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Charkhela festival of the Hajongs

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Abstract
The North- East India is a hub of different tribes having own distinct language, culture, tradition, custom, food habits, art, dresses etc. All are conscious to maintain their own distinct identity. Similarly, Assam also a multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic state with colourful festivals. Among different ethnic groups many are tribal ethnic groups. Since ancient period they have been observing and maintaining their unique traditional cultures which are now become a significant character of Assam state. The tribes like Boro- Kachari, Mishing, Deori, Rabha, Sonowal, Dimasa, Karbi, Naga, Tai Phake, Tai Khamyang, Singpho, Hajong, Tiwa, Thengal Kachari, etc. all have colourful and wonderful festivals. All these tribes are mainly agriculturalists. So, besides the religious & cultural festivals they observe different agro based festivals also. All their festivals make them lively and spirited. For example, Bohag Bihu or Baisagu, Bathou or Baitho puja, Lakhimi Hobah of the Sonowal & Boro Communities, Ali-Ai-Lrigang & Kaban of the Mising Community, Bor Boli, Ibaku Bisu, Maghiyo Bisu & Joydam festival of the Deori Community, Ronker festival, Chojun Puja, Chok Keroi Hacha- Kekan of the Karbi Community, Poi Saang Ken, Buddha Purnima festival, Poi Ok- Wa, Naun- Wa, Poi Lu- Fa & Poi Lu- Kyong of the Tai Phakey Community, Luira, Sekrenyi, Kanghi, Gaan- Ngai & Yemshi of the Naga Community, Yawn Manau Poi, Ninggawn Chyanun etc. of the Singpho Community and so on. Among different tribal ethnic groups, the Hajongs are also an important tribe who have rich culture. Traditionally, they have various cultural, religious and agro based festivals. All these festivals introduced them as artists, cultured and spirited tribe in the greater Assamese society. For example, Baastu puja, Dhaan Mao puja, Hiljaga, Baans puja, Garam puja, Chang Deo, Jatra puja, Paboni puja, Hudum Deo puja, Bhekuli Biya, Kaani Deo puja, Moyla Deo, Hoyla Deo, Jharang Deo puja, Masang Deo, Bisua, Falani Deowa, Puila Ruwa, Haal Duka, Aag Neoa, Naya Khaoa, Deuli, Thuba, Charkhela or Charmaga, Bhaluk Maga and so on. Of course, in this article an attempt has been made to discuss the Charkhela Festival of the Hajongs.

Objectives

1. To study the characteristics of the Charkhela festival.
2. To study the cultural status of the Hajongs.
3. To discuss socio- economic status of the Hajong.

Methodology

This study is based on Historical cum Analytical method which includes secondary and primary sources of data like books, journals and fieldwork

Keywords: Hajong, Festival, Culture, Tribe, Charkhela etc

1. Introduction

The Hajong people are one of the ancient dwellers of Assam and Northeast India. They are descendants of the Mongoloid race. They form a sub-section of the Bodo-Naga section under Assam- Burma, a group of Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino- Tibetan family^[1]. Historically and sociologically, the Hajongs are one of the important tribes of Northeast India, particularly of Assam. They are spread all over Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Tripura, Jalpaiguri, Dandakaranya of Madhya Pradesh, Port Blair of Andaman, Mymensingh & Sylhet districts of Bangladesh etc. Their population is at present near about 2 lakh including all these places^[2]. In present Assam, the most concentrated areas of the Hajongs are found in Goalpara, Dhemaji, Darrang, North Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Cachar, Dhubri, Chirang, Nagaon, Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta, Sonitpur, Kokrajhar and Tinsukia districts.

Originally, the Hajongs are a branch of the Kachari group of people. Initially, the whole Bodo language speaking Tibeto-Burman group was known as the Kachari^[3]. The word Kachari as a racial name for the Bodo linguistic group of people appears in all early books

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and Government records. The British and the Christian Missionaries, who first created literature in Bodo language, used the word Kachari as a racial name. It also appears in the specification of the Scheduled Tribe under Article 342 of the Indian Constitution^[4]. The Census Report of 1881 listed 12 sub-groups under Kachari race. Their names are - Kachari, Mech, Lalung, Hajong, Garo (plains), Rabha, Madhahi, Mahalia, Saraniya, Chutia, Koch and Rajbanshi^[5]. Brian Hodson, a known linguist, who had conferred Bodo for the first time, to the whole Kachari race^[6]. Since then Bodo has however, been used both as a generic and nationality name by the authors of later period.

So, from the above discussion, it is clear that the Hajongs are a sub-tribe of the great Kachari race and they are modern representatives of the Koches. Originally, the Hajongs were not a separate tribe but they were hailing from the Koch Community. However, may be, traditionally, the Hajongs are very rich in culture. Basically they are agricultural based tribe like other Mongolian origin peoples of Assam. As an agro based tribe, the Hajongs celebrate various festivals. Among those the Charkhela festival is the most important and meaningful festival that keep their life vibrant. It is almost equivalent to the Bohag Bihu or Rongali Bihu of Assam. It indicates the fine art and aesthetic sense of the paddy field based Hajong society. Charkhela festival makes the Hajong society fresh and lively. Through this festival they have attained a special status and a distinct position as artists and spirited tribe in the greater Assamese society.

Basically, the Charkhela festival is a folk custom of the agro based ancient rural society of the Hajongs which developed with the evolution of time. This festival is also very much in conformity with the nature and it manifests their natural life-style. Charkhela festival is celebrated for one week. The period in terms of Indian months i.e. Baisakha, Jetha, Ahara, Shrawana and Bhadra are the period for growing paddy cultivation for the Hajongs. During these months the people work very hard in the field cultivating paddy crop. Each and every member of the family remains busy in the cultivation and they cultivate their land with all their hands and tools as it is the main means of livelihood for the tribe. The planting or growing of paddy crops is completed in the month of Bhadra. In the later one or two months, the paddy plantation begins to grow with greenery all across the field. The nature also changes its colour. Gradually, the hot, rainy summer season gives way to autumn season with clear, sunny sky and with decreasing yet more pleasant temperature level. After the cultivation is completed, people are with less work and remain in a leisurely mood. Mood of the people gradually turns into festive mood with Charkhela festival fast approaching.

On the day of Kartik Sankranti (the last day of the month of Ashina), the Hajongs devotedly illuminate lamps at paddy field expecting a good harvest. They call it Kati Gasa. The paddy crops also gradually grow into maturity with green leaves promising a good harvest. The green paddy field emanates a ray of hope on minds of the Hajong youths. A festive mood prevails among them. During this period, the Hajong youths celebrate Charkhela festival. This festival starts two/ three days prior to the Deepawali festival or Shri Shri Shyama Puja or Kaali Puja. It continues for a week. The Hajongs names the Deepawali as Deuli^[7]. On the occasion of Deuli, the Hajongs illuminate light in every household. They celebrate Charkhela or Charmaga with Dhaak, Dhol, Flute etc. musical instruments. In Charkhela festival, the Hajong

boys perform different songs like-Lewatana song & dance, Tengla song, Jakha mara, Bhanga Nauka, Ruwa Laga etc. Among these Lewatana Song & dance is the most attractive and important part of the festival.

The Hajong society is conservative and cohesive. The society does not permit the Hajong boys and girls to mix up freely. Open and free relationship between a boy and a girl is prohibited. The Charkhela festival gives the Hajong boys and girls an opportunity to interact with each other. The Hajong boys silently and secretly select there would be life partner during this festival.

The Charkhela festival is a cultural festival. Songs, dance, part play and dance drama with traditional musical instruments are the main features of this festival. These songs, dance or dance drama, part plays are mainly extracted from religious books. The character of mythology or stories gets priority in the dance drama. For example, Devi Puja, or Mahikhasur Bodh, Exile of Lord Rama, kidnapping of Sita, Kurukhetra War, killing of Abhimanyu, etc. In course of changed time, the stories of King & Queen are also acted. However, in the Charkhela festival 10-15 youths make a group and with traditional dresses they use to visit door to door every household. They perform song, dance, part play and the host family respectfully offers them with rice, money etc in return. Thus, they collect rice, money etc. from every household. Two boys who play the main role in the Charkhela festival are called Gaan-Sugra. In fact, there are two methods of collection-(1) Dhauwa Maga & (2) Charmaga. If the boys come back home after the collection at the end of the day then it is called Dhauwa Maga^[8]. On the other hand, if the boys collect rice, money etc. for one week, leaving their village, from other villages then that is called Charmaga. If a group of Charmaga want to stay in any house for the night then they send information to that family. The person through whom they send information to the host family is called Bhatkhabari^[9]. The family, that provides accommodation and serves meal to the Charmaga troupe, feels itself proud and fortunate for being capable of doing so. In the last day of the festival, they organise a feast or Bhoj for all the people. In the Bhoj they prepare meal separately for both Saka and Baishnava i.e. the followers of two different sects of Hinduism. It is called Charkhela Khaun or Chengra Khuwa^[10]. After the completion of the Bhoj the Charkhela festival also comes to an end.

2. Conclusion

Like other Mongoloid tribes the Hajongs also have own distinct language, custom, tradition, song, dance, dress, food habits, art, literature etc. But these are not developing like other tribal communities. They are unable to preserve, exhibit and publicise all their cultural heritages. Due to the factors such as, illiteracy, poor economic condition, political ignorance, lack of high thinking and myopic views to life with their simplistic life-style, the Hajongs are gradually losing their culture. Lack of integration is prevalent in the community. Even they have no organisational capacity to develop and unite their community. After the partition of Indian sub-continent, maximum Hajong people became refugees and at present their population is sparsely scattered in different parts of the North-East India. Though the Hajongs have a few organisations, they failed to organise the entire community under one umbrella. Their cultural programs are also not capable of embracing all Hajong people living different places due to long distance factor and

lack of communication and lack of cultural consciousness. They are unable to overcome the communication hurdles due to their poor economic conditions. As such, all the Hajongs inhabiting different parts of North-East India are not able to participate and co-operate in the activities or cultural programs of the organisations. On the other hand, they do not have any political organisation to assert their political rights and to press for the solution of their problems before the Legislative Assembly and Parliament. So far, the community have failed to create any political leader and no members from the community have ever been elected to the State Legislature. As a result, unfortunately, near about 90% of population of North-East India may not know the Hajongs and their culture, tradition, society, life style, economic & political condition. Even, the Hajongs living in the Assam plains could not enjoy Scheduled Tribe (S.T.) status till 2002. As a result, they remained backward in comparison to other tribal communities of Assam. The tribe was recognised as Scheduled Tribe (Plains) only in April 2003. On the other hand, the Hajongs who came from Bangladesh in 1964 and later, rehabilitated as refugees in Margherita Sub-Division, of Tinsukia District, Assam got the right to vote in 1971 and have been granted Scheduled Tribe status in 2004. Nevertheless, at present, the Hajongs are the most backward among the tribes in North-East India.

3. Recommendations

- (i) The scattered socio-cultural organisations of the Hajongs should come forward under one common platform and should work towards bringing awareness in the community on education, society, politics and economic upliftment.
- (ii) Hajongs should make themselves aware of their rich cultural heritage and maintain it. The community should also need to be politically conscious and organise themselves to press for their rights.
- (iii) The government would do the best to make the slogan of the present Prime Minister—"SABKA SAATH, SABKA VIKASH" a success, in true spirit, by bringing about all round development to the Hajongs.

4. References

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