A Study of A Konyak Naga Village in Sivasagar District of Assam, India

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Abstract

Assam is a cradle of different ethnic groups. Along with the indigenous tribes and communities of Assam, a good count of migrated communities is contributing to the grandeur of greater Assamese ethnicity since time immemorial. Besides, the Assam valley being surrounded by hills, sections of many tribal groups from the hills made foothill regions and beyond their habitats from ancient times. Some of these groups were also settled by the kingdoms of the valley. One example of such settlement is that of a small group of Konyak Naga community in Sivasagar district of Assam. Even if historical evidences are not enough to confirm the accurate root or causes of their migration to Assam, their existence and endeavour to assimilate with the Assamese community is a confirmed phenomenon. They have been living in this soil and have become an inalienable part of Assam with the time. This study tries to understand the historical background of the village formation and explore the assimilation process of the village with the larger Assamese society.

Keywords: Konyak Naga, Tribes, community, Assimilation.

Introduction

Assam is a cradle of different ethnic groups. Along with the indigenous tribes and communities of Assam, a good count of migrated communities is contributing to the grandeur of greater Assamese ethnicity since time immemorial. Besides, the Assam valley being surrounded by hills, sections of many tribal groups from the hills made foothill regions and beyond their habitats from ancient times. Some of these groups were also settled by the kingdoms of the valley. One example of such settlement is that of a small group of Konyak Naga community in Sivasagar district of Assam. Even if historical evidences are not enough to confirm the accurate root or causes of their migration to Assam, their existence and endeavour to assimilate with the Assamese community is a confirmed phenomenon. They have been living in this soil and have become an inalienable part of Assam with the time.

The prime and primitive objective of migration is always interpreted through socio-economic necessities of people. The natural resources and the fertile soil of Assam attract the various ethnic groups and their migration to this land. Migration has always been a reality in Assam. Throughout history people from various places have migrated to Assam and they assimilated with the existing culture.

This study tries to understand the historical background of the village formation and explore the assimilation process of the village with the larger Assamese society. The social system of the Konyak Naga community of the village is different from the other Naga communities. They assimilated with the larger Assamese society without giving up their own culture. This study tries to understand the process of assimilation of the village. This is true of unique linguistic dialectal, racial and religious diversities. It is here to be mentioned that these Konyak Naga people have not only assimilated with Assamese society but also have converted to Hinduism. They attend the Hindu holy shrine known as ‘Namghar’ and ‘Satra’. They feel proud of considering themselves as Assamese. Even if there has been frequent border dispute between Assam and Nagaland, they take in pride in identifying themselves as Assamese people.

Objectives: i. To understand the extent of their assimilation and find out related problems in assimilating with the Assamese Society. ii. To understand the socio-cultural profile of the village

Methodology

The study conducted in a Naga village in Sivasagar district of Assam under Hahchora Gaon Panchayat of Sivasagar Development Block. The name of the village is Naga Gaon Model Village and it is 12 kilometres away from the district headquarter. The total population of the village is 291. The village mostly consist of Konyak group of Naga community. The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected with the help of an Interview Schedule. In addition to this we have conducted Focus Group Discussion in the village to understand the culture, economic, social and health condition of the villagers.

Secondary data is collected from books, local news paper reports and government reports.

Nagas: A Brief Profile: North-East India is like a melting pot of different ethnic groups. There are so many ethnic group inhabitants in this region.
The Naga is a generic name for a group of tribes inhabiting Nagaland, Northern Manipur and bordering districts of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The various Naga groups include Ao, Angami, Sema, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Chang, Rengma, and others. The heterogeneity among the Nagas may be because of prolonged inbreeding and lack of intermixture within the Naga group of tribes. The Nagas comprising of about 40 odd tribes are found in North East India and North West Myanmar.

Konyak Nagas: The Konyak Naga is the important fold of Nagas. Mostly the Konyaks are inhabited in the Mon District of Nagaland. The word Konyak derived from the word ‘Kenjaik’, which means ‘man’. The facial feature of Konyak is palaeo-Mongoloid type. Hutton and Mills divided the tribe into two different groups – Thenko and Thendu, distinguished by cultural and linguistic features. Till the early 20th century, the Konyaks were named differently such as Tablungias, Banferas, Mulonias, Namsangias etc. And they were known collectively as South-eastern Nagas.

Four different classes of people form a clear cut social hierarchy among the Konyak. The traditional chief Ang occupied the top position. The second position come the descendants of Ang. The third class is formed by the commoners, who have attained higher social status. At lowest social strata are the common village people who lead a simple lifestyle. The Angship is related to social, political, religious, and territorial functions. In terms of their face Konyak divided into two groups, Thanda, who used to tattoo their faces, and the Thenko, who generally do not tattoo the face. There are many clans among the Konyaks which are Lwang, Kongnok, Yingshanku, Angnophang, Wanghu, Paikno, Matpisun, Yanlam, Laktuhi, Hentoklu, Punlonghu, Angwanhu, Shishohu, Manching Wangnanting, Wonghu, Wangnayaum, Wangchingphong etc. Lwang and Angnophang clans are considered to be in the highest position. The members of clan were consanguineous kin. Bonds of loyalty and joint responsibility among the members of a clan are very stronger. Cooperation between the clan members also extended to the economic activities. A man rebuilding his house would get free voluntary labour from his clans men. All individual consider themselves as equal to each other and Angship also treated in the same spirit.

Konyak marriage are held either mutual consent or by negotiation. Negotiated marriage is highly preferred. The marriageable age of the male and female are twenty five and twenty respectively. They also prefer cross cousin marriage. After the marriage they followed the pattern patri-neolocal residence. Divorce is a rare phenomenon in their society.

Every traditional Konyak village have their own Wang Hamyen (village council) formed by the representatives from all the Morungs of the village. Ang is the supreme authority of the council. Angs have three categories – Ang, Wangsa, and Wangshu. The representatives are selected on the basis of their merit. In the council the decision of the Ang is final and honoured by all. The council enforces customary rites, and adjudicates all disputes. The punishment of the council is varied according to the nature of the crime committed by the individual. The punishment is generally imposed in the form of fine, in kind or cash, which is not paid by the aggrieved party, but it shared by the representatives.

The traditional Konyak people believed in Gawang also called the sky god as their supreme deity who is omnipotent and omniscient. They believed that Gawang punish the offenders of social rules and moral conduct. They also believe in after life. The sacred specialist performs the simple offering to Gawang as and when such occasion arises. They have two main festival and they celebrated with joy and feasts.

The varied and colourful ceremonial dresses, ornaments, house architectural designs, wood carving, tattoo painting, engravings, weaving, bamboo and cane crafts displayed the artistic and aesthetic expression of the Konyak Naga.

Konyak calendar have four seasons. Lao-ong (Autumn), Eimyu (Spring), Hong (Winter), Chaee (Summer). The Konyak year Wangpeang divided into 12 le’s each le’s into four hats (weeks) there are lunar months, and observed after them are their festivals and agricultural ceremonies.

Narration from the field study: Sivasagar is the districts of Assam known for its ethnic and cultural diversity with vital historical importance. There is a sizable number of tribal groups inhabiting in many parts of Sivasagar district. Some are small and some are bigger in number. One of the small numbered tribal groups in Sivasagar is the Konyak Naga tribe. They constituted two village in the district namely Hahchora Naga Gaon Model Village and Monaing Naga village. The study covers the Hahchora Naga Gaon Model Village.

Naga Gaon Model Village basically inhabited by the Konyak Naga tribe. The village is 372 kilometre (approximately) away from Guwahati and 10 km away from the district headquarter Sivasagar. The Naga village is situated in the Hahchora Gaon Panchayat in Sivasagar Development Block. The name of the village in Konyak dialect is Ting-Ya village. It is bounded in the South by Lankak Gohain Village, Moiramora Handique Village and Moiramora satra in the North, in the East by the Latum Village, and in the West by the Kachari Village. The village connects the other places through the state highway. The nearest railway station is Simaluguri. Cherekapar market is the nearest market of the village.

Historical background of the village: Every village has a history of its own, but mostly it has been orally transmitted. The Konyak people are generally the inhabitant of Nagaland. However, the migration is an inevitable phenomenon. The Konyak people also have long history of migration. Assam has been an attractive destination for those people since long. Among the districts of the state, Sivasagar district is likely to be
the highly beguiling destination for them. The formation of Konyak Naga village is also emanated from the history of migration of Konyak people. However, till today, no any written documents for their migration to this area are found. This hindrance is drawing a concrete migration rout of these people to their present location.

The villagers believe that their ancestors came from Mon district of Nagaland. According to them they led to this place approximately in 18th century at the time when Ahom monarchs ruled in Assam. They consider themselves to be the companion of Dalimi. As no concrete historical evidence is collected in her presence, therefore the existence of such character is debatable. According to the folklore, there was a Naga girl named Watlong (also known as Dalimi) who fell in love with Gadapani, an Ahom prince during his exile in the Naga hill. Watlong accompanied him (Godapani) at the time when he returned to his home state but unfortunately waited on their way. She fell sick on this journey to the plains and died in the place called Naginimora (present sub-division of Mon district). The villagers said that the people who came with her did not go back to their original place. They stayed in the place Cheng-phan (present day Sripur). They again shifted to the bank of the Hatigharia Bill. Finally the Moiramora Satra offered land at their present residence. Initially there were only seven household and now the count grow to sixty four households.

In an interaction with Banita Buragohain, who has been studying for a long time about these people said that the village formed in the present area only because of their migration from Naga hill. The people came to the plains in search of food and livelihood as there was dearth of food and other things in their native land. They firstly stayed in cheng-phan. The Gosain of Moiramora Satra after converting them to Neo-Vaisnavite religion took them to this village.

Social Structure: Family: Family is the basic social unit of the village. Nuclear type of family is highly accepted form of the village. But there are joint family also prevalent in the village. After the marriage the new married couple formed new household.

Clan: The tribal villages are divided on the basis of clan. In the study area there are four clans in the village. Namely Ti, Luk, Tingphoi and Wanchu. All the members of the village irrespective of clan write the same surname ‘Konyak’. There are no hierarchical division of clan. Luk is the largest and Tingphoi is the smallest clan in terms of their population. Clan is more important than the individual. All the individuals respect their elder member and they play an important role in village polity.

Population structure: The total population of the study area is 291 out of which 138 are male and 153 are female with total household of 64 as per 2011 census. The average household size of the village is 4.5. Among the 64 households are Hindu and other 2 households are the follower of Christianity.

Religion: Durkheim’s work “The Elementary Forms of Religious Life” explored the essence of the religion and it is believed that religion act as an agent which brings solidarity in a community. The villagers follow their traditional religious beliefs and customs. Their religious beliefs are belongs to the totemic form of tribal religious practices. They worshiped “Kawang” (Gawang) as their supreme god. The traditional people believe that the Kawang created everything: sky, human, rice, firmament, et al. Kawang caused thunder to roll, lightning to flash, and the earthquakes and floods and destroy. Kawang is omnipotent and omniscient. In present day, they believe in other Hindu gods and goddesses also. In their religious functions they follow their traditional custom and practices. They publicly observed their religious function in the “Moring Ghar”. They offer their worshiped to the main pillar of the Moring Ghar.

The villagers are aware of their religious identity. The people of the village followed Hinduism. They are neo-vaisnavite. They take Sarana (religious shelter) from Moiramora Satra. ‘By taking Sarana under a guru through a very simple procedure anyone could enter into the fold of neo-vaishnavism. It thus facilitates the entry of a large number of tribal people into the fold of Hinduism without any of the difficulties posed by the brahminic Hinduism’. The villagers are the disciple of Moiramora Satra which is belongs to Kala Sanghati of Neo-Vaisnavism. Gopal Ata of Bhabanipur disciple of Madhabdev developed Kala Sanghati. This sub-cult gave emphasis on proselytizing work among the tribal people. The socio-cultural customs of the tribes were incorporated in the Kala Sanghati. The people of the village are visiting the satra in the time of religious functions.

There are two household of the village followed Christianity. But the village authority excommunicated them and pecuniary punishment is imposed to the people who are gone to their home. The Christian people perform their ritual with the help of the Christian Konyak Naga who are live in Monaiting Naga village. The village people are not like the Christianity. They believe that if they take the other religion unlike Hinduism they cannot preserve their rich cultural heritage. It is only happen in the fold of Hinduism. The authority does not allow any religion unlike Hinduism to enter in the Moring Ghar.

Festival: The unity and friendship among the villagers is also brought about by annual communal feasts and festivals. The festivals are the symbols of social unity and friendship among the villagers.

The festival of the village is related to agriculture. ‘Ao-Leng’, “Ao-Ya”, “Pamou” etc are the seasonal festivals observed by the villagers. Fo-yam and Anak-ru are their religious rituals as mentioned by Buragohain"
Ao-Leng festival is observed in the last part of the month of Chait (March-April) for continuous five days to welcome their new year. Ao-Ya festival is observed after the harvesting. Ao-Ya is the festival observed after harvesting. Pamou observed in the time of winter. They celebrate it before the day of purimina (full moon) and the day of purimina of the month Magh (January-February). On the first day the male members of the village arrange a feast of pork and traditional rice beer ‘yu’. On the very next day the villagers are going to hunt.

In terms of religious festival the villagers celebrate Jathi Puja (Spear worship) and Clan Worship. Jathi puja is celebrated in the Morung Ghar after two months of celebrating Ao-Leng festival. Clan worshiping ceremony is held in the time of Ao-Leng and Pamou.

**Marriage:** Like the other communities marriage is an indispensable part of the Konyak Naga society, which can be regarded as a social institution. The villagers are practicing monogamy as accepted form of marriage system in the village. They prefer marry within the village and they are clan exogamy. Some of the girls are directly married from their native Nagaland but today it is very rare phenomena in the village. The Konyak youth are now marrying other community girls. Most of the girls come from their neighbouring community Ahom and other. Not only they married the other community girl but some of the girl of the village married with other community member. These marriages are held without the proper acceptance the society. But gradually the village recognized this marriage. In earlier days, there are no any girls’ puberty attain ceremony held in Naga village. This type of ceremony is now a day hold in the village under the influence of Assamese society. Most of the Assamese Naga marriages are held on the elopement basis. Only one marriage is held in the type of so called arranged basis.

**Language:** Language is a kind of medium through which we interact with others. It is a medium which associated with society. Linguistically, the Konyak Naga community comes under the Naga-Kuki group of the Tibeto-Burman family. The people of the village express their thought by “Naga Duwans” called “Longkai” and “Waking” dialect. They use their own dialect at home and the village and also use Assamese language for communicating the people of other community.

**Education:** Educational development of a community is very important to measure the progress of a community. The findings show that the people are highly aware of the education. Almost approximately 80% of the villagers can read and write. After so many years of spread of education in the village the people of the village still lacks qualified educated people. There are no such discrimination between boys and girls. Girls are highly educated in comparison with boys. There one girl passed out MA in Assamese and one pursuing MD and one of the boy pursuing MA in Geography.

**Food Habit:** Food habit is the primary element of human culture. It is depended on the ecological set up. Every ethnic group has their own tradition related to food items. The Konyak Naga people have also separate food items differing from the other. The staple food of them is rice. They are non-vegetarian. The villagers mostly preferred boiled food. They take pork and chicken. The pork is their traditional food item. The pork is popularly used in the time of festival, communal feast etc. They prepared the pork without using masala. In the time of their three seasonal festivals they arranged communal dinner with pork item. In Ao-Leng festival they prepared pork item with hundred one varieties of hak (green leaves).

They also take a homemade rice beer called “Yu”. It plays an important role in Konyak Naga’s social life. Each of the houses of the village use Yu. They use it their day to day life and it plays as sacred liquor in their traditional festivals and pujas. They use different kind of method to preparing the liquor. They don’t take the meat of dog.

**Political life and local administration of the village:**
According to Vidyarthi and Rai, “The political life of the tribal of India reflects a paradoxical situation in which democracy and monarchy co-exist. Every head of a community at different levels like clan, village and territory is generally honoured, obeyed and accepted as the head of the group. Every tribal has a share in the political ties of the village and the region. The tribal leader governs the community only because he is backed by the majority or the whole of the group. There seem to be no society where political activities are non-existent. Even the smallest community requires some form of government. The tribes have clearly demarcated territorial boundaries. As a rule the tribals, living in small groups, are united by kinship, marriage and frequent individual contact, and with them it is difficult to distinguish political affairs from domestic affairs. Tribal political associations are of various kinds and incorporate individuals, elders, families, a clan group, a village and a tribal territory. Still they are micro-political in nature. Every tribal village has some type of political machinery to look after the village affairs”.

The Village social-political structure is democratic. In the discussion of Jatin Mipun on ‘Mishing tribe of Assam’ he talked about the Ke'bang (Village Council) of that community and its role in the society. The Ke’bang is constituted of village elders within a village. According to Vidyarthi and Kumar “The Ke’bang has the power to deliver judgments and punish the
offenders. The punishments are usually depends upon the nature of offence. Generally, it is in the form of the imposition of fines in money or kind, physical punishment or ex-communication. In the Naga village the villager set up a Village Development Committee (VDC) in the year 1971 and the main aim of this committee is to all round development of the village as well as their villagers. VDC maintain the peace and harmony of the village. No any villager above the decision of VDC. It is like a village court where discussing all the affairs of village. The village development committee took initiative in various public functions of the village. The VDC has a president and a secretary and twenty one members including female also. The members of the VDC are selected by the villagers for a fixed term only. The post is not hereditary. The person who is selected as president and secretary respectively should have some essential qualities. Female got less importance in comparison with male. Traditionally male dominate the VDC. The first president of the committee is Batai Konyak and the secretary is Angbang Konyak. The decision of the VDC is strictly followed by the villagers. The meeting of the VDC held in the Morung Ghar premises. Women participation is negligible in the meeting.

After the independence political structure in the village changing and with democracy they also started participating in the present political structure. The villagers are engaged in mainstream politics in terms of participating in the general elections. The mainstream political party also has influence in the village. The village is under the Sivasagar Legislative Assembly seat and Jorhat Parliamentary Constituency. Mainly the villager supported the Indian National Congress (INC). One of the villagers is present President of Sivasagar District in tribal cell of Indian National Congress Party.

Role of Morung Ghar: “The Morung, or youth dormitory, is typically a huge building which physically dominated a Naga village, resplendent with carvings representing hornbills, tigers, mithun (bison) and human heads and sometimes with projecting barge-boards resembling wings or horns. Sociologically it is a key institution of Naga society, though its importance varies between the different groups. The pillars of Morung Ghar carved with striking representations of tigers, hornbills, human figures, monkeys, lizards and elephants. Morung Ghar is a socio-cultural institution of the Konyak Naga society. It plays an important role in the village. The festivals are observed in the Morung Ghar. The villager established the Morung Ghar in the year 1775. The villager decorates the Morung Ghar with ethnic designs, which exhibits aestheticism in their culture. Women are not allowed to enter in the Morung Ghar. In earlier time it is compulsory to all the unmarried youth have staying in Morung Ghar at night. The cultural event of the annual festival observed in the open space of Morung Ghar where all the people of the village participate. It is compulsory to all that they wear their traditional dress and attend in the function. Only Hindu people are allowed to entering in the Morung Ghar. It also plays a role of religious institution. The people offer prayer in the main pillar of the Morung Ghar. The main pillar of the Morung Ghar is sacred to the Konyak Naga.

They keep the ‘Tungkung’ (log drum) in a right side of the main pillar. It is the crucial musical instrument of the village. The people beat the ‘Tungkung’ in the time of festival, when a male dies, calling a meeting etc. But they cannot beat the log drum when a female member of a village is expired. Women are not eligible to touch the ‘Tungkung’. The Morung Ghar helps the Konyak to preserve their traditional festival, song, musical instrument, rituals etc. The villagers himself assume that they are the preserver of original Konyak Naga culture.

In the time of festival the cultural programmes are held in front of the Morung Ghar. In that time the villagers decorate the Morung Ghar with various designs. The public feasts are organized in there. All general as well as Village Development Committee meeting are held in Morung Ghar campus.

Summary

This study is basically a primary investigation to the nature of amalgamation of Naga communities with Assamese communities. Women were not allowed to participate in the religious ceremonies. Male member of the society mainly conduct the religious rituals. Though they enter to the fold of neo-vaishnavism by taking sarana, their position in the religious life is not good. According to one old man of the village, in earlier days, the village people were considered as impure by the so called upper class people of the Satras. They were engaged in building the pandle for rituals held in the Satras and Gosain’s residence, but were not allowed to participate in the rituals. However, they were allowed to have dined at the occasion. Moreover, entering to the Manikatis strictly prohibited for them. In the time of Bhaona the Naga people come to the satra. According to Kamala Mahanta one of the member of satra family said that there a separate area is confined for the Naga people to sit for watching Bhaona. They sit in their respective area united. It is seemed a sense of communal solidarity is floating in the air among them. Though they performed ritual in their own belief and customs, they also believe in their Gurus advice. They offered Sarai in the various occasion at satra and they yearly giving their religious tax as well. It is compulsory that when a youth attaining adulthood he must take sarana from the satra. One of the people of the village actively engaged with Sadau Asom Satra Mahasabha. During the visit, the author of this work himself witnessed that the villager, offering puja to various Hindu god and goddesses also. Annually the Naga people observing Nam-Prasanga in their home for the betterment of the household and in that time the Satradhikar come to their home for chanting Prasanga. In this occasion they offered the guest with Mah-Prasad. Traditional rice beer is prohibited in the time of the Nam-Prasanga.
The people of the village do not like the religion which is completely different from the Hinduism. There are two household of the village adopting Christianity but the village people are not happy with their activities and they excommunicated those household from the village. The village authority does not allow any villager to go to their home. Or otherwise, the person has to pay the pecuniary punishment for non obedience. The people of the village performed Ankiya Bhaona namely “Kankha Badhi” in the “Setubandhan” of Sadou Asom Satra Mahasabha in the year 2005 in Jorhat and they also participate in the cultural procession of the same occasion in the year 2003 at Guwahati and 2006 at Tezpur.

The study also finds a tremendous linguistical corporation between the two communities. The village is bounded by the other so called Assamese community such as Ahom, Koch, Kaibarta etc. From the time of immemorial, the village is more or less assimilated with the majority culture of the society. According to the neighbouring villagers, the Naga people did not know the Assamese language. From the above study we found that Marriage is also a factor of assimilation in the village. There are twenty five of the married girls come from the other Assamese communities. In this condition they have acculturated with the other communities. Assimilation is also evident in the dressing pattern of the people of the village. The men folk of the village wear suriya when they go to the satra for any occasion. The married women wear vermilion as like Assamese women wear in the forehead.

The people of the village restricted some of the food items which are traditionally take by the Naga. Traditionally the Konyak Naga has no notion of purity and pollution in their food habit. By the influence of Hinduism like Eka Sarana Hari Nam Dharma the people abstain themselves from taking the meat of dog. They also offered the guest with a cup of tea which is traditionally occupied by their rice beer. They welcome their guest with betel nut which is again a sign of being influenced by the Assamese society. In the time of festival the people of the village prepare Til Pitha, Tel Pitha and other kind of Assamese traditional cake.

The people of the village now recognized themselves as Assamese. In the contemporary time there is a constant border conflict held between Assam and Nagaland. Sometime it turns like into violence. However, the people of this village defy the Naga intrusion to the land of Assam. Sometime their counterpart from Nagaland use to come to the village and force them to convert as Christian. But, they have refused their proposal. The common people of the village don’t know about the famous ‘Hornbill Festival’ held every year in Nagaland to encourage inter-tribal interaction and to promote cultural heritage of various Naga tribes. They never take any invitation from their counterparts from Nagaland to this festival. They themselves claim as the preserver of traditional Konyak Naga culture and tradition. Due to the close contact with the Assamese community many of the customs and practices of Konyak Naga community in the village have assimilated with the Assamese community.

Conclusion

In nutshell, this village has tremendous scope for the social researcher to know more about the nature, prospect and consequence of assimilation and acculturation. The village is undoubtedly an ideal example of collaboration with grandeur of Assamese community without compromising their own traditions and customs.

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