

The Construction Of Pan-Tangsa Identity: With Special Reference To The Socio-Cultural Elements Of The Tangsa Tribe.

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Tangsa tribe is one of the major tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh who are mostly found in the hilly areas of Changlang district. It was believed that they came to this region from Myanmar in search of agricultural land and later on they settled here. The evidence of the migration history from Myanmar can be traced through their dressed pattern and their language which is still prevalent today. Tangsa people generally follow the 'Donyi-Polo' religion. The Supreme Being is locally known as 'Rangrah'. In the present context, Theravada Buddhism as well as Christianity has made a major influence on the religious life of Tangsa people. The paper will focus on the major festival '*MolMoi*', the traditional dress pattern and language of the Tangsa tribe, which is used as an identity marker by the Tangsa tribe of North East India and the changing socio-political scenario of the tribe, will also be analyzed. It will also focus on the migration history of Tangsa tribe from Myanmar to Arunachal Pradesh and will emphasis on the oral tradition of the tribe in an attempt to create Pan-Tangsa identity.

Key words – Culture, Ethic Identity, Oral tradition, Tangsa tribe.

Introduction

The word 'Tangsa' literally means "children of hills" that cover 35 Trans Patkai ethnic groups. And it is an umbrella term used for the collection of small ethnic group who had migrated to India from Myanmar, most of them within the last couple of centuries. They had settled in the north eastern state of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. They are inhabited the hills and the valleys of the wider areas in Tirap river and the Burhi Dihing river up to Miao. They are spread in both the changlang and the Miao subdivisions. The Tangsa are used to be headhunter but after coming in contact with the British government they had completely abolished the practice of head hunting by the year 1945. The skulls in the possession were destroyed. As they were head hunters before, it came to be known that they are superstitious in some respect as for example when lightening stuck the paddy fields with standing crops the paddy field its abandoned, when the house or particular plot of land stuck by lightening no one goes to that place and its abandoned and no meat from the jungles is taken for three years. If they take meat after one year only the meat of domesticated animals and birds are taken. The family affected by lightening

remains in quarantine for three days without talking. After three days puja was performed prayed to God not to repeat the phenomenon again. They are many other superstitious beliefs among the Tangsa community. After the coming of British government and along with then Christian religion was spread among the various tribal communities. The Christianity was introduced through the missionary school established by the British government. It was said that rangpang Tangsa were the first to target for conversion. But it came to know that it was not the rangpang Tangsa but it was the Morong and Mossangs tangsa the history of conversion started. With the spread of Christianity among the Tangsas many superstitious and traditional religious belief and practices are abolished. Not all Tangsa adopted the Christian religion few tangsa communities adopted Buddhism and became the follower of Buddha. Here, also we can see some changes in it, those who are not followed of Christianity and Buddhism; they started new religion that is Rangfra the mixer of Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism.

There are more than 60,000 Tangsa living in India at present. The arrival of Tangsa in the plains from the hills, their acceptance of modern way of life and intermixing with other non-hill communities have brought them close to the rest of the world. Most of the Tangsa are tea planters and farmers, different Tangsa speaks different languages which are not mutually tangible so they used Singpho and Assamese to communicate with people. Although most Tangsa village in Assam are ethnically and linguistically mixed but in Arunachal Pradesh most of the Tangsa live village where norm is followed that is one village, one group and one language and it is still prevalent.

In the last few decade rapid changes in the life style of Tangsa are seen as a result of migration of people from Patkai hills to plains of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Furthermore it was also observed that many people had converted to Christianity in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. It was observe that they had given up old cultural practices in the lieu of adopting new cultures and religion.

The newly converted Christian Tangsa believed that new religion could also suffice their cultural identity but many came to believed that religion alone cannot help them to secure their cultural identity. On the other hand, the few Non-Christian Tangsa realized that putting religious divides before ethnic unity could lead to their ethnic annihilation. Therefore they had put intense effort on the part of both groups to come together and jointly celebrate a traditional festival to create a common pan Tangsa identity.

As Turner pointed out that (1982, 22), cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances.”

Hence, the representation of Tangsa culture as evidenced is the act of it being performed at village festivals offer valuable insights into what it means to be Tangsa today, both to the people

themselves and to those around them. Studying these processes reveal that how village festivals reflect as well as cause cultural change in Tangsa society.

Aims and objectives

The aim of this paper was to focus the traditional village Festival of Tangsa that is 'Mol' and the migration history of Tangsa from Myanmar to Arunachal Pradesh and Assam which help in the building the Pan Tangsa identity. Along with these two another objectives of the paper was to see the traditional dress pattern of the Tangsa community which also helped in the creations of own identity in the main stream society. In this regards we can talk about traditional festival of Tangsa that is MolMoi.

The Mol Moi traditional festival which is celebrated in Arunachal Pradesh by the Tangsa community. It is pre harvest festival and it marks the ending of sowing season with the end of toil and labour in the field. It signifies the beginning of New Year which is celebrated with zeal and enthusiasm. Mol is not just a festival for the Tangsa, with this festival its love and emotion for the community is seen. Through this festival departed souls are remembered and pray for them. In this People wear the colorful and culturally flamboyant traditional dresses sing and perform folk dances during the festival. The Bong, a traditional musical instrument is played during the celebrations and it is an amazing experience as the sound reverberates through the mystic setting of the Tangsa villages. The indigenous Sapolo folk dance which is the most popular folk dance form of the Tangsa community forms the main highlight of the Mol festival. In this festival animals sacrifice are done before but after coming in contact with main stream society slowly animals sacrifice was abandoned. The Rangfraa Movement had brought changes in the Tangsa community. And it had huge impact in Mol festival of Tangsa community.

About Rangfraa and its impact on Tangsa community

Many Tangsa are seen to be head hunter and followed the practice of burying their dead under their chang ghars ostensibly for the fear that enemy would steal the heads and take away as trophies. But this practice had been discontinued. The death ritual had been suitably modified, the feasting done with, and the dead body is no longer kept rotting for days waiting for family members to arrive. Animals sacrifices are allowed during the festivals and on special occasions, for instance if there is any wedding in the family, a new house is built or the steps to chang ghar are renewed, but it is not mandatory. The feasts of merit are no longer performed. The Tangsa used to spend lot of money and energy trying to appease the spirits who believed to cause death and illness. In the Rangfraism the practices of treating illness via divination and expensive sacrifices has been replaced by prayer, fasting and healing. Instead of sacrifices they offer flowers and agarbatti (incense). The Rangfraa movement in mid of 1990s by professional educated Tangsa doctor, engineer and civil servant led by the charismatic Latsam khimhum, a civil engineer by profession and government employee. The Tangsa used to spend a lot of money and energy trying to appease the malevolent spirits who they believed caused illness and misfortune. There was benevolent spirits in the traditional Tangsa community which many Tangsa pray after harvesting. According to the new religion of the Tangsa community the cultural practices followed by Rangfraa are part of people identity. Although villagers often sacrifice a buffalo during festivals, But it become mandatory instead of offering blood the

rangfraites offer rice beer and rice along with ginger at the lom-roe outside the village at the time of Mol Festival. Most of the traditional methods are retained. Before Rangfra movement animal sacrifice and rice beer drinking are were most important markers of any festivity. But Rangfra followers encouraged not to drinking rice beer and animal sacrifice.

This is seen as an internal contradiction by many outsiders, the leaders of the Rangfra movement look it as process of rationalizing their cultural and economic practices and claim that the traditional practices of Tangsa are feasible in today's world are retained and modified. Some practices of Rangfra are similar to Christianity like the practices of reading holy book on Sunday. The Baptism can be considered to be similar to initiation in Rangfraism. The marriage system that followed in Rangfraism is quite similar to Christianity. Moreover both the Christian and the Rangfra service impart a sense of fraternity and solidarity to the village community, and the services provide at least weekly meeting the community to discuss the matters. It is clear that Rangfra had adopted most of the ideology from the Christianity to keep the followers within the fold. It is also clear that rangfraism is an attempt to stop the wave of Christian conversion. In one of the book it was found that Rangfra society goes so far to appeal to all those who converted to Christianity to adopt Rangfraism, there even set a procedure for reconversion. Using the slogan "Loss of culture is loss of identity". The Rangfra society leaders have tried to keep the Tangsa from converting to Christianity.

The Christian Tangsas are not convinced about the claim made by Rangfraism and viewed that institutionalization of Rangfraism is an interpolation from other religions. It seemed to them as mockery of the old traditions". Whereas Christian Tangsa viewed that Rangfraism is certainly different from their old traditional belief system, but another Baptist Christian said that old man Tonku - wa in the mythical Rangfraa story was none other than the Noah of the Old Testament. One thing it is clear that both Rangfraites and the Baptists ask to keep the houses clean and to pray when people fall sick. From the above discussion it is clear that Rangfraa and Christianity are not different from each other.

The confusion lies here that many of the arguments used by Rangfraa society leaders imitate those used by other religious reform movements elsewhere in the region such as the Heraka movement among the the Zeme Nagas and the Donyipolo Movement among the Apatanis in Arunachal Pradesh. In this regard we can say that Rangfraa movement is a part of bigger Pan Arunachal Pradesh movement against Christian conversion that advocates a return to indigenous faiths. It was spearheaded by organizations such as Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP) based in Itanagar. It was first started among the Adis and now spread to the Nishis and the Apatanis around Itanagar. The IFCSAP is actively influenced by Hinduism and many other Hindu organizations active in the hills. It is not surprising that rangfra society activities are supported by Hindu nationalist groups like the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh) and the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad). In many calendars and publications of the Vivekananda Kendra as the God of the Tangsa and Tutsa communities in Arunachal Pradesh. Hindu organization played an active role in having the Rangfra statue made in Jodhpur in Rajasthan.

In Rangfraa idol worship was introduced which was considered to be characteristic feature of Hinduism. Many Rangfraism has criticized for introducing idol worship, but rangfra society member claim that they had no other option since they do not have symbol like cross (like Christianity). One thing it was clear that Rangfraa houses have images like Shiva and Vishnu which they cannot explain. The image of Rangfraa looks like tribal Shiva and the Keychus (god of Rangfra) not only possessed the spirit of Rangfraa but also the spirits of Hindu Gods and Goddesses such as Shiva and Kali. Followers of Rangfra made a comment that “Rangfraa and Shiva are same and they are like brothers”.

Like Buddhism, Rangfraism is said to be the offshoot of Hinduism and the fact is that main alter in the rangfra prayer house was like that in a Hindu temple. Therefore it was not surprising that many practices of Hinduism are adopted by Rangfra besides idol worship, the uses of Diyas (oil lamp), and the uses of Agarbatti (incense) during the services, offering flowers, ringing of bells when entering the prayer house, the uses of tulusi leaves (basil leaves) are all essential Hindu temple rituals. Rangfra society leaders have been accused of playing into the hands of Hindu Fundamentalist groups. Rangfra leader have said that there is no difference between the Janajati (ethnic Communities) and the Hindus. This fact was known to every Hindu from very beginning, so they never felt the need to convert the Janajati to Hinduism as they are already Hindu. The link with Hinduism was clear and since the primary aim of Rangfra society leaders to stop conversion to Christianity which is labeled a foreign religion,

In the recent year it was found that Rangfraa had try to attract many Tangsa people through the healing power of Keychus because the miracles and healing power had proof that power of Rangfra. It was clear that Rangfra had attracted many Christian Tangsa to reconvert to Rangfra but some were it was seen that when Rangfra healing power does not work people sacrifices animals. Many of the Follower are not Tangsa and saying that Rangfraism based on traditional belief system of the Tangsa is not enough as this new reform movement has still some way to go to institutionalize and rationalize the traditional belief system of the Tangsa and combine it with the rest of the world in order to resolve the contradictions in the teaching and attracted other religions in the modern world.

Migration history and the Apparel of the Tangsa

The migrations history of Tangsa community to India not much known but it was assumed that they migrated to India during twelfth century and continued till date. In this view few lines are written about the migrations and coming of Tangsa to India (Arunachal Pradesh and Assam) from Myanmar and they relations with the Ahom King during the Twelfth century and help them to settle in Patkai range of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

The exact date of migration of Tangsa to northern slope was not properly known. The basis of determining the date to be the twelfth century migration of Tangsa community to India can be assumed after the invasion of first Ahom king Sukhpha. According to Assam Buranjis, the Kacharis were at the Mohong country before and after the arrival of ahom king. The kachari king

Bicharpati Dersongpa was driven out of Mohong by Sukapha. In 1490 AD the kachari king made inroad into Ahom country and defeated Ahom king. On being defeated the Ahom king made a friendship by paying tribute. The tribute consisted of girl to the kachari king twelve female slaves and pari of elephants. But kachari king was defeated by Dihingia Raja and drove out the kachari king from hill to the south of Dikhu River. When the kacharis vacated Mohong and Borhat the Noctes and Wanchos occupied the place in the early sixteenth century. All the rivers and streams of Mohong including salt wells here under the Noktes. The Dihingia Raja had to fight and free the Mohong from Noktes in 1536 AD. It was clear that Noktes and Wanchos came after Twelfth century. It was Tangsa who all came during twelfth century and occupied Dihing and Tirap valley. When Sukapha came across the Patkai he found naga village and subjugated them. They engaged in making bamboo rafts for Sukapha to cross the Dihing River. So it was assumed that twelfth century can be taken as probable date for the Tangsa to come to the northern side of India. Likewise all the indigenous sub tribe of Tangsa started to entered from Burma present Myanmar from time to time through various passes on the Patkai range. The Tikhaks, mossangs and Longwin entered through the Okhutohap, Ranghill Ranglum, Pangsau passes respectively. It was clear from the above discussion that Tangsa had migrated from Myanmar to India before that coming of the Nocktes and Wancho group other ethnic groups Northeast India. But we cannot clear say the reason behind the migration of Tangsa community to India but one thing was cleared that they came to India during Twelfth century and made a strong relation with then Ahom King. Later it help other sub Tangsa community to migrated from the Native land Myanmar to India (Arunachal Pradesh and Assam). Though the tangsa had migrated to India from Myanmar during the twelfth century the biological cultural and social relation between Tangsas of two nations cannot be ignored. While talking to few respondent it came to know that Tangsa of Myanmar and Arunachal Pradesh has strong relationship, though they have language and cultural difference. If we see the relationship between of two nations it came to know that most of the Tangsa living in India they grandparents or they maternal grandparents are living in Myanmar. Not only that some family member of both the countries related with each other by through marriages. As it was mention above that Tangsa came to India through a pass known as Pangsau pass. Pangsau is small village near the India border and it is the meeting point of the Tangsas of two nations. In this place people meet each other and exchange social and cultural relation not only social and cultural relationship are exchange but other valuable things are also exchange. Now Pangsau pass has became one of the market area and people of two nations meet for three days in month and exchange goods.

Every ethnic communities or groups have they own way of life and dress pattern that help them to create its own identity among the main stream society. After the migration of the Tangsa community from Myanmar to India in order to survive and to make they own identity. In this form Tangsas made their identity through the beautifully coloured dresses in the society and created own Pan Tangsa identity. Not only the colourful dress but the apparel of the community

was also the reason behind the creation of own identity society. As Tangsa are original inhabitants of Myanmar. They used to wear the Burmese type dress in some way. The male used to wear check pattern lungi (sarong) woven in loom. The upper part is used to be covered by a cotton vest or a shirt and sometimes a black coat. Those who cannot afford to buy a dress from market wear dresses locally made from homespun cloth made of local cotton. On the head, a piece of white or checked cloth is wrapped round the head as a turban, leaving the chignon clear on the top. This same fashion found among the Malaysians, Javanese and the Balinese. Other preferable apparels are cane belt mostly dyed black and coiled round the waist. But nowadays the Tangsas don't use this other than on ceremonial occasions. Some of the hill men wear a belt of woven fabric or a metal belt or a belt of Buffalo hide which are locally made. Necklaces and chains of conch shell discs, spondylous discs and beads, coral beads, tiny beads of coloured glass and stones are valuable ornaments. Similarly the dress of the Tangsa women consists of the checked patterned mekela (sarong) with large horizontal lines in white, black and yellow. It is wrapped round the loom and suspended up to the ankles. The Tangsa women are expert weavers. For the rough used the black sarong were use. A black velvet blouse with a side pocket for ceremonial occasions and an ordinary blouse for the daily use in the upper garment. A white piece of cloth round the head like turban, i.e. as a coif, another addition to married women. The ornaments used by women among all the groups are bead necklaces of different designs, grass chain, necklaces of silver coin, coral beads slave bangles of brass, large earrings of brass wooden earplugs and earplug of ember. After coming in assimilation with the mainstream society the ornaments and dresses of Tangsas are getting huge recognition in national as well as international market. Thus we can say that Tangsas are not only the different in religion belief and practices but uniqueness in the dresses and apparel made them different from the rest of the tribal or ethnic community living in north east India. In the apparel of the Tangsa slight changes are observed nowadays due to the assimilations of the community with the mainstream society. But still they originality and traditional pattern are not hidden.

Conclusions

In the concluding line we can say that Tangsa known as the people of the hill had its own identity in the form of dance, religion and languages, festival and dress pattern that made them different from the other tribal communities. These identities help them to create pan Tangsa identity among the main stream society. Along with the dress pattern and migration history of Tangsa to India another thing that help in the creations of the pan Tangsa identity that is Rangraism which help them to create its own identity by adopting some of the ideology from the Christianity and Hinduism and creating own religious belief and practices. In this process we can say that Tangsa small frontier community migrated from Myanmar come to terms with the changes life world and reacted the friction and interaction both internal and externally with other communities as well as with the neighbouring frontier. The revival and survival that bear witness

to the complex interplay between the resilience and transformation also help them to create its identity in the process of domination and assimilation.

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