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ABSTRACT

The Wancho are one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, North-East India. Ethnically they are belonging to mongoloid race. According to census reports for 2001, their total population is 47788. In 18th Century Some of the Wancho people migrated to Assam from Arunachal Pradesh. They have been living in Assam with their indigenous socio-cultural identity ever since. Due to the impact of the mainstream culture of Assam, the Wancho society is changing its age old tradition. This study intends to bring light in their recent cultural tradition. Especially the festivals and ceremonies of the Wanchos of Assam are highly influenced by the undergoing process of Acculturation. This study focused on their festivals and ceremonies which are evolve in the cultural environment of Assam.

INTRODUCTION

India’s North-Eastern and Barma’s South West regions are the main habitants of the Naga tribes. One of these Naga people is the Wancho tribe. So, the Naga tribe should be discussed before discussing this tribe. The term ‘Naga’ refers to the tribes of Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and particular areas of Assam with similar socio-cultural ingredient. Tribes like Ao, Angami, Sema, Lotha, Rangma, Kanyak, Phom etc. are known as Naga tribes in this region. Nocte and Wancho of Arunachal Pradesh, zeliang of North Kachar of Assam are also included in the large Naga community. These tribes are also known by different names by others or themselves. For example, Ao Naga identified themselves as ‘Aor’; on the other hand Sema, Lotha and Konyak Nagas called ‘Ao’ Nagas as ‘Cholimi’, Paimi, and Chongli accordingly. The Nagas were also named after their regions or area. They were given area wise names like hatigoria (Ao), Namsangia(Konyak), Borduaria (Nocte) etc. Many anthropologists and historians present their views regarding the term ‘Naga’ but it’s not clear when and why it began to use. It may also assume that the other tribes started calling these specific people as ‘Naga’. The Assamese people of the valley used to call them Naga referring to their hill residence. The term ‘Naga’ originated from the word ‘Nagna’ means naked in Assamese. But some scholars describe it differently. S.H.M Rizvi and Shibani Roy writes in this regard, “his term when assimilated within Naga languages (Kanyak, Ao and others) become ‘noka’ and ‘nog’ which means ēfolkī ēmenī or people.” (Rizvi, 2006). Some other scholar argues for the same origin of ‘Nag’ or snake dynasty of ancient Indian literature for the ‘Naga’people. But this view is not acceptable. There was no tradition of worshipping Nag or snakes found in the Naga people of North-East India like some communities and tribes.

According the Ahom Chronicales, during the period of Ahom kindom (1228-1826) in Assam there are good political relationship was maintain between the Hill Nagas and the Ahoms and people of the Valley. There are controversies regarding the origin of the Nagas. Many scholar comments that the original place of habitation of Nagas were South-East Asia’s countries including Thailand, Mynnmar, Philipine, Indonesia, Malaysia, Indonesia. Some tribes of these countries have the same kind of socio-cultural traditions. The Borneo based tribes Dayak has the head hunting tradition like the Nagas.

The migration time periods of the Naga tribes are also different. There can be seen mixed anthropological elements in the Naga tribes. In this regard, B.B. Kumar said, “The Naga tribes have mixed origin. They have incorporated Mongoloid, Austric, Aryan and even Negroid ethnic elements in them. Even the individual Naga tribes have taken ethnic elements from diverse sources”. (Kumar,2005) According to Scholar
Lila Gogoi Nagas have some similarities with primitive Igorot and Dayak tribes of Philippine and Indonesia. He also said that once upon a time the nagas lived in the mid of China and from that place they were gradually migrated to the south. (Gogoi, 2006)

In this study the historical and cultural background of the Wanchos of Assam have been discussed to analyse the framework of their traditional festivals and ceremonies.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The Study of this selected topic has been done by descriptive method. The outline of this study has drawn from the field work in various Wancho populated area. Wancho is one of the major tribes of South-west part of Arunachal Pradesh. They live in 41 villages of six revenue circles-Longding, Kanubari, Pongchou, Wakka, Pumao and Lawnu. According to census reports on 2001, their total population is 47788. They are the third largest tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Wancho’s Literacy rate is 25.4 per cent which is significantly lower than other major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. In Assam, their population is only 650 and they live in Dibrugarh and Charaidado district of Assam. Daopani village of Charaidado district is the main living place of Wancho with a population of 550 Wancho people.

Wancho dialects are listed in endangered languages of India by UNESCO. They mostly use Assamese and Nagamese as lingua franca for communication with other people. Besides, some secondary sources are used to enrich the study.

**DISCUSSION**

**Historical background**

The history of Wancho people of Arunachal Pradesh is harder to analysis due to the lack of written documents and evidence.

Like the other Naga tribes, they have no writing tradition among them. Therefore, we can only draw some outline of their past with the help of folk literature of their society. In the old days, Wancho are also known as Rangpang. They were also named with their native lands like Bormithunia, Banpheria, Banchangia, Harubanchagia etc. Manlong Ralongham collected four myths for their name. The term ‘Wancho’ come from the word ‘Wang’ means ‘King’ and ‘Cho’ means ‘natives of the hills’. It may also derived from ‘wan-to’ means ‘followers of the king’. Some people observed the name ‘wancho’ originated with the word ‘wan-to’ means followers of the law. The name may also have a connection with their society. ‘Wangham’ family member can be selected as their king. Their society are now in the stage of extinction. In 1978 the Wancho Nagas of Assam widely adopted Christianity after establishment of the Church in their village. They were practicing Vaishnavism before this. Despite the fact that they are Christian, some primitive or tribal elements are present in Wancho society to worship of their god ‘Rangwan’. (Ralongham, 2013)

According the Ahom chronicles of Assam the Wancho were mentioned as ‘Banpheria’ and ‘Banchang’ during the war of 1665 between these territories of Wancho. The Ahom king Chuklengmoung stood on the side of Banpheria wancho and Ahom forces fought under the command of Kundo Khamon and Porbatia Deka and defeated the Banchangia Wanchos. (Dutta, 1990). Wanchos had paid taxes to the Ahom kingdom for many centuries. Since 1835 the Wancho tribes were explored by the British Administration and at first they took initiative to document their society and heritage. We could say that from the time immemorial there was a good trade relationship of hill’s Wancho with the people of the valleys of Assam.

**Ethnic Identity**

No any clear record has been found regarding their ethnic identity. Most of the Anthropologist listed them in Mongoloid race. According to H.M. Bareh, “the Wanchos also show improvised features like the Noctes. The acuitine nose is just like the Aryans. Their features resemble those of the hillmans of Western Himalayan tracts in many details. They are decidedly of Mongoloid race but Aryan admixture cannot be ruled out.” (Bareh, 2007). We already mentioned the mixed socio-cultural features of Nagas. In this case, we can propound the same mixed ethnic characteristics are present among Wancho. Moreover, the presents of Aryan race characteristics cannot be denied.

**Migration**

Reliable information about the migration of Wancho in Arunachal Pradesh is not present till today. There is no information has been found about Wanchos in Pre Ahom ruling period. But as mentioned in the Ahom chronicles the first Ahom King Chukafa encountered with the Nagas on his way to Assam gives us a hint about their habitation in the present location at that time. (Barboruah, 2003). According the myths of Wancho, they migrated from a place called Nyanu Ophannu situated towards the southwest beyond the Patkai hills. Further in time they divided in two major groups, Tangjan and Changjan and established their villages in the Upper hills and the lower hills area.

**Cultural and Social Background**

Wancho society has their own kinship system. Only ‘Wangham’ family member can be selected as their king. Their villages are also controlled socially and politically by village councils. These councils handle all the problems and issues of their society. Village dormitories known as ‘murung’are theessential part of Wancho villages from the time immemorial. Murung played an inevitable role as a social organization in the Wancho Society. Nowadays, their society is rapidly changing. Especially in Assam the Wancho are highly influenced by the mainstream culture of Assam. Although the Wancho Nagas are known as tribal people, yet their traditional culture is losing its base among them due to the process of Acculturation. The Wanchos of Upper Assam proselytize to Christian which effect their traditional beliefs and rites. Primitive traditions which are known as their characteristics of society are now in the stage of extinction. In 1978 the Wancho Nagas of Assam widely adopted Christianity after establishment of the Church in their village. They were practicing Vaishnavism before this. Despite the fact that they are Christian, some primitive or tribal elements are present in Wancho society of Assam. Moreover, the belief of almighty-omniscient god ‘Rangwa’ is present among them. Existences of these kinds of religious beliefs stimulate Wancho society to growing with the preservation of tradition and accept the modernity in a parallel manner.

**Festivals and Ceremonies of Wancho**

Wanche are known for their vibrant indigenous cultural heritage. In modern time, many social customs and ritual have been discarded by them. However, the Wancho Nagas of Assam are celebrating many of their traditional festivals and taking part in ceremonies in current time. Furthermore, many
specimens of acculturation have also be find out in Wancho society of Assam. In this research paper we are trying to highlight some of these festivals and ceremonies.

**Oriya**

Oriya is the main festival of Wancho society that has been celebrated annually. In some places this festival has been known as ‘Oiyyele’. Oriya festival is related to agriculture of Wancho Nagas. Since time immemorial, it has been celebrated to evoke the blessing of their worshipped supreme god ‘Rangwa’ for better harvest. Oriya festival rejuvenated the cultural heritage of Wancho tribe. Jhum cultivation has been practiced by the Wancho nagas from old time. This type of Cultivation needs group work and abounding physical labour. This festival strengthens the emotional integration, communal harmony, unity among them. They also believed it bring prosperity and happiness in their society.

The diverse cultural environment of Assam is giving the Oriya festival a different shape. The procedure of celebrating Oriya in Assam is different from Arunachal Pradesh. Oriya festival has been got greatly influenced by the Assamese culture in Assam. It’s worthy to say that its taking an Assamese cultural shape by adopting its elements in different ways. After analysing the the pattern of ritual and customs related to Oriya, we can distinctly find out some area based tradition and manners. The wanchos of Assam called their Oriya festival as ‘Wancho Bihu’. Bihu is the major festival of Assam known as-Rangali bihu, Kati bihu, Bhugali Bihu. They adopt this name from Assam’s native language Assamese. The time of the celebration of this Festival has been changed to the first month of Assamese calender ‘Bohag mah’. In this month the Rangali Bihu have also been celebrated by the other ethnic groups of Assam. They accept these changes to follow the mainstream culture of Assam. Moreover, The day before Rangali bihu is known as ‘Uruka’. Wancho nagas have also included a preparation they with some ritual in Oriya according to the Assamese culture.

In the first they of Oriya, the villagers clean up the dormitory ‘murmung’ together for the maintenance of hygiene of their sacred place ‘Pahom’. In front of this building, they build a structure of raised bamboo platform (Chang). The height of 1.5 feet and wide of 10 square feet have been considered a good ‘chang’ from the festival. According to the tradition, a ritual named ‘Wanklatjosa’ has been performed by the old people of the village under a specific tree. In the old days, a buffalo had been sacrificed in the name of mighty ‘Rangwa’. But now it has been done with roosters and ducks. They take ‘pithaguri’ (powdered rice) as a meal. This tradition is actually come from Assam’s mainstream culture. The popularity of this type of special food in the festival has come from the Assamese society. This was not present in theirtradition.

On the first day of celebration all the members of the village get together in Pahom. Songs and dance have been performed by them with pleasure and joy. These songs are known as ‘Ariifura’ means ‘songs of bihu’. On this day, the traditional log drum has been played by the villager. Log drum of Naga people has a unique identity. This indigenous instrument is also an indispensable part of Wancho society. This wooden instrument is also present in some other tribes of North-East. In Assam’s Wancho society Log dram is made by a 20-25 feet long size of a tree log. Usually it has a diameter of 3-4 feet. The Outer bark of the log is removed and also the inner side hollowed out by skilled persons. After the decorion of the log it can be played with a group 10-12 person by hitting it on the top side with some heavy drumsticks. It is used in various purposes. In the old days it used for warn enemy attacks, wild animal chases, fire alarm or death announcement in the village. Its heavy sound can hear from many miles farther. Every sound emit made by log drum is related to a different meaning. A logdrum used in a village for many decades. Some Wancho villages changed it after the death of a king and welcome the new ‘Wangham’ of King. Many rituals and omens are related to logdrum making and its uses. In ‘Ponggan’ ceremony of newly crowned king the Wancho nagas mainly deal with the establishment of new logdrum with a six day schedule. In every step of making logdrum many rituals are practiced by them. It includes the slaughter of pigs, buffalo, cocks, various divination by Gampa (priest), omens etc. Some restriction with logdrum also found in Wancho society.

A feast is arranged onthe occasion of Oriya. Traditional rice beer ‘jo’ and pork are also prepared for all. There is a tradition of distributing a slaughtered pig’s heart within the villager. In the name of ancestors, they sacrifice a cock and some food in a specific pillar of home known as ‘Khongtong’. Generally, this pillar has found in the kitchen.

The villlagers are gathered and go to each and every house of the village. The villlagers are gathered and go to each and every house of the village. The host entertains the guest with rice beer and pork or as much he can do. All the villagers are participated in a group dance and sing songs in festive mood. A special group dance is performed at the chief’s house by the males. The females are not allowed to participate in this one. There is a dance that performed only by the ladies and girls in the fourth day of Oriya. This dance known as ‘chachawan’. Bamboo dance also be performed by the boys and girls in the Oriya. This all activities are done in front of murung. All the members of the village are gathered with their traditional ornaments and costumes. The Oriya festival ends with a prayer to the God ‘Rangwa’ for happiness, peace and prosperity.

**Akhanole**

If crops do not grow well, the farmers of Wancho believe it a sign of displeasure of God. In this situation, the farmers arrange Akhanole and sacrifice a cock to the God ‘Rangbou’. They spraying the slaughtered cock’s blood in crops and the Gampa (priest) pray God for his blessings. Some other similar ritual also are found in Wancho society. One of this ritual is known as ‘Asahom’ where they temporarily plants a ‘Pok’ tree’s branch in front of the chief’s house and Gampa observes omen by divination with eggs.

**Naosonkiya**

After a birth of a baby, the Wancho of Assam’s performs a ritual named ‘Naosonkiya’ or ‘man-man kadjao’. None of males participates in this. The old ladies of the village give a bath to the new born and from some selected names collected by the father from ancestors they give one to the baby. It is noticeable that any ancestor’s name that died in an accident or unnatural way are not given to new born baby.
When a baby intake his first solid meal the Wancho celebrates a ceremony named ‘jotham’. This ceremony is similar to Annaprashan of Hindu religion. For this the parents cooked a fish and take some rice beer ‘Jo’. Maternal uncle or grandparent takes some ‘jo’ and rice and feed him first. Parents carry the new baby to the paddy fields and show him the crops. They believe that by doing this God gives blessing to the baby. The parents go for fishing to know the faith of the baby. If they gets good amount of fish in the first attempt with their traditional fishing equipment, they take it as a good omen.

**Khu Gu Maan**

Nowadays, this tradition is not strictly followed by the Wancho society. In this ceremony the hair of new born baby is shaved on the sixth day after born. Sometimes this ceremony arranged lately. The ears of the baby get pierced and a traditional bead garland put on his neck. A feast for the guest also arranged with rice beer and pork.

**Laka Khyatham**

Laka Khyatham is a ceremony that is celebrated in the adolescence of a boy. In this ritual, the boy has to wear a cloth named ‘khiya hit’ by the maternal uncle in the waist. A ‘Dao’ (heavy Knife) is also given to him. Without this ritual a young boy never gets social entrance in the Murung. After this ceremony a young boy is socially get bounded to community and starts taking part in social work.

**Rafot**

After burial ceremony of a death person the Wanchos arrange ‘Rafot’ (funeral) in the tenth day. A tradition of visiting graveyard of the dead person before rafot also be found among them. Furthermore, a believe of inviting the village householders from the outside is popular among them. The householder never orally replays to invitation of rafot. The family arranges a feast in the name of their ancetors and the dead person. They pray for the soul to rest in peace and blessed them. Wanchos believe that dying is the end of a person’s life on earth, but the soul lives in the afterlife with ancestors. In present time, they also follow the church’s funeral rules.

**Findings**

Wancho society of Assam getting influenced by the mainstream culture of Assam. However, their society trying to accumulate their tradition which includes many indigenous elements, but the fact is that their society is going through the process of social and cultural assimilation. We could find many cultural elements in Wancho society of Assam which are coming from the other cultural environment. We clearly say that the cultural environment of the Wancho who are living in Assam is definitely different from the main culture of the Wanchos of Arunachal Pradesh. Assamese culture is affecting Wansho society as dominant host to spontaneously adopting the lifestyle, custom, beliefs, and material culture of its own. We could mention Minority, proselytization, modern communication and economic growth as major facts of discontinuing tradition or its changes in Wancho society of Assam.

**CONCLUSION**

Folk life is really a vast topic of study in the North-East India. Wanchos of Assam and many other tribal societies of North-East India are currently changing according to the modern world. This study only highlighted few aspects of their cultural life. There is a good scope of extensive study in this field.

**References**


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