

An Ethnographic Profile Of The Thengal Kachari Tribe Of Assam

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Abstract

The Thengal Kachari tribe is a plain tribe of Assam, having rich cultural history. This small tribe is said to be an offshoot of the great Kachari race. BM Das has stated, 'Of the tribes of Assam, the Kacharis are distributed almost all over the state. They have several sub-divisions. One is the Dimasa, who are a hill people and are concentrated in North Cachar Hills. The Sonowals, Thengal and Jharua are met in Upper Assam' (Das 2010). The Kacharis are also known as the Bodo-Kacharis or Bodo-Kacharis in the Brahmaputra valley, particularly of some district like Kamrup, Sonitpur, Mongoldoi, Barpeta and Jalpaiguri of West Bengal. This Bodo people of the eastern part of Assam who settled themselves in the Cachar district specially in North Cachar of Assam call themselves Kacharis (Brahma 1992). The Thengal Kacharis are very close to the Sonowal Kacharis, one of the largest plain tribe of Assam. As the Thengal Kacharis belong to the Mongoloid race like the Sonowal Kacharis their physical feature are close to the appearance of the Mongolian groups as found in the narrations of the historians. The Thengal Kacharis racially belong to the Kachari race, Rev. Sydney Endle states about the Kacharis as- 'They are certainly not a tall or handsome race, and in general appearance bear some resemblance to the Nepali, being as a rule shorter and stouter than the people of North-west India, though well fitted to bear up against physical fatigue and hardship. In face and figure they show a distinct approximation to what is known as the Mongolian type, i.e. they have square set faces, projecting cheek bones, with almond shapes eyes, and scanty beard and moustache, the last mentioned being often wanting altogether' (Endle 1997). Regarding the origin of the tribe there are many myths and legends. There is very

information about the origin and history of the ethnic group in the history books and so scholars have arrived at some conclusions depending upon the mythical narratives.

Introduction:

One of the scholars of the Thengal Kachari tribe, Dr. Jogeswar Borah has stated- 'There were two kingdoms of Kacharis in Upper Assam according to the Deodhai Buranji (a Historical writing) and Kachari Buranji. They were established by the two Kachari group called as Sadiyal Kachari and Herambial Kachari. Manik was the first king of the Sadiyals. Dr. Lila Gogoi says that Manik ruled during the 11th & 12th century. The kingdom of the king Manik had Sadiya in the east, Dikhounukh in the west, in the north there was the South bank of river Dihing upto Kenduguri. According to Benudhar Sharma, the city of Koundilya or Kundil city was called Halali in Kachari language. Manik had no son, so he handed over his kingdom to his son-in-law Mukuta. After that there is no historical evidence as to what happened to the Sadiyal Kacharis and to their kingdom (Borah 1999).

Dr. Jogeswar Borah also writes - 'There is a saying that in the war of 1526 A.D when the Kachari King Khunkhura won the war against the Ahom King Suhungmung Dihingia, two Kachari youth who were brave and expert in magic and bow, named Jangbahadur and Chakradhwaj decided to establish two separate kingdom. They came with some Kachari family and established a Kachari Kingdom with its capital at Kachamari field. Jangbahadur became the first king and then Chakradhwaj. Their soldiers used to wear a trouser called thenga (pantaloon) while they fought. They even wore thenga in the time of peace. This was the reason that the king Jangbahadur and his subjects were called as 'Thengal Kacharis' (Borah 1999).

Another eminent writer Hiteswar Borboruah in his book 'Ahomor Din' writes that some Sonowals used to earn silver in the Dhansiri river and they were called as Thengals. But this is to be noted that the word Sonowal does not mean only the Sonowal Kacharis. He also writes that earlier those who earned gold were known as Soniyathakur and who earned silver was known as Rupialthakurs. The Thengals did the works

of silver and so they are known as 'rupuals' or rupiyathakur (Borboruah 1981).

The myths, legends about the origin of this tribal group has helped the writers and scholars to conclude that the Thengal Kacharis are included as a sub-branch of the great Kachari race. As stated by Laskhshmi Devi "There are no written records of Kachari rule. There are however, several traditions on the accuracy of which it is impossible to rely as history and legends are mixed up in these traditions. According to these traditions, there were two branches of Kacharis, one ruling at Sadiya and the other, the southern branch, who established themselves with capitals at Dimapur, Maibong and Khaspur' (Devi 1968).

Objective of the paper:

The paper has made an attempt to study the ethnographic profile of the Thengal Kachari tribe , a small tribe in Assam.

Methodology:

The present study was conducted in two villages of Lakhimpur District. Both primary and secondary source of data has been used to prepare this paper. Data was collected through observation and interview method. In addition available literature viz. books, journals articles were reviewed as secondary data. The collected data was then analysed and the following discussion has been done.

Ethnographic Profile of the tribe:

Population and settlement: The tribe has been found to have settled in both sides of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam and the major concentration of the population of this tribe have settled themselves in Jorhat, Golaghat and Lakhimpur district of Assam. A few villages of the Thengal Kacharis are also found in Dhemaji, Sibsagar, Sonitpur and Karbi Anglong districts.

The exact population of the Thengal Kacharis is very difficult to be ascertained as they have no separate census till now. As stated 'From independence of India, the community has never been separately enumerated in any of the five census operations (1951, 1961, 1971, 1991 and 2001)

conducted in Assam (Goswami 2007). In the Scheduled Tribe and Caste list in the Assam Gazette on 12th April 1961, there is the government notice which includes a group as Kachari including Sonowal (Sarania, Thengal). The community was getting the benefits of the caste in that name. However from 1976, the group is named as Kachari Sonowal (Borah 2006). Dr. Jogeswar Borah, Chief Advisor of the 'All Assam Thengal Kachari Organisation remarks, 'The present population of the Thengal Kachari is estimated to be 3 lakhs'.

Family Structure and Inheritance: Family plays a major role in the process of socialization among the tribal people. The Thengal Kacharis have a patriarchal society, where the father is considered to be the head of the family. Usually the father is the decision maker in a Thengal Kachari family. The females are given due respect although the final decision is taken by the male member in a Thengal Kachari family.

Nanda Borah states, "Generally the Thengal Kacharis live in a joint family. The father is considered to be the main person of the family. After the father, the eldest son has the position next to him. Husband, wife, father and mother of the husband, the brother and sister of the husband, son and daughter, daughter-in-law, cousins all constitute a big joint family. Husband, wife and their children look like a small family in appearance. Some sons when started to live separately this type of small families are formed. Nowadays instead of the joint family system nuclear family is mostly found. The nuclear family is very common among this tribal group also.

Regarding inheritance of property, the Thengal Kacharis are patrilineal. Usually the son is the inheritor of the father's property and in case a son is absent in a family a daughter inherits the property of the father. Sen Gupta states about inheritance of property as, "It is patriarchal tribe and it follows patrilineal descent. After the death of the father, the sons inherit the property. They follow the rule of equigeniture for inheritance of property. However the son with whom old parent live inherit the house. The movable and immovable properties are distributed equally among the brothers (Sen Gupta 2003).

Clan: The Thengal Kacharis are divided into 21 exogamous clans and these are divided according to occupations. The clans are Hajoal, Manikial, Muktal or Mukutial, Durungial, Dalangial, Sakurial, Haigiyal or Sargiyal, Xukriyal, Hugral, Biyagharal, Kumral or Kumariyal, Komariyal, Dekral or Dhekiyal, Nangal, Lathiyal, Mekheliyal, Neguriyal, Dinkgiyal, Dhuliyal, Formal, Ejmal. Nanda Borah writes, 'The marriage between the same clan is strictly prohibited among the Thengal Kacharis'. (Borah 1999).

Folk Architecture: The term Folk architecture can be termed as traditional architecture. It is concerned with all traditional aspects of building, their shapes, sizes and layouts of buildings, such as dwellings, barns, sheds and craft shops, the materials used and the tools and techniques of building, the sites chosen and the placement of various buildings on the site and the use to which buildings and various parts of buildings were put' (Roberts 1972). The tribal groups of Assam have their unique house type and architecture. The Thengal Kacharis build houses with the materials which are locally available such as thatch, wood, bamboo etc. The use of sun grass is found among the tribe. They believe in the proverb, 'Pube Bharal, Pashime Goral, Uttare Choru, Dakshine Goru'. The meaning of the proverb goes in this way - the barn should be in the eastern direction, the place where the fowls are kept should be in the west, kitchen should be built in the northern direction and the cowshed should be in the southern direction.

Religion: Most of the Thengal Kacharis are the followers of Neo Vaishnavite faith, preached by Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam during the 15th and 16th century. As Nanda Borah states, 'The Thengal Kacharis are completely Hinduised and they are no longer in pristine form. At present their religion is Neo-Vaishnavism (Bora 2007). Since the time of Basudev Gosain the Thengal Kacharis were the followers of Vaishnavism and disciples of Auniati Satra, a Neo-Vaishnavite religious institution. Some of the Thengal Kacharis are the followers of Lord Shiva and worship and offer prayer to Shiva in different ceremonies to get the blessings for the wellbeing of the people and also wish for the good production of crops. A section of them also celebrate Durga Puja in a grand manner. This is still practiced in a village named Dhaldhalia in

Lakhimpur District of Assam. This is being celebrated since long time under the initiative of Umakanta Neog. The Thengal Kacharis had animistic beliefs in the past days and worshipped some evil spirits and appeased them with the objective of satisfying those spirits, gods and goddesses. Even now some of the Thengal Kacharis maintain their animistic belief and is carrying on the traditional worship of the ghosts and the spirits. At present it has been observed that the Thengal Kacharis have completely assimilated themselves with the caste and communities of Assam and have almost lost their traditional culture. Despite the process of assimilation they have been trying to retain and maintain their unique and traditional culture to a great extent.

Status of Women: Regarding the position of women among the Kacharis Endle states, 'Among the Kacharis women do not perhaps occupy the same influential position as seems to be enjoyed by their sisters in the Khasi Hills, where something like a matriarchate apparently hold the field of social and domestic life. Still with this interesting race the position of the wife and mother is far from being a degraded one' (Endle 1997). Although the Thengal Kachari society is a patriarchal society, still the females are not disrespected and the women have been found to have a great role to play both in the society and the family. Except in few cases the women are considered to have a lower position in the traditional society. In religious, economic and educational sector they do not have an equal position with that of the male counterparts. Even they were deprived in some personal independence and rights. As compared to male, the women cannot fulfill their wishes so independently. The wife can eat only after the husband has his meal. Thus the position of the women was lower than men in the traditional society (Bora 2010).

Sengupta states, 'In this society, a female is not at par with a male. However, major decisions are taken by the husband in consultation with his wife. The women are hard workers and they participate in agricultural operations. Poultry farming is very popular economic activity of the Thengal Kachari women and they earn good amount of money from the animal husbandry. A widow is required to be maintained by her husband's family. She also may claim her husband's share of parental property. They are expert

weavers. Tradition permits widow and divorce remarriages' (Sengupta 2002). Changes have occurred in the recent time in the status of women also. Those women, who are well educated, have been able to grab the opportunities provided by the government and those who are illiterate are still lagging behind and have to depend upon their husbands for their livelihood. The Thengal Kachari women are also getting the benefit of 33% reservation in case of Panchayati Raj and politics (Bora 2010).

Social Organisation: As the Thengal Kacharis are under the influence of Neo-Vaishnavite faith of religious belief, Naamghar (a religious institution) plays an important role in their socio-religious life. People gather in the Naamghar, which is a religious prayer hall. This is present in almost all the the Thengal Kachari villages. A Naamgharia looks after the matters of the Naamghar. Thus a Naamghar is an institution which has a great role to play in the Thengal Kachari Society. The various rituals and religious ceremonies are run by the Satradhikar in the Thengal Kachari villages through the Rajmedhi, Pasani and Barmedhi (Bora 1999). Many Thengal Kachari families are also the disciples of the Auniati Satra and those who are not the followers of this institution follow the rules and regulations of another organisation named Srimanta Sankar Sangha. The villages also have a village headman, who is the mediator of all kind of disputes that take place among the villagers. Some other officials like the Medhi, Barik also have their responsibility if that village is under the Satra. In the recent time, the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council has been given power to look into the matters of administration of the Thengal Kachari villages.

Folk costume: The Folk costume of any ethnic group represents its culture and identity in the society. The Thengal Kacharis wear same kind of dress that women of the other women of the Assamese society wear i.e. Mekhela Chador (traditional dress of an Assamese women). But in the past women used to wear the chador (piece of cloth wrapped in the upper part of the body) by wrapping twice around the upper part of the body and methoni (cloth tied around the breast) was wrapped and the same chador was used as Uroni (veil to cover the head, as a mark of respect to the elders). So

the chador was to be 9 cubit in length or Tinikhonia. The elderly women did not wear blouse. The young girls wore mekhela chador and blouse (Borah 2013). During the study one informant of the Titabor area also informed about the kind of dress that they wore in their days. But she mentioned that those dresses are rarely seen today. Due to the modern way of life, dressing pattern of people has changed among the tribal people also. Except the elderly women we rarely find anyone wearing the traditional dresses. In recent time, people have understood that loss of their culture may bring threat to their identity. So they have started wearing the traditional dresses though not regularly but on special occasions and ceremonies.

Food and Drink: The Thengal Kacharis use rice as their staple food. Meat, fish and vegetables are added to their menu. The use of kharisa (fermented bamboo shoot) and items prepared by using kharisa is very popular among this tribe. Sengupta writes, 'The Thengal Kachris are very fond of Kharisa and Khar (an alkaline condiment). The khar is prepared from the ashes of dried banana peel' (Sengupta 2003). Use of Kharali (sauce prepared out of grinding mustard seeds) and Hukuta (dried leaves of jute plant) is a popular item added to the menu. A powder of dried fish prepared by a special method known as Sukoti Mash is also is a popular item among the Thengal Kacharis. It is preserved in either earthen pot or bamboo tube (Bora 2000). Besides all these they use kumol sawal (rice made to use as a snacks), pithaguri (powdered rice), sandoh guri (parched rice) etc. in the rituals and ceremonies. Several items prepared by using rice powder of sticky rice is very popular among the tribe. Chewing betel nut is commonly seen among them.

Thengal Kacharis use the traditional wine known as 'Xereka' on special occasions i.e. in rituals and ceremonies.

Language: Language is considered to be an important factor of the cultural life of any tribal group. The Thengal Kacharis do not have their own language or dialect. They speak Assamese language. Gogon Chandra Sonowal stated, 'Originally though the Sonowal and Thengal Kacharis spoke Kachari (Boro) language, they gave up the language after the Kacharis had left their country' (Sonowal 2008). At present they speak

Assamese language as their mother tongue. Due to assimilation with other caste and communities of Assam it has merged with some other language (Bora 2009). Thus the Thengal Kacharis speak Assamese language but some phonetic variations are there in their speaking of Assamese language.

Constitutional Status: The Thengal Kachris are a scheduled plain tribe of Assam. However the name of this tribe is not yet included as a separate group in the constitution of India. They are considered under the Kacharis. The other groups of the Kachari community are enjoying this status individually. Dr. Jogeswar Bora, the Chief advisor of the 'All Assam Thengal Kachari Organisation writes, ' In the list of the plain tribes of Assam of the constitution, due to the inclusion of the other groups of Kacharis by different names, the Thengal Kacharis remained as the 'Kachari' only. Accordingly, the group is getting the facilities given by the government. But the Thengal Kachari community is now overlooked by the constitution of India. The old literatures only prove that the Thengal is a tribe of Kacharis (Borah 1999).

Thus this issue of not giving the status of scheduled tribe to this distinct community of Assam is a matter of great concern for the society and it is necessary to take proper steps for giving a status as scheduled tribe of Assam.

Culture: The Thengal Kachari tribe have their own cultural distinctiveness. But they have undergone the process of assimilation and acculturation and have started adopting the Assamese culture. A section of them are still continuing with the customs and practices of their traditional life. The other sections of them who have become the followers of Neo-Vaishanism perform the rituals and ceremonies like the other caste and communities of the Assamese society follow in general. Some try to retain their traditional life and perform the rites and rituals like the birth rites, marriages, puberty rites and death rites in the manner in which the Thengal Kachari Society originally did. They celebrate Bihu, the national festival of Assam with distinct customs such as the ancestor worship even today. They also celebrate 'Tora Chira Bihu' which is considered to be a pre-bihu celebration. The young boys collect 'Tora' which means cardamom and there is

a tradition among the Thengal Kacharis that some days before the celebration of bihu they collect 'tora' from the jungle. While returning from the jungle they perform bihu dance in group during night. The money collected by performing bihu is used to buy salt. For performing bihu they use the musical instrument 'Dhol'. The Kachari Cheo or Buracheo (specific style of beating the dhol) are specific contribution of the Thengal Kacharis towards the Assamese culture. In case of the beating of the dhol in Upper Assam, nobody can deny the contribution of the Thengal Kachris (Borah 1999). Besides these they observe numerous other festivals and ceremonies. Some of them are Aai Sabah, Gohali diya, Lakhimi Sabah, Gopini Sabah, Pirdiya etc. All these are related to the folk belief of the tribe. As the Thengal Kacharis believe in the presence and influence of supernatural spirits, ghosts, gods and goddesses, they perform some rituals and ceremonies to satisfy the evil spirits from time to time. Jakhjakhini puja, Ga dangoriya puja, Bhitor sakam, Sani grahar sakam, Jaldebota puja etc. are some of the ritual which are still found to be practiced by the Thengal Kacharis.

The Thengal Kachari women are very expert in the skill of weaving and rearing silk. They rear muga silk and prepare various clothing. The women have the culture of applying vermilion at their parting of hair as a symbol of marriage and this is a common practice among the other people of the greater Assamese society. The older women wear riha along with mekhela (piece of cloth worn at the lower part of the body and scarf known as chador (Sengupta 2003).

The Thengal Kacharis have the culture of engaging themselves in the making of bamboo materials for their own use and also for sale. Tradition of giving bamboo fencing in the Thengal Kachari houses is a common culture in Assam. The Thengal Kachari women are also very active in the management of bari or the courtyard. The maintaining of a distinct way of life and culture can be obviously seen among the Thengal Kacharis. The Thengal Kachris have a beautiful cultural life like the other communities of Assam. Their folklore and folk culture proves that they are a cultured and civilized community. The Thengal Kacharis have contributed immensely towards the Assamese culture like the other ethnic groups and community (Borah 2000).

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