



A Study of the Cultural Heritage of Chutia: An Ethnic Tribe of Assam

With special reference to Rituals related to Agriculture

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Abstract:

Society of any tribe cannot be discussed without discussing its culture, polity, economy and education. Among all the ethnic tribes of Assam, the Chutias were the most civilized tribes who ruled gloriously in the kingdom named Vidarbha (Presently Sadia Region) with its capital at Kundil Nagar (Presently in Arunachal Pradesh). The Chutias had contributed much to every aspect of society and the Assamese society of today will be incomplete without recounting the contributions made by the Chutias towards Assamese society. The Chutia kingdom played a crucial role in shaping Assamese culture and society, having a lasting impact that continued to resonate through successive historical development. The Chutia community is recognized as an Other Backward class by the Government of Assam. As an ethnic tribe they have a rich historical and cultural heritage. Among all the Assamese ethnic groups, most of the elements of Assamese culture were created by Chutia community. In this study the investigator wants to evaluate the cultural heritage specially rituals related to agriculture of Chutia community that holds the most significant place in the culture and history of Assam.

Key words: *Chutia, Culture, Heritage, Ethnic, agriculture, rituals.*

1.Introduction:

Every tribe has some of its traditional values, beliefs, norms, festivals, rites and rituals of its own. Through these, one can have an idea regarding their culture. As a result of transition, though some changes have come to the ancient form of these rites and rituals, yet some characteristics are sometimes seen within these. These characteristics throw some light on the past social history of the tribe.

The definition of the word culture is very wide and meaningful. Just like the small tributaries join and fall in the Brahmaputra and make it mighty, the culture of various tribes like the Chutias, Morans, Boros, Kocharies, Ahoms, Tiwas, Rabhas, Deories, Mising, Singphoes, etc. enrich the Assamese culture. Among all these tribes the Chutias were the first Hinduised and Aryanised tribe of Assam who possessed a very rich culture. Though the Chutias were defeated at the hands of the Ahoms but their culture still remains in Assam and enrich the Assamese society. The word culture includes various traditional elements like rites and rituals connected with the agriculture, birth of a new born baby, marriage, language and literature, festivals, dress, dietary, habits, economy, education, position of women in the society, implements and method of cultivation, dwelling houses, songs and dances, art and architecture, crafts and industries etc.

2. Review of literature:

1. 'Chutiya Jatir Buranji', (ed.) by S.L. Baruah published by Chutiya Jatir Buranji Pranayan Samiti, All Chutiya Jati Sanmilan, Asam, 2007, is a systematic study of the Chutiyas and a study on the political, social and cultural life of the Chutiyas.

2. The book entitled 'Sadiyar Barnomoy Buranji' was written by Srikumar Dohutia and published by Banalata, Dibrugarh, 2016. It describes in details about the social and domestic life of the Chutiyas, their religious belief and practices, and the system of human sacrifice.

3. Objective of the study:

This study attempts:

1. To explore the traditional agricultural practices of the Chutia community.
2. To raise awareness about the importance of preserving traditional agricultural practices and cultural heritage.
3. To contribute to the development of sustainable agriculture practices those respect the cultural heritage of indigenous communities like the Chutias.

4. Methodology:

This study basically depends on observations, interviews and document analysis to gather information for the study.

5. Significance of the study:

Culture is the mirror of a society, which reflects values, customs, traditions, livelihood and overall identity of a society. Livelihood of a society is mainly depends on the economic condition of the people lived in society. The main pivot of the traditional livelihood of the Chutias was agriculture. Chutia community has a rich agricultural tradition that is closely related to their cultural identity. The rituals connected to agricultural practices can provide valuable insights into sustainable farming methods and the importance of preserving traditional knowledge. It is also hoped that, it can also help in documenting and preserving the cultural heritage of the Chutia community.

6. Discussion and analysis:

The Chutias had contributed much to every aspect of society and the Assamese society of today will be incomplete without recounting the contributions made by the Chutias towards Assamese society. Despite having their rich culture, there is a scarcity of scholarly work on their cultural heritage of the Chutias. In this paper discussion is made regarding some cultural heritage related to agriculture as traditional livelihood of the Chutias.

❖ Ritual related to Agriculture:

Like other tribes of Assam the main livelihood of the Chutias was agriculture and still now agriculture is their main stay. Among all the agricultural tribes there were some rituals related to agriculture and such rituals are still prevalent among the Chutias. The rituals related to agriculture which are still prevalent among the Chutias are:

1.1 Pani Tula Borsobah:

The Chutia people living in villages expecting rainfall and good harvest perform Borsabah in Namghar for three days annually in the month of Jeth (middle part of May to the middle part of June). To celebrate the Sabah six small girls who have not attained puberty, and who belong to six complete families are selected to fetch water for Borsabah. Those girls are known as Daivakis. Before three days of celebrating the Borsabah, these girls have to stay in the same house and remain on fast. On the first day of the Borsabah, the women (Aiyotis) along with five Daivakis go to fetch water accompanied with the sound

of Dhol (drums). Among the six Daivikis, one takes the dunori (decorated sarai with cover). Rice, a bunch of banana, betel nut and betel vine and an earthen lamp are kept inside the dunori. The second and the third Daivakis take two earthen pots filled with water. The bunches of mango leaves are put in the mouth of the pots and these pots are wrapped with raw threads. The fourth and the fifth Daivakis carry on their shoulders two palanquins made with the barks of banana trees. The sixth one carries a jakoi (fishing implement). One aiyoti puts in a dola (winnowing fan) an earthen lamp, raw thread, four slender pieces of bamboo (khorika), betel nut and betel vine and gets ready to fetch water.

1.2 Na Bhui (Planting of New Rice):

Seeds of paddy are sown in the month of *Jeth* and the planting of rice starts from the months of *Ahar* and *Sravan* (June part of June to July). The first day of planting of rice is called by the Chutias as *Na Bhui*. On that day planting is done on a large scale.

This ritual of *na-bhui* comes to an end after three phases. The women of the village are informed to implant seedlings (*kothia*) as required for the land prepared for planting. The women who implant paddy seedlings are called *Tuloni*. Next day some young farmers are informed to carry the new seedlings and they carry these accordingly. After carrying the new seedlings (*kothia*) ploughs are asked from several houses to plough several *bighas* of land in a single day. The villagers thus help them by providing them plough.

After transplanting rice in the plough field, the headman of the family after taking bath takes an arum plant of pleasant growth, a pair of forepart of plantain leaf, three pieces of betel nut and plant the arum plant in the middle of the field facing to the east and then pray to Lakshmi Devi for sufficient amount of produce. After this, new seedlings are planted in the four corners of the land. On that day, in their lunch they are given duck's meat and homemade brew.

1.3 Nangal Dhua Pitha or Bhat Pitha:

On the day of the completion of agriculture, the family members feel very happy. During the days of agriculture nobody in the house can sleep or eat properly, even the pair of oxen and men becomes lean and thin. Therefore, after the end of agriculture every family prepare bhat pitha according to their convenience and if possible sewa pitha also. The Chutia people take bhat pitha and sewa diya bhat along with the curry of a pulse called matimah and curry of duck's meat prepared with kumura and thus remove the tiredness of the work of cultivation. In some regions bhat pitha or nangal dhuwa pitha is taken with curd and molasses. In some regions the Chutias call this kind of rice as Kheti Utha Bhat.

1.4 Bringing of *Lakhimi* or Pluking of *Lakhimi*:

The ritual called "*Lakhimi ana*" is observed on the first day of bringing new rice to home by reaping it. On that day, three bunches of rice are cut and put in the granary by lightening earthen lamp. These three bunches of rice are put in a pair of plantain leaves with three pieces of betel nut. After this, three bunches of rice are cut, put in the plantain leaf, wrapped in a *gamocha* and brought home by someone on headundles of rice go home. The person who brings the *Lakhimi* does not talk with anybody and does not even look back. The *Lakhimi* is directly kept upon a raised place outside the granary.

1.5 Taking of New Rice (*NaKhua*):

In the month of *Aghun* (middle part of Nov. to middle part of Dec.) after boiling and drying new rice, a feast called *Na-Khuwa* is arranged with duck's meat and new vegetables. To this ritual all the neighbouring people are invited. From the extract that remains after winnowing rice, a little portion of it is kept in a pair of forepart of a plantain leaf along with three pieces of betel nuts and binding three small packets of thatch with three pieces of mud thrown by the earthworm are placed at the entrance gate facing to the east for the Patani Devi.

1.6 Bharalot Pitha Diya – (Giving Cakes in the Granary):

After reaping the harvest these are cleaned in threshold and then put in the granary. The Chutias do not bring out rice from the granary up to the month of *Magh*. Rice is brought out from the granary in the

month of *Phagun* after performing a ritual called *Bharalot Pitha Diya*. For this ritual, dry and pounded rice (*pithaguri*) is kept in an earthen pot to the brim and by lightening an earthen lamp offers to Lakhimi Ai in a pair of a forepart of plantain leaves along with three pieces of betel nuts in front of the granary.

1.7 Ritual Performed By Cowherd Boy (Gorokhia Bhog):

Chutias main property of the agriculture is their ploughing oxen or buffaloes. In the Chutia society just like the cows and buffaloes, the cowherd boys are also honoured. When these animals are affected by any disease these cowherd boys offer *bhog* to the Ai in the grazing field under a bamboo or any other tree by killing a duck in the months of *Jeth* and *Ahar*. This is called *Gorokhia Bhog*.

1.8 Feast of the Cowherd (Gorokhia Bhuj or Gorokhia Chawl):

The village people believe that the blessings of the cowherds do not end in vain. The cowherds while grazing the cows ask money from the pedestrians by giving them blessings. The pedestrians also do not refuse them.

Some couples who do not have children or have no son invite the cowherds, offer them feast and take blessings from them for children. Such kind of feast is called *Gorokhia Bhuj*. There is a prevalent belief continued from the past that the *Gorokhia Bhuj* should not be taken sitting on a mat or *dhari*. This is called *Gorokhia Chawl*.

1.9 Sadashivak Diya (Offering to Shiva):

Sadashiva should be satisfied to protect the cows and buffaloes from the attack of diseases and for this a kind of ritual is observed in the month of *Jeth* or *Ahar* by inviting a few old men of the village and it is a tradition to entertain them with opium for smoking.

The head of the family invites a few old men of the village to the ritual of *Sadashivak Diya* at noon and the ingredients like banana, sugarcane, *mah prasad* and a vessel of opium are put before them. One among the *bhakats* is selected Deori who by lightening an earthen lamp in the name of Sadashiva offers three pieces of betel nuts, contribution, *mah prasad*, banana, sugarcane and a vessel of opium decorated in a pair of forepart of banana leaves. The headman of the family took *sewa* there and one *bhakat* blesses him desiring the well being of the cows and buffaloes. Thus this ritual is ended.

1.10 Bhekulir Biya (Frog Marriage):

When it does not rain for a long time, during the days of agriculture the rice fields become dry with cracks. Then the village people in order to satisfy the rain God perform frog marriage, which are prevailing in the Chutia society for a long time. For this ritual, a pair of frog, one male and another female are caught and they are decorated as bride and bridegroom and kept in two separate houses. The ritual of *borbiya* is performed by fetching of water, bathing of the bride and the bridegroom and singing *biyanam* (song sang in marriage) etc. The dresses given to the bride and bridegroom are of clean torn cloths. The bride and the bridegroom are carried in palanquins made from barks of banana trees. After the marriage the bride and the bridegroom are floated in water of pond or river at twilight and the things which are given as dowry are thrown into water.

Above discussion revealed several potential challenges faced by the Chutia community in terms of culture and heritage as well as agricultural rituals:

7. Challenges:

The Chutias were one of the civilized tribes of Assam who from an ancient time possessed a very rich culture but with the passage of time these are now extinct. They face some challenges in preserving and maintaining their cultural heritage.

- Loss of traditional practices: The Chutia community's traditional agricultural practices and cultural heritage are at risk of being lost due to modernization and urbanization.

- Limited access to education and healthcare: The Chutia community may face challenges in accessing quality education and healthcare services, which can impact their overall well-being.
- Economic marginalization: The Chutia community may face economic challenges, including limited job opportunities and low incomes, which can make it difficult for them to sustain their traditional way of life.
- Cultural erosion: The Chutia community's cultural heritage is at risk of being eroded due to the influence of external cultures and the lack of documentation and preservation of their traditions.
- Social exclusion: The Chutia community may face social exclusion and discrimination, which can impact their access to resources and opportunities.
- Climate change: The Chutia community may be unprotected from the impacts of climate change, including changes in temperature and rainfall patterns, which can impact their agricultural practices.
- Lack of representation: The Chutia community may lack representation in decision-making processes and institutions, which can make it difficult for them to advocate for their rights and interests.
- It is a fact many of the rituals connected with agriculture are all preserved only in the interior Chutia villages of Assam.
- Another challenge is that Chutia language is original language of upper Assam even before the coming of the Ahoms. It is a matter of regret that now the Chutia language is used only the Deoris.

8. Suggestions:

- **Documentation and Preservation of Cultural heritage:** A cultural documentation center should be established to record and preserve the Chutia community's traditional practices, customs, and language. Develop a digital archive of Chutia cultural heritage, including videos, photographs, and written records.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Establish a community-led cooperative to promote economic self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship among Chutia community members.
- Provide access to microfinance and other financial services to support Chutia entrepreneurs.
- **Land Rights and Resource Management:-** Support the Chutia community in documenting and mapping their ancestral lands and resources. Need proper guidance for the recognition and protection of Chutia community land rights and interests.
- **Social Inclusion and Representation:** Need guidance for the inclusion of Chutia community members in decision-making processes and institutions at the local, national, and international management strategies.
- Provide access to climate information and early warning systems to support Chutia community members in preparing for and responding to climate-related disasters levels.
- Support the Chutia community in developing and implementing climate-resilient agricultural practices and natural resource.
- Measure should be taken to revive the Chutia language.

9. Conclusion:

In the Census report of Assam (1881, p.75) there is mention of Chutias as tribe—"Chutias are very old inhabitants of Upper Assam". Among all the ethnic tribes of Assam, the Chutias were the most civilized tribes who have a glorious past in the history of Assam. But the Chutias were the dominant race in upper Assam when the Ahom swarmed in to the valley. It is believed that they were settled cultivators. After the Ahoms annexed the Chutia kingdom and its population were absorbed into the Ahom kingdom. The land was then resettled for wet rice.

The Chutia people, along with other ethnic communities in Assam, have developed their own indigenous technical knowledge for agriculture. The knowledge is based on their experience and is often of a biological in origin. The cultural heritage of the Chutia tribe of Assam is rich and colourful which are reflected in their history, traditions, and rituals. The rituals related to agriculture, reveal the deep connection of the Chutia people and the land where they live.

Through this study, it is evident that the cultural heritage of the Chutia tribe is valuable asset, not only for the tribe itself but also for the state of Assam and the country as a whole. Therefore, it is imperative that efforts should be made to preserve and promote the traditional cultural heritage of the Chutia tribe,

particularly their agricultural rituals, which are an integral part of their identity. By doing so, we can ensure the continued survival and thriving of the Chutia culture, and also contribute to the rich cultural diversity of our nation."

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