

Tora Chira Bihu : A Pre Bihu Celebration Of The Thengal Kachari Tribe In Assam

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Abstract

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. They may be moments of transition, from one season to another or from one stage of life to another. , These recurring moments of special significance , with the celebrations that fill them, are called festivals. Festival is a prime device for promoting social cohesion, for integrating individuals into a society or group and maintaining them as members through shared, recurrent, positively reinforcing performance.(Smith 1972). 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). The above stated opinions regarding festivals and celebrations depict that the traditional festivals help in building cohesion and solidarity among the participants of the community. Hence this paper will make an attempt to explore the significance of the celebration of 'Tora Chira ' Bihu among the The Thengal Kachari Tribe in Assam.

Introduction

Objectives :

- To explore the significance of Tora Chira Bihu of the Thengal Kachari Tribe.
- To study the customs related to the celebration of this bihu.

- To investigate if any changes and transformations have come in the celebration of this festival.

Methodology :

The study was conducted in Lakhimpur District of Assam. Field study was done to collect information regarding the celebration of this festival. Informants, traditional bearers, academicians were interviewed to investigate about the changes and transformation in the customs and practices of this bihu. Secondary source of data was also used for the study of this topic. Books, journals, other printed materials were taken help of. The study was mainly conducted in Lakhimpur District.

About the Thengal Kacharis :

The Thengal Kachari tribe is a plain tribe in Assam. They are said to be an off shoot of the great Kachari group. BM Das states in his book " People of Assam", " 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 Sonowal , Thengal, Jharua are met with in Upper Assam. (Das 2010).

The Thengal Kacharis have much resemblance with the Sonowal Kachari tribe of Assam. But the difference is that the Sonowal Kacharis are much larger in population as compared to that of the Thengals. Both these tribes are sub-branch of the Kachari race and are very close to the appearance of the Mongolian groups as described by the historians. There are many narratives which speak about the origin of the Kacharis. On the other hand the history is almost silent about the origin of the Thengal Kacharis , their settlements and their migration. Some of the scholars have studied the matter and have arrived at some conclusions.

There are no written records of Kachari rule. There are however , several traditions on the accuracy of which it is possible to rely as history and legends are mixed up in these traditions. According to these traditions , there are 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 1992) .

Dr Jogeswar Borah writes, “ There is a saying that in the war of 1526 A. D. when the Kachari King Khunkhura won the battle against the Ahom King Suhungmung Dihingia, two Kachari youth who were brave and expert in magic and archery, named Jangbahadur and Chakradhwaj decided to establish two separate kingdoms. 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’.(Bora 2005)

The Thengal Kachris celebrate several festivals all the year round. Each festival is celebrated at a particular season and at the time they have set aside for this. As an indigenous community of Assam this tribal group celebrate Bihu which is considered to be the national festival of the state. Bihu is an agricultural festival and it heralds the beginning of the Assamese new year. Regardless of caste and creed people of Assam celebrate all the bihus namely Bohag bihu, Kati bihu and Magh bihu in different time of the year.

Tora Chira bihu starts on the second Wednesday of the Assamese calendrical month of ‘Choitra’. It is a pre-bihu celebration .They have the custom of collecting the ‘tora’(cardamom plant) from the jungle and this done by the youths of the village. The females do not participate in the collection of tora. There is a tradition of offering oblation to the ‘Bon Debota’ (god of forest) so that they would not face any trouble in their journey. As they are strong believer of the influence of supernatural forces in their life they often offer prayer to the god before any work. The young boys then cut the tora plant and return back taking along with them whatever herbs and plants they find in the jungle. They hunt animals and come back with great joy and enthusiasm. From this day onward the boys start practising ‘bihu dance’ in an open space which is named as ‘Dhuliya Bheti’. The tora plant is then cut and

split into pieces and then dried to prepare the rope for the cattle. As it is a tradition of the Assamese society to tie a new rope in the cattle in the house during Bohag bihu, a day known as 'goru bihu' special day of celebration for the cattle. The elderly persons of the village visit from one house to the other to help the villagers in preparing the new rope made of tora. On this day they have the custom of serving the elderly persons with 'Xereka' (traditional rice beer of the tribe) and Khaji (whatever the youths collected). They dance and sing and celebrate the occasion. The tradition of collecting and cutting of the tora plant is one of the distinctive festivals of the Thengal Kacharis.

They sing bihu in the neighboring houses:

Tora Chiri golurongbairohimola
 Pogha bati golurongbairohimola
 Budhebrihospoti bihu he rongbairohimola
 Risip sip Jorourouwa
 Tora siriboloiRongbairohimola
 Pogha bati golurongbairohimola
 Bosorekormuroteahisuami
 Risip sip Jorourouwa.

The song means that they go for collecting tora and they prepare a new rope for cattle as the bihu is on Wednesday.(Hazarika 2022).

In this manner the Thengal Kacharis celebrate the tora chira festival which was declared as the national festival of the community.

The Thengal Kachari tribe have been trying to preserve their culture in the recent time and with this purpose there are documentations and revival of many festivals have been done for the purpose of their identity. The celebration of this festival has almost become extinct and from 2009 onwards the community started celebrating this publicly in Bihpuria of Lakhimpur District. The customs of celebrating this tora chira festival is now very rarely seen in the villages due to many reasons. Assimilation and acculturation have made great change in the traditional life of the ethnic groups. Besides these the impact of globalization, modern lifestyle may be some other reasons for losing our own cultural and traditional way of life. But now the Thengal Kacharis have

become conscious regarding their own identity and have been trying to bring back their lost identity.

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