

Sarania Kachari- A Tribe in Assam

Abstract :- Assam is a land of harmony of various ethnic tribes. Since the past, various ethnic groups migrated to Assam. According to the anthropologists and the linguists various groups including Negrito, Austroloid, Mongoloids and Dravid lived in the areas and at last the Aryan or Nordic came during the first A.D. Except the Aryans, all others were tribal groups. Most of the original groups were Mongloids who included the Bodos also.. Sarania Kachari is a branch of Bodo tribe, a major Mongoloid group. Actually, some Bodo-Kacharis came under the influence of any vaishnavite gurus during new-vaishnavite age and abandoned “ Kairataja” (In Mahabharata age, the inhabitants of assam were called Kirat and the religion of kirat was Kairataja) and accepted Vaishnavism. They were later called ‘ Sarania’. This research paper puts forward a study of Sarania – Kachari as a tribal group along with the social, cultural, religious and economic aspects of the tribe.

Key Words:- Sarania Kachari, tribal, religion, culture.

1. **Introduction**:- From the Anthropological and linguistic perspective scholars like Delton, Risley , B.S.Guha, Suniti Kr. Chattopadhyaya etc. have divided Indian people in to six division- the Negreto, the Proto-Austroloid, the Mediterranean, the western Brachycephals, the Armenoid. and the Nordic .But in Ancient Assam, mainly the Negrito, the Australoid, and the Mongoloid groups inhabited. Later in around first A.D., Aryan arrived assam. In Ancient Sanskrit literature (Ramayana, Mahabharata, Joginitantra, Kalikapurana etc.). The past inhabitants of Assam were described to be Mlesh, Nisad or Kirat who belonged to the Mongoloids. Those Mongoloids included Bodo-Kacharis, Rabha, Hajong, Moran, Motok, Karbi, Demasa, Sonowal-Kachari, Deuri, ,Chutiya, Daonia, Fakial, Mikir, lalung etc. Bodo-Kacharis is a major tribe living in Brahmaputra valley. Sarania kachari is a branch of Bodo-Kacharis. Because, of some social, political and religious reasons, a section of Mongoloid people adopted Hinduism and consequently mingling of Mongoloids and Aryan resulted a new tribe named Sarania Kacharis. However, after the advent of Shankardev’s new Vaishnavite religions this term was used. Shankardev and his disciples preached Vaishnavite religions among the various tribal people and those are called Sarania Kacharis. Ofcourse, before Shankardev also some tribals took Hinduism who were initiated by Brahmins and they accepted Aryan culture and introduced themselves as Khatriya.

Sarania Kacharis have been living mainly at the North Bank of the Brahmaputra. They are scattered in Kamrup (Metro), Kamrup (Rural), Udalguri, Darrang, Sonitpur, Baksa, Chirang, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Lakhimpur, and in Morigaon District of Assam.

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I. Sarania Kachari- A Real tribal Group

In recent time, some people have brought a controversy that Sarania Kachari is not a tribal, rather a non-tribal community . But this allegation is not found to be a true. A Bodo language researcher Bhaben Narzy in his book ‘Boro Kacharir Samaj aru Sanskriti’ mentions that some Boro-Kachari people became disciples of any Aryan Goswami and thus initiation to God made them well known as Sarania. They believed that this initiation made them sacred. They abandoned their own language and accepted Assamese language as their own mother tongue. Although they changed their food habits in some extent but later they remained intact with their old cultures (P-17). This recognition of the researcher like Bhaben Narzy is certainly a miles- stone in support of genuineness of Sarania Kachari as a tribal group.

Moreover, another author Ratneswar Basumatary also affirms in his article 'Boro Janajati Samikhyatmak Adhyan' that Sarania Kachari belongs to the greater Bodo or Bodo Origin. He says that these Bodos are named differently in different states in India, i.e. Bodos in Bihar are called Hazari, Mesh in West Bengal, Hajong in Bangladesh and in other places they are known as Bodo, Bodo-Kachari, Kachari, Koch, Sonowal - Kachari, Thengal - Kachari, Madahi, Garo, Moran, etc.. E.T. Delton in his Population of the Assam valley (Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal 2nd part) says, "the Kacharis are found in small district settlements all over upper Assam. The majority called themselves 'Sorania' that is, purified Kacharis, to indicate that they have adopted the customs of the Hindus and abstain from forbidden food.' Thus, Delton described Sarania – Kachari as Kocari early in 1872. The Bodo or Kochari who abandoned their lingua Franca are again termed to be a tribal by another researcher Sidney Endle. In his book *The Kachari* (P-5) a list of the Kachari or tribals is published and Moholia, Phulgoria or Sarania of West Darrang are given the status of "Hindu Kachari". As like the other tribals i.e. Bodo, Kachari, Rabha, Demasa, Hojai, Lalung, Hajong, Tripuri, Garo etc., Moholia, Phulgoria, and Sarania are also mentioned to be Kacharis. (P-5) by him.

Hence, with those opinions by the researchers we can ascertain that Sarania-Kachari is a branch originating from Bodo Kachari. Among the different tribals of Assam, Sarania Kachari is the second largest population and they had been adopting different Assamese titles like Das, Deka, Borah, Mahanta, Saikia, Choudhury etc. even up to 70's and 80's of 20th century. But, for the sake of their tribal status they now compulsorily use the titles like Das-Sarania, Deka- Sarania or Sarania.

II. Social and cultural life of Sarania.

Sarania Kacharis live in different parts of Assam and they are mostly peasants. Now their population in Assam is about 5 Lakhs. Although they have abandoned their Kachari language and adopted Assamese language, still a tribal

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tune is dominant in their Assamese pronunciation. The tribal impact in their life style and also in their traditions, customs and rules has added a unique charm in the cultural life of Sarania-Kachari. But it is a matter of concern that TRI Popular Series Book *Tribes of Assam* published by Janajati Gobeshana Pratisthan' (Govt. of Assam) has not mentioned about Sarania Kachari.

Like the other tribal societies Sarania Kacharis also neatly build their houses of choices and live with their families. It may be of a unit family or a compound. One and half decade ago they were mostly in joint families. Women of Sarania-Kachari always contribute to the economy of a family. Women equally participate in household and social matters. Socially and economically they are not more advanced. Like all other tribes of Assam they are not found to be advanced in educational field also. In spite of being an agriculture based society amount of land in their possession is low. Developmental scheme of government is yet to reach them. Deprivation of education leads to lack of awareness. Hence, they have not achieved the expected goals in terms of socio-economic conditions and not flourishing like the other tribals.

III. A. Festivals of Sarania Kochari All Tribes have some own festivals and Sarania- Kochari is also not an exception. The main festivals of Sarania are-Bah Goxai Utsav, Noan (Na-Khowa) Khoa Utsav, Bihu, Bator Puja, Hom Pura, and Goxai Bah Khohoa Utsav, Bamblepita Utsav etc.

Bah Goxai Utsav or Goxai Bah Utsav is a traditional festival of Sarania-Kochari. Having a Goxaighar is an important aspect of every Sarania-Kochari Village. On the last day (Domahi) of Chatrya, Bah Goxai is decorated. After the rituals of Goru Bihu all elders and the younger of the village gather in the Goxaighar and the Deuri (the priest) fetch a sword from the Goxaighar and with two men

go to cut a Bamboo, usually, an adult Jaati bamboo (*Bambusa nutans*) is selected for the purpose. The bamboo is cut in to a piece of nine feet five inch long. The bamboo is washed and smoothened well. Then the bamboo is wrapped with a white cloth. The white cloth is again tied with Handkerchief, colorful Gamosha etc and well decorated. At the upper end of the bamboo a brass crown is put and the bamboo is rubbed with mustard oil and Sindur. The bamboo is then tied to the altar of Goxaighar wishing best wishes to all for the coming new year.

The next day being the first day of Bohag month all villagers gather in the Goxaighar after bath and carries the bamboo door to door with sounds of beating Dhol, Taal, Sankha (The conch-Shell), Ghanta (bell), Barkaah etc. Two persons are engaged to carry the bamboo. The front side carries is called Agdhara and the backside carrier is called Gordhara. The Agdhara always has a Bata to hold the bamboo vertically. The Bata being full of tree leaves and flowers is covered with a white cloth. When the group of villagers reaches a home the Agdhara directs the bamboo upward and the Pasdhara holds it for some time . The Agdhara then keeps

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his Bata at a specific place well cleaned by the host and the Pasdhara places the bamboo vertically at the Bata. At the arrival of Goxai Bah the host brings the offerings like incense stick, earthen lamp, coins etc. in a piece of banana leaf. Gathering people then sing 'Naam'. Of course, sometimes they cut short the programme. The host kneels down with devotion in front of the offerings and all the villagers pronounce blessings. They also give him flower from the Bata as a mark of blessings and leave for another house after joyfully taking Maah-Praxad offered by the host. Usually, Bah-Goxai is carried first to the house of an honorable person of the village and then, to the house of the Deuri and lastly to the houses of other common people. At the end of the day Bah-Goxai is again replaced at the Goxaighar, thus villagers roam door to door with the Bah Goxai up to the seventh of Bohag. Part of rice, money collected during those seven days is used for the development of Goxaighar and the rest part is spent for a feast arranged by the villagers.

Hompura and Goxai Bah Khohoa Utsav :- Some people of Saranias observe the Hompura (Sacrificial fire) and Goxai bah Khohoa on the 13th of Bahag, some others on seventh of the same month, while the rest observe on 31st of Bahag. On this auspicious occasion Villagers gather in Goxaighar and the priest offers hom for the welfare of the people. Various offerings owed to God by the villagers are done during Hom. Naam-Kirtan is also sung during home. Some even bring Duck, Pegeon ,Goat etc. and let free as a sacrifice to God. After hom, with devotion people kneel down before the altar, then, two youth fetch the Bamboo from the Goxaighar. People participate the occasion with the sounds of Dhol, Taal, Ghanta, Sankha etc. and moves around the Goxaighar for seven times. After that Bah-Goxai is again replaced on two sticks of Bamboo in the Goxaighar. The clothes like Rumal, Gamosha, and whisk, crown etc, are also removed from the bamboo and stored well in the box of Goxaighar after sprinkling with hom water. Again, the bamboo of previous year is placed in a raft made of bamboo tree along with offerings and floated in the river water. Four youths carry the raft and the villagers follow them with the sounds of beating of Dhol, Taal etc. As they return from the river it is customary that no one looks backward which is believed to be inauspicious for villagers and thus Goxai Bah Khahoa Utsav ends.

Bator Puja:- Another religious function of Sarania- Kachari is Bator Puja. In order to recover from many inauspicious things or evils they offer Puja floating a raft at the river. This Puja is held on the street or at the end part of a village and so called a Bator Puja (A Puja of street).

On this occasion, the Villagers arrange the Hom Pura at Goxaighar and the next day Bator Puja is offered. In this Puja, for a goddess one offering is done. A Temple like raft is built and decorated with flowers. A Hucca is made out of papaya branch and placed here. Two pigeons, two eggs, two Mango

leaves, a jack fruit, Banana fruits with flower (there should have at least three bunches of banana) are

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essential things. Ghee, honey, incense sticks, Dhuna (a kind of tree and its resins) are also necessary . Offering those things with Urulee, women sing Naam clapping hands and at the end of the Naam float the raft along with the offering items.

Bamblepita Utsav :- Another peculiar festival of Sarania is Bamblepita Utsav. Through this festival they bid farewell to Summer and welcome Autumn. This festival begins on the day of the full moon of the month of Bhadra and lasts for five days. Bamble is Bam meaning Bamboo and Bol meaning speaking by taping and altogether that means singing of song striking a small piece of bamboo at a long one. Youths of the Village make bamboo stick long up to the height of their shoulders. Singing song they strike the long stick with a small piece of bamboo (one feet long). This Bamble Pita song enriched the folk song of Assamese literature. Youth of a village visit the houses of the village singing Bamble Pita song and people offer them rice, money etc.. They pour blessings for the well being of the host. At the end of the Bamble Pita Utsav, youths arrange a feast with the funds collected during the festival.

Noa Khoa Utsav :-_Noa Khoa Utsav is a festival of unity among the people of Assam. Although Saranias leave their own language, culture etc. mingling themselves with Aryan , still their festivals carry the tribal characteristics. Noa-Khoa Utsav also has its uniqueness. On the 9th of Aghon month Noa-Khoa is observed. They believe that the rice from the new harvest should be used for that feast so, they collected the Saali Paddy early so as to arrange the fast on the 9th of Aghon. In the past all the villagers observed the Noa-Khoa on the same day of 9th of Aghon.

On this day, Sarania Kachari hold a Goxai Puja and sacrifice a duck to satisfy all the gods and goddesses . Again, offerings are done in front of the granary. These offerings include Maah Dal along with new rice from the harvest. At first a meal is offered for forefathers at the back side of the house. Then two bundles of sheaves of paddy are offered to the cows at the cowshed as new rice. And then a meal is given to dogs. After this, people are offered to enjoy the feast.

All the festivals discussed above reveal the uniqueness of Sarania-Kachari tribe. Above all, they observe the Bihu, Moh Kheda Utsav etc. But in their social customs and rules like marriage, cremation, birth related rituals, Ainam, Biya Nam etc. they follow the Assamese systems of customs and rules.

III.B. Songs, Dance and Musical Instruments:-All tribes have songs and dances as their recreational things amidst their daily life activities like fishing, hunting and agricultural activities. Sarania -Kachari has their own dances and songs. Among all these, Machmoria Nritya (Dances of Fishing), Bumble Pita Nritya, Dhepa Dhuliya Nritya, Palu Poha Nritya, Sikari Nritya, Deudhoni Nritya, Saktola Bihu Nritya etc.. With these dance performances they also sing song with their musical instruments made out of traditional materials like bamboo etc..'Machmoria nritya' of Sarania

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Kachari is of three types -Jakoi nritya, Polo nritya and Jakoi-Polo nritya. During summer season, People go for fishing when the wetlands of Assam become full of newly –bred local fishes. Sarania people never go for fishing before 'Amoti' (time believed to be mother Earth's menstruation). At the end of 'Amoti' young women and go for fishing in groups. They use Jakoi (a bamboo made fishing tool) and Khaloi (creel) to catch fishes and then they wear traditional 'Mekhela' of green colour and tie Gamosha on head and also around their waists.

On the other hand, Polo dance is performed by male as 'Polo' (a fishing basket of bamboo) is used by male to catch fishes. During a Machmoria nritya's song in Assamese language they sing-

‘Oh aihat baihat jakoi khaloi lou

Amotir sua gel ami mach marong jou...’

Dhepa- Dhulia dance is performed with drum beating. During the dance a side of the ‘Dhol’ is kept wet just to produce a flat sound. Therefore, the drum is called a ‘Dhepa Dhol’. The main performer of the group is ‘Agdhulia’ or ‘Gain’ and others as ‘Pali’ follow suit in chorus. usually, six persons form the group . Two perform as drummers. They wear traditional costumes. ‘Dhol’ made of mango tree and goat skin is used. Following is a song sung during the dance performance -

‘Oh aapi kihedi khali vat aapi kihedi khali vat-

Hahe- mahe bonnir bhate tit kella pat

Aapi kihedi khali vat’

Mohkheda dance is performed mainly during the Mohkheda festival. The word ‘Mohkheda’ means – ‘driving away the mosquitoes’ for the year . This festival is observed for five days which starts on ‘Purnima’ (The full moon day) of ‘Aghon’ month. The young boys dance and sing in groups with clubs in hand. They visit door to door of the village and sometimes dressed like a ‘buffalo’ or a bear. A line of Mohkheda nritya’s song is quoted –

Aghon mahor purnima hol

Mohkhedba hokum hol

Haalti houre thupri hao

Kanaikujai ekphal hao..”

III.C. Dresses and Ornaments:-

Like all Assamese people Sarania also wears clothes of Eri, Muga, Silk and cotton Products.

Although Sarania Kachari women wear the common Assamese Page : 6

Riha-mekhela Sadar at home. They wear Methoni (A mekhela worn tightly up to the breast) while going for fishing and other household works and also use Gamosha as headgear. Sarania has a fondness for green colour. Man also wear green Gamosha. Of course, in modern age all tribals are now familiar with Pant-Shirt, coat etc. The aged people only use Suria-Panjabi, Endi-Posora etc. Women also wear Saree, Blouse, Selwar-Kurta etc.

In the use of ornaments Saranias have no any difference with greater Assamese society and they use gold and silver ornaments in neck, ear, finger and toe.

III. D. Food Habits of Sarania

The chief food grains of Assam are Paddy and Mustard Oil. All tribes and ethnic people of Assam take rice as their major food items. Thus, Sarania Kachari also use rice to prepare various delicious recipies. Khar (A Curry prepared with alkali or soda), Tita (bitter tasting items), Tenga (Sour Tasting food), fried food in oil, roasted food, toasted food etc. are their favorite dishes. They commonly cook meat and fish and also dry food to preserve for future. Dried meat of duck and pig are their favorites. From the ‘Bara’ rice they prepare a delicious liquor called ‘Mera.’ ‘Mera’ is usually prepared during the festivals like Bihu etc. After meal they take Betel Nut and Betel leaves as Muhudi (Mouth freshener). Like all other Assamese people Betel nut and Betel leaves are extensively used by Saranias during various social programmes.

III. **Conclusion:-** With this study we can come to a conclusion that with their rich cultures Sarania Kachari is a unique tribe of Assam. They are a branch of Boro Kachari. The Boro Kacharis, who have abandoned 'Kairataja' and accepted new Vaishnavism are called Sarania-Kacharis. With the mingling of Kairataja and Hinduism a separate culture has been created through the life style of Sarania Kachari. Although they are rich in festivals, songs, and dance etc. economically and educationally they are not advanced. Goxaighar occupies a very honorable place in their religious life. Their social and religious life is centred around the Goxaighar. Bamboo being as an essential thing of life, they offer Puja to Bamboo tree like God. Finally, we can sum up that the language, literature and culture of Sarania Kachari always carry a strong message of unity and fraternity in Assamese society.

We always notice a tune of harmony in every aspect of religion, society and literature of Sarania Kachari.

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