Ethnographic account of the Tarao Nagas with reference to their origin and migration

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ABSTRACT

Ethnography provides a scientific description of individual human societies from the unique perspective of individual human societies from a unique perspective that of the subject. The word literally means ‘writing about people groups’. The topic of the present study is entitled as the ethnographic account of Tarao Naga, a tiny tribe of Manipur basing on the historical review covering an area – origin and migration. The Tarao is one of the smallest Naga tribe of Manipur, least known and mostly ignored by the government, this tribe are not much mentioned in the long history of the state. Every land and people whether small or big have their own and unique ways of growing towards the civilization. The tribe had, however, an indigenous identity since time immemorial and yet till the dawn of the inhabitant of the Manipur state. Through the study of this their mythology and culture, one can clearly understand various unexplored lesson from them. The cultural heritage is disappearing day by day due to the influence of the outside world on the traditional values system. The fear is that will there be traditional value to keep the Tarao identity intact.

Keywords — Ethnography, Unique, Tarao, Smallest, Unexplored, Heritage, Influence

1. AIM
This research aim is to study the details of the ethnographic account of the Tarao Nagas of Manipur

2. RESEARCH SCOPE
The scope of the study will mainly confine to origin and migration.

3. METHODOLOGY
The present study is mainly based on both primary and secondary data in nature, field investigation and participatory research methodology were also used as a technique for the study and the research is mainly based on Auto ethnography types.

4. INTRODUCTION
The area of the present study was conducted for the whole Tarao community mostly confined in Chandel district of Manipur in the northeastern part of India. The Chandel district of Manipur spread over an area of 3,313 square km, lying in between 23°45”N-24, 45° N latitude and 93°, 45°E-94°, 30°E longitude towards the south of Manipur. The Chandel district (formally known as Tengnoupal sub-division) came to existence on 13.05.1974 covering a large chunk of the southeastern portion of Manipur. The district touches Myanmar territory in the east and south, Thoubal, and Churachanpur district in the west and northwest and Ukhrul district in the north. The National Highway-39 runs through the district to Moreh, the last town, in the eastern fringe of the state.

Manipur population has three ethnic groups; the Meites of the valley, the Nagas and the Kuki-Chins of the surrounding hills. Besides the Pangals, the Nepalese, the Assamese, the Punjabis, the Biharis etc, also included in the valley population. The meiteis are generally Mongoloid and speaks Tibeto-Burman language and are the most dominant group. The Meiteis are mostly the Hindus and the Pangal are the Muslims and both speak Manipuri language, one of the national languages of the country.

The hills people have two major ethnic groups, the nagas, and the Kuki-chin group. The Naga tribes of Manipur are the Tangkhul, Zeme, Liangmei, Puiimei, Mao, Maram, Maring, Chiru, Moyon, Monsand, Tarao, Lamkang, Chothe, Kharam, Koireng, Thangal, Poumei, and the Anal. They are the inhabitant of the four hills district of Manipur. Ethnically they belong to Mongoloid group and linguistically they came under the Tibeto-Burman family of languages.

Supra Sen remarked in this connection, the tribes of Manipur belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of people. They are generally medium stature, mesocephalic head, very prosopic broad flat round face, broad high cheek-bone, flat platyrhine nose, brownish, yellow-skin, narrow mongoloid oblique eyes. They are strong and sturdy. The Naga tribes of Manipur have all the affinities with the Naga tribes of Nagaland and have same affinities with the tribes of Southeast Asian countries.
5. ORIGIN

The nagas have their own myth and legend which tell of their origin and migration, and occupation of their present homeland. Although the absolute authenticity of their myth and legend is in question as there can be an exaggeration, we cannot reject them together because unquestionably there is certain information that may be drawn from such traditions. From the mythical and legendary point of view, the nagas and the Kuki-chin tribes emerged from the subterranean world. Almost all the tribes in Manipur have the same cave origin theory. According, to Maikhel theory, Angamis, Semas, Rengmas, and Lothas came out from the hole of the earth in Maikhel-Tungan area in present Mao sub-division of Senapati district. A group of Tangkhul also claim this theory. However, the Aos said that they came from Lungterok (six stone), perhaps, a hole near Chungliyumti. This theory is shared by the Phoms yet they did not reckon themselves to be Aos.6

The Tarao people have more affinities with the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes. Linguistically they are similar to the tribes of Chin-Kuki-Mizo group. Sarabjit of Calcutta University made a study on the Tarao tribes in 1932, by that time he could meet informants who could assert a tradition that the Tarao were from the Paws of Falam in the present Chin state of Burma which is now in Myanmar.7 Another writer had written that physically they are Mongoloid race. In language and traditional dress, they closely resemble others tribes like the Kukis, Kom, Koireng, Chiru, Kharam and Tangkhuls of Kashung and Nambashi.8 According to K. Solomon chief of Khuringmul, the Tarao languages, and the traditional dresses resembles Kom, Koireng, CHiru, Kharam and Tangkhuls of Kashung and Nambashi villages. However, the people of the Tarao claimed themselves that they belong to the Naga group as there are so many dissimilarities in the cultural activities though some areas may be similar in one way or the other, this might be due to the community being a tribal in nature.

Some Naga tribes of Manipur, like the Anals, Lamkangs, Marings, Moyons, Monsang etc, have their traditions of coming from the caves, which according to them who are located in the south-east of Manipur. The origin of the Tarao is also based on the traditional legends, folktales, and folk songs, etc. some written account and information of the later period are also accounted for its investigation. Every community living in different countries used to claim at least a certain place or cave as the origin of the human race according to its own beliefs or legends.9

Like other tribes of this region, the Taraos believe in a cave origin. They live in a subterranean world before they sprang out of the cave or a hole called Tukeikhar10. Their legend has it that the progenitors of the Tarao lived inside a cave or a hole located by the foot of Entohonna Mal (Houbi hill in Burma)11 in the bank of the Chindwin River12. The Tarao People lived there quite happily under the Supervisors of their elders Katrimsha, Khurpu, and Chanasha. As they do not like to live in the underground world. They liked to leave the place. Accidentally Katrimsha discovered that the cave inside led to an open space suitable for human habitation. At the mouth of the cave was a ferocious tiger which preyed on any living being, which got out of the cave. Katrimsha made the first attempt to get out of the cave. This attempt ended in the loss of his precious life. Chana’s fate as the second person was the same; his attempt proved to be fatal. These two human beings all happened to be nice morsals to the tiger. The third of the last man Khurpu, master of the cave, attempt to get out of the cave. He has equipped himself with a ‘Y’-shaped wooden fork made from markheeng tree, dress like in a war costume with a view to over witching the lucky tiger. Horrified by the wooden fork held by Khurpu, the tiger fled for good without any sort of confrontation. Thus, emerged Khurpu and his people out of the subterranean cave. Khurpu was chosen the leader of the group in appreciation of his valour. Under his behest, the people moved hither-thither on the surface of the earth to see any place suitable for habitation. Whenever they were on the move in search of suitable land for settlement13, they accompanied with Khungpe (drum) to rejoice with, arkhong (cock) to indicate time, Lungat (a stone slab for sharpening swords) and tukhan (cat) to guard the granary against rats14.

To commemorate the victory over the tiger and other enemies, they held a grant festival and happiness over this event of victory over their common enemies gave them the nomenclature the word ‘Tarao’ which means ‘a happy people or contented people’. In order to remember their victory, Khurpu instructed to erect Markheng wood fork- ‘Y’ shaped (resembling animal’s horn) in front of the entrance of their houses to show the significance of markheng in their victory. In course of time the markheeng tree becomes not only a mere sign of victory but a symbol or talisman, a means to ward off the evil spirit, sickness, diseases, misfortunes and became a sacrificial offering of the family. This symbol was seen in front of every Tarao house before their conversion to Christianity until the 1970s. The Maharaja Budhachandra of Manipur also redefined the meaning of the ‘Taro’ in Manipuri language as ‘Ta’ hear and ‘Rao fine/nice’ which means nice to hear. According to Maharaja Budhachandra, the Tarao people were wise and brave in war through ‘markheng thingtrak’ (the wooden folk)15.16

6. MIGRATION

The first ever Tarao village was established at Houbimul (Houbi hill). The descendent of Khurpu are now known as Khulpu-in17, one of the major clan of the Tarao tribe. Their folk song and the tradition trace their original and migration to be from Burma to India. As their available settlement history suggests that they were moving in the neighboring territories of Burma and inside Chandel district of Manipur. There is evidence after coming from the Houbi Hill they settled at Somshokmul in Burma, from Somshokmul they migrated to Sangaimul, Lunghpha, and Ratenphai in Burma. Thereafter migrated to Indian Territory before occupying the present villages includes uithoupamul village (which is between the present Morre and khudengthabi hill range of Manipur). Hence, the stories that present on verbally through generations that Manipur valley was a vast lake may not be an exaggeration.

While the Tarao were still in uithoupamul, there was a Burmese war between 1755 and1782 AD. The Burmese troupe invaded off and on, they began scattered over a wide territory on account of this great war, they again migrated to, Wangkhipimul (which is near the present tengnoupal village), Lumruk (near the present Kongpe Lamkang village), Rangmul (on the hill overlooking Kakching), Despite its long long settlement history, the Tarao continue to be very small. Some villages are also found mention in the songbook includes –reiokung khu, Suk-in khu, Changkungiol khu, Trennu mul, Kerchingmul, Dukte mul and Shanger mul17.
The probable reason for the rather stagnant population size of the Tarao in the past as well as in the recent past could be due to their absorption to the surrounding population apart from their low birth rate. In this regard, a meetei old man of Waikhong pointed out that before the Burmese invasion of Manipur the Tarao were settling on the hills overlooking Waikhong meetei village. Their population then was quite big. Burmese troupe invaded Manipur off and on between 1755 and 1782 A.D. During this period, the Tarao got scattered over a wide territory. Many of them got merged with the meetei of Waikhong, those absorbed into the Meetei-fold are now affiliated to one of the Meetei lineages. Another instance was cited by Gangumee Kabui. According to which the Tarao were absorbed by the Tangkhul of Nambasi village. The probable reason for the absorption, in the opinion of the scholar, could be the linguistic similarity which exists between the Tangkhuls of Nambasi and the Tarao. Due to the above reasons and outbreak of Cholera, a tiny population began shifted to Bukthrol village which was known as Laimanai earlier. It was named Laimanai meaning servant of God in Meitei dialect. The Meitei King in the days past believed that the Tarao were the chosen people of God and that they were the servant of God to serve him. Thus Bukthrol or Tarao Laimanai became the oldest village of all the Tarao at present and is considered as the original village of the Tarao. The Tarao which has a single in the long past have now split in population. Today, the 500 odd Tarao population had increased to 838 are now confined to permanent settlements in Chandel District and Ukhrul district of Manipur.

7. SETTLEMENT AND HOUSE TYPE

Regarding settlement, The Tarao used to identify a suitable site by the availability of a cultivable land, sufficient water throughout the year, plenty of forest in the vicinity and good climate conditions. Whenever the Tarao were in search of a suitable site for a land, they used to accompany themselves with three important things. The khungpi (a big cylindrical drum) to rejoice with; arkhong (a Cock) to indicate time, lungtat (a stone slab for sharpening knives/swords) and tokhan (a cat) to guard the granary. The elders chose the site, which they intended to build the house or a village. They slept the night at the chosen location to observe the prediction. The observations are as under:

(i) If the cock crow first, it is a good sign to establish the village and there will be no trouble, problem and they will be able to live in peace.
(ii) If the drum sounds first, it is a sign of a bad omen, there will be more death to establish a house or a village.
(iii) It the cat mews first, it is a sign which predicts the abundance of wild animals which is a favorable sign. and,
(iv) If the stone slab produces sound first it predicts the birth of a courageous man. It is also a favorable sign for settlement.

The area of habitation of the whole villages is well marked with boundaries and fields. Both shifting and cultivation in plains were practice. The whole Bukthrol and a party of Sinakeithei village practices shifting cultivation and rest including partly of Sinakeithei enjoyed plain/wet cultivation. Some fields were situated somewhere in far places, such areas are not found in abundance in one places on the shifting cultivation, where huts are built near and amidst of it which seems to be in dispersed or scattered in the settlement patterns. Houses are of kaccha and slightly modern or of the traditional types. The houses were made of hardwoods or of the quality of timber like oak, pine, leihao, etc. Their houses usually have two doors which act as entrance and exit. Some houses were roofed with RCC, GCI sheet roofing, and thatch usually rectangular in shape. Walls are either plunk or mud. Some houses are made of bricks, out of 142 houses, 46 houses are kaccha, 95 houses live in slightly modern types and only 3 houses are of a traditional type.

8. CONCLUSION

The study reveals that the Tarao Naga tribe of Manipur is one the smallest indigenous ethnic community like any other tribal community in northeast India. Their origin, migration, and settlement condition witness that since time immemorial the Tarao existed. However, due to smallness in the numerical strength history is quite imperative for a gradual emergence from a discrete tribe. Through the study of this their mythology and culture, one can clearly understand various unexplored lesson from them. The cultural heritage is disappearing day by day due to the influence of westernization on the traditional values system. The fear is that will there be traditional value to keep the Tarao identity intact.

9. REFERENCES

[2] V. Senganba, Manipur: Geography and Regional development, p.50
[3] Verrier Elwin, Nagaland, p.4
[9] Tukleikhur It is a hole or a cave where they emerge/came out
[10]Entholna mul- the hill of the cave where they came out
[16]In Tarao ‘i’ and ‘r’ are interchangeably used without affecting the meaning of the word.
[18] Ibid 11
[20] M. Mukul Singh, estimated on the basis of the household census as research scholar M.U.