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MECH TRIBE IN JALPAIGURI DISTRICT: AN ASPECT OF CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

ARTERY SARKAR

ABSTRACT:

Mech is a little known schedule tribal community of West Bengal. They are found in West Bengal and Assam only. They are mainly distributed in West Bengal in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar only. Total Mech population in West Bengal as per census 2001 is 9570. The Mech belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of people and have similarities with other members of Bodo group such as Garos, Kachari and others. The Mech of West Bengal generally speaks local Bengali but their own language is called Kochcrow of Chini-Tibbeto or Kirat language family. Mech known for their rich culture and tradition. Mech tribes are under the process of acculturation. This paper will try to highlight the cultural geography of Mech tribe of Village Torsa, village Manglabari and forest village Kodal bastee of Jalpaiguri.

Keywords: *schedule tribal , Chini-Tibbeto*

INTRODUCTION:

Mech tribe is one of the scheduled tribes of India and belong to Bodo-Kachari group of tribes. They belong to Mongoloid race and speak mainly Bodo language, which is a Tibeto-Burman dialect but have got influenced by the Assamese language. The Mech people live in the Dooars region of West Bengal and parts of western. The name Mech is supposed to be arrived from the in the Terai region. According to a belief, some ancestors of these people had resided in the region adjoining the Mechi river and subsequently they were named as Mech. Others say, the word Mech has come from the Sanskrit word Mleccha, meaning unclean. Today, a section of Mech people in West Bengal prefer to refer themselves as Bodo instead of Mech.

OBJECTIVES:

- To discuss the cultural aspect of Mech tribe of Jalpaiguri.

METHODOLOGY:

The research is based on both literature review and field study. For this present study both qualitative and quantitative data have been collected during field work for first hand information. Various tools and techniques have been applied to collect the data such as Interview, Observation, participant observation, schedule, Interview guide, Genealogical Table. Village profile schedule and household schedule have also been applied. To know the traditional and cultural background of the North Bengal tribals case study methods have also been applied.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Mech settled centuries ago in the sub-Himalayan regions of Assam and West Bengal. They are members of the Mongoloid race, who moved from the north into southwestern China. Most eventually migrated into Burma and Indonesia, but a branch of the tribe remained in India. Today, the Mech build their villages in the forests and hills of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch-Bihar districts. Related to the Bodo and Kachari, they speak Bodo, a branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family.

While living under Brahmin influence, the Mech embraced Hinduism and took Hindu surnames for themselves. An ancient tradition claims that the Mech are descendants of the god Shiva ("the destroyer"). Although they have mixed with other peoples, they have retained social class divisions, or septs. These include classes of priests, warriors, and farmers. The divisions are not to be mistaken for castes, as there is no prohibition against intermarriage or eating together.

The Mech are very hospitable, friendly people. They are amiable, intelligent, and honest. Although they have an ancient history of being headhunters, they are free from arrogance, revenge, and cruelty. The Mech marry within their own tribe and within any of their septs. Women are forbidden to engage in any premarital sexual activity, and any sexual offenses are heavily punished. Husbands generally have great respect for their wives, who have absolute control over the household affairs and are consulted in all family and social matters. Most households consist of extended families, as the sons bring their wives home after marriage. Fathers are responsible for training their sons in economic skills, and mothers train their daughters in household duties.

In the early 1900's, the Mech were nomadic people, practicing swidden ("slash and burn") agriculture. There were few people and much land; thus, this type of erratic agriculture did not affect the country at all. Now, however, with growing populations in the region, they have become permanent farmers, using bulls and plows in their

cultivation of the soil. Rice is their principal cash crop, but they are experts in growing the areca nut and betel leaves, two powerful stimulants. Recently, they have begun to grow maize as an additional food supplement.

The Mech have a close affinity with the earth, referring to it as the "human mother." Harvests cannot be fruitful, they believe, without first worshiping the Great Mother through offering an animal sacrifice and performing the ritual dance.

The Mech religious beliefs are a blend of animism (belief that non-human objects have spirits) and Hinduism. Like many primitive tribes, their idea of gods developed from the concept of "dynamism" or "power." Anything that appeared to possess superhuman power was regarded as an object of worship. The Mech worshipped-and still worship-the rivers, forests, celestial bodies, snakes, and certain plants. Tree-worship is an important custom, for every tree is a symbol of life. The Mech believe that trees have souls like their own and that the tree-soul is capable of being transferred to humans and animals. The great god of the Mech-the Bathou (the Euphorbia plant)-is worshipped in every Mech household. Most of the ancient Mech gods now have Vedic names but have retained the old, animistic qualities. Except for the use of lumps of dirt in the worship of the earth, the Mech traditionally have no idols. However, the influence of Hindu culture has caused some of the Mech to begin making idols of gods in recent years. As in most animistic cultures, the Mech live in fear of the spirits of nature. Only through appeasement can they have peace or success in life, but no one is sure when or if the spirits are appeased. The Mech need liberation from such oppressive beliefs. Their culture is also in great transition economically. A large percentage of Mech has encumbered unmanageable debt, and may face lives of poverty in the near future. The Mech have a rich cultural heritage. In the opinion of Alfred Weber and sociologists like Maclver and R.K.Merton, culture is the direct expression of our nature, in our way of thought and action, in art, religion, morality and recreation. It deals with interest and values conceived as ends, to which various actions and objects are directed as means. The social structure, economy, culture. The Mech are an egalitarian society. They do not have any class or caste differences. The present mech society is primarily patriarchal in contemporary times, The women are accorded their due status and respect. The mech woman occupies an important place in the socio-economic structure of her society. It is said that the status of women in a particular society is a significant reflection of the social justice in that society. The mech society seldom witnesses such crimes as persecution or murder of wife by her husband or in-laws. Dowry deaths and divorce due to dowry are nonexistent. The mech are now monogamous though in the past polygamy was practiced. Polyandry is strictly prohibited. From the very ancient times, Mech women have been sporting long looks done up in beautiful chignons of different styles. Mothers go about their daily routine with their children carried on their backs.



The institution of marriage is considered to be very important among the Mech. The Mech word for marriage is ‘Haba’ The marital bond is found to bring together not just two individuals but two families even kindred’s and villages. Scholars like Dal ton (1872), Hodgson (1880) and Sunder (1895 A.D.) described some of the old marriage customs that prevailed during their time. According to them ‘there were three types of marriages, marriage by 1) consent, 2) elopement and 3) forcibly entering the house like the ‘Ghar Sandhani’ m arriage of the ancient Rajbanshis’’. The latter two systems soon became obsolete. There were no elaborate rituals and marriage was supposed to be a mere contract, easily dissoluble. It was a matrilineal society and the actual marriage would take place in the house of the groom. Traditionally the Mech had six different types of marriages. They were I) The normal marriage based on negotiation or the negotiated marriage, ii) ‘Garjia lakhinai’ or Gabwi Thanai’ system, iii) ‘Dangoa Thanai’ system, iv) ‘Kharsonnai’ system, v) a) ‘Lanan kharnai’ (to elope), b) ‘Dwisonnai’ and vi) ‘Homan Haba Khwlamnai (to marry by force). The Mech do not observe any specific name giving ceremony. There is no special principle underlying the giving of names to children. Sometimes the children are given names associated with their physical appearance of the day or month in which they are born. The names Damphla (flat faced), Deobar (Sunday), Asharsing (born in the month of Ashar) are some examples. In the present times, many affluent Mech like to give their children meaningful names commonly used by other communities which sound attractive. The mech who consider themselves as Hindus, show a keenness to give their children names like Krishna, Nikhilesh, Uttam, Aditi etc. According to Charu Chandra Sanyal “from the time of naraka and

bhagadatta in east Assam and then hariya and viswasingha of chikna hills (kokrajhar, goalpara, assam) the Brahmins exercised a great influence on them so much so that in the later year large section of the Bodo including the Mech embraced Hinduism and took Hindu names and surnames. Many Christian Mech also choose English names like Thomas, James Anne, Albert etc for their children. In the past, the Mech used to give their children Mech names and surnames. It was the common Mech who retained the practice of giving their children Mech names like Ranteng, Sombrau, Krishing etc. People of the developed races give their children indigenous names drawn from their own language because one's name is the best proof of one's identity. The names of famous people like Edmund Hillary, Tensing Norgay, Hiuen Tsang etc. Clearly establish the racial identify of these personalities. It is natural that parents like to give their children names of their own choice. With the changing times the mindset of the Mech has also undergone changes to a great extent. They are now making efforts to safeguard their language and culture and have again started giving their children meaningful Mech name like Sanjarang (reddish like the sun) ,Srang (bright), Onsula (kindhearted) etc. Surnames or titles also play a significant role in determining the racial identity of person. In the early days, the internal organization of the mech probably rested a on a totemistic basic although in the present times there is hardly any real regard for the totems. The title mushahary or mochary means the clan(ary) of Musha meaning tiger which must have been the totem of the clan in the past. The 'ary' seems to signify some kind of kinship. The title champromary is a combination of 'chompram' plus 'ary' it is not clear how this group originated. But there is a story that a group of mech was cooking food half cooked (Chompram) and flee for their lives. In mech 'chong' means to cook and 'fram' means to leave any work half done. Hence they were given the surname 'champromary'. Basumata or basumatory or bwiswmuthiary is a combination of 'basumata' plus 'ary'. They are said to be the mech engaged in agriculture or the landlords. In mech 'basu' or bwisu' means earth and 'ary' means sector clan. The surname 'Hazusry' or 'Hajary' is a combination of 'Hajo' plus 'ary'. The word 'Hajo' means hill in mech.

Festivals are an essential part of the socio cultural life of the mech. Their festivals can be divided into two groups, namely i) Religious festivals and ii) Seasonal festivals. Religious festivals are those festivals which are connected with the performance of religious ceremonies. The 'Kherai', 'Garja' and 'Marai' are some of the important religious festivals of the mech. They are closely linked with the 'bathou' religion. The 'kherai' festival is the greatest religious festival of the bodos. It is performed individually or collectively once or twice a year for the welfare of the people and a good harvest.

The Dokna, Phali ,Indisi, Aronai, Rejeregang, Janjikhana phalli are some of the garments worn by the mech. The yellow coloured Dhokna is very popular among the mech women. They are probably fond of the yellow

colour because it resembles their complexion. The traditional ornaments used by the mech are the Charakari (necklace), Makhri(earring), Mutha (board silver bangles) ,Bajoo (Armlet) ,Nolo (nosering), Nakhaphwl(nose top) Bowla (ear ring used by dancers), Jinjri (necklace) , Chandrahar (heavy necklace of five layers), Inthi (earring), Khandla etc



The fishing implements commonly used are the Burung , Jekhai, Khobai, Je (net), Khokha, Bwrshi etc. The culture of castor worms is common among the Mech. They obtain a raw material popularly known as ‘Endi’ from the castorworms. The Fabric (Endi cloth) is of great value. It is soft, warm and durable. The active cultivation of castor (endi) worms and the manufacture of the Endi cloth is one of the chief industries of the mech. They rare the cocoons, spin the yarn and weave the cloth. It enables the woman to contribute to the family economy without neglecting their domestic chores. The Endi chaddarm(shawl) is a famous local product of mechs. It is popularly as Endisi . The castor worm is also a favourite dish of the Mech.

Weaving among the mech used to be a part of woman’s ordinary household duties. The Mech woman are expert weavers. Their weaving is replace with artistic sensibility and it includes not only cotton textiles but also silk fabrics of the finest quality. Some of the weaving implements used by them are Rasw, Makhu, Jenther , Garet, Hichhan, Swrkhi, gandwi, Gorkha , Thakuri, Chanchali etc.



Meches migrated into India through Patkoi Hills between India and Burma and gradually spread themselves into the whole of Assam, North Bengal and parts of East Bengal. It is said that, during their migration to India, they marched towards three directions. A group of people from there went up to Cachar district in Assam. In Cachar, they are called Kachari. Another group went along the river Brahmaputra and established themselves in the whole of Assam up to Goalpara district and parts of Jalpaiguri district and Cooch Behar district under the name of Bodo or Bara. The third group went towards the West along the foot of the Himalayas up to the river Mechi, bordering India and Nepal and settled on the North bank of the river known as Mech or Mechia. Later they spread to Darjeeling Terai, Baikantpur in Jalpaiguri district again marched further East and settled in the Dooars. It is said that, a group of Mech people, again moved further East, crossed the Sankosh River, and went towards Goalpara in Assam. Due to repeated floods in Dooars and eastern bank of Teesta river, a large number of families migrated towards Assam.

According to N. Vasu (1922) Meches and Kiratas belong to the Asura dynasty. They were Mlecchas and so abbreviated into Mech. They ruled Pragjyotisha Kingdom for four thousand years and later began to decline with the elevation of the Aryans. Many of them sought refuge in the remote forest areas to be regarded as wild and uncivilized tribes in later years. George Abraham Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India also maintains that Mech is a corruption of Mlecchas.

Sanyal (1973) narrates a mythical story about the origin of Mech people. It says Mech and Limbu used to live together. They were driven out from the north-eastern corner of India, Burma and Tibet. They fled along the foot of the Himalayas and came to the low lands of the present Darjeeling district in the midst of thick forests. They lived there temporarily. The Limbus did not want to stay back there. They started towards the hills making the way by cutting trees. The Meches started a few days later. They tried to follow the track but lost the way and came upon the river Mechi between Darjeeling and Nepal. Some of them preferred to live on the banks of river Mechi. They called themselves Meches or Mechias. Thus, it is believed that the Limbus of Nepal and the Meches of India belong to the same tribal group.

Risley (1891) tells a story about the origin of Mech, which is close to the above one. God sent Mech people on the earth from the heaven. They descended to Varanasi in the beginning. However, Varanasi was not the ascertained place for them. They started moving towards north and reached Kachar in Kamrup. The youngest brother decided to stay back there. He was the forefather of Mech, Koch and Dhimal. The elder brothers went towards the hills. The descendants of those two brothers are Limbu and Khambu of Nepal. From the third to the tenth century, Aryan kings of Gaur namely Samudragupta, Prabhakar Vardhana, Jayapala, Vikramaditya and many other Kshatriya kings advanced as far as the Louhitya with their army and subjugated Kamarupa from time to time. Some of the military personnel must have been retained there and miscegenation between the invading army and the indigenous people must have taken place. Thus, the Hinduized Bodos and Meches gradually assimilated much of Kshatriya blood, adopted Aryan Hindu gods and started worshipping them along with their own gods. The Meches were one of those early inhabitants of the Dooars and adjacent tracts and had exercised control over large areas in earlier centuries. Several accounts state that the Koch Behar royal family descended from a Mech leader Haria alias Haridas Mandal. Since the thirteenth century, the Meches experienced a process of both Hinduization and Islamization.

More than a century ago the Meches used to practice 'jhum' cultivation that is cutting and burning the jungles and then sowing different seeds in each hole made by dibblers and sowers. Short-staple cotton was their cash crop. They had no idea of cultivation with bullocks and the plough. In the later years, they found themselves displaced from their lands by the strict forest rules of the British foresters and extension of tea plantation. Meches were compelled to adopt settled cultivation. D.H.E. Sunder (1895) a British surveyor reports that the Mech people showed a rapid progress from the nomadic to settled state. They had taken to the permanent cultivation in all seriousness with bullocks and the plough. They raise many crops of which rice is the principal one. They are

experts in areca nut (betel palm or betel) cultivation Betel vines climb ups the areca trees. These are their cash crops.

Mech women rear silkworm. They spin Endi thread from the cocoons. Mech women also weave cloths with the thread produced at home, on a primitive loom called ‘kanti’, which is made from bamboo. They also make baskets, fish traps and other items out of bamboo. Their traditional houses are still constructed with bamboo.

Today, most of Mechs are mainly dependent on agriculture for their livilng. They follow subsistence level agriculture, though in recent times they are progressively using modern methods of agriculture. Both male and female member of the community work together.

A sij plant (Bathou) in a Mech house in Dooars

Meches view the 'mother earth' as human mother. Even today, they follow the same idea and customs of agriculture even after they have shifted from ‘jhum’ (slash and burn) cultivation to settled agriculture with the bullocks and the plough. The Meches call ‘jhum’ as ‘Hadang’ and the settled cultivation as ‘Hal-wai-nai’.

The Meches have still retained their distinctive Septs or Gotras. They have five or seven principal Gotras. They are associated with the objects other than human that might be the remnants of some form of totemism as probably practised earlier. The most common Gotras, found among the Meches in the Dooars today, are following, Sampram-ari or Campram-ari (the priestly class), Narzin-ari, (the warrior class), Basumat-ari (landlords and cultivators), Bargaon-ari, Iswari-ari, Moch-ari and Hajo-ari. The suffix ‘ari’ means Sept or Gotra. In some early literature, more numbers of septs are mentioned among the Meches and Bodos.



Sacred Bathou plant

The Meches prefer negotiated marriages. They marry within their tribe and within any of their septs. However, there is no restriction in marrying outside one's sept. Rarely do they marry outside their own tribe. If it happens, the couple is not made out caste but absorbed in the society, reports Sanyal in his book.

The Mech families are mostly joint or extended. The boys usually do not take a separate house after marriage. Separation is done by the head of the family according to necessity. Girls after marriage go to their husband's house. In a Mech family, only sons inherit father's property. Daughters, both married and unmarried, do not have any right to the property. However, they may get maintenance.

For the Meches, any object possessing super-human power is regarded as an object of worship. Meches worship rivers like Tista and Torsha. The Meches worship celestial bodies, the god of the forest (Hagra Modoi) for protection against carnivorous animals. They worship Manasha (the snake goddess), Mahakal (Shiva), and Bathou, which is represented by a Euphorbia plant or sij plant. Bathou is the most important god of the Meches. Bathou is worshipped in every Mech household. Later on, they started worshipping several Vedic and Hindu gods too. Lately, some of them have started making idols of gods, probably under the influence of Hindu culture.

The Meches in West Bengal also follow other religions like Islam and Christianity. There is also a small number of followers of Brahmoism, use Brahmo or Brahma as their surname. At the beginning of the present century, the Brahmo reformatory movement, under the leadership of Guru Kalicharan Brahma, became popular among the Bodo Kachari people and led to an overhauling of the social system.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The Pan Bodo Movement, which originated in the neighbouring state of Assam, has given rise to political aspirations among the Mech. They have extended moral support to the movement of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam for a separate state of Udayachal. The Pan Bodo literary movement, which also originated in Assam, under the name of the All Bodo Sahitya Sabha, has its counterpart in West Bengal. As a result, the educated Mech of this state demand that the medium of instruction, at least at the primary school level, should be their mother tongue in the predominantly Mech or Bodo speaking areas. The Mech have achieved a literacy rate of 26.97 percent. The males and females have registered literacy rates of 33.37 percent and 19.97 percent respectively.

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