

THE ORIGIN OF SONOWAL KACHARIS OF ASSAM AND THEIR FAMILY: A STUDY

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Abstract

The Sonowal Kacharis of Assam is recognized as an aboriginal tribe that belongs to the Indo-Mongoloid community habitually living in a different part of the state of Assam. At present, the people of Sonowal Kacharis are prominently found in the District of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts of the state. Apart from that, in every District of the state, more and less in numbers, this community of people has been also seen. Consistently the Sonowal Kacharis are listed in schedules as plain tribes. The Sonowal Kacharis are a division of the Kachari. During the Ahom rule in Assam, some Kacharis engaged in gold panning from river sand. In later courses of the time, this group of people was identified as Sonowal. To anecdote and folklore, there are different beliefs regarding the origin and identity of this community. According to the history of Assam, it is stated that the Kacharis were the royal family and they were able to establish their kingdom in different parts of the Assam. In this paper, an attempt has been made to study the origin of the Sonowal Kacharis and their clan.

Keywords: *Aboriginal Tribe, Sonowal Kacharis, Indo-Mongoloid, Bodo, Washing Gold Particles*

Introduction

One of the most prominent indigenous communities of Assam is Sonowal Kacharis. This ethnic group is the branch of great Kachari which belongs to Indo-Mongoloid family falling within the Assam–Burmese linguistic section. The identity of the Sonowal Kacharis is not uniform as an ethnic group. Different names are used to designate them. In Bengal and the lower range of the Himalayas coming within the territory of Nepal, they are known as Meches. In upper Assam, they are identified as Sonowal and Thengal Kacharis, while in the western Assam they are more popularly known as Boro or Boro Kacharis. In the southern districts of Cachar and North Cachar, they are designated as Dimasas and Barmans respectively. Before the coming of Ahoms to Assam (1228 A.D.), the Sonowal Kacharis was known as Bodo Kacharis. The Bodo Kacharis are the indigenous inhabitants of Assam who are recognized as the aboriginal tribe of the state.

Demographically the Sonowal Kacharis are the third-largest plain tribal group of Assam. Although they are chiefly found in the districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur & Dhemaji districts of Assam but a few Sonowal Kacharis villages are found in every district of Assam basically in upper Assam. Like other Mongolian people of this region, the Sonowal Kacharis are short stature, flat-nosed, almond-shaped eyes,

straight hairs and scanty bearded people. It is believed that the prefix Sonowal in the name of the tribe came to be used during the reign of Ahom Kings when the Kacharis of Upper Assam took to the trade of gold washers and collection of gold particles.

Objective of the Study

Considering the importance of the study and understanding the origin of the Sonowal Kacharis, the researcher has drowned the following objectives to test the hypothesis.

- (1) To find out the origin of the Sonowal Kacharis and their history.
- (2) To find understand the similarities and differences between Sonowals Kacharis and other tribes of the state.
- (3) To find out the various families of Sonowals living across the state.

Methodology and Sources of Study

The approach to the study of the research problem is historical and descriptive in nature. For the purpose of the study data has been collected from primary and secondary source. To collect data, emphasize has been given on historical documents, historical books, journals, published research works, news papers, and monograph of different periods.

The Family and Origin of Sonowal Kacharis

As an earlier discussion, the Sonowal Kacharis are a division of the Kachari family inhabitant in North-East India, especially in Assam. They speak the Tibeto-Burman language and predominantly inhabitants in the District of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Tinsukia and Dibrugarh of Assam. They are also scattered in some Districts of Assam such as Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and some part of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. In Puranas and trantas, a glorious description was made on Sonowal Kacharis of Assam. It is said that during the reign of the Ahom king some of the Kacharis were engaged in washing gold particles from the sands of the river and therefore the prefix 'Sonowal'(Gold washer), was added to signify them. According to an anecdote, the Kacharis of upper Assam who became the disciple of 'Gossain' (a religious head, Goswami) named 'Keshawdeo' were considered to have the supernatural power of offering a certain quantity of gold in a bamboo tube while the Ahom king Godadhar Singha was on the throne and these people came to be known as Sonowal Kacharis.

The Sonowal Kacharis believe that they were the descendants of the great Raja Boli, Prahlada, Ghatotkacha, Narakasura, Bhagadutta, and Bhaskar Barman. The great king Boli Raja, mentioned in Bishnu Purana who was exiled to Patal Puri by Lord Bishnu, is said to be their ancestor. (The name of 'Boli Raja' is vividly mentioned in the tale 'Haidang Husari Geet' of the Sonowal Kacharis.) The works
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‘Tamreswari Mondir’ and the ‘Kesaikhaiti Than’ contain the names of the rivers and tributaries that proved to be true of the Sonowal Kachari's kingdom at Sadiya before the Chutiyas. An opinion has been given by a prominent literate Lila Gogoi that ‘Manik’, a king of the Sonowal Kacharis, ruled ‘Sadiya Rajya’ sometime back in the 11th or 12th century AD. According to Benudhar Sarmah, an eminent historian of Assam says ‘Kowndilya or Kundil’ of ‘Sadiya’ was called ‘Halali’ by the Sonowal Kacharis. It’s evident that the Sonowal Kacharis belonged to the royal dynasty.

There are different clans of Kacharis. Among them the ‘Bodowsa’, ‘Dhyan or Dehan’, ‘Lathowsa’, ‘Thawthensa’, ‘Hafalongsa’ and ‘Hammusa’ are mentionable. The Sonowal Kacharis are descendants of the above mentioned ‘Hammusa’ family. There are some folklore narrates regarding the origin of Sonowal Kacharis. In folklore, it is narrated, "having being blessed by the ‘Khiring Raja’, the god worshipped by the Sonowal Kacharis, the wife of a Sonowal Kachari named Manik gave birth to a cat. The cat was kept in a ‘Hariyaha duli’ (mustard loaded bamboo basket), and the cat turned into a golden cat, surprisingly. On having this heavenly gift from ‘Khiring Raja’, Manik could become the king of Halali. Later he bequeathed his kingdom to his grandson Mukuta." On the other hand, historians said that two immigrants group entered into Brahmaputra Valley and some part of NE from the north and northeast. One entered into Bengal and Assam through the valley of Tista, Dharla and Sonkosh and the other taking its way through Suwansiri, Dibang and Dihong into upper Assam. The historians believe that the second immigrant group may be the Sonowal Kacharis.

According to “Deodhori Ahom Buranji” and “KachariBuranji” the family of Kachari were coming to the east who after naming themselves as Shadiyal and Herembiyal Kachari who established two kingdoms in Upper Assam. Manik was the first king of Shadiyal Kachari. There is no historical record to know what happened to the king and his dominions after the handover of the empire to his son-in-law named Mukuta as there was no son of king Manik. The group of Herembiya Kachari established Heremba. The first king of that kingdom was Chasempha, and Birhah, Bicharpatifa, respectively become the king of Heremba. After that, the son of Bicharpatifa known as Vikramaditya established Sonapur and Banpur town and then Mahamaniba ruled the kingdom. Later, he became the king of Dimapur. Till then, the Dimapur was extended from the river Dikhou to Kalong in “the North bank of Brahmaputra in the 13th century. Within this boundary, some areas of the valley of Dhansari and Cachar hills were in the possession of them”.

It may be mentioned here that in the year 1526, while the Ahom king Chuhungmung Dihingia attacked the Kachari kingdom, some Kachari soldiers fought tooth and nail against Ahom Raja to reoccupy the lost area. Two Kachari youth named Jangbahadur and Chakardhaj, very courageous and expert in archery taking with them some Kachari families, established Kachamari kingdom on the bank of the Doyang river in 1526. www.asianmirror.in

During those days Kachari soldiers put 'pantaloon' which is called 'Thengal'. On the other hand, scholar presumed that the Bodo Sarania, of the northern group (Endle). According to Dr Bhuban Mohan Das (2003), the Thengals are one of the divisions of the northern group of Bodo Kachari. So Thengal Kachari is one division of Bodo. Thus, it is obvious that the large and powerful Kachari group who could expand their region in the 13th century from the river Dikhou to Kalong in the North bank of Brahmaputra even from the east of Dikhou to some part of Kachari district, became known as Dimasa and Barman and the other who established a kingdom of Kacharis after coming from Dimapur, become known as Thengal Kachari.

Family Tree

According to the Haidang Geet, the family tree of the Sonowal Kacharis includes seven major clans or 'Khels' which are divided into fourteen sub-clans or 'Bongshas'. These 'Bongshas' are again sub-divided into 108 numbers of 'Hons or Pariyals'. The names of the Khels are 1. Ujani Kusia 2. Namoni Kusia 3. Amorabomia 4. Tipomia 5. Dhulial 6. Siripuria and 7. Balikhitiari. These 'Khels' are subdivided into fourteen 'Bongshas', which are: 1. Madanial 2. Manikial 3. Hogral 4. Muktal 5. Ezmal 6. Formal 7. Horu Hazual 8. Bor Hazual 9. Lothial 10. Chotial 11. Kumral 12. Bormal 13. Dongral and 14. Dingial. However another nine 'Bongshas' have so far been found which are merged into the Sonowal Kacharis either from Miri, Dofola, Bodo, Rabha, Dimasa, Naga, Shyam, Konsh or Ahom origin. These are: 1. Mukhral 2. Hukral 3. Dekral 4. Chungial 5. Chunial 6. Dhansirial 7. Hakual 8. Dhadumial and 9. Dolongrial.

All the 'Bongshas' mentioned above are again subdivided into minimum 4 Nos. of 'Hons or Pariyals' totaling 108 Nos. These are as follows: 1. Guinri 2. Pithari 3. Dakuwali 4. Boglari 5. Lokkhanari/Phetari or Ghorpurari 6. Gaon Khuwari/Hatiri/Pakrari or Ghujari 7. Balikhitiari 8. Baithoari 9. Akhuari or Bhaktiari 10. Dekari 11. Ujhari 12. Khaniri 13. Loguwari or Swargiari 14. Gelepi 15. Hukuli 16. Muktali 17. Makrari 18. Gejepi 19. Hogun Murari 20. Dhaknari 21. Ezlari 22. Langiri 23. Tuhuri 24. Tepari 25. Lapitri 26. Mukudumi or Kenari 27. Chururi 28. Bormajhiri/Misniri/Nagharari or Udiri 29. Khatuwali 30. Jarlogari 31. Manari or Marari 32. Khotari 33. Nezkatar 34. Phatuwali 35. Phalari 36. Luluwari 37. Thakuli or Thakuri 38. Pedari 39. Chelengi 40. Tangiri 41. Kshagunmari 42. Tarari 43. Kedali 44. Hatkhuwari 45. Borghiari 46. Betari 47. Kumrari or Kumari 48. Dhawali 49. Pingrari 50. Duliri 51. Lerangi 52. Jhingiri 53. Akolhoriari 54. Choitari 55. Burha Mudari 56. Mudori 57. Meglari 58. Anthuali or Deori 59. Daphlari 60. Keontari 61. Bagri 62. Likamiri 63. Hagumiri 64. Kolari/Kopowhiri or Hatihilari 65. Turuki 66. Baolari 67. Titari 68. Ganthiri 69. Demari or Doimari 70. Kharghiari 71. Borgiari 72. Kekuari or Tamuliri 73. Horumajhiri 74. Dhenkiali 75. Mukhrari 76. Kheprari 77. Pikrari or Pikari 78. Ghotari 79. Lokri or Kandh Bhongari 80. Ghungiari 81. Gebrari 82. Dhokuwali 83. Kolakhuwari 84. Dekanuwari 85. Nakori 86. Jhoprari 87. Agari 88. Tipamiari 89. Buniari 90. Bailung or Bailungiri 91. Besnari or Changpetari 92.

Gherari 93. Polashi 94. Dhemkari 95. Kshadiari 96. Ahoari 97. Lohari 98. Matiari 99. Gohpuriari or Gorporari 100. Dhadumiari 101. Lunpuriari 102. Dhadumial 103. Hazari 104. Kenari 105. Ledhari 106. Teziari 107. Ghuniari, and 108. Phutkari.

From the above discussion, it is known to us that there are close relationships between the 'Bongshas' and 'Honses'. Therefore, the ceremony such as marriage is strictly prohibited among the same 'Bongshas' and 'Honses'. In Sonowal Kacharis society the system like monogamy is prevailing as tradition but having more than one wife is not a social bar. Widows can remarry if both parties agree. The Sonowal Kachari people suffix their 'Hons' with their names and they have their titles like 'Saikia', 'Borsaikia', 'Hazarika', 'Borah', 'Baruah' 'Dekabaruah' and 'Das' also. Although the Sonowal Kachari people do not have their own language at present, yet they have their own dialect and they speak Assamese mainly. However, some of the dialectal words they use are not available in the Assamese Dictionary.

Conclusion

The above discussion has stated that the Sonowal Kacharis is an aboriginal group of Assam. At an early age, this group of people has their own kingdom in different parts of Assam and NE. regarding their language and dialects, the history is still silent. The Sonowal Kacharis people speak in the Assamese language and it is their medium of exchange. In the process of assimilation and the formation of greater Assamese nation, the Sonowal Kacharis peoples have lost their own language and dialect. After the assimilation process and the Vaisnavite movement of Assam, a huge number of Sonowals have converted themselves into new Vaisnavite Hinduism. Earlier they were belief in the principles of Shakta. Despite that, the Sonowal Kacharies can keep their customs and traditions from which we can identify them as Sonowal. Even a section of converted Sonowal Kacharis has maintained some rituals of old tribal tradition and culture while assimilating themselves with the other Assamese people.

There are different views and narrates regarding the origin of Sonowal Kacharis. The narration of Assam history, in this regard, seems to be true. The name of identification of Sonowals comes from the practices of washing gold from the river sand. The discussion also states that there is the prohibition of marriage among the same clans & class. Monogamy is the prevailing tradition.

The constitution of India has demarcated the Sonowal as the plain tribe of Assam. At present they have a good amount of people (near about 2, 50,000) in Assam which plays a significant role in the field of political and socio-economic development of the state.

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