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THE DHEYAN OF CACHAR – A BRIEF INTRODUCTION



S. Urirei Singh

PhD Research Scholar, Assam University, Silchar.

Short Profile

S. Urirei Singh is a Ph.D. Research Scholar. She has completed B.A., M.A. She has professional experience of 2 years.



ABSTRACT:

The Dheyans are the Koch Rajbanshi people in Cachar. They are known by this name only in Cachar. They settled in Cachar in the middle part of the 16th century. Since then their socio – cultural life has evolved a lot. At present, they are incorporating certain cultural nutrients from their neighboring communities as per their needs and requirements. At the same time they are also maintaining their distinct cultural identity.

KEYWORDS

Dheyans, Koch Rajbanshi.

INTRODUCTION:

Cachar is the southernmost district of the state of Assam. It covers an area of 3,786sq km, and is bounded on the north by the North Cachar Hills District of Assam and Jaintia Hills districts of Meghalaya, on the east by Manipur, on the south by Mizoram and on the west by Hailakandi and Karimganj districts of Assam.¹ By the late medieval period Cachar witnessed a number of settlements. The Dheyman settlement was one amongst them. Dheyman is the Koch Rajbanshi people of Cachar. They are known by this name only in Cachar. At present, they form a distinct ethnic group with a contribution of their own to the multi-cultural composition of Cachar. They came with Chilarai in his expedition to Cachar and when the country was brought under the Koch rule they stayed on. Initially they were referred by the local people as 'dewan' or 'deoyan'² which mean prime minister in connection to the prime minister or dewan Chilarai. But it later became 'dheyman'.

The objective of the present paper is to give a brief introduction of the dheyman in Cachar and also study their socio-cultural life in brief.

BRIEF HISTORY:

The immigration and settlement of the dheyman in Cachar took place during the reign of the famous and powerful Koch king Naranarayan of Kamata. Under his reign the Koch power reached its zenith. With the aid of his brother Sukhladhvaj better known as Chilarai who was also his prime minister (dewan), Naranarayan sent a number of expeditions and subdued a number of states of Northeast India. After their successful campaign against the Ahoms, Chilarai under the order of Naranarayan subdued Manipur, Dimacha, Jaintia, Khyriem and Dimarua. The subdued monarchs were obliged to make costly presents and to pay annual tributes. Chilarai then marched towards the Tripura kingdom which at that time included the plains of modern Cachar and a battle took place at Longai on the Southern border of Cachar in which the Tripura ruler was defeated and killed. With this the Tripuri rule over the plain of Cachar ended and Longai came to be recognized as the boundary between the Koch and Tripura territories.³ Thereafter Chilarai is said to have defeated the ruler of Sylhet.

The Koch general then left behind a contingent of his army at Brahmapur, which since then came to be known as Kochpur and ultimately as Khaspur.⁴ Later Kamalnayan, another brother of Naranarayan was appointed as the governor of the province for maintaining diplomatic relations with the vanquished states and collection of tribute. However, in due course of time with the decline of the Koch power in Kamata, the governor at Khaspur also began to assert his independence and with this, the Koch territory in Cachar began to emerge as a petty independent kingdom. The other rulers who ruled in Khaspur after Kamalnayan were- Udita, Bijoy, Dhir, Mahendra, Ranajit, Nara Singha and Bhim Singha.⁵ The last ruler Bhim Singha had no male issue but only a daughter named Kanchani whom he gave in marriage to the Kachari prince Lakshmichandra. With this marriage the Koch kingdom in Cachar merged with the Kachari Kingdom.

SOCIO- CULTURAL LIFE OF THE DHEYMAN:

The dheyman are found in only 9 villages of Cachar. The names of the villages are Japhirband, Thaligram, Leburband, Larsingpar, Digli, Lakhicherra, Dewan, Harinagar and Narayanpur. These villages are all situated near tea gardens. But the dheyman do not work there. Of late, owing to their financial condition very few of them have slowly started working as laborer in these tea gardens. At present each village consist of about 200 dheyman families and the population of each village is around 1200(approx).⁶

Of the 9 villages 4 of them viz. Japhirband, Thaligram, Leburband and Larsingpar are under the Udharband constituency. These 4 villages share a great proximity with the Bengalis as it is their immediate neighboring community. The dheyan in Cachar are mono caste. They do not have their own priest and in these 4 villages the Bengali Brahmins perform their rites and rituals. Since it is done by Bengali Brahmins the rituals are carried out in Bengali manner. Moreover, due to their close connection with the Bengali community there is a large amount of Bengali influence in their lifestyle. These four villages are located nearby to each other and because of good communication among themselves and presence of educated people they are able to work collectively for their welfare and development. They have created a number of associations and organizations like the Cachar branch of the All Koch-Rajbanshi Students Union, Koch-Rajbanshi Samaj Unnayan Samiti and the Bir Chilarai Utjapan Samiti which aims for their all round development and welfare. They also work for creating awareness amongst other regarding their glorious past by organizing meetings and sanmelans in different dheyan villages. Social medias are also used for creating a sense of unity and brotherhood among the people. The Chilarai Diwas is also being observed under the initiative of the educated people of these villages. They are also striving for protecting their identity which is gradually being drawn within the orbit of the neighboring communities. At present they are also making effort to rebuild their lost relation with their mainland i.e. Cooch behar through such organizations and associations.

The remaining 5 villages i.e., Digli, Lakhicherra, Dewan, Harinagar and Narayanpur are scattered widely and are under the swaddle of Manipuri Brahmins. They come under the Lakhipur constituency. Due to the presence of the Manipuri Brahmins the influence of the Manipuri community is seen in almost all aspect of their life. The rituals from birth till date are all carried out in Manipuri manner. Moreover their food habit, dresses and lifestyle are all replica of the Manipuri community. However at present, they are slowly abandoning it in favour of their own.

The dheyans are basically agriculturist and very few of them are engaged in white collared jobs. The people have a very good hand in bamboo works specially in making basket which is known by other communities as dheyan basket. They also make various types of fishing implements which is again used by other communities in large number. They are also known for making japhi, a kind of head protector made with palm leaf, bamboo and cane and which is very compatible in sun and rain in agricultural operation. It is also believed that the village japhirband had derived its name from the word japhi as the japhi (palm) plant is grown here in large quantity. The women's also have good hand in weaving and their daily dresses are procured from their own looms.

For their daily wear the male use gamchas, shirts or banyans. In winter they use sweaters and shawls. For certain occasions such as marriage, shraddha or any other puja they wear dhoti and Panjabi. The women wear mekhla and chaddar which resembles the designs of both the Assamese and Manipuris. The youths however prefer to wear as per their taste and preferences. But for certain rituals they try to be at par with the elders with slight variations.

The dheyans were earlier worshippers of Shakta but later became Vaishnavites. Earlier they were vegetarian taking only fish among the non- vegetarian items. But at present times they have started consuming eggs and meat also. They celebrate Bihu, Durga puja, Holi, Diwali, etc with great pomp and joy. Each dheyan village possess temple as their place of worship which is known as Mandap. Here they perform Bhajan- Kirtan in the Brajabali language under the guidance of either the Manipuri or Bengali Brahmins. They also learnt the Vasihnavite form of Sankirtans in connection to marriage, shraddha and other forms of performing arts⁷ from their respective Brahmins. Among the elders there are folktales which mainly centre on chilarai's campaign and admire him as a hero. There are also certain tales regarding the naming of the dheyan villages. At present Khaspur is an important historical site of Cachar. The Kancha kanti Mandir and the Shyama Devi mandir built by the dheyan raja Kamalnarayan

has survived the stress and strain of time and is worshipped till date.

Child marriage was not prevalent among the dheyan but remarriage of widows existed though in fewer number. At present times, intercaste marriage is also prevalent although not favorable among the elder members of the community.

At present the dheyan prefer to call themselves as Rajbanshi or Rajbongshi. But other communities still continue to designate them as dheyan. They speak the Koch Rajbanshi language which is locally known as dheyan language. The language is somewhat in between Bengali and Assamese⁸ but again different from both. The language spoken by the dheyan in Cachar however has slight variation with language spoken by the Koch Rajbanshi people in North Bengal and other parts of Assam. It is the Dheyan language that has enabled the people to keep their identity intact for more than four hundred years they are in Cachar.⁹ Like other non-Bengalis in Cachar they use the Bengali language to communicate with people outside their community. But surprisingly the medium of education in each of these villages is Assamese. Because of this many have taken them to speak the Assamese language as this is the language in which they read and write.

CONCLUSION:

The Koch Rajbanshi is a community with rich culture and language of its own. The dheyan carried that rich culture and language along with them to Cachar. But they have failed to maintain this cultural continuity in Cachar due to their isolation from their mainland Coochbehar. As a result of this they have rather a comparatively weaker footing in the soil of Cachar in comparison to the other communities. Therefore the dheyan are incorporating the cultural nutrients from other neighboring communities as per their requirement and at the same time also retaining their distinct cultural identity without being subjugated upon by others.



A small gathering of the villagers after a Shiv puja at Harinagar.



A dheyan couple in Japhirband.

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