

Rites of Passage of the Sarania Kacharis of Baksa (BTAD) District of Assam (India)

Sarat Chandra Bhuyan
Faculty Member of Anthropology
M.C.College, Barpeta (Assam:India)

Abstract

Rites of passage are completely different from religious rites that comprise of the worship of the nature-gods and different spirits. These special rites are significantly associated with the life cycle of the people. They are known in English by French equivalent Rites-de-passage and popularly known as life crisis rituals. Gennep first suggested this conception to attention. Rites of passage develop an emotional state which facilitates bridging the gap between old and new. They mark the passing of one phase of life and the entry to another e.g. birth, puberty, marriage, initiation to priesthood, death etc. This paper presents a descriptive overview of rites of passage of the Sarania Kacharis of Baksa (BTAD) district of Assam.

Key Words: Birth, initiation, puberty, life cycle, priesthood, rites of passage.

Introduction

All religions essentially exhibit a mental attitude towards supernatural which is manifested in belief and rituals. The belief is considered as the static part of the religion while ritual is the dynamic part. Ritual comprises of different actions that aim to establish a connection between the performing individual and the supernatural power. Belief, on the other hand, has no direct impact; it stands as a character for the rituals and provides a rationale for the same (cited in I. Basu Roy, 2003: 502).

Some rites, Evans-Pritchard says, are concerned with changes of social status and the interaction of social groups. The occasions for rites of the first type, which Evans-Pritchard calls 'confirmatory', are remarkably similar all over the world. Arnold Van Gennep first brought the concept of rites-de-passage to attention. He distinguished rites into three types: rites of separation, transition rites and rites of incorporation or aggregation. According to him, rites of separation often get prominence in funeral ceremonies, transition rites stand important in pregnancy, betrothal or initiation, and rites of incorporation are widely visible in ceremonies (cited in I. Basu Roy, 2003: 506-507).

Van Gennep pointed out that human being does not become a member of his society merely by being born; he has to be formally accepted into it. The attainment of social adulthood is marked by ritual, as are marriage and death, and one of the effects of mortuary ritual is to establish the status of the dead person as an ancestor (cited in Lucy Mair, 1985: 234).

The Sarania Kacharis

The Saranias are one of the most distinct community who belong to Mongoloid racial stock like other tribal groups living in Assam. The Mongoloid people entered in this part of North east region from China-Tibet region in 2000 B.C.

In many cases the tribal people were sanskritized by adopting Hindu religion and cultural practices. A segment of kacharis bifurcated and called themselves Saranias by adopting Hinduism. Later the term Sarania kachari was finally recognized by the Britishers in 1881 in their census report. The Sarania Kachari is a distinct tribe inhabiting the different areas of Assam. The major concentration of Sarania Kacharis is found in the north bank of the Brahmaputra river. They are widely distributed in the districts of Kamrup (rural), Nalbari, Baksa, Odalguri, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Darrang, Sonitpur etc. According to the census conducted by the authorised body of the Sarania Kachari community, the total population is above 5 lakhs out of which 2,85,704 (approx.) males and 2,14,286 (approx.) are females (Hakasam, 2013).

So far as the physical features are concerned the Sarania Kachari possesses all the Mongoloid features like a yellowish brown skin colour, hair form which is straight and black in colour. The 'Sarania Community' was formed when the Aryans entered Assam in 5th century AD. The British Rulers in 1881 census gave the identity to this community in their census report as Sarania'. Social life of the Sarania Kachari is very simple. The Sarania Kachari society is composed of patrilineal families. The smallest social unit is the family. Marriage among the Sarania Kacharis has both a religious and social aspect. The Sarania Kacharis are generally an endogamous tribe. One can marry anyone within the community. Agriculture is the main occupation of the Sarania Kachari people. Ploughing with a traditional plough and a pair of bullock is a common sight in their paddy field. They also rear animals and poultry as secondary source of income.

The Sarania Kachari women seem to be born weavers. They are expert weavers and make colourful dresses for themselves. Weaving in the family looms and rearing of *eri* worm (silk worm) are favoured past times for the womenfolk. Rice is their staple food. They relish pork and fowl. They are very much fond of their native rice beverage. The Sarania Kacharis are animistic. They worship various natural objects like river, trees, stones, animals etc. for peace and prosperity.

Methodology

The method used for this paper was a systematic literature review by utilizing a combination of both the contextual and conceptual review methods.

Rites of passage

The life cycle of Sarania Kacharis is surrounded by a number of rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies performed in different stages of life.

Rituals connected to pregnancy and child birth

The new life starts with conception. The Sarania Kacharis are no exception. The birth of a child, be it a male or a female, is an occasion for rejoice for the whole family. Among the Sarania Kacharis, a number of traditional customs and rituals have been observed with respect to pregnant mother and new born baby. A pregnant mother has to follow some certain restrictions during pregnancy. She is to follow certain food taboos. For instance, she cannot take any spicy food which may cause any harm to her health. Even her husband must follow certain restriction. For instance, he must abstain from killing animals, attending mortuary rite, doing evil deeds etc. The Sarania Kacharis believe that all these have to be observed both by the expectant mother and her husband in order to ensure the well development of the foetus in the mother's womb.

After the birth of a baby, the umbilical cord is cut by a bamboo splinter. During this period both the mother and the baby are considered as impure. The woman does not touch any eatable things or food stuff. Others also do not take anything from her. She generally confines herself in her own place. After the expiry of a specific time period, i.e. twenty one days and thirty days in case of a baby boy and girl respectively, a purificatory ritual is observed in order to break the impurity. Shaving of the baby's head is also done on this ritual. While the naval cord of the baby falls, it is preserved till the child is three or four years old. If the child suffers from stomach pain, the cord of the child is kept in a little water which is given to the child.

Puberty ritual

Puberty is a natural happening with the onset of adolescent stage both for the boys and girls. Among the Sarania Kacharis no initiation ceremony is seen in case of the boys in order to mark the beginning of adolescence. But they perform *tulonia* biya (one kind of ritual) in case of girls when the girls reach the stage of sexual maturity. The first menstruation cycle is observed by a good number of rituals. In the first three days of the occurrence of menarche, girl is asked to sleep in a separate room along with two or three girls to give her company. On the third day, she is bathed by her friends or a group of village women and put on new cloths. That day she is regarded as *koina* (bride). A well-to-do family offers a feast while the poor family offers a tea party to the relatives and friends to mark the closing of the ceremony.

Marriage ritual

Among the Sarania Kacharis, marriage is the accepted form of union between a man and a woman. They believe that an unmarried person is socially incomplete and therefore, marriage is considered as part and parcel. Illegal unions specially incestuous relations are very much hated. Marriages are solemnized after the attainment of puberty. Boys usually marry between the ages of 21 to 26 and girls between 16 to 21. Clan exogamy is strictly adhered to. This means that a boy must not marry a girl of his own clan. Monogamy is the socially recognized type of marriage although cases of polygyny cannot be ruled out.

The Sarania Kacharis follow two distinct forms of marriage. They are: i) marriage by negotiation and ii) marriage by mutual love and elopement (*gandharba biya*). Marriage by negotiation is the prevailing practice among the Sarania Kacharis. In case of marriage by negotiation, the father and the other male relatives of the boy have to approach the girl's family first for the marriage of the girl with the boy. The well-to-do Sarania Kacharis prefer this type of marriage which entails huge expenditure and long drawn formalities. But now-a-days Sarania Kachari marriages are solemnized according to this type of marriage i.e. marriage by mutual love and elopement where the couple concerned takes the initiative.

Mortuary Ritual

In Sarania Kachari Society, death is regarded as a natural process from which none can escape. In Sarania Kachari Society, the performance of the death ceremony is compulsory.

A series of rituals are performed by the Sarania Kacharies in case of the individual. When death occurs in any family, the neighbours and the fellow villagers are informed. The dead bodies among the Sarania Kacharis are usually cremated. But the body of the person died of infectious diseases like small pox, by hanging or drowning is traditionally buried. Besides dead bodies of children, unmarried persons and pregnant women are buried. A bier (*chungi*) is made of bamboo on which is laid a bamboo mat. On this mat the corpse is kept and then carried to the cremation ground. The corpse is accompanied by friends, relatives and co-villagers. A billhook and a torch (*jumuthi*) made of twisted rice straw is lighted and taken along by the deceased's eldest or youngest son or the brother. A pyre is made in the cremation ground by putting four bamboo posts. The body is then bathed and new clothes are also put on. In case of male, the body is placed in such a way that the head faces downward while in the case of female, it faces upward. Bamboo and wood are put under and above the corpse on the pyre. The eldest son first puts fire in the pyre. In the absence of eldest son any male member of the family can perform rituals. The person who is supposed to put fire in the pyre, first usually move around the pyre for seven times by holding a burning torch (*gor*) by both his hands. Then the pyre is burnt with the help of relatives and friends. When the dead body is burnt to ashes, the fire is extinguished by pouring water from an earthen pot and then a handful of sesamum, black pulse (*black maati dal*) are sprinkled over the ashes. The son collects few pieces of burnt bone for performing *pinda* ritual. The friends and relatives pray for the eternal peace of the departed soul. After that the funeral party takes bath in the nearby river or pond. After returning from the cremation ground, friends, relatives and co-villagers take warmth in the fire caught at the gate of the deceased.

Purificatory ceremonies are almost similar to those of the neighbouring non-tribals. The obsquies include three rituals i.e., *Tilani*, *Doha* and *Shraddha*. The first and second rituals are observed after three and ten days of the death respectively. The Sarania Kacharis employ priest in order to perform *shraddha* rituals which is the final mortuary ritual of the Sarania Kacharis. Ancestor worship is prevalent among them. The spirits of ancestors are called and worshipped annually or occasionally. They believe that unless the spirit of newly dead ancestor is worshiped, it continues to exist and appears in dream. At present, majority of the Sarania Kacharis are followers of vaishnavism. Hence, they prefer to observe the mortuary rituals like other caste Hindus. As a result, the traditional mortuary rituals of the Sarania Kacharis have now become obscured. After the completion of the ritual a feast is offered for the villagers in honour of the dead. The offering of the feast marks the closing of the death ceremony. Pigs or fowls and *mod* (rice bear) are the pre-requisites of this feast. A share of the food prepared on this occasion is kept separately for the deceased and is offered to the departed soul at the cremation ground or at the back side of the dwelling house.

Conclusion

Though the Sarania Kacharis follow their traditional religion, yet the influence of Hinduism is perceived in the observance of different rituals pertaining to birth, marriage and death. The Sarania Kachari religion is based on the sakti cult. They even sacrifice animals for appeasement of Goddess *Kechaikhaiti*. *Kechaikhaiti* is one of the most important deities of the Sarania Kacharis. Many of the Hindu deities like *Durga*, *Manasha*, *Saraswati*, *Lakshmi*, *Shiva* etc, are finding their place in the Sarania Kachari pantheon. They never feel much difference, when they worship Goddess *Durga* during *puja* festival of the Hindus. Hence, many similarities are found in the observance of different rituals relating to birth, marriage and disposal of dead.

References

- Bordoloi, B.N. 1976. *The Dimasa Kacharis of the North Cachar Hills Districts of Assam*. The Director of Information and Public Relations, Govt. of Assam.
- Bordoloi, B.N. and G.C. Sharma Thakur, 1988. *Tribes of Assam, Part II*, Tribal Research Institute, Guwahati (Assam)
- Bordoloi, B.N., G.C. Sharma Thakur and M.C. Saikia. 1987 *Tribes of Assam, Part I*, Tribal Research Institute, Guwahati, Assam (Now Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled castes) pp-74-98
- Bose, N.K. 1971. *Tribal life in India*. National Book trust, New Delhi, India
- Dutta, P.C. 1990. *The Singphos*, Directorate of Research, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar
- Elwin, Verrier. 2009. *A Philosophy for NEFA*, Isha Books, Delhi
- Endle, S. 1911. *The Kacharis*, Low Price Publications, Delhi
- Gait, E.A. 1963. *A history of Assam*
- Hakasam, B.R. 2013. *Sarania kachari Sanskriti aru Lokosahitya (in Assamese)*, Saraniya Kachari Unnayan Parishad, Guwahati (Assam)
- Haviland, W.A. 1989. *Anthropology*, Holt, Rinehart and winston. Inc, New York
- Kashung, S. and Bhattacharya, M. 2015 *Role of Folk practitioners: A Caste study of the Tangkhuls in Bulletin of Deptt. of Anthropology, Vol- XVII Gauhati University:50-60*
- Mair, Lucy. 1972 *An Introduction to Anthropology*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- Roy, I.B. 2003 *Anthropology The study of Man*, S.Chand & Company Ltd., New Delhi

Sharmah, M. and Sonowal, M. 2008, '*Rites of passage of the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam*' *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, Vol.XI: 89-94*

Sharma Thakur, G.C. 1985. *The Lalungs*. Tribal Research Institute, Assam (Now Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled castes)

Sonowal, M. 2006. '*Rites of Paassage among Deoris: A brief Account.*' *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, Vol.10:111-115.*
