



INDIGENOUS RELIGION AND CULTURE OF THE THENGAL KACHARI TRIBE: A STUDY BASED ON JORHAT DISTRICT OF ASSAM

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the indigenous religion and culture of the Thengal Kachari tribe of Assam. The Thengal Kachari tribe is an indigenous and major type of ethnic group of Assam. The tribe lives basically in upper Assam. The traditional ritual and practices of the Thengal Kachari include 'Deoban' or 'Habi puja', Batbon Puja and so on. The Thengal Kachari tribe believes in Hinduism. They celebrate the festival called 'Tora Chira'. The Thengal Kacharis are belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid race with mythical ancestry. They are a clan of the Bodo- Kachari ethnic group. They are one of the ancient inhabitants of Assam and have a rich cultural heritage. They have adopted other cultures and as a result, they even lost their dialect and adopted Assamese as their language. But at the same time, the community is trying to maintain its traditional customs. This paper tries to reflect the traditional religion and culture of the Thengal Kacharis and their changes in the Jorhat district of Assam. The study is mainly conducted in the area of Borholla, Jorhat district of Assam. In this study, we have chosen two villages, namely- Balijan2no block gaon and Thengal Kacharigaon. Two village headmen, 40 educated persons (twenty each) from two villages, and a few (10) prominent leaders of the tribe are chosen as the respondent of the study by using the purposive sampling method. For the collection of the data, we have used both primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Thengal Kachari Tribe, ToraChira, Bodo-Kachari, Mythical Ancestry, Race, Indo-Mongoloid.

¹Borholla, Jorhat, Assam

INTRODUCTION:

The Thengal Kachari community is considered as one of the aboriginal tribes of Assam. They come under the great Bodo group of the Indo-Mongoloid family with mythical ancestry and have rich cultural history. The culture of Thengal Kachari tribe is mostly based on Agriculture. Agriculture is the primary source of living of the large majority of the Thengal Kachari community, particularly in the rural areas. Earlier, the culture of the community was very rich. Lack of preservation, due to assimilation and also impact of Globalization and Modernization the community had lost its rich cultural traditions. But Now-a-days they are also concern about maintaining a distinct culture and tradition. They also revive some old festivals and tradition which they had left in the past. The community revived a festival known as *Tora-Chira Bihu* or *Bali Husari* ('A festival of tearing a wild Cardamom leaves for making ropes for the cows'). Large section of the Thengal Kacharis is the followers of the Neo-Vaishnavism from the time of Basudev Gosain and is the disciples of the Auniatri Satra (a neo-Vaishnavite religious institution). Another section of the Thengal Kacharis is the followers of the Ek- Saran Nam Dharma under the Srimanta Sankardev Sangha (a socio, religious and cultural organisation). They are also known as the Namkirtania or Haridhanias. The devotees are of the two types: *Bhajanias* and *Saranias*. In Titabar sub division of Jorhat district the some of the Thengal Kachari people follow the principles of Ek Saran Bhagawati Samaj (a socio religious organisation).

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

The main objectives are mentioned as follows

1. To understand the Indigenous Religion and Culture of the Thengal Kachari tribe of Assam.
2. To highlight the changes of Indigenous religion and culture of the Thengal Kachari tribe of Assam.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The study is conducted in the Jorhat district of Assam. The villages chosen for the study are Borholla, Thengal Kachari gaon and Balijan 2no. Block gaon. The study mostly based on both

primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary sources data include field investigations, interviews of key resource persons etc. The secondary sources include books, journal, web materials, government official records like census reports etc.

DETAILS ABOUT THE TRIBE:

The *Kacharis* are represented by different terms in different places like the Bodo in The central part, the Mech in the western part, the Sonowal and Thengal in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. As the community does not have its own language, oral literature is the greatest source for them. According to Borah (2000), due to the wearing of the Pantaloon, they were called as *Thengal* and with the passage of time ,they came to be known as the *Thengal* Community. In the past the Thengals were known for their valour and fighting skill as well as for loyalty to the Ahom administration. The author also in his masterpiece “*Asom Thengal Kachari Itibitra*” has reflected the socio-cultural life of Thengal Kacharis. Sengupta(2003), in his work stated that although, they are a Scheduled tribe of Assam, nevertheless they have not been shown separate in the list of Scheduled tribe of Assam. At present they are mainly inhabit in the district of Jorhat, Golaghat, KarbiAnglong, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Sonitpur district of Assam. As per the official information of the ThengalKachari Autonomous Council, there are altogether 264 villages of *Thengal Kachari* people in the North and South Bank of the river Brahmaputra in Upper Assam. These includes 120 numbers of villages in Jorhat district, 76 numbers of villages in Golaghat district, 42 numbers of villages in Lakhimpur, 11 numbers of villages in Dhemaji, 9 numbers of villages in Dibrugarh, 5 numbers of villages in KarbiAnglong and a village in Sonitpur district of Assam.

Thengal Kacharis have 21 numbers of exogamous clans each of which was formed according to various occupations. They are Hajowal, Manikial , Muktal or Mukutial, Durrungial, Dalangiyal, Sakuriyal, Haigiyal or Sargiyal, xukriyal, Hogral, Biyagharal, Kumral or Kumarial, Dekral or Dhekiyal, Nangal, Lathiyal, Neguriyal, Dinkgiyal, Dhuliyal, Formal, Ejmal and Mekheliyal.

The Thengal Kacharis are Patriarchal community. In general, father is the head of the family. All the major decisions of the family is being taken by the eldest member of the family. In running the house, both the husband and wife has the equal responsibility. There is however a

clear division of work among the male and female members. Although the society is a male dominated one. Both the joint and single family system is prevalent among them.

Marriage in the Thengal Kachari community involves Vedic rites and rituals. There are basically three types of marriage 1. Bor biya, 2. Abioi Biya or Juron Diya Biya, and 3. Poluai ana Biya.

Religious Ceremonies:

***Pani Toola Sobah* (water bringing ceremony):**

Before the beginning of the sowing season of the principal paddy the *Thengal Kachari* people perform this annual ritual in the *Namghar* (religious institution) premise in the month of *Jeth* (English equivalent to May-june). There is no fixed date for this ceremony and the date is chosen by a discussion of the village headman. Generally the duration of the function is three to five days and they called it as '*Tini Pani Toola*' (Three times water bringing) or '*Pach Pani Toola*' (five times water bringing) according to its duration.

***Bor Sobah*:**

The *Thengal Kachari* celebrate '*Bor Sobah*' just after one day's interval from '*Pani Toola Sobah*'. The day is a rest day for the villagers. It is an overnight celebration with '*Nam-Kirton*' '*Gayan Bayan*' and *Bhaona* (Vaishnavite dance- drama) performances.

***Gopini Sobah* (worship of Mother Goddess):**

In every *Thengal Kachari* village, '*Gopini Sobah*' is arranged once in a year at the village *Namghar*. There also no fixed date for this ceremony. In the month of April to May just after observing *Bohagbihu* and just before cultivation starts. Especially the females of the village take part in this worship. The deity of the ritual is *Ai*, the Mother Goddess. In their belief, '*Ai*' is the '*Pox Goddess*', and this ritual is performed to appease the Goddess, so that the disease does not harm their life, which was very dangerous in the early days, when vaccination was not invented. The ceremony is observed for Two to Five days.

Bat-Bon puja:

One of the traditional religious practices of the *Thengal Kacharis* is *Batbonpuja*. It is a community practice. It is celebrated in the month of *Jeth* after the *BohagBihu*. This ritual is performed under a tree in the eastern direction of the village on a Sunday. In this '*puja*' four pairs of *Cocks* (red colour) are needed to be placed in the four corners, east, west, north and south of the altar. Another pair of cock and a duck is needed for the act of propitiating. Besides these, rice beer is essential. They also offer '*Mah Prasad*', *banana*, *coconut*, *betel nut* and *leaf* in plantain leaf in the altar and an earthen lamp is kindled by mustard oil. They kill the sacrificed birds by hitting with a stick and do not use '*dao*' or other weapon for that purpose. The duck is offered to the Goddess of the Road and the pair of cocks that sacrificed in the altar is meant for the God of the place. Among the offering '*Bhog*' is also included. At the end of the '*puja*', they all take '*Bhog*', *Mah-Prasad*, cooked meat and then go home.

Deoban puja or Habi Puja:

Traditional ritual practices of the *thengal kacharis* *Deoban puja*. During the month of April, before the *BohagBihu*, the tribe yearly performed to placate the God of the Jungle, near where they live.

Torachira festival:

Thengal Kachari tribe celebrate the festival called '*Torachira*'. Every year Assamese month *Chot* Second week of Wednesday they celebrate this festival. *Tora Chira bihu* is a pre-*Bohagbihu* celebration. The main function of this *Tora Chira* in earlier time people went into the Jungle for collecting *Tora trees* and in the Jungle they hunt animals like deer, pig etc, to eat their meat in the *Tora Chira* festival. The collected *Tora trees* people *tear* it and dried in the warm Sunshine to make as rope. *Tora chira* means the tearing of *Tora trees*, in Assamese the word '*Tear*' is called as *Chira*. So, the festival name is *Tora Chira*. After collection of *Tora Trees* people perform *Tora Chira* dance and singing, a kind of dance holding the *Tora trees* on their

shoulder. As now there ban of hunting animals in Jungle, so people eat rearing *pork, chicken, silk worm* and traditional *rice-bear* called '*Heraka*' or '*Hajpani*' as part of the festival.

SuwaUtuwa festival:

There is no definite date for this festival. This festival celebrate the month of Fagun(February-March). It is celebrated of the village *Namghar*. The offerings include '*Mah-prassad*', *betel nut, leaf, white flower, sindur, a white goat, a white pigeon and a white duck* so on.

Family religious practices:

Connection with health:

Besides the community worship, every household of the community observe some traditional ritual throughout the year. The purpose of the rituals are mostly connected with their health and cultivation.

Ai Sobah or Sokam:

Every household of the community perform this ritual annually to appease the Goddess *Ai*(the pox Goddess). Through the ritual is performed in the month of *Bohag*(April-May), if somebody is affected by pox, then the respective families perform the worship to pacify the deity for quick recovery of the ailing person. The worship is chiefly conducted by female devotees and the service is very much identical with the '*Ai Sobah*'.

UparSokam or ApeswariSobah

This is also a family practice and chiefly conducted by female devotes. *ApeswariSobah* is another form of 'puja' performed by womenfolk for relief from some particular diseases. If a child fall frequently ill, a girl do not attain puberty at the proper age, this ritual is performed, as it is thought that such problems occur due to the influence of *Apeswari* (the Fairy Goddess).

Chang Dangaria Puja:

This is a worship of *BurhaDangariya*, who they believe is the creator, protector and the destructor as well. It is a secret worship and performed only in the presence of a few aged males secretly in the Jungle. Not a single word about this ceremony is spelt in front of children and pregnant women. If a person's health deteriorates for being suffering in prolonged illness, then the head of the family, promising a worship of *BurhaDangariya*, offers and wrap up a pair of betel nut and some rice in a plantain leaf and keep safe and secure in the roof of the hearth praying for good health of the ailing person. They call this as 'Agban' and it is done in secret.

AyushToolaSobah(worship praying for long life):

If a child falls into pond, tank or river, they take this as the evil influence of the God of water(*Jaldevota*). So to bring back the child's longevity they perform a ritual which is known as *AyushToolaSobah*. It is a still living ceremony among this community. This worship is conducted by three to seven women. The place of the ritual is the pond, tank or river, whatever the accident occurred. The things required for the ritual are, some raw cotton threads, a pair of betel nut and leaf, a pair of "Jakoi-Khaloi" (*Jakoi* is a fishing implement and *Khaloi* is a storing implement, both made of Bamboo), four small posts, a duck egg, plantain leaf and 'thuriaTamol' (piece of betel nut and leaf).

Family Religious Ceremonies connected with Cultivation:

Agriculture is the mainstay of the people. There are a great number of rites and rituals, connected with agriculture, that the community observe all through the year, both in group and family circle. At present, majority of such rituals are performed in family circle. Although many of them have thrown away their old customs as an influence of *Vaishnavism*, yet few rituals persist in their society.

Bhang Diya Or KaniDiya(Worship of God Siva):

Before the cultivation starts, they conduct a ritual called *Bhang Diya Or KaniDiya*. This is performed in the cows and the worship is dedicated to Siva and his consort Ai (the mother

Goddess). They believe that by propitiating Siva, their pets (especially cow and Bullocks) would be free from any kind of disease or peril throughout the year. So to pacify Siva and Ai they offer, 'Mah -Prasad', Banana, 'paramanna' (cooked rice with milk and sugar). There is the first rice growing ceremony (*Na gojloa*), first harvesting ceremony (*Lakhimiona*), last harvesting ceremony (*Lakhimichinga*) etc. Which too are performed with a profound religious passion. They also hold *Lakhimi Sobah* and *Lakhimi Diya* in the month of 'Ahin-Kati' (September to November).

CHANGES

In this chapter an attempt has been made to elaborate that how changes take place in Indigenous religion and culture of the *Thengal Kachari* community of *Balijan 2no block* and *Thengal Kachari gaon, Borholla*, Jorhat District.

While started data collection respondents of the study said that at earlier time maximum people of the village celebrated various type of worship and ceremony like *panitoolasobah* (water bringing ceremony), *Borsobah*, *Batbon puja*, *Deoban puja*, *suwautuwautsav* (Festival of immersion of the impurities into river) are distinct ceremonies of the community. And other ceremony mostly related to the folk belief and customs. Some of them are- *Ai Sobah*, *Apesari Sobah*, *Lakhimi Sobah*, *Gopni Sobah*, *pirdiya*, *Gohalidiya*, ,numerios ceremonies related to worship of lord Shiva etc. They also believe in many ghosts and spirits. There are many ceremonies associated with it. Some are *Jakh-Jakhinipuja*, *Ga-Dangariya puja*, *Bhitar Sakam*, *Sanigraharsawlkhua*, *Jal Devata puja* etc. Some people said this village *Thengal Kacharis* were traditionally the Worshipers of Lord Shiva. They also use to worship Goddess Durga.

But present time the community has lost many of its customs and traditions. The impact of Modernization, lack of preservation and due to impact of the Great man Sri Sri Shankardeva and Sri Sri Madhabdeva Neo-Vaishnavism religion. The younger generation of the community members are educated and hence it is no longer a primitive community. Due to assimilation, the group has adopted the life and culture of the Assamese people. No doubt, the community has also contributed a lot towards the growth of the greater Assamese society. Due to the influence of the Neo-Vaishnavism preached by the great saint scholar Sri Sri Sankardeva, one can see the

religious prayer hall called *Namghar* in each village of the *Thengal Kacharis* of Assam. This *Namghar* has great role in the social, cultural and religious life of the people of Assam.

Some respondent said that at earlier time maximum people of the village related to agriculture, but present day, they are not only related to agriculture, they also involve in various type of occupations. Their life style also changed. Earlier time women of Thengal Kachari community made their own clothes through hand weaving. But present day they buy clothes from the market.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH:

- Maximum of Thengal Kachari community people followers of Neo-Vaishnavism religion.
- Due to Assimilation, they had adopted some kind of elements from the neighboring communities. This process is clearly visible among Thengal Kachari people as they have lost their dialect and adopted Assamese as their primary language.
- Maximum of Thengal Kachari community people along with the involved in agriculture and they also involved in various kinds of occupations.
- Each village of the Thengal Kacharis we can see the religious prayer hall called *Namghar* and *Namghar* is the most important religious institution of the Thengal Kachari village. The village council is headed by the village headman.
- The impact of modernization and Globalization the community has lost many of its custom and traditions.

CONCLUSION:

The Thengal Kachari community people followers of Neo-Vaishnavite religion preached by the great saint scholar, Sankardeva of Assam. The Thengal Kachari of Assam is an indigenous community with its rich cultural and historical past. Bihu is the most important festival of the community. Thengal Kachari are very peaceful in nature.

To conclude, it should be noted that Thengal Kachari community of the Balijan 2no block and Thengal Kachari gaon, Borholla, Jorhat live in very simple way. Maximum number of people

Older generation of those villages is illiterate but new generation are concerned about the education. Due to Assimilation and in the process of formation of a greater Assamese society, the group have adopted caste Assamese life and culture. In the recent time, due to deprivation in social, economic, political and other spheres, the group has started their identity movement. The community is trying to maintain its traditional customs.

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