



Continuity and Change in the Socio-Economic Life of the Biате Tribe of Assam in the 19th and 20th Centuries

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Abstract

The Biates are one of the earliest hill tribes inhabiting the northeastern regions of India and speak a Tibeto-Burman-related language. Their facial and physical features are similar to those of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribal group. The Biates have preserved their culture and traditions through the ages by adhering to oral tradition. Prior to the arrival of Christianity, the Biates practised animism as their primordial religion. They gradually started to discard their centuries-old rituals and practices with the emergence of Christianity and Colonial rule in India. The main purpose of this paper is to showcase the traditional socio-economic activities of the Biате tribe in the North Cachar Hills District (present Dima Hasao) of Assam and also highlight their change and continuity throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

Key Words: Biате tribe, Socio-economic, Dima Hasao, Christianity, Colonialism.

Introduction: Assam is a state in northeastern India, located south of the eastern Himalayas and along the Brahmaputra and Barak River valleys. Assam has a total area of 78,438 sq. km. The state is bounded on the north by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, on the east by Nagaland and Manipur, on the south by Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, and Bangladesh, and on the west by West Bengal via the Siliguri Corridor, a 22 km wide stretch of land connecting the state to the rest of India. Assam has 35 districts, with the Biате tribe living in the present Dima Hasao District. Due to poor road conditions, a lack of transportation and communication infrastructure, and the surrounding hilly terrain, the Biате tribe has remained isolated from the outside world for many years. Textual materials on the Biате tribe in colonial and native sources are limited. Their population is shrinking, and the Biате dialect is only spoken in the North Cachar Hills of Assam and the East Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya; some who settled in Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura have already disowned their dialects, adopting the local dialects of their kindred tribes. The tribes which first emigrated from Lushai land into Cachar, the Rangkhols (Hrangkhols) and Betes (Biates), with their off-shoots, are generally distinguished as Old Kuki; while it has become customary to use the term New Kuki to denote the Thados, Jangshens, and their off-shoots.¹ Therefore, when the Biates, along with their kindred tribes, first came into contact with the

¹ G.A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol.III, Part- III, p.2.

plain people of Assam, they were identified as the 'Old Kukis', and later, the term was popularised by the colonisers.

Socio-Economic Life: A self-sufficient village, based on agriculture carried on with the primitive plough and bullock-power and handicrafts by means of simple instruments, was a basic feature of Pre-British Indian society. The self-sufficient village as the basic economic unit had existed for centuries in India and, except for some minor modifications, had survived till the advent of British rule, in spite of all political convulsions, religious upheavals, and devastating wars. It stood impregnable in the face of all foreign invasions, dynastic changes, and all violent territorial shifts in inter struggles. Kingdoms rose and collapsed, but the self-sufficient village survived.² The socio-economic life of the Biatae tribe underwent major changes and continuity with the advent of colonisation and Christianity.

The Biatae village is usually perched on a high hill or ridge and has easy access to a natural source of water such as a river or stream. These are all desirable locations. In the olden days, a thiampu (priest) with his bervas (assistants) performed the 'tlasan'³ ritual to confirm whether a location was suitable for establishing a village or house before settling in. For that, two bamboo halves would be tossed into the air by the priest. If they wind up falling in opposite directions, it is believed to be a good place for humans to settle there. If the bamboo halves face the same way in the front or back, it is a sign from their god of land that the region is unfit for settlement. Approximately three to seven attempts were made in the same process until and unless they got positive results. The priest then offers sacrifices of animals or fowls and chants incantations to the divinities of the land and forest for good fortune, prosperity, and better livelihoods. The people will move into the chosen location on the following day. This old practice was not completely abandoned but modified, and a pastor, in place of a priest, prayed to the Almighty God for new settlements without sacrificing animals or fowls. The ancient method of house architecture with thatched roofs and floors made of bamboo and cane began to fade gradually, and instead, houses with tin roofs, concrete walls, and floors were preferred.

The Biataes maintain a patriarchal family system. The youngest son, who traditionally stays at home and inherits the property, is the official heir. The remaining assets are divided among the other brothers after the eldest son receives his part of the property. If no sons were born, the daughter's husband would inherit the property, but only if he was a Biatae. But inheritance traditions are not inflexible, and a father has the right to leave his belongings to his daughters as well.

Marriage by consent is common among the Biataes. Marriage between members of the same clan was prohibited. A man had a poor social position and was not allowed to participate in village council sessions if he married a woman from the same clan. According to a Biatae proverb, "A man who marries a woman from the same clan is often considered as

² A.R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, 1948, p.1.

³ Tlasan is an omen that is either good or bad, as narrated by Mr. Lianpuia Darnei (61 yrs.) at Fiangpui village, Dima Hasao District, on 26.01.2019.

similar to a chicken that shits in its own coop." In Biате society, polygamy was not practised. The wedding ceremony is conducted by the priest in the bride's house. Two types of marriage exist in Biате society: an arranged marriage by negotiation and a marriage by elopement. According to custom, the son-in-law is sought to reside in his father-in-law's house for at least six to seven years to assist the in-laws in agricultural fields in order to maintain a strong bond with the family. This son-in-law's labour is called "maksin." The Biате tribe has no marriage symbols in the form of clothing or ornaments. There is no distinction between a married or unmarried man and a woman. Traditionally, the bride's price, such as a copper plate known as "mairang," a mithun (mountain cattle), and brass gongs such as Darribu, Darkhuang, and Darthir, were given to the bride's parents by the groom, and cash was not preferred. Changes were made in the late 19th century. Though 'Mairang' is still preferred, bride prices have started to include cash. Clan exogamy has become less rigid. In the church, marriage ceremonies were conducted by a pastor instead of a priest. 'Maksin' was reduced to three years, and some do not practice this custom since they started engaging in governmental jobs and other related work. Divorce was rare in Biате society. Infidelity, committing adultery, infertility issues, and individual marital decisions are all grounds for divorce. If one of the couple engages in adultery or extramarital relations, that person will forfeit custody of their kids.

The attire preferences of the Biates were also changed and upgraded. They were familiar with blue-indigo and red in the pre-colonial period. They acquired blue colour from indigo plants they produced, and red cotton was produced by boiling white cotton with different forest tubers available in their inhabited areas. They also maintain a tradition of rearing eri silkworms. Women wear a kilt of blue cloth extending from the waist to just above the knee and another cloth from the breast to the waist. Bracelets and earrings are worn in great profusion.⁴ Later, with the advent of mill made yarns bought from towns, the weavers started using bright colours like yellow, purple, blue, green, pink, and maroon to add variety to their textiles. The motifs of the Biates were inspired by phenomena of nature, like a bunch of flowers, the markings on a snake, the black and white of the human eye, the design on a butterfly's wings, parallel lines from the bamboo rows, etc.⁵ Before the colonial period, women had a low position. They are engaged in all household as well as agricultural activities and are not allowed to take part in political and religious affairs. In the late 20th century, women were permitted to take part in church activities, and equal educational opportunities were given to them. However, their responsibilities for taking care of household tasks continued to exist.

The Biates have seven traditional festivals in general-Pamchar Kut, Lebang Kut, Mim Kut, Favang Kut, Chemchoi Kut, Tamthar Kut, and Nuldung Kut, which are related to agricultural activities. Except for Nuldung Kut (the festival of renewal of life), the mentioned festivals are no longer observed at present. The traditional dances of the Biates include Dar lam, Mebur lam, Buantum-lam, Parton lam, Chem lam, Ar-ek inuai lam, Riki facho lam, Sialrikichoi lam, Lampalak lam, Tuipui lenthluk lam, Rualdara lam, Pualvachang lam, Sulribum lam, Uite koi lam, Chitu lam, and Sikpui-zollam. Musical

⁴ C.A Soppitt, *A Short Account of The Kuki-Lushai Tribe*, 1887, p.6.

⁵ Anjali Karolia & Baiahunlang Ladia, 2012, p.312

instruments include brass gongs such as- Darkhuang, Darthir, Jamluang, Theiphit, Theile (bamboo flutes), Seranda (violin), Rosem (mouth organ), and Khuang (drum).

Rice is the principal meal of the Biates. Common dishes include meat, fish, turtles, snails, crabs, prawns, and turtles, caught in rivers or streams. Bamboo shoots, leaves, herbs, mushrooms, banana blossoms and stems, tubers such as taro, yams, and nuts are gathered from the forest and consumed in large quantities. The traditional dishes that are frequently prepared for important events are "sumrisivoksa", which are edible leaves common in their land known as "Eurya acuminata" with pork meat, and "Arsafaipui," which is chicken porridge. The most common beverage is called "zu." There are four kinds of zu- Baitui known as rice beer; Zu-ning, a fine distilled rice beer; Rakzu, a strong distilled spirit; and Zu-phok, made from special flavoured rice, which is a mixture of solid and liquid.⁶ Zu is required for a variety of ceremonies, including marriages, festivals, council meetings and important discussions, childbirth, and even in spare time. Later on, zu was replaced by tea. In the Biate community, shifting cultivation is the mainstay of the economy and a source of livelihood. Hunting, fishing, blacksmithing, etc. are additional professions. A thirsu (blacksmith) is appointed by the Siarkalim Devan (traditional village council) based on his skills in metalworking. Every household equipment and agricultural implement, such as hoes, axes, knives, chisels, sickles, spades, hammers, and the like, is created or mended by him. To compensate for his service, the traditional village council assigns a day for one member of each household to come out and assist a thirsu in clearing his jhum fields or doing some other labour on his property. This service is referred to as "soilo." The blacksmith receives one basket of rice from each house-holder whose tools he repairs.⁷ The Biate people are excellent at a variety of crafts, including bamboo and cane crafts, weaving, stone carving, and the like. In the past, the Biate tribes were skilled metalworkers. In one of his tour diaries,⁸ J.P. Mills (a colonial administrator and anthropologist) made the following observations about the metal objects made by the Biate tribe:

"We went to Loskor and back (5 miles). It is the only village in which I have seen nice old things. I acquired an outstanding and unique piece of old metalwork, bought from a Bete (Biate) village 40 years ago. Not being ancestral, the owners were quite ready to sell. It is here that the Kacharis from the North and the Rangkhols from the South meet. "

He has further added, "The art has been lost and there is no one alive who could make such a vessel now."⁹ He has also mentioned that the Biates were excellent brass-casters. As the value of a thirsu has begun to decline, the techniques of metalworking and brass-casting are no longer prevalent in Biate society. People started preferring to purchase the ready-made tools from the plain people. The use of fertilisers has also superseded older methods of agriculture. However, rudimentary methods are still employed in some rural areas.

⁶ Ramdina Lalsim, *History of the Biates*, 2013, p.25.

⁷ J. Shakespear, *The Lushei Kuki Clans*, 1912, p.44

⁸ J.P. Mills and others, *Tour Diaries and Administrative Notes from the North Cachar Hills, Assam, 1928-1940*, p.28.

⁹ J.P. Mills, *Notes on (i) An Obsolete Kuki Metal Vessel; (ii) Fire-making by Men and Women of the Old Kuki Clans of Cachar. Man, Vol.30, 1930, pp.1-2.*

The Biates are fond of hunting and fishing. When a hunter uses firearms or traps to hunt the animals in the forest, tradition holds that he should offer parts of the meat, preferably the neck, shoulder, and leg portion, to the 'Siarkalim' (traditional headman), as a gesture of gratitude and to seek security from the latter against any future disaster.¹⁰ One can be certain that the head of the family or any male family member is a great and brave man known as "Biate Pasalthra" if they visit someone's residence and notice the skulls of a mithun and a deer with its horns displayed on the center or main entrance of his house. This is considered one of the biggest accomplishments and feelings of esteem in his life. This practice culminated after the government prohibited the hunting of wild animals. The Biates enjoy fishing as well, and their traditional fishing equipment includes- rikuai rui (bamboo fishing rods with hooks), arial traps or conical bamboo traps, gears, len (nets), manual fishing, ngoi (weirs), and so on. Both men and women were also great weavers, since weaving is an integral part of Biate culture. Men weave baskets and women weave clothes. Modern tools have supplanted the widespread usage of bamboo in the manufacture of household items and for house construction.

The barter system was prevalent in the Biate village. The Biates exchange rice, eggs, cotton, cattle, fowl, and so on, for other basic commodities such as salt, tea, sugar, dry-fish, and medicine. They travel mostly by foot to reach the nearest market, and stay with their neighbouring tribes and plain people for a few days to meet their own requirements. The primary markets frequently visited by the Biates of North Cachar Hills were located in Harangajao, Ditokcherra, Sylhet, and Borkhola (Cachar). Later on, the money economy replaced the barter economy.

After embracing Christianity, the importance of education is given to both boys and girls. Health and hygiene were introduced. The Biates, in their primordial religion, believed that there were good and bad spirits, known as magnanimous and malicious spirits, respectively, who dwelled in the forests, rocks, streams, and rivers. They worship and please the spirits by sacrificing animals and birds. After embracing Christianity in the late 19th century, all of their anxieties, superstitions, taboos, and other animistic beliefs were abolished. Household and village altars such as Sutmung, Simbak, and Bolkuang were brought to an end. A grave known as "khurkhang"¹¹ was made in the olden days by excavating a deep pit. The body is wrapped in a white cloth and buried with its belongings. The grave is then encased by a bamboo fence before being covered with mud. This practice has been discontinued and is now replaced by coffins for placing the body. However, there was no evidence of cremating the dead.

Conclusion: While progress and modernisation can be seen in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were some negative consequences as well. Tribal identity crisis began to emerge, and civil unrest among the populace began. The creation of distinct states had now

¹⁰ Interview with Mr. Siama Nampui (Gaonbura), 72 yrs., at New Sangbar Village, Dima Hasao District, Assam, on 28.06.2019.

¹¹ *Khurkhang is a side-cornered grave on the ground base where a hollow space is created for placing the dead body as narrated by Mr. Siama Nampui, ibid.*

politically and geographically divided the Biates from their brethren. The division of many Christian groups and the emergence of church denominations like the Presbyterian, Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, etc., which were introduced by the Welsh, Anglican, American Baptist Missionaries, and others, caused confusion and divisiveness among the people. The element of a self-sufficient economy started to disappear, linguistic dominance over the state and disputes emerged. The younger generations of today adopted contemporary lifestyles impacted by the western lifestyle, which therefore, led to a gradual displacement of the centuries-old traditions and customs maintained by the Biates progenitors.

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