



Construction of Pan- Tangsa Identity: With Reference to Socio-Religious Identity among the Tangsa Tribe.

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ABSTRACT

Tangsa tribe is one of the major tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh, primarily found in the hilly areas of Changlang district. It was believed that they came to this region from Myanmar in search of agricultural land and later on, they settled here. Evidence of migration from Myanmar can be traced through their dress patterns and language, which are still prevalent today. Tangsa people generally follow the 'Donyi-Polo' religion. The Supreme Being is locally known as 'Rangfraa'. In the present context, Theravada Buddhism as well as Christianity has had a major influence on the religious life of the Tangsa people. The paper will focus on the major festival 'MolMoi', and other festivals of the Tangsa tribe, which is used as an identity marker by the Tangsa tribe of North East India, and the changing socio-political scenario of the tribe will also be analyzed. It will also focus on the migration history of the Tangsa tribe from Myanmar to Arunachal Pradesh and will emphasize the socio-religious identity as an oral tradition of the tribe in an attempt to create a Pan-Tangsa identity. For data collection, primary and secondary sources of information will be used in an analytical way.

Keywords – Culture, Ethnic Identity, Oral tradition, Tangsa tribe.

Introduction

The Tangsa is one of the major tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. They are scheduled Tribes as per the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950, listed under 'Other Naga Tribes' of Arunachal Pradesh. But in 2018, a revised bill was passed in a Union Cabinet meeting under the Chairmanship of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, namely, the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) bill, 2018, where the Tangsa are listed under 'Any Naga Tribes' of Arunachal Pradesh. The word 'Tangsa' literally means "children of hills" or "people of high land," which covers 35 Trans Patkai ethnic groups. It is an umbrella term used for the collection of small ethnic groups who had migrated to India from Myanmar, most of them within

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the last couple of centuries. In Myanmar, they are known as Tangshang. Sometimes the term Tangwa is also used, which means “father of the highland” and refers to the forefathers of Tangsa who wore loincloths. The word Tang means “to sacrifice” because some groups of the Tangsa performed human sacrifice.

In Myanmar, Tangsa are known as Rangpang, Pangmi, and Heimi. The Tangsa of both countries regard themselves as Naga Tribes. They had settled in the northeastern state of Assam in Tinsukia District and Arunachal Pradesh in Changlang District. They have inhabited the hills and the valleys of the wider areas in the Tirap River and the BurhiDihing River up to Miao. They are spread in both the Changlang and the Miao subdivisions. The Tangsa of Myanmar and India have a good relationship with each other, though they have linguistic, religious, and cultural differences.

The Tangsa are scattered in small groups and do not claim a territorial or location identity. As we know, Arunachal Pradesh is a tribal majority state, while Assam is not a tribal dominant state. If we talk about the Tangsa of Assam, the population is not more than ten thousand, approximately twenty-six villages. Those who came to India a long time ago (like the Katoi) have become Hinduized and have assimilated into the mainstream Assamese population. Some of the Tangsa subgroups who came to India with Singpho followed the Buddhist religion. In the early 1970s, a wave of missionary activity led by the Ao and Sema Baptist missionaries from Nagaland resulted in many Tangsa converting to Christianity. The effort was so strong that the Tangsa living in twenty-six villages in Assam, out of which six villages started following Buddhism. Thus, it can be said that in the two villages, Kharangkong and Phulbari of Margherita Sub Division under Tinsukia District in Assam, the Tangsa people are either Buddhist or unconverted, that is, followers of traditional religion, which is Animism, while the rest of the 20 villages in Assam are Baptist Christian.

According to the 2011 Census data of India, more than 450,000 Tangsa are living in India at present. They came in contact with plains from the hills, which led them to accept the modern way of life, and intermixing with other non-hill communities brought them close to the rest of the world. Most of the Tangsa are tea planters and farmers. Different Tangsa speak different languages as it is not mutually tangible so they use Singpho, Assamese, Hindi, and Nagamese to



communicate with people. Most the Tangsa villages in Assam are ethnically and linguistically mixed, so it came to be known that most of the Tangsas have inter-tribal marriages with other tribal communities as well as with ethnic groups of Assam, but in Arunachal Pradesh, most of the Tangsa in a village follow the norms of one village, one group, and one language, and it is still prevalent. Rapid changes in the lifestyle of the Tangsa can be seen due to the migration of people from the Patkai hills to the plains of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

Mol Moi and Wihukuh are common festivals of the Tangsa, both the festival is celebrated after sowing and before harvesting of crops. “Mol Moi” is celebrated for three days by people of villages as a community festival after sowing of seeds in the paddy field. While “Wihu Kuh” is celebrated before the harvesting of crops. The Word “Wihu” means ‘to praise the Mother Earth’. During the WihuKuh festival, the Wihu Songs are sung to complete the harvesting. Thus, we can say that village festivals are an important part of community identity in mainstream society.

Aims and objectives

The aim of this paper is to focus on the traditional village Festival of the Tangsa, which is the ‘Mol’ and ‘Wihu’ festival, and the migration history of the Tangsa from Myanmar to Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, which helps in building the Pan Tangsa identity. Along with these two, another objective of the paper was to see the socio-religious identity of the Tangsa community, which also helped in the creation of their own identity in the mainstream society. In this regard, we can talk about the traditional festival of the Tangsa, which is Mol Moi.

The Mol Moi traditional festival, which is celebrated in Arunachal Pradesh by the Tangsa community. It is a pre-harvest festival, and it marks the end of the sowing season with the end of toil and labour in the field. It signifies the beginning of the New Year, which is celebrated with zeal and enthusiasm. Mol is not just a festival for the Tangsa, with this festival its love and emotion for the community is seen. Through this festival, departed souls are remembered and pray for them. In this, people wear the colorful and culturally flamboyant traditional dresses, sing, and perform folk dances during the festival. The Bong, a traditional musical instrument, is played during the celebrations, and it is an amazing experience as the sound reverberates through the mystic setting of the Tangsa villages. The indigenous Sahpolo folk dance, which is the most popular folk dance form of the Tangsa community, forms the main highlight of the Mol festival.



In this festival, animal sacrifices are done before, but after coming in contact with mainstream society slowly animals sacrifice was abandoned. The Rangfraa Movement had brought changes in the Tangsa community. And it had a huge impact on the Mol festival of the Tangsa community.

The Festival of Wihu Kuh was a traditional festival of some of the Tangsa tribe. This festival used to be celebrated at the end of the harvesting season as a kind of thanksgiving. The word wihu was derived from two words, “Wi and kuh,” where Wi means grandmother in Tangsa, and the word " kuh " means to gather or to assemble. Wihu is the spirit of the earth, and Wihu Kuh was traditionally celebrated by the Tangsa people at home by sacrificing a chicken while chanting a traditional ritual prayer called “Rhim-him” that is thanking the spirit of the earth for giving them a good harvest and asking her to bring them greater prosperity in the near future. Most of the tribes belonging to the Pangwa subgroup of the Tangsa did not have hereditary kings but had powerful village chiefs. Rich and powerful Tangsa chieftains used to perform a sort of “feast of merit” called the Wangjang Kuh to show off their wealth and to gain greater prestige and power. One of the main Tangsa consultants, Lukam Tonglum from the Kharangkong villages of Assam, was a self-styled present-day Tangsa chief. He was the president of various Tangsa organizations like the Tangsa cultural society, and he was also vice president of the Development Council that was awarded to eight ethnic groups in the Tirap area, which includes the Tangsa. He was concerned about preserving the old traditional culture of the Tangsa tribes, for which he showed a keen interest in Wihukuh festivals and believed that they needed to be celebrated every year. So he tried to combine elements of Wihu Kuh festivals and Wangjang Kuh to create a new kind of festival celebrated every year on the 5th of January. The format of celebrating the festival was very much like that of a secular government meeting, with a flag hoisting ceremony in the beginning, followed by the public meeting. Wihukuh was celebrated locally in LukamTonglum’s house and the village of Kharangkong in Assam. Some Buddhist Pangwa in Assam celebrate Wihukuh but without sacrificing animals. The Baptist Christians are not allowed to drink rice beer and not sacrifice animals, for which the Wihukuh festival is not celebrated by the Baptist Christian people. The loss of ethnic identity due to the gradual loss of knowledge of the language and cultural and ritual traditional practices among the Tangsa community led to a gradual convergence of ideas of unity. (Barkataki, 2015)



The traditional Tangsa festival aimed at internal consolidation within the Tangsa, the preservation of cultural traditions that led to the creation of the new Pan- Tangsa world around them. Most of the Tangsa came to attend the festival because they felt the need to be present at the festival, as lots of ritualistic changes were being seen and observed. Thus, we can say that the ‘new’ Tangsa identity has been consciously and deliberately fashioned by the few Tangsa leaders keeping in view the traditional as well as modernization of ritualistic practices.

History of Migration

The migration history of the Tangsa community to India is not much known, but it was assumed that they migrated to India during the twelfth century and has continued till date. In this view, a few lines are written about the migrations and coming of Tangsa to India (Arunachal Pradesh and Assam) from Myanmar and their relations with the Ahom King during the Twelfth century, which helped them to settle in the Patkai range of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

According to Wihu folklore songs, the Tangsa are believed to have originated from a mythological place called ‘Yuixkhux,’ where, under the leadership of Wihu, they crossed the Tanai river at ‘*wakrap*’ (pig’s way through the river; wak = pig; rap = crossing the river). Later, while crossing the Patkai range, they defeated the Shamsha (Shan = Tai/Thai) people and established their first settlement in Myanmar (Morey 2011, 2017, 2020). There are thirty-two subdivisions in the Tangsa community, namely, Moklum, Jaglili, Kimsing, Morang, Longchang, Tikhak, Sangwal, Longri, HaviSangke, and Yongkuk. The Tikhak, Yougkuk, and Muklom had arrived several centuries ago, while the Joglei and Mossang came to India in at least 1900. Others like Cholim and Rera arrived maybe 60 years ago in India, and Hakhun came to India more recently. The pattern of Migration is an old one. Some Mokloms claim that they have been to the plains for a long time and are the original inhabitants of the Kharsang area of Arunachal Pradesh. In Arunachal Pradesh, Tangsa Sub Groups such as Muklum, Longchang, and the Havi are gathered under the umbrella title of Tangsa, a term coined in 1956. The Tangsa are divided into two sections depending on their residence in India. The first groups of settlers are known as Tangwa, while those who arrived later are known as Pangwa or Pangsa. There is a village in Burma that is directly related to Muklum and Havi. The Tangwa lived almost exclusively in Arunachal Pradesh and claimed that a variety of them come from ‘just over the border’ to the



Hukawang valley of Burma. The Tangsa people, on the other hand, have most of their villages on the Burmese side of the border, where they are known as Ha Chat, a northern branch of the Heimi. (Saul 2005).

About 20 of the Tangsa groups in India are clubbed together as the Pangwa, a term based on the word Pang, which means 'Spread all over'. This group was also known as Rangpang by the British administration. They are mainly found in both India and Myanmar and entered India through the Pangsau pass via Nampong. They also share the common heritage of the Wihu song and Sahpolo dance.

The exact date of the migration of the Tangsa to the northern slope was not properly known. The basis of determining the date to be the twelfth century, the migration of the Tangsa community to India can be assumed after the invasion of the first Ahom king, Sukhpha. According to Assam Buranjis, the Kacharis were in the Mohong country before and after the arrival of the Ahom king. The kachari king Bicharpati Dersongpa was driven out of Mohong by Sukapha. In 1490 AD, the Kachari king made the road into the Ahom country and defeated the Ahom king. On being defeated, the Ahom king made a friendship by paying tribute. The tribute consisted of a girl to the kachari king twelve female slaves, and a pair of elephants. But the Kachari king was defeated by Dihingia Raja, who drove the Kachari king from the hill to the south of the Dikhu River. When the Kacharis vacated Mohong and Borhat, the Noktes and Wanchos occupied the place in the early sixteenth century. All the rivers and streams of Mohong, including salt wells, were under the Noktes. The Dihingia Raja had to fight and free the Mohong from Noktes in 1536 AD. It was clear that Noktes and Wanchos came after the Twelfth century. It was the Tangsa that came during the twelfth century and occupied the Dihing and Tirap valleys. When Sukapha came across the Patkai, he found a Naga village and subjugated them. They engaged in making bamboo rafts for Sukapha to cross the Dihing River.

The twelfth century can widely be regarded as the probable period of the Tangsa migration into northern India. Likewise, all the indigenous sub-tribes of Tangsa started to enter Burma, present-day Myanmar, from time to time through various passes on the Patkai range. The Tikhaks, mossangs, and Longwin entered through the Okhutohap, RanghillRanglum, and Pangsau passes, respectively. It was clear from the above discussion that Tangsa had migrated from Myanmar to



India before the coming of the Nocktes and Wancho groups and other ethnic groups in Northeast India. But we cannot clearly say the reason behind the migration of the Tangsa community to India, but one thing was clear: they came to India during the Twelfth century and made a strong relationship with the Ahom King. Later, it helped other sub-Tangsa communities to migrate from their Native land, Myanmar, to India (Arunachal Pradesh and Assam). Though the Tangsas had migrated to India from Myanmar, the biological, cultural, and social relations between the Tangsas of the two nations cannot be ignored. To trace the relationship between the Tangsas of the two nations, it was found that most of the Tangsas living in India, their grandparents, and the Maternal Family Members are still living in Myanmar. Some are related through blood, while some are related through marriage. Pangsau, the small village in Myanmar, is a meeting point for the Tangsas of two Nations. Pangsau is the border village, which is one of the passes, where the border market is set up, and goods are bought and sold from the two nations; not only material commodities are sold and bought, but also cultural goods are exchanged between the Tangsa. It is like a meeting point of one tribe of two nations.

In the article “Best of all Worlds: Rangfraism: The New Institutionalized Religion of the Tangsa Community in Northeast India”, it was mentioned that the community’s understanding of the traditional religion is mostly guided by the following thumb of rules: “What is old is traditional”, what we did in the hills before moving down to the plains is traditional” and what we did before we converted to Christianity is traditional”. Most of the Tangsa used to believe in benevolent spirits like Wihu, which protect and bring prosperity, and also some malevolent spirits which cause illness and bring misfortune. Many Tangsa elite groups used the term Hindu to refer to their older traditional practices because, like the Hindus, the Tangsa also used to sacrifice animals. This inclusive nature of Hinduism among the Tangsa, claimed them to be Hindu and remained so till the 1970s when the Baptist missionaries arrived, and the whole scenario of Northeast India changed. (Barkataki 2015) (Xaxa 2005)

About Rangfraa and its impact on the Tangsa community

Many Tangsa are seen to be headhunters and follow the practice of burying their dead under their chang ghar, ostensibly for the fear that the enemy would steal the heads and take them as trophies. But this practice had been discontinued. The death ritual had been suitably modified,



the feasting done with, and the dead body was no longer kept rotting for days waiting for family members to arrive. Animal sacrifices are allowed during the festivals and on special occasions, for instance, if there is any wedding in the family, a new house is built, or the steps to chang ghar are renewed, but it is not mandatory. The feasts of merit are no longer performed. The Tangsa used to spend a lot of money and energy trying to appease the spirits who believed to cause death and illness. In the Rangfraism the practices of treating illness via divination and expensive sacrifices have been replaced by prayer, fasting, and healing. Instead of sacrifices, they offer flowers and agarbatti (incense). The Rangfraa movement in the mid-1990s was led by professional educated Tangsa doctor, engineer, and civil servant, led by the charismatic Latsam Khimhum, a civil engineer by profession and government employee. The Tangsa used to spend a lot of money and energy trying to appease the malevolent spirits, who they believed caused illness and misfortune. There were benevolent spirits in the traditional Tangsa community, whom many Tangsa pray to after harvesting. According to the new religion of the Tangsa community, the cultural practices followed by Rangfraa are part of people's identity. Although villagers often sacrifice a buffalo during festivals, it has become mandatory instead of offering blood, the rangfraites offer rice beer and rice along with ginger at the lom-roe outside the village at the time of the Mol Festival. Most of the traditional methods are retained. Before the Rangfraa movement, animal sacrifice and rice beer drinking were the most important markers of any festivity. But Rangfraa followers are encouraged not to drink rice beer and animal sacrifice.

The Tangsa people decided to institutionalize their religion by setting up places of worship called Rang-som-hum (prayer house). The prayer house in New Changlang town of Arunachal Pradesh was designed by Latsam Khimhun himself. The design of the prayer house incorporates architectural elements from places of worship of four world religions- the central shrine with an idol is borrowed from a Hindu temple, the hall-like building resembles a church, the round dome is taken from the Muslim Mosque, and the crowning turret with glass windows recalls a Buddhist Pagoda. On 4th November 1997, the first idol of Rangfraa was installed in the prayer house at New Changlang. Prayer services (**Rongsom**) are held on Sunday, Wednesday, and Saturday. The Rongsom means the combination of Romrom (rituals) and Rangtam (prayer). The service begins with the mass prayer followed by the singing of devotional songs. The service is held in a



mixture of languages, whereas the hymns and music are set by Latsam Khimhun in Muklom or Longchang languages. Latsam Khimhum, the founder of the Rangfraa religion, said that Rangfraism and old practices of the religion have a relationship in three aspects: 1. the religious aspect, which was not there before and has been added, 2. the cultural practices, which have been kept completely intact, 3. The bad social practices have been eliminated. (khimhun 2006)

In Rangfraa, idol worship was introduced, which was considered to be a characteristic feature of Hinduism. Many Rangfraism has criticized for introducing idol worship, but Rangrfaa society members claim that they had no other option since they do not have a symbol like a cross (like Christianity). One thing that was clear was that Rangfraa houses have images like Shiva and Vishnu, which they cannot explain. The image of Rangfraa looks like tribal Shiva, and the Keychus (god of Rangfraa) not only possessed the spirit of Rangfraa but also the spirits of Hindu Gods and Goddesses such as Shiva and Kali. Followers of Rangfra made a comment that “Rangfraa and Shiva are the same and they are like brothers”.

Like Buddhism, Rangfraism is said to be the offshoot of Hinduism, and the fact is that the main altar in the Rangfraa prayer house was like that in a Hindu temple. Therefore, it was not surprising that many practices of Hinduism are adopted by Rangfraa, besides idol worship, the use of Diyas (oil lamp), and the use of Agarbatti (incense) during the services, offering flowers, ringing of bells when entering the prayer house, and the use of Tulsi leaves (basil leaves) are all essential Hindu temple rituals. Rangfraa society leaders have been accused of playing into the hands of Hindu Fundamentalist groups. Rangfraa leaders have said that there is no difference between the Janajati (ethnic Communities) and the Hindus. This fact was known to every Hindu from the very beginning, so they never felt the need to convert the Janajati to Hinduism, as they are already Hindu. The link with Hinduism was clear, and the primary aim of Rangfraa society leaders was to stop conversion to Christianity, which is labeled a foreign religion.

The religious reform movements in the region, based on the indigenous faith and practices in North East India, are an attempt by the tribal population to represent their religious and cultural identity. Movements such as the Heraka movement among the Zeme Nagas and the Donyipolo Movement among the Apatanis in Arunachal Pradesh are attempts to reform some religious



practices with changing times. The Donyi Polo movement was essentially the work of the tribal elites and religious leaders of those who practiced the indigenous faith. The increase of Christian proselytization among the people of the Apatani groups and the inadvertent successive destruction of their indigenous tradition and cultural practices by the people responsible for initiating the reform movement. If we talk about the religious movement of Zeliangrong Nagas, that is the Heraka movement, where the reform has been derived from the traditional beliefs and practices. The movement was organized by the Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei tribes in the 1930s and became an organized and operative movement by the 1970s in the Zeliangrong inhabited in the territory of Nagaland and Assam. The reform movement of Heraka was to abolish some of the superstitious customs and practices. The movement was launched during colonial rule to fight against the British and defend the Zeliangrong religious and cultural identity from the Christian proselytization and the advancement of Hinduism. Thus, in the same way, we can say that the Rangfraa movement is a part of the bigger Pan Arunachal Pradesh movement against Christian conversion that advocates a return to indigenous faiths. (Barkataki 2015, 2017)

Conclusions

In the concluding line, we can say that Tangsa, known as the people of the hill, had their own identity in the form of dance, religion, languages, festivals, and dress patterns that made them different from other tribal communities. These identities help them to create a pan-Tangsa identity among the mainstream society. Along with the dress pattern and migration history of Tangsa to India, another thing that helps in the creation of the pan Tangsa identity is Rangfraism which helps them to create their own identity by adopting some of the ideology from Christianity and Hinduism and creating their own religious belief and practices . In this process, we can say that the Tangsa small frontier community migrated from Myanmar, came to terms with the changes in life world, and reacted to the friction and interaction both internally and externally with other communities as well as with the neighboring frontier. The revival and survival that bear witness to the complex interplay between resilience and transformation also help them to create their identity in the process of domination and assimilation.



Most of the Tangsa leaders are trying to construct and create a new Pan Tangsa identity as a common identity that itself is a modern need that was already imposed by the Indian state. The need for a modern identity by a small group of Tangsa people was perhaps the emergence of the new Tangsa elite. The understanding of Tangsa identity and Culture itself has undergone lots of changes and transformation from one defined traditional ritual characteristic to the visually attractive performance that was associated with dance, song, drama, dress, food habits, and language, as well as with festivals. In the article by Virginus Xaxa, “Politics of Language, Religion, and Identity: Tribes in India,” he mentions that most tribes, including Tangsa, are categorized as scheduled tribes not because they practice or follow any religion of their choice but because they constitute a particular community distinct from the dominant regional community. They speak their languages; have a distinct social organization and a way of life that is quite different from that of the regional community. (Xaxa 2005)

So far in the process of cultural identity, it does not matter if they have their own identity in the process of assimilation. This small group of people living in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh has succeeded in figuring out how to instrumentalize their social and cultural identity, gain visibility of their interest in the world around them, and give reason to proudly flaunt their Pan Tangsa identity.

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