



Changes In The Cultural Practices Of The Thengal Kachari Tribe Of Assam –A Study

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Introduction

Change is inevitable in a society. Change in culture is a universal phenomenon and cultural change occur due to many factors and reasons. Transformation or change is a continuous process and this process differs from society to society. In some society transformation in culture may take place very rapidly and in some it becomes very slow. Thus it may be said that the process of change is not the same everywhere.

Assam , a land of diverse culture and tradition and in this land of diversity various ethnic groups and tribes having distinct culture, customs, dress and way of life live unitedly. Assam has as many as 23 tribes, out of them 11 are hill tribes, and 9 are plain tribes. The prominent among them are Bodos, Mishings, Karbis, Dimasas and Kacharis. Almost all these tribals are standing at uneven levels from one another in terms of educational, social, cultural, economic and political development. Some of them entirely depend on Jhum cultivation while others are better off with some stretch of wetland cultivation. Though some of the plain tribes have become very conscious about their distinct identity and language, it must admit honestly that all of them have been contributing very significantly to enrich the composite Assamese culture, language, literature, arts and nationality. (Medhi et al. 2009,p 10).

The Thengal Kachari tribe is one such tribe in Assam which is a subgroup of the great Kacharis. The Thengal Kachari is one of the plain tribe of Assam of Mongoloid origin belonging to the Tibeto- Burman linguistic family inhabiting in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh. Regarding their origin, settlement and migration the historical writings donot have clear mention about this particular tribe. But the narrations, myths and legends have helped in arriving at some conclusion about this tribe. This aboriginal tribe is very rich in its cultural life. The cultural belief and practices have distinctive traits and this has made them unique in their traditional life. But the original cultural belief and practices are found to have undergone tremendous changes. The customs and traditions which they followed from time immemorial have lost the originality. This paper has made an attempt to deal with changing cultural cultural practices among this plain tribe of Assam.

Objective of the study :

1. To examine the changes in the cultural practices of the Thengal Kachari tribe (with special reference to religious belief, festivals and marriage system.)
2. To examine the present trend of cultural practices
3. To investigate the factors responsible for the changes

Significance of the study :

The Thengal Kachari tribe , an aboriginal tribe of Assam have rich cultural and social life. But the process of assimilation ,the impact of Neo Vaishnavite religious faith and,modernization have made great changes in their folklore and folklife. They have lost their age old customs and traditions and have started adopting the belief and practices like the other caste and communities of the Assamese society. Since they have not been able to continue with their original tradition , a conscious section of the society have realised the fact that they would be losing their identity and face a threat . So they have recently started the process of revivalism .Hence this study is believed to have great significance and importance in having an indepth study about the changing cultural life of the Thengal Kacharis.

Methodology :

The study is based on both primary and secondary source of data. Field work has been done to collect data by both observation and interview method. During the field study, active tradition bearers e, literate people and elderly persons from the Thengal Kachari society were chosen as informants to get the expected result. Secondary source of data such as books, journals, articles, unpublished thesis were referred to get proper help for the study.

Study area:

The present study has been carried out in the Lakhimpur District of Assam where major concentration of the Thengal Kachari population is found. Two villages were selected in the Bihpuria area of Lakhimpur District namely Bagicha Village and No 2 Jakoipelua village.

Discussion :

Changes in religious belief and practices : Religion comprise beliefs and behaviours. Scholars of religion generally address belief system first since they appear to inform pattern of religious behaviours. Religious beliefs tend to be shared by a group, sometimes by very large number of people. Through the centuries people have found way to give their beliefs and permanence. (Barbara 1999, p.312) . Religion is a major concern of man. It is one of the earliest and the deepest interests of human being. Religion is universal , permanent,

pervasive and perennial interests of man. (Rao 1990, p 412).It is a matter of belief. .The Thengal Kacharis have a cultural system of their own. But during the study it has been observed that the tribal group, who were originally animist have been greatly influenced by the Neo-Vaishnavite faith, preached by Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam.Earlier they were great worshippers of Lord Shiva, but after they started taking residue in Vaishnavism they stopped the sacrificial rites and rituals. As Dr Jogeswar Bora has stated : ‘The Thengal Kacharis were originally worshipper of Lord Shiva and goddess Durga. They donot worship any idols of the gods and goddesses. But as a symbol of Lord Shiva a plant known as ‘Hiju’ is planted in the front side of the compound of the Thengal Kachari houses. Moreover they offered prayer in a place called as ‘Sal’ to appease the gods and goddesses and this is conducted by various rites and rituals.’(Bora 1999,p 10).Gradually all these were left behind and they were under the influence of Neo Vaishnavism . Now they practise the rites and rituals according to the norms of the new faith.Sacrificial rites ,which was once their originality is now is not relevant to their society. Instead they go the ‘Naamghar’(a religious institution of the Assamese society) and observe the celebrations and religious rites as set by Vaishnavism. This is a major change in the religious life of the tribe. During the study the informants informed that they donot have any different religious belief and practices and they do whatever the other caste and communities do . This shows that they have entirely lost whatever they had in the past days.

Changes in Festivals and Celebrations :

Most ,if not all, of the societies of the world periodically set aside portions of time for celebration. These are moments of special significance to the group or community. (Smith 1972 ,p 159). The Thengal Kacharis also have set aside some portion of their time for celebrating festivals of their society at different time of the year. ‘Festivals are a part of traditional culture . Their nature is determined by both season and religion. Further , tradition is never static. With the change in lifestyle of the people , customs and beliefs are also tending to get changed.(Goswami 1995,p 2).This tribe is an agrarian tribe like the other tribes of Assam. So celebration of the ‘Bihu’ one of the biggest festival of the Assamese society is also observed by this tribe . They celebrate the three Bihus namely Rongali or Bohaag Bihu, Kati or Kongali bihu and Maah or Bhogali Bihu. Along with the celebration of these they originally had the tradition of celebrating Pre Bihu Celebration known as ‘Tora-Chira’ Bihu as informed by Hemanga Neog. The young boys used to go to the jungle to collect ‘Tora’ (a type of plant) to prepare a rope to tie the cattle on the day of ‘Goru Bihu” (bihu meant for the cattle ,celebrated in Bohaag bihu). This custom of collecting tora and performing bihu by the elderly people and helping in the preparation of the rope is no more practised.There are great changes observed in their celebrations. The Thengal Kacharis were strong believers in supernatural forces and evil spirits and always tried to satisfy these spirits by performing the rituals. But nowadays the celebration of ‘Bon Debota Puja’, Apeswari Sabah, Ayush Tula Sabah , Pani tula Sabah is not practised among them. But recently under the initiative of the

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conscious members they celebrate 'Tora Chira Bihu' publicly in Bihpuria area of Lakhimpur District. In Dhaldhalia village under the initiative of Umakanta Neog festivals like Durga Puja and sacrificial rites are still done there. So preservation of the culture and tradition also have been given importance by the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council and they have started the Thengal Kachari Museum in Titabar of Jorhat District.

Changes in the Marriage System :

The Thengal Kacharis mainly practise three type of marriages. They are Bor Biya, Abiyoi biyars Juron diya biya and Poluai nia biya. But the study has revealed there are major changes in the marriage system. The strict restrictions in marriages within the same clan is no more strictly maintained. The society has become flexible about these matters. The rites and rituals of the marriages are performed according to the Vedic rites. The marriage songs which were sung in the marriages are very rarely found to be sung nowadays. A great change has taken place in the celebration of the marriages. Earlier marriages were celebrated for seven days but nowadays people celebrate for one or two days. The tradition of performing 'Kulaburhi Naach' by an elderly women is rarely practised in the marriages. The whole system of marriage has actually changed nowadays. The traditional culture of the Thengal Kacharis have become almost extinct and this has happened due to assimilation with other races and cultural groups. Another major cause for the change in the cultural system of the tribe is the influence of modern way of life. The tribal group has been influenced by the other cultural system and they gradually adapt themselves to that cultural system. Thus a remarkable change has been observed in the cultural life of the Thengal Kacharis.

Conclusion :

Change is very much necessary for development. Developmental activities in a society lead to the change in that society. With the change of time the traditional lifestyle of the Thengal Kacharis have been transformed. They have started adapting themselves with the changes and have embraced the cultural practices of the greater Assamese society. The superstitious beliefs are now left behind and they have started looking at things from a scientific point of view and has been able to cope themselves with the globalised world of today.

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