



Folk Beliefs of the Koch Community of Assam:

A Descriptive Study

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ABSTRACT

Assam is the meeting place of different castes and tribes. According to the tribal structure, these tribes are known as The Nordics, Mongols, Austrics and Dravidians. Most of the people of Assam are Mongolian or Tibeto-Burmese, along with Nordic or Aryan origin. The Kochs are a Mongolic population that is similar to the Bodo, Rabha, Dimasa, Karbi, Tiwa, Garo, Mising, etc. The Koch have lived in different states of India and are scattered across Nepal and Bangladesh. The Tintekia, Hargiya, Wanang and Margan sections. Among the various sections of the Koch, some of them still retain the original language, culture and folk literature. Like each of the Mongolian communities in Assam having a distinct socio-cultural ethos, the Koch too have their own socio-cultural ethos. These folk beliefs, which are prevalent in the socio-cultural traditions, are introduced to the social customs of the Koch as well as the characteristics of their own ethnicity. These beliefs are birth, death, marriage, religion, nature, birds etc. Not only can these folk beliefs play a major role in the creation of the social system of the Koch people, they may also have contributed to the nutrition of Assamese folk beliefs. There has not been a scientific systematic study of these folk beliefs of the Koch people. This is the reason why the folk beliefs of the Koch community need to be studied. Therefore, the prime concern of this paper is to try to recover and discuss various aspects of the folk beliefs associated with Koch's socio-culture. For this purpose, the topic 'Folk Beliefs of the Koch Community of Assam: A Descriptive Study' has been selected as the subject of the paper.

Keywords: Koch, society-culture, folk belief

Introduction

Assam is one of the places of India wherein various ethnic and tribal communities have been living harmoniously. Due to their way of living, they are known as The Nordic or Aryan, Tibeto-Burman or Mongolian, Austric and Dravidian. Most of the people residing in Assam, are Mongolian. One of the tribes having similarities with Bodo, Mech, Rabha, Dimasa, Karbi, Tiwa, Garo, Mising is Koch. The Koch people have been living in different parts of India as well as extending to Nepal and Bangladesh. They have their own language, culture, folk literature, etc. It has to be noticed that there is a vast difference between the Koch with the Koch-Rajbanshi. Although the root of both the communities is Mongolian but the language of the Rajbanshi is Aryan and the language of the Koch discussed here is Tibeto-Burman. In the present scenario; it is noticed whether it is due to the influence of globalization or of other factors, the tradition of the tribe is gradually disappearing. The linguistic, socio-cultural, folk literature, etc., are in vogue. Although some of the sections are still holding on to them. Some sections of the Koch are Tintekia, Hargiya, Wanang and Margan. There are some social customs and beliefs still prevalent in the social tradition of the Koch which make them unique in ways from other tribes and communities. These beliefs are associated with trees, birds, dreams, gods and goddesses, witches, etc. Scientific systematic studies are limited in these aspects. It is for this reason that the popular beliefs of the Koch society need to be studied. Therefore, the prime concern of this paper is to throw light on the folk beliefs of the Koch. By keeping in mind this purpose I have titled the paper as "**The Folk Beliefs of the Koch: A Descriptive Study**".

Importance of study:

The Koch Tribe has many sections. These sections share the common linguistic, socio-cultural basis of the Koch people and almost accepted it. But among several sections there is a sense of linguistic, socio-cultural difference which still exists today. Some sections almost left behind socio-cultural elements, including their own Koch language. Apart from Koch people living in Meghalaya, Tintekia, Hargiya, Wanang and Margan living in different districts of Assam retaining their linguistic, socio-cultural characteristics. Therefore, to have an intense outlook of the Koch tribe, it is necessary to study its sections as well.

Purpose of the study:

- (1) To systematically highlight the popular beliefs prevalent in the Koch society.
- (2) While highlighting various aspects of the folk beliefs prevalent in the Koch society.
- (3) It is believed that it would pave the ways for further studies.
- 4) It is also believed that the content of folk beliefs prevalent in the Koch society can be collected, preserved and evaluated.

Method of Study:

In this study, descriptive method has been followed. Primary sources have been collected through field studies in the selected areas: comprises of interpretation-analysis The mechanism followed for this study are as follows:

- 1) Data collection
- 2) Observation
- 3) Understanding significance
- 4) Interpretation and decision-making.

Review of literature:

The following are some books and magazines discussed on the Koch Tribes:

1. Hobin Koch published an article in 'Dobak' in Srimanta Sankardev Krishti Vikas Kendra, Hojai, Silver Jubilee Memorial Magazine of Assam (2010). This article gives a brief introduction to the Koch community.
2. Raju Baruah awarded Doctorate Degree on the study of "Garo Paharor Koch Sampradayar Samaj Sanskriti aaru Bhasha" in the year 2011.

Although the aforementioned article and thesis highlighted about the Koch Tribe in a subtle way, in this paper an attempt has been made to look into the aspects which have not been yet

explored by deploying a scientific and systematic study about folk beliefs associated with different aspects of society.

Folk beliefs associated with birth:

Various beliefs associated with the birth of a child have traditionally been followed by the people in Koch society.

They are mentioned below:-

a) On the eve of childbirth in the Koch community, a dai(a foster mother)i) prepares an old kula, leffendumura (The old mekhela is kept ready), a sickle, two-three pieces of charcoal and mera (wine). After the intersection of the child's pulse; the newborn is put to sleep on the leffen. They believe that,

b) Kula is a symbol of wealth. It is used symbolically so that the newborn does not face any shortage in the future and pursue life with utmost happiness and peace.

c) The belief in keeping sickle is that it is made of iron and if there is iron, ghosts or any kind of witchcannot do harms to the newborns.

d) According to the Koch community, charcoal is a symbol of evil, to which Yama himself is afraid of. Therefore, to give safeguard from Yama, the charcoal is kept in the labourroom(wherein the newborn is kept)

e) They believe that the newborn is born out ofmera (wine) and mera protects their Kula(clan). A drop of wine on the newborn's tongue is being poured after the umbilical cord is cut off. They believe that the clan will remain intact in the future.

Folk beliefs Associated with death

The folk beliefs associated with the death of the Koch society are mentioned below:

1. When a person dies in the Koch community, they believe that the deceased soul is born again in the same clan.
2. When a person dies, they put two banana trees near the dead body, a sickle and a pan on it, on which rice , alcohol, water, paddy,, small cotton cloth, a handful of white yarn, etc. can be placed on it. The belief of keeping these is that,
 - a) The Koch people have been considering banana trees as an immortal tree. This banana tree will work as a boat when the soul of the deceased crosses the river-water bodies found on the way to heaven.
 - b) The Koch believes that when a person dies, the soul is turned into a spirit. So they keep a sickle near the body. So that the ghost can't attack people out of fear of the sickle and run away in fear.

Folk beliefs associated with marriage:

The folk beliefs associated with the marriage of the Koch community are mentioned below:

- 1) Social marriage of the Koch community does not happen within the same tribe. They believe that if someone is married within the same tribe, they believe that their children will be born as handicapped.
- 2) For the well-being of the bride and groom in the Koch society, Maitakkills two chickens in front of people and the witness the entire process of killing till the death of the chicken.
- 3) It is believed that the one whose chicken dies first would die before and the one whose chicken dies second will die later.
- 4) Koch society believes that the future of the bride and groom will be happy if the two chickens die in the same place and it will be miserable if they die separately.

Gods and goddesses, folk beliefs associated with witches:

- 1) Koch society believes that if someone feels pain in any part of the body, it is because of the evil spell of 'Hudum Bay' (Hudum God). For this, it is believed that if they sacrifice either a chicken or a butterfly, then the poison will disappear.
2. It is believed that 'halepa' (witch) is in the body of the newborn if he/she is crying continuously and reluctant to breast feeding and if the mother is in pain. It is believed if they promise to offer pork to the almighty, the sick will be cured.

Folk beliefs associated with birds:

- a) The Koch community believes that if the 'Kawlek Tau' (the crowlek bird) flies over the house or falls on a tree near the house and sings 'kavalek' 'kavalek', that means guest may come or this could be a sign of danger.
- b) It is the sign of bad news if a 'Kaori' (crow) falls on a tree near the house at any time and sings 'Ka Ka'

Conclusion and Finding:

Unless there is a scientific study of a community, that community cannot be able to discern its identity and socio-cultural characteristics. There is scope to think that systematic study of the socio-culture of the community concerned can preserve the uniqueness of the community as well as serve the picture of social and cultural exchange with other similar tribal communities. It is hoped that the study of the material leading up for such purposes will open up various aspects of the folk beliefs of the Koch society and to make the following conclusions with information from the content narrative.

From the belief about birth, the lineage of the Koch people can be said to be matriarchal.

2. Given the widespread prevalence of alcohol and pork in the Koch society, they will be identified as the ancient tribal communities of Assam of the same origin as other tribal communities.

3. It can be said that they are mainly nature worshippers who are the followers of nature.
4. Koch folk beliefs can be said to have the influence of primitive reforms on their society from the tradition of worshipping trees and goddesses under the tree.

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List of Informants

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