

SOCIO-CULTURAL BELIEFS AND PRACTISES OF THENGAL KACHARI TRIBE OF ASSAM

Papori Borah,

M. Phil. Research scholar, North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous)

Diganta Hatiboruah,

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous)

Abstract

Beliefs and practices are integral part of social life of human beings. The Thengal Kacharis are one of the prominent tribes of Assam (India). The tribe has its own kind of socio-cultural beliefs and practices, which have enormous impact on their everyday life. These beliefs and practices help them to maintain their community life as well as social life. The Thengal Kacharis have numbers of beliefs and practices which are related to Animals, Trees, Bihu, Birth, Marriage and Death, etc. During the courses of Assimilation with the greater Assamese Society, the Thengal Kachari Community has lost their own dialect, religious practices as well as some rituals. At the same time the community has adopted Hindu religion and their rituals, Assamese language and some other customs and believes of other tribes and communities of Assam. In spite of that some specific beliefs and rituals are still alive in the Thengal Kachari society.

In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss about the socio-cultural beliefs and practices of Thengal Kachari tribe of Assam so that the concept of folk and folk beliefs can be understand.

Keywords: Thengal Kachari, Beliefs, Customs, Practices, Rituals.

Introduction:

Ethnicity is the expression of distinct socio-cultural formation of a community which is articulated through their various beliefs, customs, myths, rituals, etc. Beliefs and practices are inseparable elements of folklore and folk culture of a community¹ which are manifested through various rituals, ceremonies and celebrations. The main elements of belief are different religious beliefs, and social beliefs like superstitions, omens, taboos, magic, food habits, spirits, folk medicine, etc. On the basis of these beliefs people formulates ideas about what is good or bad, what should be or not, auspicious or inauspicious etc. These beliefs, customs, practices and folk characters of each ethnic community are different from the others. The ethnic community of Assam generally organizes their social and domestic affairs as according to their customs and rituals which help them to sustain their unity, trust, social discipline, respects, humanity, etc. These beliefs and trust are the agents of their socialization of their community life.

It is worth mentioning that the ethnic people of Assam learn their belief, customs or practices since the age of birth which have impact on shaping their behavior. Folk beliefs have greatly impacts on the issues of living ages and even after the death of individuals of society. During these ages it is observed that in various occasion of social life and communities life, they follow some unscientific practices or superstition in the name of folklore and folk-beliefs, though it is, in fact, not helpful to them.

¹ Das, Diganta. (2019). *Beliefs and Practices of the Kaibarta Community of south Kamrup: A Folkloristic study*. Gauhati University. P.1

Assam, a state of North East India, is a home place of various tribes, ethnic groups and religious groups locating in between the latitude of 24 degree and 28 degree North and longitude of 90 degree and 96 degree east and at the South of the Eastern Himalayas. Geographically Assam is connected to the rest of the India by a narrow corridor which is known as 'chicken neck'. On the other hand, it is also known as the mosaic place of different communities of people which symbolized the unity among diversity.

The Thengal kachari is a prominent ethnic community as like as an aboriginal tribe of Assam. They belong to the Bodo origin stocks, which is on the other hand, belongs to the big Mongoloid family.² Rev. Sydney Endle and Dr. Bhuban Mohan Das have classified the Bodos into two branches popularly known as eastern branch and western branch.³ The Thengal Kacharis are belong to this eastern branch living in Brahmaputra Valley, particularly in the districts of Karbi Anglong, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivsagar, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Sonitpur of Assam. The culture of the Thengal Kacharis people is basically agrarian and the main means of occupation of them are also cultivation. As per the official record of the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council, there are altogether 264 villages where the Thengal Kachari people has been living in both north and south bank of river Brahmaputra with their own dialect and religious traditions.⁴ But, due to the process of sanskritisation, they lost their own traditional dialect and accepted greater Assamese tradition as their own rituals and dialect. This process not only visualized on the Thengal Kachari but also in fact has been seen in case of other tribal communities of Assam. Hence, these communities consider themselves as an integral part of the greater Assamese nation and playing a vital role in growth and development of Assamese nation.

Methodology:

The historical and descriptive method of data collection has been applied in this paper. The necessary data has been collected from the secondary sources such as books, journals, published research articles, news papers, etc. Though the historical and descriptive method of data collection is used in this paper but, the empirical method of research was also applied to rationalize the problem. The observation and oral sources were also applied in this research. To record the verbal data from the respondents of the universe, tape recorder were also used during the time of field study.

Objectives:

The Thengal Kachari is one of the major prominent groups of Assam. This community has some ritual and beliefs which are closely related with the religion and their customs. Considering the importance of the issue and subject matter the following objectives are determine to test the research problem.

1. To know various existing socio-cultural believes and practices of the Thengal Kachari Tribe of Assam.
2. To understand the functioning of various socio-cultural believes and practices of the Thengal Kachari Tribe of Assam.
3. To understand the relevance of these beliefs and practices in the society.

Customs and Practices of the Tribe:

Like other communities of Assam, the Thengal Kacharies are also living as a part of Greater Assamese society from very long. In spite of that the Thengal Kacharis conserved some traditional and cultural rituals to identify themselves as Thengal. Apart from that the Thengals have some traditional beliefs and practices. Today, these beliefs of the Thengal Kacharis become a part of their customs and folk culture. These beliefs and practices of the Thengal Kacharis have been inherited from generation to generation as legacy. It is worth mentioning that the ritual and customs of Thengal Kacharis are deeply influenced by the Hinduism and greater Assamese culture.

² Borah, Pranjal Kumar.(2020). *Customary Laws of Thengal Kachari Tribe of Assam: a Folkloristic Study*. Gauhati University. Guwahati.p1

³ Borah, Pranjal Kumar.(2020). *Customary Laws of The Thengal Kacharis of Assam: A Folkloristic Study*. Gauhati University. Guwahati. P.25.

⁴ Das, Munindra. (2020). *Axamar Nrigosthiya Uttatanar Itihas: Samashya Sangram Prapti*. Banalata Guwahati.p.403.

To understand the beliefs and practices of the Thengal Kacharis, here attempt has been made and lighted the issues as followings:

1. Animal related:

Like other community, the Thengal Kacharis have also some beliefs which are related to animal and their behavior. The Thengal Kacharis believe that some expression and behavior made by the animals are related with the social life of their community. Here we would like to cite some specific behavior of living-beings which is associated with the customs of the Thengal Kacharis.

Lizard: The Thengal Kacharis believe that when somebody is speaking and telling something to others, if then the Lizard making normal sound then whatever the person saying that is true.

Elephants: Elephant is regarded as the holly one for the Thengal Kacharis. They believe that if somebody is seen an elephant on the way to his journey is to be believed as a symbol of goodness and lucky. Whenever the wild Elephant come to the residential place, then they organize *puja* (a religious ceremony) of Lord Shiva keeping hope that the wilds will not harm them and their properties.

Dog: Barking dog is also related with the rituals of the Thengal Kacharis. If dog of household barks in the midnight, it is regarded as symbol of bad for the family as well as for the people of the village as a whole. According to their beliefs, after occurring of such kind of unnatural behavior of dog, the villagers will go to face danger from natural calamities and famine.

Cow: The Thengal Kacharis means of earning and livelihood is cultivation. Hence, the agrarian culture plays dominating role over the cultural life of Thengal Kacharis. Being an agrarian community, the Thengal Kachari people highly depend upon cow, bull and other domestic animals. They consider these animals as important parts of their family. Women clean their houses floors with a paste of cow dung and mud. People celebrate 'Goru Bihu' which is dedicated to cow in the first day of *Bohag Bihu*. Women having periods are not allowed to touch cow.

Cat: If a person witnesses a cat specially if a black cat crossed his path, it is believed to be inauspicious one. So generally after seeing a cat on the way of a journey, people go few steps back and then restart the journey uttering the name of the God.

Birds related:

Birds related beliefs are also popular among the Thengal Kachari tribes. The Parrot, Common Myna, and Dove if seen in the morning hours, then according to them it is good for the day. Seeing a couple common mynas in the eve of the journey it signifies that the journey will be successful. Regarding the Owl there are two types of beliefs among the Thengal Kachari tribes. Crying of Owl at night thought to be as inauspicious. But, if owl making sound like 'uruli' (a sound made by women with the help of rolling the tongue inside the mouth) means someone's marriage news will come soon or marriage will be happened. For the goodness of the family and society they offer red and black cock and chicken for propitiation of deity and therefore earmarked for sacrifice. The Thengal people believe that falling of butterfly on the body of an unmarried girl signifies that her marriage will be done immediately.

When a owner sells his or hers duck, chicken, and other domestic animals then they plucks some of body-hair of that birds and animals for three time and keep it on their cage or coop. They believe that this ritual ensure that duck or chicken will not end from their house.

Tree related:

Trees are also associated with various beliefs and practices among the Thengal Kachari community. It is said that in the time of noon nobody should climb huge trees. They beliefs that some power or spirit stays in some huge trees and during the time at noon the evil spirits and ghost takes rest in these trees. Girls after attaining puberty do not allow climbing trees by stating that if they do that then the spirit will mislead the girl child. On the other hand it is also beliefs that if the puberty attained girl climbs tree that that tree will not give fruits and flowers.

At the same time they also use some trees to prevent bad spirit or evil-power. As for example Jujube branch is made to keep in front of the door to keep safe the new born baby from bad powers and evil spirits. The Thengal people also uses various plants, leaves, branches and tree bark such as tulshi, neem, black peepers, stink vine, curry leave, etc. as medicine to cure diseases. Some of these medicine tricks are learned by people from others and some of them people found in their dreams.

Agriculture Related:

The Thengal Kachari community is an agriculture based community. Most of its people depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Related to the agriculture, they also have various folk believes and rituals. On the day of paddy seeding in the seedling field, the Thengal people generally don't give or offer *Lakhimi* (paddy) to the beggars, relatives, or others people of the locality. The *Grihini* (mistress of the household) or an elderly woman of the family starts first planting of paddy plants. On that occasion she offer pray to goddess *Laskmi* by lightening earthen lamp in a corner of the field along with *dhoop* (incense sticks), battle nut, leaves and an amount of money. On *aukhi* (the lunar day) and *ekadashi* (the eleventh lunar day) the farmers don't go to paddy field for ploughing. Similar way when a kinsman dies, farmers don't plough till the main purification ceremony is over. During the time of ploughing if a plough breaks in the paddy field, the farmers of the Thengal Kachari goes for fasting or skips a meal. The Thengal Kachari people make human like structure with the help of clay pot, limestone and cloths to create afraid among the birds so that they could not harm the ripe paddy plants or keeping bad eyes of the human beings. In the month of *Aghun* (November-December), the products of agriculture which are regarded as *Lakhimi* are taken to home which is known as *Lakhimi Anaa* (bring harvest to home). In this occasion generally the younger or elder boy of the family brings the last bundle of crops keeping in the top of his head covering with traditional cloth and depositing it in ginnery. In month of *Aghuna* farmers organized fest with their new paddy which is known as *no-bhuj*.

Food Related:

The Thengal Kachari people collect various foods from nature to eat not only for their appetite but also to be healthy and strong. From the month of *Puh* (December-January) to *Chaitya* (March-April) *dhekia xaak* (fiddlehead greens) should not be taken for eating. During these days, according to them the *dhekia* is regarded as unhealthy plant for meal. They believe that the taking of *Amroli toop* (eggs of a kind of red ant) during the *Bahag Bihu* is good for health, which can protect them from pox.⁵ Traditionally, on the day before *Bohag Bihu* which is known as *Uruga*, the Thengal people eat a special dish made with hundred and one vegetables. They also drink special homemade rice wine which known as *hereka* or *mod* (rice beer) and use it in various rituals.⁶

Marriage Related:

Marriage is thought to be the most important institution in Indian societies. The Thengal Kachari community gives so much importance on it. Marriage ceremonies are organized by this community in two occasions. One is on attaining puberty by a girl child and other is on when two young people i.e. a male and a woman is supposed to start a family life.

The marriage which is celebrated on girl's attaining puberty is known as *Tulani Biya*. When a girl attains her first puberty she is kept isolated for 11 to 13 days. In fourth day she is given a special bath by some women. On these days she is not given to eat heavy food and touch anything in the house. Also restriction is made on seeing any male. Then on the 7th or 11th or 13th days as prescribed by *Gonok* with various rituals the main ceremony is organized.

They also follow various traditional customs in the time marriage of two heterosexual persons (male and female). Traditionally the Thengal Kachari people belong to twenty-one clans. Marriage of two persons within the same clan is not preferred. Traditionally they followed monogamy. But now a-days marriage with other communities or tribes is acceptable. There are three kind of marriage seen in thengal kacharis community: (i) *Poluwai Ana biya*, (ii) *Juran Diya Biya or Aabioi Biya* and (iii) *Bor Biya*.⁷

⁵ Das, Binita.(2012). *The Life and Culture of the Thengal Kacharis of Upper Assam*. Gauhati University. Gauhati. P.90

⁶ Saika, Tileswar.(2022). Thengal Kacharir Priya Paniyo_-Hereka. *Thengal Darpan*. Lakhimpur. P.44-45

⁷ Bora, Dr. Sangeeta. *A Report on Socio-Economic Conditions of the Tribal People of Assam: A Study of Thengal Kachari Tribe in Jorhat District Assam*. Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Schedule Castes. Guwahati.P.35

Poluwai ana biya means the marriage by elopement which is chosen when family disagrees on the marriage and sometime to get rid of high expenses or irksome procedures. *Jorondiya biya* is a kind of arranged marriage with low expense. Generally a mediator plays great role in this marriage. The marriage ceremony is organized after consulting with *Gonok* (astrologer). The *Bor biya* is organized for three-five days with different ceremonies or rituals such as *Juran Diya* (ceremony, takes place before one or two days before the main wedding, in which the groom's mother visits the bride, gives betel-nut, *gamusa*, fish, sweets, cloths, jewelry, etc.), *Panitula* (mother of both bride and groom collect water from a nearby pond or river for their ceremonial bath and other women sing some particular songs and pray), *Nuoni* (the ritual of giving both bride and groom ceremonial bath with a paste of oil, turmeric and urad dal), etc.

Birth and Death Related:

The Thengal Kachari people believe that the future of children highly depends on works of parents. So they need to be very careful from the time of conceiving a baby. Some restrictions are given to follow to the expected mother and father. During the time of pregnancy, both parents should not kill any animals or birds, otherwise dead children and handicapped children can be born. Protective measures are taken for the pregnant woman and the baby against evil spirits and black magic. Sometime, pregnant women are given 'Ga-Bandhani' or 'Manijari' (an enchanted thread to be worn in the middle part of her body i.e., touching the womb to protect her).⁸ A knife and some mustard seeds are kept in the bed of expected mother and some mustard seeds are also put into a fire. Pregnant women are usually not given to go outside alone in the night as Thengal people believed that pregnant women are more likely to get attacked by evil spirits. If she has to go somewhere in the night, it is made sure that she keeps a knife with her. Some also take mustard seeds with them. A special dish made of black pepper, local chicken meat, and *Kosu gos* (Taro plant) is given to eat to the mother after 3rd or 5th or 7th day of giving birth of a child. Again a ceremony (Shudhi Sabah) is organized after one month of the child's birth.

It is believed in the Thengal Kachari community that a departed soul doesn't get peace if a ceremony is not organized on the person's demise. When people get the news of the death of a kinsman, kitchen utensils and cloths are to be washed completely. Both the practice of Burial and cremation are seen in Thengal Kachari Community. In case of unnatural death like suicide, minor death, etc. the death body is buried. Members of every household of the village come in the last rite of the co-villagers. After returning from funeral immediately they take bath. After that they touch fire, chew a little amount bitter food like of 'Sookoota' (bitter tasting dried leafy substance of jute tree) 'Neem' (Margosa tree) leaves and take 'Mitika Pani' (holy water).⁹ These are done so that the soul of the dead person doesn't come with them. The family members of the demise person have to maintain fasting for eleven days. The family organizes first purification ceremony *Tilany* in the third day, then *Doha* in the 10th day and *Kaaj* or *Shardha* in the eleventh day or 13th day. During the whole process all co-villagers co-operate and help the family.

Bihu Related:

Like other people of Assam, the Thengal Kachari community also celebrates three *Bihu* festivals in a year that come at various stages of the cultivation of paddy. These are *Bohag Bihu*, *Kati Bihu* and *Magh Bihu*. *Bohag Bihu* is celebrated in the time when the cultivators start preparing the soil or fields for cultivation. The Thengal Kacharis started the preparation for the occasion during the month of 'Choita' (March-April). The Thengal Kachari people welcome the *Bohag Bihu* with a special celebration which they named as 'Tora-chira Bihu'. Young people of this community in *Choita* month collect *Toragos* for making *pogha* (tether) for their domestic animals and then they distributed in the village with dancing *bihu*. The main *Bohag Bihu* starts from the last day of *Choitra* month. First day of this *bihu* celebrates as *Goru bihu* dedicated to cow which is an essential part of cultivating life the community. In that all cows are given special bath with paste of *mah* (urad dal) and *halodi* (turmeric). This *bihu* is celebrated with so much fun, *bihu* dance and *pitha* (rice-cake).

⁸ Das, Binita.(2012). The Life and Culture of the Thengal Kacharis of Upper Assam. Gauhati University. Guwahati. P.118

⁹ ,Das, Binita.(2012). The Life and Culture of the Thengal Kacharis of Upper Assam. Gauhati University. Guwahati. P.120

Then Kati *bihu* is celebrated after transplantation, young paddy seedlings begin to grow. In this time most of the cultivators come to the stage of shortage of saved food grains. In this *bihu* earthen lamp are lighted and prayed to Laxmi to protect the crops and make prosperous. Finally after collecting matured harvest, *Magh Bihu* is celebrated. This *bihu* is celebrated with joy and feast. Various *pitha* (rice cakes) and *jolpan* (kind of snake, breakfast), *laru* (sweet balls), *doi* (curd) etc. are made to eat. In the day *uruka*, *meji* (cone-shaped structure made of bamboo, straw etc.) and *bhelaghar* (a temporary hut is made to stay the *uruka* night) are made which are burnt in the next day morning. In *magh bihu* people eat potatoes (kaath aloo, mitha aloo), otherwise it is believed by the Thengal Kacharis that people will be born as like a pig in their next life. All three Bihu festivals are closely connected with agriculture and agricultural activities.

Women Related:

There are so many beliefs related to women among the Thengal Kacharis of Assam. Married women don't sit on a chair in front of male members which are elder than her husband. Widows generally don't take main part in various traditional ceremonies. As widow women are not regarded as auspicious. Normally women avoid joined fruits, as they believe it will result in giving birth of conjoined children in future.

In the time of menstruation women are regarded as unholy and hence they are not allowed to enter in *Naamghar* or *Mandir* and kitchen at least for seven or nine days. To the third day of menstruation women are kept isolated and don't allow to touch anything. In these days women have to wash their utensils by herself. In the third day she has to wash all her used cloths, goods and also floor of the house.

In general the status of women in tribal communities is better than others. But patriarchal structure of these societies reflects its characters in beliefs also. The Thengal Kachari society is also a patriarchal society. Its various beliefs related to women reflect its patriarchal nature. Result of which, the position of women in the Thengal Kachari society is lower than the man.

Religion Related:

Religion is itself based on belief in some supernatural power. Religious faith is a part of socio-cultural life of the Thengal Kachari community from time immemorial which are they manifested through various rituals and ceremonies. People of this community believed that there are some supernatural powers which regulate the activities of the world and reason of some unexplainable experiences of life.

Since time immemorial in the Thengal Community has various religious beliefs and practices related to God and Goddess and their worshipping. The traditional religious beliefs and practices of this tribe were based on Lord Shiva.¹⁰ Some of the rituals which are followed by the Thengal Kachari people are: *Pir Diya*, *Pani Toola Sabah*, *Ayush Toola Sabah*, *Apesari Sabha*, *Ghar Dangariya*, *Deo Sakam*, *Chuwa Utuwa* etc. *Mritokok diya* is a ritual performed by the Thengal people where they offer rice, meat, rice-bear, etc. to their ancestral spirit for the wellbeing of the family. The Thengal people organize rituals like *Pitha Khuwa Sabah* (for mumps) and *Ai Sabah* (for pox) to prevent some particular disease. They also have a tradition of '*Tupulabondha*'. When some mischief arises in a family, or someone suffers from some disease, women of the family makes a packet with banana leaf in the name of some specific god or goddess. The packet contains *Tamul-pan* (bottle-nut and leaves), rice, some amount of money, etc. within it. The packet is opened organizing a ceremony later.¹¹

At present the Thengal Kachari are followers of Hinduism. Before coming into contact with Hindus, Thengals were animists.¹² Now, the Thengal Kacharis of Assam are ardent followers of Vaishnavism (*Eka Saran Naam Dharma*). Youth members of the Community (specially male) goes through the ceremonial *Sarana-bhajana* (penance) under a Vaishnavite Guru, when he attains adulthood.¹³ Followers of *Sankar Sangha* don't

¹⁰ Bora, Dr. Sangeeta. A Report on Socio-Economic Conditions of the Tribal People of Assam: A Study of Thengal Kachari Tribe in Jorhat District Assam. Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Schedule Castes. Guwahati. P.66.

¹¹ Bora, Jyotika. (2006) Thengal Sokolor Dharma and Krikhi Sambandhiya Lukabiswas. *Thengal Darpan*. p.7

¹² Bora, Dr. Sangeeta. A Report on Socio-Economic Conditions of the Tribal People of Assam: A Study of Thengal Kachari Tribe in Jorhat District Assam. Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Schedule Castes. Guwahati. P.67

¹³ Das, Binita. (2012) The Life and Culture of the Thengal Kacharis of Upper Assam. P.148

follow religious rituals like *Mritokak Diya*, *Ai Sabah* etc. Vaishnavism added some rituals like *Naam-Kritan*, *Bhaona*, *Sankar Utsav*, *Janmasthanami*, death and birth ceremonies of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva etc. to the community. *Namghar* (Prayer house) is part and parcel of community life of the Thengal Kachari people. People don't enter in the Namghar without bathing. People often gather in the Namghar and pray for wellbeing of the family, community and whole universe. Many Thengal people also have a small Namghar in their home.

Thus the thengal Kachari people have various rituals and ceremonies which are practice in the hope of individual wellbeing as well as good for family and society as a whole. It is also worth mentioning that the Thengal Kachari community has lost or forgot its some rituals and beliefs with time.

Ghost Related:

The Thengal Kacharis of Assam believe in many types of ghosts or evil spirits. According to them these ghosts and evil spirits are available in their surroundings in the form of 'bak' (a ghost living in pond and river), 'dot' (similar type of ghost like Bak), 'jokh' (male ghost), 'jokhini' (female ghost with long hair), 'aalokhoniya' (ghost who follow cooking food carried by individuals in the twilight and night), 'poruwai puwa' (the spirit who misleded the individuals on the way to his home or certain destination but compel to roam in the same street), etc. The Thengal Kachari people believe that Ghosts normally reside in lonely places and big trees. Infants, expectant mothers, new spouses are more prone to their attack.¹⁴ They also think that the soul of unnatural death such as suicide, accident, murder, etc. could not get place in heaven, and hence these souls roam here and there in the earth and sometime disturb people. People of this community take various measures to stay away from such evil-powers. Many times they go for the *Bej (Baidya)* who takes special measures by pronouncing *Mantras* to run away the evil spirits. Apart from that *Bej* also provides *Tabij* and *Dul* (*Tabij* and *Dul* are two different kind of measures to run away the evil spirit. The *Tabij* is made by copper, silver and brash in the shape of square and cylindrical and wear in neck, figure, and waist. The *Dul* is prepared by traditional thread and wear it in neck, waist and hand).

Conclusion:

These beliefs, practice and superstition are so deep-rooted among the Thengal community. The socialization process of the community make people learn and practice various beliefs. Although with modern education and interaction with other communities of Assam, the Thengal Communities has left some superstitious beliefs and practices and attained some new beliefs. Various changes in the community belief and practices also come due to Vaishnavism and process of assimilation with the Assamese society. But, the practice of some specific rituals and the *Tora-chira Bihu* is still the especial identity of the Thengal Kachari community.

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