

An Ethnolinguistic Study of Sonowal Kachari

Jenny Merry Daimari

PhD, Centre for Endangered Languages and Mother Tongue Studies

University of Hyderabad

Abstract

This paper attempts to provide an ethnolinguistic profile of Sonowal Kachari, a language once spoken in Assam. The Sonowal Kachari belongs to the Mongoloid race of people. They are predominantly found in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Goalpara and Jorhat districts of Upper Assam. The total population of the area under the jurisdiction of Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council, which comprises of 450 villages according to Survey of India Census Report, 2011 is about 3,12,656. The Sonowals share close affinity with the Boros and Dimasas in terms of religion, deities and clan structure. The arrival of the Tai Ahoms and the subsequent battles and power struggles with the Kacharis weakened the social structure of the Sonowals. As a result, the Sonowals along with other tribes most probably had to learn Assamese after the Ahom king made it the official court language during their rule. Though Assamese was primarily used as the lingua franca of the Ahom kingdom, later it engulfed the local languages and gradually became the mother tongue of the Sonowals.

The present paper would examine the historical evolution of Sonowal Kachari's identity as well as about their language and culture. The study is based on the fieldwork conducted in the districts of Sivasagar, Dhemaji and Tinsukia districts of Assam. Data has been collected through interviews, questionnaire, participant observation as well as relevant literature of this area.

Keywords: ethnolinguistic, Sonowal Kachari, historical evolution, Assam.

Introduction

Ethnolinguistics is a discipline of linguistic anthropology that scrutinize the bond between cultures/ subculture of people possessing distinct strategy of lifestyle in a coterie including their social dealings and conversations. It can be said as an account or description of customs, heritage of people and the events in which they take part with regards to their language and how they confabulate with one another. Ethnolinguistics endeavours to elucidate the latent design and compositions of cultural idiosyncrasies (for example like, language, folklore, rituals, gender, roles, etc), particularly with respect to their historical development processes, their resemblances, as well as their variations. Ethnolinguistics can also be termed as ‘cultural linguistics’ as it is an amalgamation of ‘ethnology’ and ‘linguistics.’ It includes the cultural features through which the community spend their life and which are discernable from the other communities.

The present paper, as the name suggest “Ethnolinguistic Profile of Sonowal Kachari,” presents the ethnolinguistic profile of the Sonowal Kachari tribe of Assam. The Sonowal Kacharis belong to the Mongoloid race of people. The study is based on the fieldwork conducted in the districts of Sivasagar, Dhemaji and Tinsukia districts of Assam. They have completely lost their language and presently they speak Assamese.

Geographical location

They are predominantly found in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Golaghat and Jorhat of Upper Assam.

Theories about Sonowal Kachari origin

Although the exact reason as to when, how and why this group of people got the name Sonowal is difficult to trace out, different scholars have given different views regarding the origin of the term Sonowal over the period of time. As quoted in Kachari (2011: 5) according to Waddel, “The Sonowal or Sodial are mostly gold washer in the Lakhimpur District in Upper Assam.” However, this theory is rejected by most of the Sonowals on the ground that no folk tales or songs of the Sonowal Kachari speak of this profession. Whereas some other scholars speculated that they were the same group of Kachari people such as Dimasa, Boro, but later came to be known by different names due to geographical separation, which eventually led to developing different cultures. According to some other scholars, because

they were settlers near the river Subansiri, they were known as Sonowal. In his edition of *Kachari Buranji* (1936), Bhuyan has mentioned about the Sonowals in the following way:

“By establishing their kingdom in the region of Sadiya, the Kacharis were ruling the region with great power. The boundaries of their kingdom extended to Sadiya in the east, Dikhowmukh in the west and Kinduguri in the south. The residents of this kingdom were called as Sadiyal or Halali Kachari, of which *ha* means ‘land’ and *lali* means ‘bright’ i.e. country of bright land. These group of Sadiyal Kachari later came to be known as Sonowal Kachari.”

According to one folktale prevalent among the Sonowal Kacharis regarding the origin of the term ‘Sonowal’ is that those Kacharis who offered *xun* (gold) for conversion to Vaishnava and became the disciples of Keshav Dev, one Aoniata Gosain, were regarded as Sonowal Kacharis.

A folklore of the Sonowal Kacharis state that:

“Having being blessed by the ‘Khiring Raja,’ the god worshipped by the Sonowal Kacharis, the wife of a Sonowal Kachari named Manik gave birth to a cat. The cat was kept in a mustard loaded bamboo basket. After a month the cat turned into a golden cat. On having received this heavenly gift from ‘Khiring Raja,’ Manik could become the king of Halali.”

It is said that because Manik could become the king of Halali kingdom by receiving the heavenly gift (golden cat) from Khiring Raja, those group of people who followed Manik came to be known as Sonowal Kachari.

The Sonowals share close affinity with the Boros and Dimasas in terms of religion, deities and clan structure. The arrival of the Tai Ahoms and the subsequent battles and power struggles with the Kacharis weakened the social structure of the Sonowals. As a result, the Sonowals along with the other tribes most probably had to learn Assamese after the Ahom king made it the official court language during their rule. Through Assamese was used as the lingua franca of the Ahom kingdom, later it engulfed the local languages and gradually became the mother tongue of the Sonowals.

Ethnography

Division of society

According to *Haidang Geet*, the oldest folk song of the tribe, the family tree of the Sonowal Kachari includes seven major clan or *khels* which is divided into fourteen sub clans or *bongshas* and the *bongshas* are again sub- divided into 108 *hons* or *pariyals*.

The name of the seven *khels* are:

Ujani Kusia, Namoni Kusia, Amorabomia, Tipomia, Dhutial, Siripuria and Balikhitiari

These *khels* which are again divided into fourteen sub clans are:

Madanial, Manikial, Hogral, Muktal, Ezmal (Ehmal), Formal, Horu Hazual, Bor Hazual, Lothial, Chotial, Kumral, Bormal (Athuwai), Dongral and Dingial.

Also nine another called *Bongshas* have been found so far which can be said as being merged into the Sonowal Kachari either from Miri, Dofola, Bodo, Rabha, Dimasa, Naga, Shyam, or Ahom origin. These are:

Mukhral, Hukral, Dekral, Chungial, Chunial, Dhansirial, Hakual, Dhadumial and Dolongrial.

The above mentioned *Bongshas* are again subdivided into minimum four number of *Hons* or *Pariyals* which totals to a number of 108 *Hons* or *Pariyals*.

Settlement and housing patterns

Even prior to acquiring the name Sonowal, this group of Kacharis were residing in Upper Assam in Kandilya region of Sadiya. In Kachari language that kingdom was known as Halali. Books like ‘*Ahomor Din*’ (Days of Ahom), ‘*Kachari Buranji*’ (History of the Kacharis), ‘*Deodhai Asom Buranji*’ mentions the settlement of the Kacharis in the region of Sadiya. The boundary of the kingdom extended from Sadiya in the east, Dikhowmukh in the west to Kenduguri in the south. It is assumed that those group of Kacharis are the present day Sonowal Kacharis.

They live in a thatched house which are generally made of either cane or bamboo, or wood and mud. They either use reeds or paddy straw for thatching the roof, bamboo splits or cane for wall and wood or bamboo for pillar. They use a mixture of mud and cow dung for plastering the walls. However, now-a-days due to lack of these natural resources and the

recurring cost of repairing the houses and also modern living style has led them to build permanent houses of brick, cement, tin, iron, rod, etc. in villages also. The traditional houses are generally made facing towards the east, i.e. the main door of the house is always kept in the east direction. The house consists of three to four rooms each of which has a particular name. They used to have a fireplace which is the common place used by all the family members especially in the winter which they keep in a room near the kitchen. All eating and drinking activities starting from breakfast to dinner are in this room. They make a raised platform with bamboo above the fireplace, which is used for various purposes like drying fishes, keeping pieces of firewood, vegetables, etc. Usually a courtyard or an open space is found in front of the house. A granary in which paddy is stored is placed in east side of the house near the courtyard. Some people use to keep their domestic animals like pig, hen, goat, etc. under the raised platform of the granary. Some others build a cowshed in the southern side of the house. In the west side of the house they make coop- cum- pen for hen, duck, and goat. Some families rear pigs by making pigsty a little far away from their houses. Most of the Sonowal Kachari houses are demarcated by bamboo splits. One of the distinctiveness of Sonowal Kachari houses is that in the villages, nearest houses are connected with each other by small gateway which are meant for household uses only.

The granary of the Sonowal Kachari is worth mentioning. The whole year's production of rice is stored in the granary. The granary is made of bamboo and is plastered with a mixture of cow dung and mud. The granary is respectably termed as *Lakhimi ghar* (good fortune house) by them. After harvesting, the bundle of paddy is brought and kept in the granary. The size of the granary depends upon the quantity of the land the owner possesses.

Occupation

The Sonowal Kacharis are mainly cultivators. According to Nandeswar Kachari, approximately 90% of the total population lives on cultivation and only 10% are engaged in other jobs. Their main source of livelihood is cultivation of paddy. Apart from paddy cultivation, they grow various type of herbs and shrubs, plants and trees. Planting of bamboos and betel- nut tree, banana are common in the campus of every house of the community. Agricultural produce is the main source of their economic life. Both men and women take part in the agricultural works. Ploughing is done by men with a wooden plough yoked to a pair of bullock. However, in modern times, using of tractors and power tillers are to be seen. Ploughing is usually done in the month of April- July. Planting of crops is done by the women. Harvesting is generally done in the month of November to December. Both men and women takes part in the harvesting of crop.

Animal husbandry is an integral part of their lives. They rear animals and birds like: cow, dog, goat, ox, pig, pigeon, hen, swan, duck, etc. Most of the Sonowal Kachari women are good weavers. They weave their own clothes in their handlooms. Domestication of '*eri*' and '*silk*' worm can be seen widely practiced among them. Also, the Sonowal Kachari men are expert in various handicraft works. They are skilled in making various types of equipment out of bamboo, cane and wood like, different types of basket, some fishing equipments, various types of agricultural tools, etc. They are also very skilled in constructing houses with the various naturally available materials, such as bamboo, hay, straw, etc.



Photo1: Sonowal Kachari woman weaving cloth

(Source: Photo taken during fieldwork)

Religion, Belief System and Rituals

They were originally the followers of Lord Shiva whom they address as *khiring* or *khiring bathow*. They have a specific place of worship or *shal* for worshipping Lord Shiva or *khiring khiring bathow* known as *bathow mandir* or *bathow shal*. They also worship several other gods and goddesses like: *phul konwar*, *luhit konwar*, *kechaikhatee*, *lokhimi*, *tamreswaree*, *burdha- burdhi*, *balia baba*, etc. They also worship their religious teacher *Guru Gojai*. They believe in their dead forefathers as the protector of their house and family, and practice to worship them in every religious festivals or occasions. With the introduction and advent of *New Vaishnavism* in Assam, most of the people have become follower of it and the population now is predominantly *Vaishnavism*. Even though the Sonowal Kacharis have accepted Vaishnavism, which is completely against the worship of any gods and goddesses with or without sacrifice, yet they still continue to hold sacrificial worship to their traditional deities. They have traditional beliefs about some animals, birds and trees which they worship

for the welfare of the society. As a result, now- a- days they practice both Vaishnavism and their traditional rituals, both simultaneously.

There are a number of taboos and belief systems prevalent among the Sonowal Kachari community. Some of them are, prohibition of eating arum plants after *baitho puja* but to take young banana plant instead. Also, prohibition of cutting bamboo on certain days like Tuesday and Saturday. It is also worth mentioning that they never give paddy and rice to others on Thursday. It is believed that if they do so, the family who gives the rice or paddy on that particular day will become poor.

They also perform certain rituals pertaining to puberty of the girl child of the family in which only women are allowed to attain. They also has rituals which they perform at the time of birth of a child and also at the time of death of a person.



Photo2: Baitho Mandir at Dhadum Gao, Dhola, Tinsukia district

(Source: Photo taken during fieldwork)

Family and Marriage

Family: The Sonowal Kachari is a patriarchal family where the father is the head of the family and the inheritance of property is through male line. Generally among the Sonowal Kachari society, joint family is more prevalent, however nuclear family too exist. Every family of the tribe bears a particular name which they call as *hos*. And on the basis of *hos* they are grouped into a one of the fourteen clans. The fourteen clans are made up of four to ten different *hos* which they believe are descendent of the same ancestors.

Marriage: Monogamy or marrying of single wife/ husband is the common practice prevalent in the Sonowal Kachari society. However, widow/ widower remarriage is permitted in the society. Marriage among the cousins either from the side of mother or father is strictly prohibited among the Sonowal Kacharis. Both love marriage and arrange marriage is common among the society. However, marriage among the member of the same '*hos*' is strictly prohibited as they are believed to be related to one another through blood ties and if anyone gets married among the same '*hos*' they are excommunicated from the society.

Food, Dress and Physical Appearance

Food habit: The main food of the Sonowal Kacharis is rice. They use to have some of their indigenous herbs and shrubs grown in their garden along with different kinds of vegetables, which they use as their special food items. They also make cake out of rice flour, which is one of their favorite. Sonowal Kacharis are basically non- vegetarians. They love eating non-veg. items. Some of their favorite non- veg. food are pork, duck, chicken, pigeon, mutton, fish etc. They are also fond of eating bamboo shoots and silk caterpillars. Rice beer is one of their favorite drinks. Almost all the families prepare rice beer in their homes. They also have the tradition of putting sticky rice in the tender bamboo and burning it in a hay to get it cook which they call as '*suṇa pitha.*' The Sonowal Kacharis are very fond of eating '*suṇa pitha*' which is usually made in the month of January- February. They are also very fond of eating

betel- nut after every meal and they also have the tradition of offering betel- nut to welcome guests.

Dress and ornaments: The traditional dress of the Sonowal Kachari women includes the '*mekhela*,' a type of lower garment worn around the waist, but the elderly women wear it on their chest above the blouse and then they wrap a cloth on their waist, which is of below knee length known as '*ekhetiya*.' They use to put a '*gamusha*,' their traditional towel on their head which is called as '*tokaiya*.' The traditional cloth of male includes '*dhuti*,' a long white cloth on their waist and '*kamij*' or shirt on their body; they also put on '*gamusha*,' the traditional towel on their shoulders during the festivals and participation in other rituals. '*Bor kapur*,' which is made of eri yarn, '*cheleng kapur*' which is also made of eri yarn, and '*mugar mekhela- chador*' are some of their traditional garments. '*Bor kapur*' is a very long and broad cloth made of eri yarn which is usually used in bed in the winter season. '*Cheleng kapur*' is also used in the winters but these are for attire.



Photo 3: Sonowal Kachari women (Source: Photo taken during fieldwork)

Physical appearance: The Sonowal Kachari belongs to the Mongoloid racial group. Their skin colour is yellowish brown, they have black thick straight hair. They have scanty hair in

their body and face. Their face is broad and flat with prominent cheek bone. Their eyes are obliquely set with narrow slit opening and brown in colour.

Festivals

The Sonowal Kacharis, like all the other ethnic groups of Assam, observes the three bihu festivals; *kati bihu*, *magh bihu* and *bohag bihu*. Besides celebrating these three bihu festivals, one of the most significant traditions of them is worshipping *bathow* which they call as *khiring khiring baitho puja*. It is practiced in the temple, which they call as *bathou shal*, on the second Monday after the *Shivaratri* (it is the day for worshipping Lord Shiva by the other Hindus of India; which is generally practiced on a particular day in the month of February or March) each year. They generally perform their folk song and dance which is known as *Haidang Huchari* (performed by the males only) in these days. The rituals of *baitho puja* and the songs of *Haidang Huchari* reflect on their socio cultural life as well as on their origin and history. Some of these songs are also related to their belief about the creation of earth, sky and life by Lord Shiva.

Folk songs

The Sonowal Kacharis are exceedingly rich in folk music and folk literature. They have a good collection of folk songs in their community which are considered as the identity of their community. These folk songs are divided into *geet* and *naam* according to its characteristics and topic. The *geet* is sung by men, whereas *naam* is sung by the women. *Geet* includes:

1. *Haidang geet*
2. *Haidang husori geet*
3. *Bihu geet and ban geet*
4. *Bohua nrityar geet*

5. *Hogra nrityar geet*
6. *Phulkuwor- manikuworor geet*
7. *Jonadoi gabharur geet*
8. *Khel dhemalir geet*
9. *Horgodeo pujar geet*
10. *Gorokhiya geet.*

Among the *naam* are:

1. *Ai naam*
2. *Lakhimi hobahor naam*
3. *Guhain naam*
4. *Apeswari naam*
5. *Siva- parbatir (geet) naam*
6. *Dhai naam or nisukuni (geet) naam*
7. *Biya naam*
8. *Taatir juna*
9. *Kopahar juna*

Among them, *Haidang geet* is one of the best folk songs. It the first composed folk song of the community. This song is performed by the aged folks during the *baitho puja* on the third day. “*Haidang geet* inherits the information, knowledge and ritualistic habits or as a whole the culture of the Sonowal Kachari and hence they become one of the most significant intangible heritage property of the Soaowal Kachari.” (Sonowal. P. 2011).

The *Haidang geet* is divided into eleven sections according to its characteristics and each section bears the explanation of different themes. The primitive people were curious to know the source of the universe and years after when they acquired some knowledge, they started

praying to a super power. This prayer words are *haidang de*. Here, *ha-* means ‘land’ or ‘universe,’ –*dang* means ‘creation’ and *de* means ‘song,’ which means ‘the hymn or prayer for the creation of the universe.’

Language

The Sonowal Kacharis have totally lost their ancestral language and all the speakers of the community speaks Assamese as their mother tongue.

Conclusion

Thus the present paper attempted to provide an ethnolinguistic profile of the Sonowal Kacharis. The paper examined the historical evolution of the Sonowal Kacharis identity as well as about their language and culture. The paper also attempted to show that according to the *Haidang Geet*, the family tree of the Sonowal Kachari includes seven major clans which is divided into fourteen sub- clans and these sub- clans are further divided into 108 *hons* or *pariyals*. The paper also showed that “granary” is one of the most essential part of every household, which they regard as their *lakhimi ghaar* i.e. good fortune, which is one of the unique feature of Sonowal Kacharis. However, sadly they have completely lost their language and presently speaks Assamese as their mother- tongue.

Bibliography

- Baruah, B. 2009. *Sonowal Kachari Samajar Bibyaharik Sabdha Sangrah*. Dass Press: Calcutta.
- Blommaert, J. 2009. Ethnography and Democracy: Hymes’ Political Theory of Language. *Text and Talk*. 29(3): 257-276.
- Bloomfield, L. 1933. *Language*. New York: Holt.

Borah, B. et al. 2013. *Gagan Chandra Sonowal Rachana Sambhar*. Dibrugarh: Dibru Offset Press.

Crystal, D. 1987. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Handique, N.B. 2014. *Sonowal Kachari Lokasanskriti*. Dhemaji: Kiran Prakashan.

Kachari, N. 2011. *Sonowal Kachari Samaj- Sanskriti aru Bhasar Parishay*. Moranhat: Pahi Offset Press.

Muriel, S.T. 1989. *The Ethnography of Communication: An Introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Limited.