

Social Customs and Practices prevalent in the Koch Kingdom of Darrang (1616-1826): An Overview

Mrs. Moonmoni Borkoch
Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Jorhat Kendriya Mahavidyalaya, Jorhat,
Assam, India

INTRODUCTION

The Koches are one of the aboriginal tribes in North-Eastern region of India. They assumed political power in the early part of the 16th century and lasted up to the early part of the 19th century. The kingdom was divided in 1581 into two states i.e., Koch Behar and Koch Hajo. Political instability between the two kingdoms led to the complete eradication of the kingdom of Koch Hajo and creation of a tributary state in Darrang. The kingdom was established in 1616 in the middle of the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam. The first king of this tributary state was Balinarayan *alias* Dharmanarayan. This kingdom existed with various fates till the beginning of the 19th century when the British annexed it in 1826 as with the other regions of Assam. The state or kingdom was bounded on the north by the *Gohain Kamal Ali* that is the high causeway at the foot of Bhutan Hills; on the West by the river Barnadi; by the Brahmaputra on the South and on the east was the territory of *Chariduar*. (Boruah, 2011, P.1) However, in the initial years its territorial limit varied mainly due to political situation of the times. The present work is confined to the study of social customs and its practices of the people under the Darrang Koch kings on the basis of secondary sources.

The Darrang Koch Kingdom was an abode of different castes and tribes. The people of the kingdom practiced all the social customs according to own choice without any restriction during the period of our discussion. It is noted that there was no religious discontentment among the different ethnic tribes and castes with their own religious beliefs and thoughts. It was because of the socio-religious outlook of the Koch kings and idea of universal social brotherhood. It is observed that natives of Darrang mainly consisted of Hindu and non-Hindu tribes. However, the number of Brahmins, Kayasthas and Ganaks was comparatively small than other castes. In our study, we found that there

were also some Buddhists among the tribes who lived in the kingdom. Caste system was prevalent with all sorts classification and also distinctions. (Boruah, 2011, P.90) Although, Hindus practiced their ancient Vedic rites, caste rigidity was somewhat liberalized during the waves of the Neo-Vaisnavite movement of post-Sankardeva times. According to Maniram Dewan, after the Vaisnavite movement, Vedic rites and rituals came to be liberalized in the country in greater emphasis. (Rajguru, 1988, P.113) The noted scholar of Darrang Suryakhari Daivajana of the 18th century says that the two great scholars, Purusottam Bhattacharyya and Pitambar Siddantavagis composed many works for the spread of Sanskrit learning and Brahmanism where some modifications of Hindu rites were present (DRV, v.173, Rajguru, 1988, p.113) It is observed that the religious and to a considerable extent, the social life of the Hindus is governed by the Smritis as interpreted. However, it was modified by the later digest writers of the early medieval period.

CUSTOMS AND PRACTICES

The Brahmanas formed the priestly caste of the society. They usually performed all the sacraments more or less in connection with the birth and death of a man. The other castes of the society did not perform all these sacraments. It was essential for a householder of the priestly class to perform the customary rules and duties relating to *Yajna*, *Yajana*, *Adhyayana*, *Adhyapana*, *Dana* and *Pratigraha*. (Nath, 1989, p. 144) All the seven sacraments i.e., *Jatakarm* (birth rite), *namkarma* (naming of the child), *annaprasanna* (first feeding of rice), *Cudakarana* (first tasure), *Karnavidhana* (pouring of ears), *Upanayana* (initiation with sacred thread), and *Vivaha* (marriage) had been performed. The rites called *Preta-Karma* were observed in the society in connection with the death, which included *Chitadahana* (burning of the dead body on funeral pyre), *Mukhagni* (putting of fire in the mouth of the

dead), *dasa or daha* (ceremony observed in the 10th day), *Masasudhi* (monthly ceremony), *Brahmabhoja* (feast to the brahmins), *Jantibhoja* (feast to the kith and kin, etc) Like the Brahmanas, the other castes of the society did not perform all the sacraments as ordained by the Hindu *Smriti Sastras*. It has already been mentioned that the different types of aboriginal tribes were living in the kingdom. They are mostly Indo-Mongoloid and belong to the Sino-Tibetan group. Of them the Bodo-Kacharis and the Rabhas are the most prominent group of Darrang. These tribes of Darrang followed their own customs and traditions. They observed *Jatakarma* whether they were Hindus or not. After the birth of a child, they would bring fire to the mother's room and to protect the house against evil spirits or *deos*, branches of thorny trees were struck in the walls. (Hunter, 1974, p.372) The mother was kept in isolation for a whole month, after which a ceremony called *sudir subah* was performed at the end. They observed the custom of worshipping the goddess *Burhi* when the first shaving of the hair of a child is done. A ceremony similar to *annaprasanna* called *bhatsoa* was also performed where they also offered rice cakes to the spirits of their forefathers. The tribes either burnt or buried their dead and performed the rites according to their own tribal customs. (Nath, 1989, p.145) For example the Kacharis of Darrang burnt their dead bodies and observed some absequal rites for the good of the deceased on the tenth and thirteenth days. (cited, Boruah, 2011, p.101) On the other hand, Rabhas burnt their dead body except on certain occasions. The Muslims buried the deceased person and on the fortieth day, the post mortuary rites called *Challisa* were observed.

The Hindus performed their marriage according to Vedic rites. The different functions of sacramental marriage are given by Assamese literature of that time. A sacramental marriage ceremony consists of the following steps, viz., (1) *vagdana*, (settlement of the marriage with the performance of the ring ceremony) (2) *varavarana* (formal reception of the bride-groom) (3) *kanya-dana* (gift of the bride to the bridegroom) (4) *vivaha-homa* (5) *panigrahana* (clasping and acceptance of the bride's hand) (6) *hrdaya-saparsa* (touching the heart) (7) *saptapadi* (8) *asmarohana* (standing on a stone) (9) *dhruvadarsana* (looking at the pole star) (Sarma, 2001, p.222) Generally, the rituals relating to marriage was observed at bride's house where the bridegroom along with a party presented there. The

early or child marriage system prevailed during that time particularly among the Brahmins. In this system, the bride was not escorted to the husband's home on the marriage day but was taken by the bridegroom's party mainly for the relatives, the womenfolk. This custom was called *ghar-gachakowa*, literally stepping into husband's house. (Sarma, 2001, p.222) The bride was sent back after a few hours to her parent's house where she was allowed to stay till she attained puberty. In the case of other castes and sub-castes they performed some peculiar functions before the marriage as *Jorandiya* or *Telbhardiya*, *Pantola*, etc. Two or three days prior to the marriage the guardians of the bridegroom send to the bride's house silk and other clothes, ornaments, oil, jaggary, and two pots of curd, a big fish and a packet of vermilion. The women observed another function called *panitola* accompanied by singers and drummers for two or three evenings before the actual marriage ceremony. It included important post-nuptial customs like *ghar-gachakowa*, *khoba-khobi* etc. The peculiar custom *khoba-khobi* was held on the third day of the marriage ceremony.

In case of royal marriages, the bride had to be brought to the palace campus where the ceremony took place. Regarding the royal marriage, the *Koch Rajar Buranji* clearly reports as follows:

Royal marriage was performed through the Brahma procedure. After getting permission from the bride's parents, the bride was taken to King's city, where the marriage was held. The marriage of either one or two-three girls could be performed on the same pandal together. The bride which could not yet attain puberty sat on the right hand and the rest on the left hand of the bridegroom, during the performance of marriage ceremony. Therefore, the former one was called *Barrani* or *Madoi* and the left were entitled as *saruranies* (chief wife and junior wives) respectively. (Darrang Smriti, p. 107; Boruah, 2011, p.103)

The tribes of Darrang followed their own rites in marriage ceremony. The marriage practices of the Kacharis of Darrang are narrated by Robinson as under

At the celebration of the marriage ceremonies, a large party is usually assembled; some dance, whilst others play on certain musical instruments, and all contribute to their mutual conviviality. The whole company bear witness to the mutual consent of the happy couple to their union, and a sacrifice, consisting chiefly of fowls, is offered to propitiate the favour of either the good or the evil spirit, whichever may best suit the occasions; the whole party then dance promiscuously round the sacrifice, and the ceremony is concluded. A feast follows, and a copious libations are drunk to the honour of *Bacchus*.(Robinson, p. 295, Boruah, 2011, p.104)

The tribal people of Darrang followed the exogamous system of marriage. It was mainly due to the close contact with the Bhutiyas and plain people of Darrang and was also seen among the Koch Royal families. The social life of Assamese Muslims of Darrang was a synthesis of the Islamic and the Hindu social customs. The marriage system of Muslims was performed according to their own Quranic laws and *Shariat*.

CONCLUSION

It is observed that the society of Darrang kingdom presented a traditional society of the Brahmaputra valley as a whole. But it had certain variations regarding their customs and rites. The natives of Darrang chiefly consisted of Hindu and non-Hindu tribes. The major population consisted of the non-Hindu tribes. The society was a continuation of the customs of the ancient period in medieval times. During this period though Brahmans enjoyed a high position in the Hindu society, they did not interfere with the customs and traditions of the other castes and sub-castes. They followed their own customs and practices as in the case of birth, marriage and death. The tribes performed all the rites (customs) according to their own fashion without any restriction. From the above discussion we may conclude that the people of Koch kingdom of Darrang maintained a cosmopolitan society regarding its social customs and practices.

REFERENCE

- [1] Barpujari, H.K., *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. III, Publication Board Assam, 2007
- [2] Boruah, A.K., *The Koch Kingdom*, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2011
- [3] Nath, D. *History of the Koch Kingdom 1515-1615* Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1989
- [4] Rajguru, S., *Medieval Assamese Society 1228-1826*, Nawgaon, 1988
- [5] R. William, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, (ed.) S.K. Bhuyan, DHAS, Guwahati, 1987
- [6] Sarma, S.N. *A Socio-Economic AND Cultural History of Medieval Assam (1200-1800 A.D.)*, Bina Library, Guwahati, 2001
- [7] W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Reprint, Guwahati, 1998
- [8] *Darrang Rajbonsawali* (ed.) N.C. Sarmah, Pathsala, 1973
- [9] Souvenir: *Darrang Smriti*, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Mangaldoi Session, 1974.