

Traditional Farming System and Rich Heritage of Indigenous Ethnic Group in Upper Assam: Thengal-Kachari Tribe

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Abstract: The Thengal-Kacharis are an indigenous tribal group of Assam mainly concentrated on five districts i.e. Jorhat, Golaghat, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh districts of Upper Assam. They have a rich tradition and cultural history and have great significance from the point of view of management of diversity, conservation and preservation of nature, harvesting, pesting etc. Their farming system is known as Bari system. This study had been carried out with an objective of finding an insight in details regarding the traditional farming system; crop diversity, traditional practices, rituals and taboos associated with the traditions and culture of the Thengal-Kachari tribe.

Keywords: Thengal-Kachari, Traditional farming system, Assam, Upper Assam, North-East India etc

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I. INTRODUCTION

Thengal-Kacharis are one among the smallest ethnic groups belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid race in North-East India. Their cultures are related to nature like other tribes in the North-East India. They are a clan of both Bodo-Kacharis and Sonowal Kacharis. Thengal-Kacharis were formerly silver washers. Indigenous knowledge and practices of Thengal-Kachari women in household farming and sustainable management of Bari system of farming make them especial. Their festival is called Tora-Chira related to farming and harvesting. Mythologically, Thengal means those who possess leg foremost ascended to the heaven. In history, they served the Ahom Monarch and wore a long shirt touching their heels and by this they led to the name of Thengal. Theng means legs in Assamese. In this community women have played a key role in preservation, consumption and sustainable use of natural resources. They spread this knowledge and traditions as a legacy to the younger generation. For the meeting of the basic requirements in every rural household; farming including livestock, poultry, fish production, crops, and number of trees are grown. These farmland or Bari lie alongside the main household. This study was carried out with an objective of finding an insight in details regarding the traditional farming system, crop diversity, traditional practices, rituals and taboos associated with the farming traditions and culture of the Thengal-Kachari tribe.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out on Balijan Gaon in Titabor, Jorhat district of Upper Assam. A group of rural men and women were interviewed using a pretested peer reviewed questionnaire and observation method to collect necessary information. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section-A dealt with the crops grown in the farm or in the Baris, Section-B dealt with men and women engaged in the farming and their responsibilities; and Section-C solicited information regarding indigenous knowledge and technology used in the farming. 40 people were one-on-one interviewed and their responses were collected using the pre-tested questionnaire.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Indigenous system of farming in household farming:

This particular tribe is an excellent example of management and arrangement of traditional Bari structure and maintaining diversity, preservation and facilities of diverse livelihood necessities.

Crop diversity is spread highly near their homes and reduces with far distance. Only a few species were found at the extreme end of the farm or in the Bari. Pisciculture is a common practice among the Thengal-Kachari tribe. In every household a pond or tank is dug to rear fish at the end of the farm. Medicinal plants (kuzi

thekeera, rabab tenga, nar hingha, haldhi, mousundari etc), vegetables (potato, cabbage, sweet potato, kosu etc), spices (halodhi, jolokia, ada, moran ada etc), Som tree (silkworm rearing) were observed in their farming zone.

3.2. Role of women in maintaining a farm and farming system:

The whole farming system in this tribe is under direct domain of women and it can be easily accessed at once to get fresh vegetables, herbs, silk rearing tree, fragrance plants etc. Women are responsible for harvesting, planting, management, arrangement and propagation of planting and production. Women have deep knowledge along with the man folk about the utility, knowledge of growth habit of each farming culture. Women helped men in heavy tasks like harvesting, pond digging, weeding, pesting, disease management, plucking leaves from medicinal plants, storing, processing, seed selection etc. They are very hard working women who keep an eagle eye over their livestock and poultry. They used plants for numerous purposes i.e. in sericulture, food, timber, medicine and cash crops. Even elderly women have important role to play in every household as they passed their knowledge and experiences to the younger generation as a legacy about indigenous plants, traditional knowledge and pest control measures.

3.3. Preservation and storage technique used by Kachari people:

Kachari people removed seeds from mature and ripened vegetables and fruits to harvest in the next season. In this context, we can mention about “Dhua Chang” which is made some feet above a fireplace in a traditional kitchen system made by bamboo trees and clay. They kept different species of seeds on it and let them dry.”Dhua” means smoke “Chang” means a flat horizontal table made by bamboo which is hanging in the ceiling through rope. They also let dry different species of gourd, pumpkin etc. in the sun and extracted seeds from it. They also made traditional dishes like “Hukoti” (dry fish) by fermentation and preserved for consumption in lean season.

3.4. Rituals and Taboos among Kachari people related to farming:

Duck meat is considered a delicacy among every tribe in the North-east India and served it during marriage ceremony and in festive seasons. According to rituals, duck meat is not consumed during the rainy season. Duck meat is consumed in the winter season i.e.in January or during the Magh Bihu, which is the ideal season to consume it. Women are not allowed into the farm or in Bari to pluck something during menstrual cycle. Banyan tree (*Ficus bengalensis*), mango (*Mangifera indica*), Siju gosh (*Ephorbia nerifolia*), banana etc. are considered as holy tree and are associated with many religious rituals. During the fish breeding season, Kachari people don't consume fish i.e. in the monsoon season. Bamboo tree is not cut in the Tuesdays and the Saturdays. Dhekia (*Diplazium esculentum*) is not plucked in the autumn season. Banana is a popular fruit, however; it is not plucked on Tuesdays and Saturdays.

IV. CONCLUSION

We have seen that diverse plants were grown by Thengal-Kacharis in their farming system. This is their mega cultural tradition and their festivals are also nature linked celebration. North-East India has hundreds of linguistic ethnic groups having their own religious beliefs and rituals including Thengal Kacharis. North-East India lies in Eastern Himalaya which is a biodiversity hot spot and the indigenous tribes including the Thengal-Kacharis, contribute in the conservation of the biodiversity through their farming system by cultivating different vegetables, fruits, medicinal plants, spices, weaving materials etc. in their household farming.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT:

There was no conflict of interest among the authors.

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Annexure 1: Tables

Table 1: Some common plants found in the farm of Thengal-Kachari tribe.

Sl No.	Local name	species	uses
1	Kosu	<i>Colocasia antiquorum</i>	Vegetable
2	Sansi	<i>Aquilaria malaccensis</i>	Fragrance oil
3	Som	<i>Terminalia chebula</i>	Silk worm rearing
4	Man kosu	<i>Alocasia indica</i>	Vegetable
5	Dhan jolokia	<i>C. minimum</i>	Spice
6	Bhul	<i>Luffa acutangula</i>	Vegetable
7	Ou-tenga	<i>Dillenia indica</i>	Fruit, medicine, small timber
8	Halodhi	<i>Curcuma longa</i>	Spice, cash crops

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