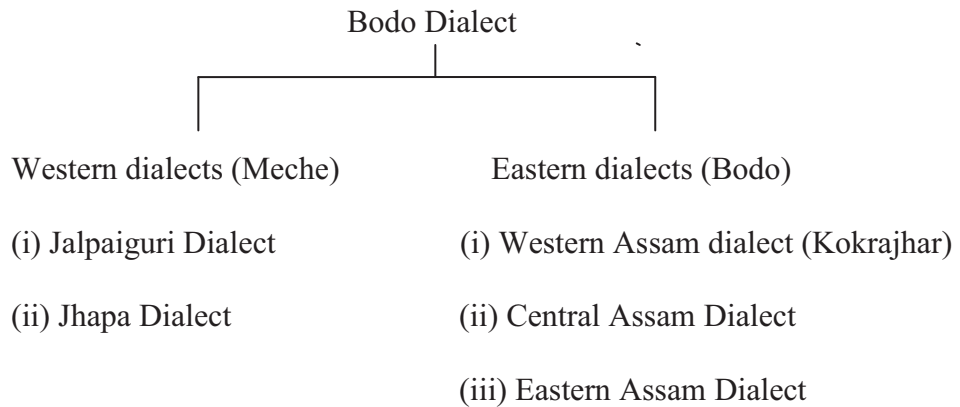
Bengal area of the state of West Bengal. West Bengal is one of the states of India which is bounded by three countries namely, Nepal in the North-West, Bhutan in the North and Bangladesh towards the South. Inside the country of India, West Bengal is bordered by Assam in the East, Odisha in the South-West, Bihar and Jharkhand in the West.

### **1.1 Classification of Bodo Dialect**

Language may vary from one region to another. The variety of a language according to the speaker is known as dialect. This variation may be in the linguistic level of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and lexis. Bodo language has many dialect areas that are extended from North-East India to the Jhapa district of Nepal. Many scholars have classified Bodos Dialect in different ways. Promod Chandra Bhattacharya, in his doctoral thesis, '*A Descriptive Analysis of the Boro language*' says that there are at least four dialect areas of the Boro language of Assam. These are -

- (i) North-West Dialect area  
(Northern regions of Goalpara and Kamrup district)
- (ii) South-West dialect area  
(South Goalpara and Garo Hills Districts and a few places of South Kamrup)
- (iii) North-Central Assam dialect area  
(Darrang, Lakhimpur and a few places of NEFA) and
- (iv) Southern Assam dialect area  
(Nowgaon, North Cachar, Mikir Hills and adjacent areas).

Kazuyuki Kiryu, in his project report '*An Outline of the Mech Language – grammar, text and glossary*' (2005-2007) has classified Bodo dialect as follows-



Based on different regions of the concentration of the Bodo speakers, Dr. Swarna Prabha Chainary in her doctoral thesis titled '*Boro and Garo: A Comparative Linguistic Analysis*' (2005) has classified Bodo dialect into three parts viz. (i) Western Boro Dialect (Dhubri, Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon) (ii) Eastern Boro Dialect (Northern areas of Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup and northern areas of Darrang) and (iii) Southern Boro Dialect (Southern area of undivided Goalpara, a few places around Boko-Chaygaon area of south Kamrup district).

Dr. Phukan Ch. Basumatary in his book '*An Introduction to the Boro Language*' (2005) has also classified Bodo dialect into three types. These are -

- (i) The Western Boro Dialect (WBD)
- (ii) The Eastern Boro Dialect (EBD)
- (iii) The Southern Boro Dialect (SBD)

According to him, WBD includes the districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang and Dhubri; EBD includes the districts of Baga, Odalguri and Kamrup (Northern part of the Brahmaputra valley) and SBD comprises the districts of Goalpara (partially from Krishnai-Agia to Dudhnoi Sub-Division) and particularly partial part of the Kamrup district (from Boko-Chaygaon to Rani Area). In this book, he mentioned that the variations of these dialects are found in the level of phonology, lexis and partially in morphology.

Dr. Birhash Giri Basumatary in his doctoral thesis titled '*Boro dialects of Brahmaputra valley: A linguistic study*' (2006) also has classified Bodo dialect into three parts. These are -

- (i) Western Boro Dialect (Sunabari)
- (ii) Southern Boro Dialect (Duikhuṅ K<sup>h</sup>ulari) and
- (iii) Eastern Boro Dialect (Sanzari)

As per classification by Birhash Giri Basumatary, WBD also known as Sunabari comprises the districts of Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Bongaigaon and Chirang. SBD, which is well known as Duikhuṅ K<sup>h</sup>ulari comprises of the district of Goalpara and some parts of Kamrup district and adjacent areas of Garo Hills, a district of Meghalaya. On the other hand, EBD or Sanzari comprises the districts of Barpeta, Baga, Darrang, Odalguri, Kamrup, Morigaon, Nowgong, Lakhimpur, Golaghat and Sibsagar.

Though many scholars have classified the Dialect of Bodo language in different ways, yet the classification of Bodo dialect is not satisfactory. Many scholars have classified the Bodo dialect depending on the Bodo speakers of Assam only. However, without including the Bodo dialect of North Bengal, which is well known as Mech dialect, the classification of Bodo dialect is incomplete. So in the present study, Mech dialect of North Bengal is considered as one of the regional dialect of western Bodo dialect. It is also worth mentioning here that the Bodo speakers of Bengtol area of Chirang district of Assam has also close affinity with the Mech dialect of North Bengal.

## **1.2 Origin of the term 'MECH'**

It is very difficult to find out the origin of the term 'Mech'. Many scholars have many opinions on the origin of the term '*Mech*'. A section of scholars inform us that the word is derived from the Sanskrit word '*Mlechha*' which means 'barbarian or unclean'.

On the other hand, the other section of researchers informs us that the community was named from the river '**Mechi**', which is flowing through Nepal and India border.

Rev. S. Endle explained that the term '**Mech**' is derived from the corruption of Sanskrit word '**Mleccha**' which means outcaste. Likewise he mentioned-"**the name (Mech) is almost a corruption of Sanskrit word 'Mleccha', i.e. an outcaste from the Brahmin point of view,...**" (Endle, 1997: xvi) G.A. Grierson also mentioned that the term '**Mech**' as a corruption of Sanskrit word '**Mlechha**'. According to him-"**the Bara folk who live to the west of the Kamrup district are called Mech by their Hindu neighbors. This word is probably a corruption of the Sanskrit 'Mlechha', which corresponds to the original meaning of our word 'Welsh,' i.e. foreigner, stranger.**" (Grierson, 1903:1)

According to C.C.Sanyal, the term '**Mech**' is originated from the name of Mechi River, because the settlements of the Meches are found around the river valley from very ancient times. Thus Sanyal says- "**Meches popularly called Mechia that is inhabitants of the banks of the river Mechi, as the inhabitants of Bhot are called Bhotia.**" (Sanyal, 1973: 22) In this regard, Dr. Kameswar Brahma also believed that the term '**Mech**' or '**Meche**' originated from the river Mechi. He remarks-"**It is believed that the Bodo-Kacharis living by the bank of the river 'Michi' flowing through Nepal, call themselves 'Mech' or 'Meche'. So, it may be possible that the word 'Mech' or 'Meche' originated from the river 'Michi.'**"(Brahma, 2008: iii) Observing opinions of scholars and interviewing with native speakers of Mech, it is clear that the term '**Mech**' is not derived from the Sanskrit word '**Mlechha**' which means 'barbarian or unclean'. In this aspect, only British Missionaries tried to comment. It is originated from the name of Mechi River where they settled around the valley both in India and Nepal from the remote past.

### 1.3 Review of Literature

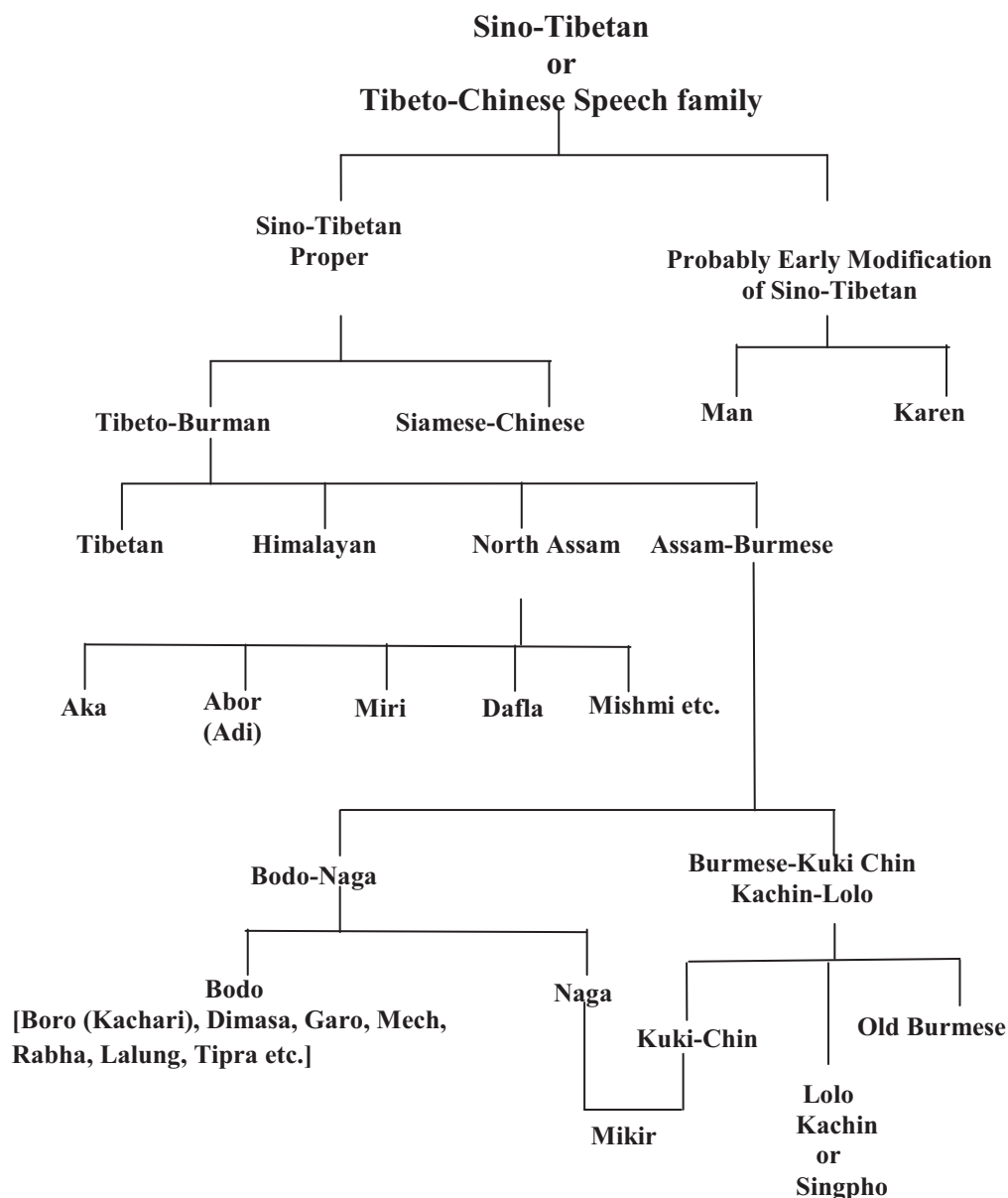
The Christian Missionaries first did the linguistic study on Mech dialect spoken in North Bengal. In this context, the '**Journal of The Asiatic Society**' no. 92 August, 1839 is mentionable. In this journal, A. Campbell wrote a '*note on the Mechis, together with small vocabulary of the language*' to the H. T. Prinsep, Esq, the then Secretary of the Government of India, giving an introduction about the Mech culture and language. In this note, he gave a long word list of Mech dialect.

Brian Houghton Hodgson has given a description on Meches in his book, '*Miscellaneous essays related to Indian subject, vol- I*'. In the chapter- '*EASSY THE FIRST on the KOCCH, BODO AND DHIMAL TRIBES*', he gives an image on the Mech vocabulary, grammar, location, numbers, creeds, customs and physical and moral characteristics of the peoples. He is the first scholar to employ the term 'Bodo' in 1847. He remarks that '*Mech*' is a name imposed by strangers. In this book, he also gave a comparison between Mech dialect of North Bengal and the languages of Bodo group.

*'LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF INDIA'(1903), Vol-III and Part-II* of G.A. Grierson noticed that, "*The head-quarters of the Bara language are now the three central districts of the Assam Valley, viz, Darrang, Nowgong and Kamrup, but it extends westwards through Goalpara, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar, in a slightly different form, under the name of Mech, pronounced Mes. The Meches deny all connections with the Bodos, but there is little doubt that the tribes are identical. At any rate their language is one and the same, differing only in a few dialectic peculiarities.*"(Grierson, 1903:5)

*'The Meches and the Totos: Two Himalayan tribes of North Bengal'* of Charu Chandra Sanyal is an important book that describes the origin, migration, language and culture of the Meches. In this book, he highlighted some of the linguistic aspects and provided a list of glossary on Mech dialect. According to him-*"the Bodos, who migrated into India through Patkai Hills between India and Burma and gradually spread themselves into the whole of modern Assam, North Bengal and parts of East Bengal....It, is probable that they marched towards three directions. One part went south up to Kachar and were called Kacharis. The second part went along the river Brahmaputra and established themselves in the whole of modern Assam up to Goalpara and parts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch-Bihar under the name Bodo or Bara. They were further subdivided into four classes, namely, Mech, Koch, Rabha, and Garo. The Meches went towards the west along the foot of the Himalayas up to the river Mechi 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 Jaipauri. Again, they marched eastwards, crossed the Testa and spread themselves in the Duars, Jaipauri. They gradually moved further east, crossed the Sonkosh and went towards Goalparain Assam. (Sanyal, 1973:1)*

*'Kirata Jana Kṛti'* (1951), of Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee describes that the place of Mech or Bodo language is classed under Tibeto-Burman sub-group of Assam-Burmese of Bodo-Naga speech group. Following chart shows the place of Bodo language in Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan language family.



**Fig. 1: Sino-Tibetan language chart**

***‘BORO DIALECTS OF BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY: A LINGUISTIC STUDY’***, (2006) a doctoral thesis of Birhash Giri Basumatary also gives an information about the Boro dialects of Assam as well as Mech dialect spoken in North Bengal area. In his thesis, he included the language variation of Bodo found in North Bengal and Nepal that is termed by him as *‘Mesa’* dialect in appendix-1. This study gives information about the Mech dialect. In this, he mentioned about six vowel phoneme viz.



/ i, e, a, o, u, u /, which occur in initial, medial and final position of word except unrounded vowel phoneme / u / . He also mentioned about sixteen consonant phonemes. These are - / b, p<sup>h</sup>, d, t<sup>h</sup>, g, k<sup>h</sup>, s, z, h, m, n, ŋ, l, r, w, j / . According to him, all these phonemes can occur in initial, medial and final position of word except / ŋ /, / t<sup>h</sup> / and / h / . He highlighted many vowel and consonant variation between Mesa dialect and Western Bodo Dialect. Following are a few examples which are found in appendix-1 of thesis.

**Vowel variation:**

<i><b>WBD</b></i>	<i><b>MD</b></i>	<i><b>Meaning</b></i>
i > a : dubri	duba	a kind of grass
u > i : sunab	sinab	west
e > i : embu	imbu	frog

**Consonant variation:**

<i><b>WBD</b></i>	<i><b>MD</b></i>	<i><b>Meaning</b></i>
p <sup>h</sup> > b : p <sup>h</sup> anlu	banlu	chilli
b > g : burza	gurza	much
g > b : gosla	busla	shirt
m > l : muuk <sup>h</sup> una	luuk <sup>h</sup> una	shrub

He also showed a few lexical variations found between Mesa dialect of North Bengal and Western Boro Dialect of Assam. A few examples are given below-

<i><b>WBD</b></i>	<i><b>MD</b></i>	<i><b>Meaning</b></i>
ɔp <sup>h</sup> ri	k <sup>h</sup> ud	rice malt
sip <sup>h</sup> uŋ	t <sup>h</sup> ip <sup>h</sup> uŋ	flute
zuk <sup>h</sup> am	dumba	maize
ɔza	rɔza	medicine man

Kazuyuki Kiryu, a scholar of Japan also studied on Mech dialect of Nepal. His *‘An Outline of the Mech Language –grammar, text and glossary’* is a result of project report carried out during 2005-2007 on the Meches found in Nepal. His report tried to study linguistic aspects like phonology and morphology. He also highlighted a list of vocabulary and a text. In his project report he mentioned that Meche has very much affinity to the varieties spoken in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri Districts of North Bengal than to the Bodo speakers found in Assam. He classified Bodo dialect into two, Western Dialects (Meche) and Eastern Dialects. Western Dialect comprises Jalpaiguri Dialect and Jhapa Dialect. On the contrary, Eastern Dialects comprises Western Assam Dialect (Kokrajhar), Central Assam Dialect and Eastern Assam Dialect.

*‘History & Culture of the Bodos’* of Satyendra Nath Mondal also gives brief information about the Bodos of Assam and Meches of North Bengal. In his book, he says that the Meches of North Bengal are also known as *‘Vwrđhwnary’*. On the origin of the term *‘Vwrđhwnary’* he commented that- *“In the ancient times North Bengal was known as Pundravardhan. Accordingly, the Bodos living in North Bengal are called ‘Vwrđhwnary’ (i.e. Vardhan+ary) which means the people living in Pundravardhan...”*(Mondal, 2011:213) He highlighted some differences found between Mech dialect and Bodo language of Assam. He used the term *‘Sanjary’* to denote the Bodo language of Assam and *‘Vwrđhwn’* for the Mech dialect. Example-

<i>Sanjary</i>	<i>Vwrđhwn</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
jignat	k <sup>h</sup> ak <sup>h</sup> lɔu	pumpkin
panthaɔ imbu	lambehara	tomato
bwiaw	hɔ-bɔu	over there
k <sup>h</sup> amani mawdwng	haba mawdwng	working
juk <sup>h</sup> am	dumba	maize

mwdwmp <sup>h</sup> ul	t <sup>h</sup> umul	papaya
gəbər <sup>h</sup> k <sup>h</sup> i	mwsəuk <sup>h</sup> i	cowdung
p <sup>h</sup> anlu	banjut	chilli
lau	laət <sup>h</sup> ai	bottle-gourd

He also describes an old folklore of ancient tribes of Nepal, Sikkim, and its adjacent areas. Folklore describes that *“a prominent Bodo chief had five sons named Rai, Limbu, Meche (Mech), Koche (Koch) and Lepche (Lapcha). The region where Meche and his decendents lived naturally came to be named after him and the river flowing through these parts was similarly named as the Mechi River.”* (Mondal, 2011:168)

*‘Mech-Nepali-English Dictionary’* is a dictionary jointly written by Santa Lal Meche and Kazuyuki Kiryu in 2012. This dictionary is based mainly on the Meches of the Nepal. Perhaps, it is the first dictionary written on the dialect spoken by Meche people of Nepal. Their work has given a value addition to the Mech dialect.

*‘Tribes of Assam Part-III’* by B.N. Bordoloi describes-*“The Meches like the other Bodo groups are Indo-Mongoloids and they are one of the branches of the Kacharis. In course of their migration along with others Bodo-Kacharis following the river course of the Brahmaputra they might have settled in the lower Kamrup region (present Goalpara district) first. Some of them still went westward and entered into Jalpaiguri and the Terai area of the Sub-Himalayan region and settled there.”* (Bordoloi, 1991: 82)

Raj Mahan Nath in his book *‘Background of Assamese Culture’* commented that-*“The Bodos are a race of the Mongolian people who are described to be the inhabitants of a country north of the Himalayas and West of China. This land is known as Bod. The word bod is supposed to mean a homeland. It is also said that*

*there were many parts of the country known as Hor Bod, Kur Bod, etc. The inhabitants of various parts of Bod (Tibet) country were known as Boddo Fichha or Bodo-cha (Ficha-cha, children) or the children of the Bod country, and were later known simply as the Boddo-Bodo - Boro.” (Nath, 1978:15)*

S.L.Baruah in his book ‘*A Comprehensive History of Assam*’ also mentioned that the original homeland of the Mongoloid people was the Yangtze-Kiang and the Hoang-ho rivers of China. According to him-“*the original home of these Mongoloid people was the upper courses of the Yangtse-Kiang and the Hoang-ho in the north-west China.*”(Baruah, 2003:66) About their migration he also mentioned- “*Probably from 2000 B.C. onwards, swarms of people from this area began to emigrate towards Assam and Burma hills and the adjoining sub-mountain area, and later on into the plains and river-valleys of these two countries. They entered Assam following the courses of the Brahmaputra, Chindwin, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong and Menam and the mountain passes of Assam and Burma through the north-east and the south-east whereas another wave followed the courses of the Teesta Dharla and Sonkosh to North Bengal. Some of them travelled to Nepal and Tibet, some occupied the foot of the Himalayas from Sadiya to the Punjab in the west and rest occupied the hills of Assam and gradually spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, driving the speakers of the Mon- Khmer speech in different directions.*” (Baruah, 2003:66-67)

‘The Kacharis’ of Rev.S.Endle also mentioned that “*they approximate very closely to the Mongolian type; and this whole seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race.*” (Endle, 1997: XVI)

#### **1.4 A brief note on Mech Culture**

The Meches of North Bengal have a rich cultural tradition. They are maintaining their cultural traits from the very beginning. ‘*Bathwu*’ is the traditional religion of the

Meches. They worship it as supreme God. They plant '*Sijwu*' tree as a representative of Bathwu. The word '*Bathwu*' has a deep philosophy. '*Ba*' means '*five*', '*thwu*' means '*deep*'. That means the word '*Bathwu*' is a compound of five spiritual essential elements. In the name of worship they sacrifice chickens, pigeons, ducks etc. They also observe '*Kherai*' and '*Gram Phuja*' for the peace of the village. These rituals are directly connected with Bathwu religion. Apart from Bathwu religion, the Meches also follow Rupa-Moni Bathwu, Ulta-Pani and at presently many are following Christianity.

The Meches have no class or caste system. They are patriarchal. The Meches are presently monogamous though previously polygamy was practiced. The Meches have six types of marriage system. These are –

1. Swngnan lainai haba (arrange marriage)
2. Bwnan lanai haba (to marry by force)
3. Khadsønnai haba
4. Lanan Kharnai haba
5. Gabai thanai or Gwrzia lakhinai haba and
6. Dangua habnai haba.

Generally, Meches marry within their community. In recent times, the followers of Christianity marry in accordance to Christian marriage system. There is also a divorce system which is however rare in their society. During divorce, leaf of betel takes a significant role. Both husband and wife tear a betel leaf into half in the presence of public and the village headman (makhal). This divorce system is called by Mech as '*Phathwilai Bisinai*'. Adoption is common among Meches. Generally, a childless couple adopts an orphan child.

The Meches are chiefly dependent on agriculture. They cultivate different types of paddy. Rice is their main food. They consume pork, chicken, fish etc. As curry, they

collect different types of vegetables from the forest as well as home. 'Zwu' (rice beer) has a high status in Mech society. They use it during marriage and religion purposes. Apart from these, Mech cultivators use it to entertain and to strengthen their health. At present, the Mech women prepare and sell rice-beer to make their economic condition sound.

The Meches of North Bengal has different types of clan. These are- Samphramari, Narzinari, Suba, Isari, Mochary, Basumata, Saibo, Karzi, Mondal, Goyari, Dwimary etc.

The Meches have an amusing tradition of dance and music. Some of the main dances are the Kherai, Bagurumba, Baisagu, Dhal Thungri Sibnai etc. They use Serja, Gongna, Siphung, Kham, Jotha, Japhkhring as traditional musical instruments.

The Meches have their own traditional dress. Dokhna , phasra , endi hi, aronai, gamsa are main dresses. The Mech women weave these dresses at home. However, in present times, many have opted for dresses other than traditional ones, e.g. saree, salwar kameez etc. Traditionally they wore Chandrahar, mut<sup>h</sup>a asan, nak-phul etc. In present time, only the aged people tend to stick to the traditional ornaments whereas the younger generation are more inclined to modern jewellery.

### **1.5 Aims and Objectives of the study**

The present research work is a linguistic study on Mech dialect, one of the Bodo dialects spoken in some areas of Alipur Duar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Cooch Behar districts of North Bengal area of West Bengal state of India. The core aims and objectives of this research is the establishment of Mech as a Bodo dialect. It is also an attempt to highlight and document different aspects of linguistic levels like phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary of the dialect, which has not been thoroughly studied so far. It is seen that native speakers do not value the language much and as a

result their linguistic elements are missing day by day due to the influence of other language and globalization. This study will give an information about the Mech dialect as well as encourage the native speakers, future researchers and the common peoples to give a record thought towards the revival of this dialect along with their social and cultural life. The study also considered the retention of characteristics of the Tibeto-Burman language group in the dialect despite their habitation among the Bengali speakers.

### **1.6 Importance of the study**

The study on the Mech dialect has high social as well as academic value. The study aims to record the linguistic elements which are in the way of extinction due to the influence of other languages. It is hoped that this study will show a new dimension to the Mech speakers in particular and other researchers or new generations in general to preserve and respect this small studied dialect of the Bodo language spoken in West Bengal. In this research, a comparison has also been made in a chapter on the level of lexis between Mech dialect and standard form of Bodo language spoken in Assam.

### **1.7 Area of the study**

The area of the study is on Mech dialect, one of the Bodo dialects spoken in Alipur Duar, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Darjeeling districts of North Bengal. They are maintaining their local language and culture in these areas from the ancestral times. But till date no serious research work has been done on this dialect. So, this research work is a study on the different level of linguistics i.e. structure of phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary of Mech dialect.

### **1.8 Methodology**

The proposed study is mainly based on Primary data i.e. field study. The primary data were mostly collected from various places of Alipur Duar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling

and Cooch Behar districts of West Bengal within the research period from 2011 to 2016. In data collection, a section of informants belonging to the native speakers of Mech dialect from diverse areas have been selected from both sex, different age groups and occupations. Like other social science research, during field study, interview and observation method was followed to gather the linguistic data from the native speakers. Significant equipments like sound recorder and camera were also used during field work to determine properly the articulation of phonetic data and to take shot of necessary things respectively. Apart from primary data, a few data has also been collected from the secondary source. In this aspect different books, periodicals, journals, articles written on Mech dialect and standard form of Bodo language of Assam have been collected to fulfil the research work. Different libraries like Krishna Kanta Handique Library, Gauhati University and North Bengal University library were also visited during this research tenure.