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Ethnic Consciousness and the Identity Movement of the Thengal Kachari of Assam

Biswajit Borah

Ph. D Scholar, Department of Sociology, Assam University, Silchar, India

Abstract:

At present many countries of the world are facing immense disturbances caused by both violent and non-violent ethnic movements. In India after independence, a number of movements for autonomy or statehood have been organized from time to time by various ethnic groups. The North-Eastern region of India has attracted much attention since independence because of the separatist and secessionist movements organized from time to time by different ethnic groups demanding statehood or union territory status or even secession from India. Ethnic consciousness and identity movement among the Thengal Kachari is a very recent phenomenon. The origin of the movement can be traced to the 9th decade of twenty century. Most remarkable chapter of their identity movements is that unlike all other ethnic groups of Assam, their identity movement is peaceful in nature. Their movement was carried out successfully without taking path of any violence and bloodshed. They have got an autonomous council in 2005 through which they got autonomous rights to some extent. In the present paper an attempt has been made to understand ethnic consciousness and identity movement in the Thengal Kachari of Assam.

Key words: Ethnicity, Movement, Thengal Kachari etc.

1. Introduction

Ethnic consciousness and the identity movement is a global phenomenon today. The history of world is replete with countless examples of countries getting fragmented on ethnic grounds. At present many countries of the world are facing immense disturbances caused by both violent and non-violent ethnic movements. The prominent among these are ethnic movement of the Tamils of Sri Lanka for their own autonomous political arrangement and Palestine problem in West Asia. In India after independence, a number of movements for autonomy or statehood have been organized from time to time by various ethnic groups. As a result states of India have been reorganized a number of times in the past 6 decades. Recently, the Central Government of India has conceded to the demand for a separate Telangana State.

The North-Eastern region of India has attracted much attention since independence because of the separatist and secessionist movements organized from time to time by different ethnic groups demanding statehood or union territory status or even secession from India. Nagaland has the history of secessionist movement. Meghalaya has the history of a well-organized movement for statehood. Mizoram was also finally the direction of the movement change towards attainment of 'statehood' within Indian Union. In Assam, different ethnic groups have been demanding separate statehood since Independence. Bodo, Kuch, Karbi, Dimasa etc. are prominent among them. Ethnic consciousness and identity movement among the Thengal Kachari is a very recent phenomenon. The origin of the movement can be traced to the 9th decade of twenty century.

Most remarkable chapter of their identity movements is that unlike all other ethnic groups of Assam, their identity movement is peaceful in nature. Their movement was carried out successfully without taking path any violence and bloodshed. They have got an autonomous council in 2005 through which they got autonomous rights to some extent. However, they are demanding inclusion of the community in the list of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes of Assam.

2. Objectives of the Study

In the present paper an attempt has been made to understand ethnic consciousness and identity movement among the Thengal Kachari of Assam.

3. Methodology

The required information was obtained from books, memorandums, pamphlets and other archival records both official and non-official. The method of historical analysis is employed to seek the answer to the question raised. Besides, some persons involved in the movement or having knowledge of the subject were also interviewed.

4. Concept: Ethnicity

Ethnicity is a group of humans whose members are related to each other, either on the basis of a presumed common ancestry or recognition by others as a distinct group or by common cultural, linguistic, religious or territorial traits. The Oxford Dictionary of Sociology defines ethnicity as 'individuals who consider themselves, or are considered by others, to share common characteristics which differentiate them from the other collectivities in a society. Within which they develop distinct cultural behaviour'.

5. Concept: Movement

The word 'movement' has been derived from the French word '*movoir*' which means 'to move, stir or impel'. The Oxford English Dictionary defines social movement as 'a series of actions and endeavours of a body of persons for a special object'. This is regarded as the most widely accepted usage of the word 'movement' as applied to social phenomenon. On an analysis of the available literature on the concept of social movement, social movement may be defined as a collective endeavour on the part of a group of people to achieve a goal guided by a well-formulated strategy based on an ideology. The goal is either to promote a change or to resist a change. It is this definition of social movement in the light of which the movement under present study is analyzed.

6. Origin and Habitat of Thengal Kachari

The Kacharis are represented by different terms in different places like the Bodo in central part, the Mech in western part and the Sonowal, Thengal in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. They are oldest inhabitants of Assam. Historically Thengal Kachari had been part of the great Bodo group of the Mongoloid family. According to Risely, they derived their name 'Thengal' from an ancestor, who is said to have ascended to heaven leg foremost (Sengupta, 2003). According to Borah (2006) in the Assam Gazette published on 12th April 1961, the Kachari including Sonowal, (Sarania, Thengal) is shown. But it is shown as (Kachari, Sonowal) in the scheduled tribe list published in 1976. SenGupta (2003) stated that although, they are a scheduled tribe of Assam, nevertheless they have not been shown separate in the list of scheduled tribe of Assam. Basically, the Thengals are the Mongoloids. At present they are mainly inhabit in Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam. There are 264 Thengal Kachari villages in the state. It is a small community and is said to be the oldest inhabitants of the land.

7. Ethnic Consciousness and the Identity Movement of the Thengal Kacharis

Thengal Kacharis are close affinity with the Assamese peasantry in socio-cultural aspect. In Assam, the interaction between the non-tribal Assamese population and the Thengal Kachari have been taking place for last several centuries. There has been socio-cultural as well as biological interaction among these populations and as a result, the tribe is modernized at different level. The influence of Hinduism is very strong among them. Their culture is largely influenced by the Hindu Assamese culture and has already lost their own dialect. The Thengal Kachari villages are situated resemble to non-tribal Assamese villages of Upper Assam. Without a careful observation, it is sometimes difficult to mark any difference between a Thengal Kachari village and a non-tribal Assamese village. It is observed that the Thengal Kacharis are influenced by what is prevalent in the neighbouring non-tribal Assamese society. Most of their traditional customs and practices have undergone change due to assimilation with non-tribal people of Assam. However, a small section of the people still follows their own traditional religion. The economy of this group is not good and agriculture is the main occupation of the people.

Thengal Kachari has never been separately enumerated in any of the six Census operations (1951, 1961, 1971, 1991, 2001 and 2011) conducted in Assam since Independence. Probably in all these Censuses, they were counted as a tribal community but not enumerated so separately. This community does not even figure in any government publications.

The ethnic consciousness among the Thengal Kacharis is a very recent phenomenon in the history of Assam. However, they never considered themselves as a separate community, different from the other people of Assam till today. Some of their conscious and educated members formed an organization named, 'Thengal Kachari organisation'. They formed this organisation on 25th November, 1990 and latter replaced the name of the organisation as 'All Assam Thengal Kachari organization' (AATKO) in an annual conference held on 24, 25 and 26 April, 1992 at Kawaimari village in Lakhimpur district of Assam. In the initial stage the main aim of the organisation was reintroduce the word 'Thengal' in the Plain Scheduled Tribe list of Assam. Borah (2006) states that the name of the Thengal Kacharis was there in the list of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes of Assam till the year 1976. But then it was secretly removed, without any notification. Besides this other aim of the organization was to unite all the Thengal Kachari people living in different parts of Assam and protect their culture and identity and to fight united for their rights. Demanding a separate status, preservation of the culture and tradition are some of its other objectives. From the very beginning the AATKO members are trying hard to carry out their identity movement. To solve this problem they submitted a detailed memorandum to the Ex-Chief Minister Late Hiteswae Saikia. Because they feel that they have been easy targets for many injustices for decades due to illiteracy and simplicity. Dutta (2008) stated that until few decades back, the community considered themselves as the member of Assamese community only. They lost their language and some elements of their customs and traditions. One section came under the influence of *neo-vaishnavism*,

preached by the great saint poet Sankardeva. But as the members feel that they have been deprived of their basic rights in all spheres, at present they are trying to assert themselves as a separate group.

A youth organization of the community called 'All Assam Thengal Kachari Student Union' was also formed for the students of the community on 23rd November, 1997. The primary demand of this organization is also the inclusion of the community in the list of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes list of Assam.

They were instead included with the Sonowal Kachari, a people closely related, and their numbers were subsumed in the total of the Sonowal Kachari. Indeed, the TKAC Bill as originally drafted clubbed the Sonowal Kachari and the Thengal Kachari and envisaged the creation of a Sonowal Kachari-Thengal Kachari autonomous council. However, it was not acceptable to either of the communities. As result it came into being two separate autonomous councils for the Sonowal Kachari and the Thengal Kachari. Finally, they got an autonomous council in 2005 in a very peaceful manner.

Government of Assam has been also making earnest effort to provide more power to different tribal and ethnic group within Assam, so as to bring about speedy development in the areas inhabited by these groups. Towards this end series of discussions, it has been felt expedient to set up an administrative authority for the areas predominantly inhabited by the Thengal Kacharis. The Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council Bill 2005 was passed by Legislative Assembly of Assam on 12th August, 2005. The objectives of setting up the Administrative Authority is to provide maximum possible autonomy within the framework of the constitution of India for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement of the Thengal Kachari people in the state. A understanding accord was signed among All Assam Thengal Kachari Organisation, Thengal Kachari Autonomous Demand Committee and Assam Government on 10th August, 2005 to form a interim council which was continue till the first election of the council. It is the youngest autonomous council of Assam and a satellite one.

Thengal Kachari Organisations agree to call of all forms of agitation programmes on autonomy demand and to extend co-operation to the Government for implementation of Thengal Kachari Accord, Dispur 10th August 2005 and establishment of peace and progress of the state. But still the main issue of the movement that is re-introduce the word 'Thengal' in the Plain Scheduled Tribe list of Assam yet to be done. From that time, they got autonomous rights to some extent. People are very much conscious of the existence of this council.

Now-a-days they are also conscious about maintaining a distinct culture and tradition. This is an important trait, as declared by the constitution of India, for considering any community to be a tribe in India. As the community does not have its own language, oral literature is the greatest source for them. Now-a-days the colourful demonstration of ethnic dresses, songs, processions is seen at their annual conferences. Besides, they try to observe their customs and traditions in a conscious way. Their leaders and the intellectuals are trying hard to preserve cultural element systematically. They also revive some age-old festivals and tradition which they had left in the past. The community revived a festival known as *Tora Chinga Bihu* or *Bali Husari* in March 2009 ('a festival of tearing a wild cardamom leaves for making ropes for the cows'). In past, they observed this festival in natural setting for more than a month.

In past they celebrated '*Chot Bihu*' on first day of the month of *Chot* (*Chot* is the last month of Assamese Calendar; mid of March); '*Rati Bihu*' performed under banyan tree at night, and it was going on till '*Chot's Samkranti*' (junction of two Assamese month *Chot* and *Bohag* (*Bohag* is the first month of Assamese Calendar). Now-a-day this *Bihu* is known as '*Maiki Bihu*' (female *Bihu*) or '*Gabharu Bihu*'. Elderly womenfolk and "*Pat-Gabharu*" (a girl about to attain puberty) girl's also perform *Bihu* separately from house to house. After the harvest is collected the young lad severed '*Nara*' (stable of paddy) to again cultivation by singing *Bihu* Song. This *Bihu* is known as '*Nara Siga Bihu*'. Besides the traditional dances of the *Bihu* festival, they also try to show all the ceremonies associated with it.

Moreover, one can see some of their new attachments to historical places and the material culture. Their identity movement is that unlike all other ethnic groups of Assam, their identity movement is peaceful in nature.

8. Major Findings

The major findings of the present study are summarized as follows.

The identity movement of Thengal Kachari had all long been a non-violent and peaceful. The method adopted has been the constitutional method of submitting memorandums and sending delegations. The movement was conducted peacefully and never adopted agitational path. The adoption of the constitutional method was more of compulsion than of violation of the protagonists. The advocates of separate autonomous council mainly rose to get maximum possible autonomy within the framework of the constitution of India for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advance of the Thengal Kachari people in the state.

Besides, the movement especially in the beginning of twenty first century had a firm leadership. Besides they never demand separate statehood outside Assam. Assam government also had taken necessary steps for the formation of Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council. But it is important that the main issue of the movement that is re-introduce the word 'Thengal' in the Plain Scheduled tribe list of Assam yet to be done. Their demand for Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council is based on the argument that a separate political entity for Thengal Kachari within Assam is necessary in order to protect the indigenous identity and to make an end of discrimination against and deprivation of Thengal Kachari.

9. Conclusion

Thengal Kachari, being one of the earliest inhabitants of Assam and major tribes of Assam, are worried about the extinction of their traditional identity due to conversion into new faith, belief and assimilation with other people of Assam. The movement led by All Assam Thengal Kachari Organisation was over a period of time resulted the Autonomous Council in Thengal Kachari dominated areas

of Assam. They are trying hard to preservation of old cultural traditions and revival of many lost traditions and customs. In the present circumstances they are facing the problem of identity crises. They are demanding their rights, but in a peaceful manner. Their autonomy movement is very peaceful, silent and without taking any agitational path.

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