

Socio-cultural Characteristics of the Naga Tribes in Sivasagar District, Assam: An Ethnographic Study

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ABSTRACT

Among the various ethnic groups of Assam, the Nagas also find a very prominent place. Tracing anthropological history, it is seen that the Nagas belong to the China-Tibetan family covering a large part of the North Eastern region of India. In fact, years back some clans of the Nagas living in Nagaland came to Assam in search of home for good. As such, some descendants of the three significant Naga tribes namely Konyak, Ao and Phom have permanently settled in Sivasagar District of Assam. Since then the Konyak Nagas have been living in Hanhchara Naga Gaon, Gargaon and Bhadhara Gaon whereas all the remaining migrated Naga tribes – Konyak, Ao and Phom – have been living in Namsai, Ligiri Pukhuri and Hatipatty Monaiting adjacent to Gelakey. Interestingly, the Konyak Nagas living in Hanhchara, Gargaon and Bhadhara are the followers of the religious practice, Neo-Vaishnavism (Ek Saran Naam Dharma), initiated by the saint and reformer Srimanta Sankardeva. The Nagas living in Namsai, Ligiri Pukhuri and Monaiting also left their cultural traits of their forefathers and adopted Christianity. Globalization has brought forth a change in the living and cultural traits of the Nagas in Assam. Although the Nagas of Namsai, Ligiri Pukhuri and Monaiting, under the influence of Christianity, have lost their cultural nativity, the Nagas of Hanhchara, Gargaon and Bhadhara, in contrast, are still sticking to their native cultures amidst huge challenges. With a field study, a humble attempt is made to present the true picture of the socio-cultural life of the Nagas of the district of Sivasagar.

Key words: ethnic group, Naga tribes, Neo-Vaishnavism, cultural trait, cultural nativity

Introduction:

The Nagas are one of the prominent ethnic groups of Assam. As per anthropological survey, the Nagas belong to the China-Tibetan linguistic family covering a large part of the North Eastern region of India. Since long back, a few of the Nagas, leaving behind their far remote places in Nagaland, entered Assam and settled there permanently. Presently there are three full-fledged Naga Villages and another three hamlets scattering in Sivasagar District. As such, in the Naga villages in Hanhchara, Namsai and Moinating near Gelakey around seventy to eighty families live whereas in the hamlets at Bhadhara, Gargaon and Ligiri Pukhuri five to six families are presently living. The Nagas from Bhadhara, Gargaon and Ligiri Pukhuri belong to Konyak ethnicity and are the followers of Vaishnavism. The Nagas living in Monaiting,

Namsai and Ligiri Pukhuri belong either to Konyak or Ao or Phom and are the followers of Christianity. These hilly tribes from Nagaland are culturally enriched and are exhibiting a great mark of unity and harmony amidst cultural and linguistic diversities by wholeheartedly accepting Assamese socio-cultural life, but through preserving their own. Globalization has brought about a change in the socio-cultural life of the Nagas. Amidst the impact of globalization, the Nagas are better preserving their cultural roots. These Nagas are playing a significant role in the formation of the greater Assamese social identity. In this discussion, an attempt is made to embark upon the socio-cultural life of the Nagas of Sivasagar District.

Objective of the Study:

Society and culture is flexible. The present study is made to explore how the Nagas, amidst the constantly changing social scenario of the district, are accepting the challenges of the twenty first century globalization and upholding their society and culture with due regards to its originality.

Methodology:

The present study was based on field study. Data were collected also from some aged but informed people from the Naga communities living in Sivasagar District. To arrive at the destined goal, secondary data including books and journals were also taken help from. As a whole, analytical and survey methods were applied here in the study.

Review of Literature:

Since the Nagas living in different parts of Sivasagar District are a source of attractions to many a social workers and cultural lovers, some writings are found offering discussions on the Nagas of the district. A small amount of discussion is found in the works such as Asomor Janagushthiya Loksangskriti (Part I) by Chandrakamal Chetia, Debajit Bora edited Uttar Pub Bharatar Janagushthiya Utsav-Anushtan, and Asomor Janajati by Pramud Chandra Bhattacharya. Some in-depth discussions and explorations are still a need on the Nagas of the district and their culture.

Discussion:

The Nagas are a prominent part of the Assamese social life of Sivasagar District. It is yet unknown exactly when these Nagas came to Sivasagar and settled there permanently. The historians are also silent here. However, some oral story goes as such that during the reign of Ahom King Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769) seven people including Tayeng Konyak of the Naga forefathers came from Chingphang situated at the North East region of Sripur of today's Charaideo Sub Division. These seven Nagas were allowed to build their houses and live on the bank of Phulcheng Pond donated to the Satradhikar Debananda Mahanta of Moiramora Satra by Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha. It is claimed that after some years another five Nagas came to settle there permanently, transforming it to a village of twelve families. Phulcheng Pond was dug in order to eternalize the name of Phulcheng Kunwari, daughter to the royal administrator. Phulcheng was married to Laju Bisaya, elder brother to Lachit Barphukan. Lajubari, the ancient name of Naga Gaon was given after Laju Bisaya. With the passage of time, the Nagas from the hamlets like Chingphou, Wanching, Wakching, Kangan, Lankai, Macha and Ti under Konyak-inhabited Tuwengchang Subdivision of the Naga hills of the then undivided Assam came to Sivasagar eventually increasing the population to the present state. With the passage of time, these Nagas became disciple to Satradhikar Debananda Mahanta, following the Ek Saran Naam Dharma of Srimanta Sankardeva.

Among the various oral stories is the one which tells us of some Nagas who took care of Gadadhar Singha during his time in hiding and shelter in Nagaland during the political turmoil in Asom. When Gadadhar Singha became the king of Ahom Kingdom, he settled those people permanently in a place adjacent to Gargaon. The Nagas presently living there are the successors of those Nagas. Some other stories would say that there were barter systems between the Assamese people and the Nagas, the barter system being basically of taro root, potato, ginger and betel to exchange with rice from the Assamese people. These Naga Veg vendors permanently stayed back in Sivasagar which is presently known as Hanhchara Naga Gaon. Although the exact time of the Nagas migrating to this area is yet unknown, it can, however, be affirmed that on social or economic or political grounds these Nagas came to Assam, i.e. Sivasagar District. Initially settling in the present Hanhchara Naga Gaon, some of the members moved to settle in Monaiting, Bhadhara, Namsai, Ligiri Pukhuri and Gargaon.

Social Structure:

As mostly in Nagaland, the Nagas of Sivasagar District too live in patriarchal social structure. As such, the children's names are kept after their father, not mother. Father is the lord of the estate of a family and in absence of father, his sons would equally be the lord of the family estate. In absence of both father and sons, the daughter would be the owner of the family properties.

Marang Ghar and its Importance:

Marang Ghar is a traditional communal house or structure found among the Naga tribes. It is considered an important cultural and ceremonial building within the tribe, serving as a place for social gatherings, decision-making, and community events. Marang Ghar is often considered a symbol of the tribe's heritage and unity. Marang Ghar is situated at the heart of Hanhchara Naga Gaon. Established in 1775, Marang Ghar is an integral part of the national life of this Naga tribe. The Konyak Nagas of Bhadhara and Gargaon do not have

separate Marang Ghar. But they get regulated with the norms of Marang Ghar of Hanhchara Naga Gaon. Marang Ghar is very often called an educational institution of fundamental learning. The boys from 15 to 20 years of age live at night in Marang Ghar in groups as set by the elders. The young boys learn the basics of hunting and war in Marang Ghar. They store war costumes, skulls and bones of the hunted animals in that house. While coming to stay at night in Marang Ghar, the youths are supposed to bring along with them their dao (a single-edged sword) and lamp. These youths help people in danger at night. If they fail to solve any problem, they leave it in the hands of the elders or the community for a solution. They also keep watch at night to save the villagers from any sorts of theft or robbery. The office holders of Marang Ghar are to take part in the social activities of the village. For better accomplishment of tasks, the responsibilities are assigned as per the order of the portfolios of Marang Ghar. For participation in any social activity, the youths have to circulate the message among the villagers. A democratic tradition as such in Hanhchara Naga Gaon is a pretty wonderful character in the 21st century.

Interestingly, the other living areas of the Nagas namely Monaiting Naga Gaon, Namsai Naga Gaon and Ligiri Pukhuri do not have Marang Ghar. These Nagas are rather Christian converts and are regulated by the norms of the church.

Religious Traits:

Although the Naga ethnic tribes are, in broad sense, the followers of Christianity, the Nagas of Sivasagar District are divided in two religions. The Nagas from Bhadhara, Gargaon and Hanhchara Naga Gaon are followers of Hinduism. On the other hand, the Nagas of Monaiting, Namsai and Ligiri Pukhuri are those of Christianity. At the time when a group of Konyak Nagas have become Cristian converts, some others, by following Hinduism, are welcomely adding to the national glory of the greater Assamese social life.

Cultivation:

Although the Nagas at the hills of Nagaland mainly depend upon Jhum Cultivation, the Nagas of Sivasagar District, especially the ones from Hanhchara Naga Gaon, Bhadhara, and Gargaon follow the same forms of cultivations like the other natives of the district. However, the Nagas from Monaiting and Namsai make their living in small tea industry. Including Shali paddy (a variety of paddy), the principal cultivation of the low lands of Assam, they make their livelihood in other forms of cultivations as well.

Art of Home Construction:

Unlike their brothers in the Naga hills who traditionally live in Chang Ghar (house of raised platform), the Nagas in Sivasagar District live in Mati Ghar (a house of clay), Assam-type house or in RCC building as per their financial strength.

Marriage System:

The Nagas have a peculiar kind of marriage system. Girls are not given sufficient rights in the societal or familial affairs. Marriage takes place as per will or consent of the parents or boys. If the parents and their boy choose some girl, they send a proposal of marriage through someone. The proposal being approved, the bridegroom's family visits bride's house with Joron (a set of clothes and jewellery, etc. from bridegroom's side to the bride before marriage) and fix the date of marriage. In the Joron are contained Pa:chou: and Khapcham (a spear and a bangle of brass). On the marriage day it is mandatory to gift a Yangyang (a bamboo shield) to the bride. However, gold jewelleries and costumes are also gifted to the bride in today's Naga societies in Sivasagar. As per the social marital customs of the Konyaks, the bridegroom and his parents do not go to fetch the bride. Instead, their other family members and relatives perform the task in their place. In front of Laikhuta (the principal post of the place of worship) the aged members of their clan kill a small cock and make prophesy of the conjugal life of the newly married couple. From that day onwards the bride is considered a member and daughter-in-law of the family and given blessing for their married life.

Legal System:

As per the legal systems of Hanhchara Naga Gaon, judgments of crimes are made in Marang Ghar. If anyone proved guilty, the offender has to abide by the decisions given by the community. Because of such hard and fast rules, the village is running in a disciplined and peaceful way.

Armaments:

Among the popular arms of the Nagas of Hanhchara Naga Gaon are two-faced spears and Naga Dao (a popular name for a machete sharp on one edge). They use poisoned arrow in hunting a well. They are pretty skilled in shooting arrows and marbles made of clay.

Craftsmanship:

The Konyak Nagas of the district are well skilled in making wooden articles for domestic uses, such as small and large baskets, hura (a kind of headgear), jakoi (a triangular bamboo scoop used for fishing), khaloi (a large wicker basket for holding fish), tum (a traditional wooden container or vessel), hat to wear in Bihu, etc. which altogether reflect their artistry character. They decorate their houses with bamboo-made barrels with

picture of animals, birds or human being on them. They make animals' wooden frames as of tigers and preserve them carefully in Marang Ghar. Apart from that, they make tungkhung (wooden musical instrument) and keep it in Marang Ghar. The instrument tungkhung is almost like dhol of the Assamese people. It deserves mention that this tungkhung is 30 foot long and has a three-foot-wide diameter. Tungkhung contains a hollow space of fourteen foot long inside which are kept dambaru (a type of traditional drum). These drums are taken out to play whenever in need.

Social Status:

Enriched with agricultural life, the overall conditions of the Nagas in Sivasagar District is quite satisfactory. Educationally they are far advanced. In Hanhchara Naga Gaon of about 80 families are found people getting settled in various sectors such as medical practitioners, engineers, teachers, and other employees as in forest department, defense, Indian railways, etc. Likewise, Monaiting Naga Gaon too is rich with a good number of service holders in different sectors such as teaching, law, ONGCL, railway, and defense. But, although Namsai Naga Gaon till date has not produced any govt. employees, the village is in constant march towards development.

Socio-cultural Life:

The Konyak Nagas of Sivasagar District have been following the traditions of their forefathers. Especially, every families of Hanhchara Naga Gaon place a thongtong (a type of principal pillar) in a separate room of their house and make worship to it as God. In their ritual ceremonies, they kill fowls or pigs to make offerings to thongtong. Even if a family has a separate kitchen room, it is their custom to keep a furnace in that special room of thongtong, the furnace which is supposed to keep burning every evening. These Nagas still have belief in ghost.

Costumes:

The Nagas had a peculiar kind of dress code which they maintain in their festivities. As traditional wears, the men wore yekam (a waist belt of cane), one-foot-breadth cloth covering their private part known as toukap or lengti, whereas women wore knee-deep skirt or mekhela (known as nicha), khangai on the chest (called methoni) and red blouse (called phaksou). However, today they normally wear modern dress keeping aside the traditional ones to wear in their festivals only.

Jewellery and Accessories:

The Konyak Nagas wear various jewels on their earlobes, neck, hands, legs, and waist. During their bihu, they wear clay-made earrings, bangles, khaapchan (a bangle of brass), and various sorts of colourful ornaments. Men, in bihu occasions, wear various ornaments namely khachou, lokwa, yakyap, nathak, maiwalik, yangmu, paamu, etc.

Festivities:

Festivals are the inseparable parts of a tribe or community. The Nagas of Sivasagar District observe three festivals namely Aoling or Oiya, Oiyen and Pamou. It deserves mention here in this context that the Nagas of Monaiting and Ligiri Pukhuri observe only Aoling festival. As they are Christians, they observe these festivals outside their church. On the other hand, the Nagas from Hanhchara Naga Gaon, Bhadhara and Gargaon observe all the three festivals with full spirit and vigour. During Spring they celebrate Aoling where they welcome the new year. The significant aspect of Aoling is that this festival starts every year in the month of Fagun at night of the first moon. At the sight of the first moon the Konyak youths gather in Marang Ghar and beat tungkhung announcing the start of Aoling festival. The first day of the festival, every clan of the village bring a pig to Marang Ghar. The second day, they kill those pigs and have their community feast. They keep the blood of the killed pigs in bamboo barrels and on the third day they smear the blood on two leaves and hang those leaves on the threshold or granary or cowshed. It is believed that this way a family always keeps blessed.

Konyak Nagas observe Oiyen festival in the season of Autumn. After six months of celebration of Aoling, i.e. on the eve of the full moon of Bhada this festival is celebrated. This festival is celebrated basically with feast at the end of their cultivation works. Every clan ties a pig at Marang Ghar entire night on the first day of the festival. Next day every clan enjoys feast with pork in one of its families. That day every family observes annakapu, a kind of ancestor worship. Pamou festival, the third of the lot, is observed in the month of Magh after harvest. This two day long festival is celebrated on the eve of and the full moon day. The first day of the festival, the male Konyaks make celebrations with a feast of pork and drinks in Marang Ghar. A share of the pork is given to the females also. On the second day, the males go out for hunting and whatever is hunted they cook and eat in the forest itself. On return from hunting, they beat tungkhung in Marang Ghar and leave for their home.

Cremation Rituals:

The Nagas of Sivasagar District bury dead bodies as per their traditions. On natural death, the dead body is carried to the burial ground on a changi, a traditional stretcher, by four people. On the occasion of unnatural

death, two people carry the dead body and bury it with certain ritual formalities in the already dug pit. On the third day of death Tiloni (a ritual form) and on the ninth Daha (another ritual form) are held with a feast. Till the ninth day of death the family members of the deceased take veg. meals.

Conclusion:

The Nagas of Sivasagar District are prominent among all the communities who love Assam by heart. They have immense contribution to the formation of greater Assamese identity. Although the Nagas are not original speakers of the Assamese language, they exhibit peerless love to the language. Being educated in Assamese medium schools, they have contributed to the Assamese socio-cultural life. Amidst challenges of globalization, the Nagas of the district are determined to preserve their national identity. That the role the Konyak Nagas of the district are playing for the preservation of Assamese socio-cultural life by following Vaishnavism is of course praiseworthy. They display respect to the other co-existing communities of Assam thereby setting an ideal of unity in diversity and racial harmony. These Nagas who are living with the socio-cultural life of Assam while preserving their own can be called Assamese proper.

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