

Role of Women with Special Reference to Socio-cultural Features of Tai Turung Tribes of Jorhat District of Assam

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ABSTRACT This study was undertaken to highlight some socio-demographic and cultural features of the Buddhist Tai Turung Tribe of Pathar Shyam village located at about 5 km in the south-eastern part of Titabor town of Jorhat district of Assam. Pathar Shyam village inhabited exclusively by the Tai Turungs for ages is surrounded on all sides with villages inhabited by indigenous Assamese communities. The people of this tribe under the forces of changes with respect to time had assimilated with them in certain aspects but still have retained their identity through customs, traditions and festivals. The population of the tribe in the village with a total of 60 households was enumerated at 350 of which 280 were adults comprising four to seven family members in eighty percent of households. All the households displayed 'average' economic condition and were classified either nuclear or extended type of families with none in the joint type of family. Role of the womenfolk within the community is considered important and is accorded a high status in the society with least gender discrimination. It was observed that demographic parameters like landholding, education and type of house had significant positive relationship with income level of the respondents. Negative correlation was found between participation in various activities at home, farm and allied sectors with educated women and higher landholdings. Amongst many festivals *Poi-Mai ko sum phai* that falls on *Maghi purnima* is an important festival observed to commemorate the forecast of Lord Buddha on his attainment of "Nirvana" on the day of *Buddha Purnima*. With the participation of the whole village, this day is celebrated with great pomp and enthusiasm following traditional rituals and values that were retained through ages without intermingling with rituals of other Assamese communities.

INTRODUCTION

Assam holds and supports a large proportion of tribal population, highly differentiated in terms of ethno-lingual characteristics as well as economic responses to their habitats (Saikia et al. 2012). Tai Turungs are also a tribal community who are residing in Assam since a couple of centuries. This tribe is a sub-division of Shan tribe of Mungkong of Southeast Asia. They belong to Siamese Chinese sub-family. They now speak Tibeto-Burmese language closely related to Singpho (Morey), originated from the bank of Nam-Turung river of Hokong valley and migrated towards Assam in the beginning of 18th century (Gogoi Phukan 2002). On their way, they had spent certain period of time with the Singphos of Arunachal Pradesh. During 1825 B.C. on their willingness to migrate to Assam, British officer, Captain Newbill had settled them at a place named Tokolai in Jorhat Town. They later on migrated to Titabor in search of convenient land for farming, as they were mainly agriculturists.

In course of time, the Tai Turungs founded three villages named *Pathar Shyam*, *Tipomia* and *Pahukotia* in Titabor sub-division. Some migrated still further to form villages named *Bosa Pathar*, *Avang Pathar* and *Roja Pukhuri* in Golaghat District and *Balipathar* at Karbi Anglong District (Turung 2000; Gogoi Phukan 2002). *Pathar Shyam* village is located at about 5 km in the south-eastern part of Titabor town of Jorhat district. The Turungs are the followers of Hinayan sect of Buddhism popularly known as *Therowadi* Buddhists. They are bilingual, as they speak Turung among themselves and Assamese for communicating with other people and are well versed in both the languages. It has been observed that changes in a tribal society are inevitable with time. According to Doley (2014), the impact of urbanization and modernization has brought a major economic and socio-cultural transformation among the Mising tribes of Assam. Even though the Tai-Turungs are closely associated with other Assamese communities and have assimilated a lot. They have

preserved their own customs and traditions to a large extent.

Objectives

- ◆ To see the socio-demographic characteristics of the Tai-Turungs of *Pathar Shyam* village with special reference to women.
- ◆ To study the traditions and customs that they have maintained in their celebrations with special reference to *Poi-Mai ko sum phai*.

METHODOLOGY

To elicit information on the demographic profile, customs and traditions of the Tai-Turungs of *Pathar Shyam* village, a well-structured questionnaire was developed and administered on 100 households having elderly persons above the age of 55 years. Data was collected in the year 2013 and was analysed in terms of frequencies, percentages to see quantification and to determine the level of relationships between dependent and independent variables coefficient of correlation was computed. A visit was also conducted on the day of celebration of *Poi-Mai ko sum phai* for ascertaining the information and thus the study was accomplished.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The population of Tai-Turungs of *Pathar Shyam* village was about 350 numbers of which 280 were adults. The village comprised of 60 households, eighty percent of whom were comprised of four to seven family members. All the households were either nuclear or extended type of families while none of the households were found to have joint family. The economic conditions of the people were found to be average. With regard to occupation, majority of the population were agriculturists, a few were found to be entrepreneurs, petty traders and still less were found to be service holders. Almost all the households had small landholdings with only twenty percent having large landholdings and none landless. The study further revealed that there was cent percent literacy with a post-graduate, an engineer and five general graduates in the village. Women literacy was also found to be better (64%). Regarding living space it was found that older generation preferred to live in

stilted houses, which were typical to the Turung tribe. But younger generation with better economic condition preferred contemporary houses with a typical Turung fervor. With regard to the general health condition where most of the people suffer from diabetes or hypertension, in case of the Turung elderly population, it was found to be good with no one having diabetes and a very few having hypertension but under control. They mostly relied on traditional medicines and used different types of herbs in their diet menus. The oldest person in the village was 98 years old and was healthy till date. Regarding food habits the people forbid beef and buffaloes but eat pork, chicken, mutton and fish. They also eat all other vegetables, greens and wild grown greens like ferns, colocasia etc. like other Assamese communities. Older people restrained from having meat and fish. It was found that they mostly eat boiled food and greatly relished the bamboo shoot preparations. The eldest member of the family male or female was respected a lot, any food prepared in the house was offered to him or her before serving others.

Table 1: Relationship of family income level with other demographic variables of the women respondents

S. No.	Demographic variables	Average scores	Coefficient of correlations 'r'
1	Landholding	0.664	0.698**
2	Education	2.670	0.709**
3	Family type	0.160	0.105
4	Family size	0.595	0.054 ^{NS}
5	Type of house	0.609	0.567**

**significant at 0.01 level, and ^{NS}: non-significant

Correlation coefficient was computed to determine the level of relationship between various demographic variables of the women respondents with household income level (Table 1). It was observed that demographic parameters like landholding, education and type of house had significant positive relationship with income level of the respondents. It indicated that with higher income level these necessities of life were also found to be better. On the other hand, a non-significant correlation was observed between demographic parameters like family type and family size with income level. This might be because income level might not play important role in maintaining family type and family size. The present findings conform to

a certain extent to the findings of Mallikharjuna et al. (2010) regarding type of house, family type and occupation of tribal people in their study.

In agricultural activities men besides other farm activities used to be behind the plough in the field. Activities like uprooting, transplanting and harvesting were under women's work domain but they were also found to be involved in the post harvest activities along with men in the homestead. Apart from regular home making activities, womenfolk involved extensively in weaving and wove their traditional dresses at home as well as performed other allied activities such as rearing of animals and birds. But with improved level of education and income there seemed to be some shifts in the traditional roles of women. Coefficient of correlation was assessed to see the level of relationship between the demographic variables of the respondents and their participation in three work domains.

Computation of correlation of coefficient to see the relationship of personal variables and participation in work of the respondents revealed negative and highly significant relationship with education level and holding size of the respondents with their participation in all the activities of three work domains (Table 2). Education brings about certain changes in the attitude of people which might be a reason for the educated Tai Turung women having less participation in work in field, home and animal rearing. On the other hand, some might have better income and higher landholding and preferred engaging paid help to share their work, some of them leased out part of their land for which their participation might have been less.

Income level of the respondent households had no effect on home and allied activities, but had shown significant negative relationship with farm activities. The reason might be, as the income level increases extra helps were engaged that looked

after farm activities and required women's lesser participation.

On the other hand, family type was non-significant on extent of participation in activities of all the work domains. However, family size showed positive and highly significant relationship at 0.01 level with participation in all the activities which might be because mostly these families had older parents and children that required younger women to work more.

The present study partially agrees with the following observations of Chauhan (2011). According to him relationship of occupation, type of family, age at marriage and participation in farm activities were found to be negative, whereas, six variables like age of the respondents, education, herd size, land holding, family size and number of children were observed to be positive and highly significant with their participation. Similar findings on relationship between personal variables and participation in farm activities were reported by Choudhury et al. (2004).

The tribal communities follow series of rituals to appease spirits, gods and deities for the well-being of their family and the community. According to Kaman (2013), missing tribes too perform series of rituals like ancestor worship and gods for their health and well-being. The Tai Turungs performed their religious functions in the Budha Vihar called *Chong* built in 1834. There was a pagoda called *Kong-mu* in the *Chong* premise built during the same period which gave a serene backdrop from roadside. They celebrated many functions, which were religious and cultural based. One of their important festivals was *Poi-Mai ko sum phai* celebrated in mid January on the day of *Maghi purnima* that bore a striking resemblance with *Magh Bihu*. *Magh Bihu* is a harvest festival of all other Assamese communities, which falls on the 13th

Table 2: Correlation coefficient (r-value) of personal variables of women respondents with their participation in home, farm and allied activities

S. No.	Personal variables	Participation in activities		
		Home activities	Farm activities	Allied activities
1	Education	-0.329**	-0.371**	-0.348**
2	Income level	0.120 ^{NS}	-0.151*	0.161*
3	Landholding	-0.293**	-0.396**	-0.446**
4	Family type	0.026 ^{NS}	0.010 ^{NS}	0.009 ^{NS}
5	Family size	0.332**	0.352**	0.412**

*significant at 0.01 level, * significant at 0.05 level and ^{NS}: non-significant

or 14th of January. Turungs celebrated the festival on the full moon day of *Magh* (January) and had a religious vehemence associated with it. This day was celebrated to mark the forecast that Lord Buddha would attain *nirvana* on the full moon day of *Bohag* (April) traditionally called as *Buddha Purnima*. Similarly, *Poi Sunk-en* also known as *Pani Bihu* was observed on the same day as *Makar Sankranti*, which falls on the eve of Assamese *Rongali Bihu* in mid April and marks the beginning of their traditional new year. The Turungs also observe many other such festivals throughout the year. Despite their confluence with greater Assamese community they had preserved their tradition, rites and rituals through these ceremonies and functions. One of their important religious functions was *Poi-Mai ko sum phai* celebrated in the *maghi purnima* with full rites and rituals.

Before the day of full moon in the month of January, the village youths collected good quality firewood from jungle, cut them uniformly and made a huge sturdy square shaped high structure of about 25-30 feet by placing four bamboo poles in four corners and piled up the fire woods one above the other in a decorative way. Bamboo pieces were also inserted inside to help in inflammability. All the village girls got together to decorate the surroundings with coloured paper flags and flowers. Earlier the shape used to be octagonal and still bigger but due to scarcity of fire wood these were made smaller and squared. It was decorated with fresh banana sheaths on the base that looked like a big lotus. This was done in the *Chong* premise in an open ground. Generally, the village youth who could wake up early and burn it at any time after mid night was considered to be lucky. So, there used to be a competition for this activity. A village youth climbs up and lights the *Mai ko sum phai* (pile of firewood). They kept on putting whole green bamboo pieces (un-split) in the fire, bursting of which made large sounds like crackers. All the villagers congregated there and began their rituals. The Turungs did not offer eatables directly on the fire instead put the food in four bamboo poles placed at four corners near the *Mai ko sum phai*. All the people then offered prayers and feasted on their food items. After that they went inside the Bodh Vihar and offered prayers to Lord Buddha with the Buddhist monk called *Bhante*. Then the young people took the *panch sheel* or five percepts and elderly peo-

ple took *asto sheel* or eight percepts given by the monk. The *Bhante* (monk) then gave a sermon and read some prayers both in Tai and Pali language followed by participation in traditional games like pot breaking, pole jumps and long jumps performed with lot of merry making.

At home women prepared special rice based preparation called *khao-ya-ku*, which had medicinal value because they added different herbs along with sesame. They added dried pork or chicken pieces for taste or simply vegetarian along with nuts and peas which they offered near the *Poi-Mai ko sum phai* and exchanged with their neighbours also. Another delicious rice item *Tongtap* was made from rice flour wrapped in *torapat* (Allughus leaf) by steaming in big vessels. They also made *chat matai* by wrapping whole rice in *torapat* (Allughus leaf) and steam in boiling water. They used the reverse side of Allughus leaf as well as plantain leaves for serving, unlike others who use the front side. Thus it was revealed that in all these functions women were found to perform an indispensable role throughout.

In the evening, all the villagers offered prayers and lit candles in the *Chong*. Earlier they used to fly gas balloons made in their own traditional way to ward off evil spirits from the sky. But due to increased habitation, this practice is avoided fearing accidents.

CONCLUSION

Thus, it was found that Turungs were basically agriculturist and were culturally advanced tribe and developing in modern context. The study revealed that they still practice their traditional customs and rituals having very less influence from greater Assamese community. Whatever changes occurred was because of lack of resources and change of time and not because of any other threat. They had strong family values. Women in general were active in different home, farm and allied activities barring exceptions of educated and economically higher status women. All the ladies preferred home woven attires (wrapper for lower half and top for upper body and a scarf). They wove by hand in looms and made variations in their traditional dresses through use of colours and designs/motifs. Women had played special roles in various day-to-day activities and in religious rituals for generations and this still continue.

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