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A Changing Cultural Glimpse of Rais Community in Sikkim

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Abstract

This paper provides an opportunity to consider the cultural aspects of Rai community in Sikkim. Rais are not a single community but rather a collection of clans which exhibit different culture within themselves. They are Animist and Naturist within a Hindu fold. However, they are getting influenced by the culture of different States on one hand and religious conversion on the other. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to explore the changing cultural patterns and how the society addresses their newly emerging cultural values according to social structure in their time frame. The Constructivists approach of G.H. Mead and Emile Durkheim will be employed to understand the various institutions like Family, Marriage, Religion and occupational structure that underwent change due to modernization and diffusion of other cultures.

Keywords: Samkhalung, animists, mangpa, enculturation, sorarate, levirate, patriarchy, patrilocal and patrilineal.

Introduction

The Constructivist approach to culture, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann,[1] and Emile Durkheim has been employed to gain the Subjective understand about the Rais community of Sikkim. They emphasized that human being creates system of meaning and ideologies that they then experienced as "objective" and when the social roles are made available to other members of society to enter into and play out, the reciprocal interactions are said to be institutionalized. Emile Durkheim's approach was employed to understand the various institutions like Family, Marriage, Religion and occupational structure underdone change due to modernization and diffusions of others cultures.

Literature Review

The traditional homeland of Rai extends across Solukhumbu, Okhaldunga in Nepal. Rais are also known as Khambu because traditionally they used to live in Khambuan region of Nepal. The "Rai" is a title given by the King Prithvi Narayan Shah to those who were chiefs ruling small estates until the political unification of Nepal in 1769 (Hermanns, 1954).

He appointed local 'Rai' or 'chief' to act as intermediaries between them and the state. Rais are not a single tribe but rather a collection of tribes, exhibiting among themselves difference in language, culture and social organization although they do share a common culture base and have similar social structure. The Rais do not follow any religion in the strict sense of

[1] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote a book "The Construction of Reality". This argued that society is created by human interaction, which they called habitualization.

term. They are "animist" and nature worshippers. In fact, it is not religion in the straight sense of term, because there is no concept of God. The main festivals of Rais are Sakewa and Sakewa. These festivals are mainly performed for good rain, sunshine, good harvest and for good health, peace and prosperity for all the villagers. Rais engages Mangpa[2] (Rais Priest) in their religious rites (Dougal, 1979).

The Mangpa plays an important role in their entire life circles, sickness of a person is closely associated with ancestors' spirits. Rais believed that they fall sick because their ancestors were displeased. The Mangpa perform religious rites for the well being of the family members and also prophesy the future happenings for the family and the society and also perform the last rite of the deceased individuals, and perform soul journeys and handover the souls of the deceased person to the ancestors and also performs minor religious rites and cures the sick. He chants the spell to ward off the affected evil spirits or the diseases of the sick person and use wild herbs as medicines. The main shrine of Rai is called Samkhalung[3] every item produced from the land has to be ceremoniously offered to the ancestors at Samkhalung. Only after such offering one is entitled to eat and drink the items (Rai, 2005).

Geographically Rais are spread in the areas of North East India including Assam, Orissa, Nepal, Sikkim and Burma and also in different parts of the North West India. The Rai people are divided into many different sub-groups such as - Bantawa, Chamling, Sampang, Dumi, Jerung, Kulung,

[2] Mangpas means Rais communities Religious Priest called shamans.

[3] Samkhalung (sacred kitchen) having three stones where all the important religious rites are conducted. It is the peculiar and symbolic identification among them. The believed that all soul of dead Raipas and Raimas (forefather and foremother ancestors) dwell here, where the ancestors are worshipped. Only clan members are allowed to go near it.

Khaling, Lohorung, Mewahang, Rakhali, Thulung, Tamla, Tilung, Wambule, Yakkha and Yamphu. Sumnima-Paruhang is worshipped as primordial parents. They are divided into many different sub-groups. Hunting, fishing, weaving, gathering of wild fruits, agriculture, animal husbandry, army and tea plantation were the main traditional occupation. They have twenty three different dialects of which Bantawa dialect has been officially agreed as a common official Kirat Khambu Rai language (Singh, 1990).

Concept of Culture

According to E.B. Tylor, "Culture is defined as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." MacIver and Page, "Culture is the expression of our nature in our modes of living and our thinking, intercourse, in our literature, in religion, in recreation, and enjoyment. Malinowski, "Culture is handiwork of man and the medium through which he achieves his ends. Culture has two components: material and non-material culture. Material culture is similar to civilization, which consists of all the physical objects or artifacts of human beings create like clothing, schools, factories, cities, books etc. Non-material culture on the other hand consists of more abstract elements like language, values, beliefs, family, and patterns, political system etc. As a scientific term, culture refers to all the features of a society's ways of life: e.g. modes of productions, routine habits, food preferences, the architecture of houses and public building, the layout of fields and farms; and systems of education, government, law, etc. It is through the socialization process that a person acquires a cultural knowledge. In anthropology, this process is called enculturation.

Objective of the Research

i) To study the changing cultural values in the social structure in contemporary setting (family, marriage, kinship, occupational structure and religious institution among Rais community).

ii) To explore the impact of religious changes (conversion) among the Rais of Sikkim.

Identification of Research Problem

A lot of study has been done on the Rais of Sikkim focussing on their culture and I felt that there is a lot of gap because there is no authentic work when it comes to analyze the culture and the identity of Rai community. Therefore I propose to study the cultures in contemporary settings.

Methodology and Area of Research

Methodology is a procedure for obtaining knowledge based on empirical observation and logical reasoning. Methodology is logic of scientific investigation. It means description, explanation and justification of methodology themselves (Ram, 2003). The study was undertaken at Chemchey village which is 19 kms away from Namchi Bazaar and Neez Goan which is 20 kms away from the Jorthang Bazaar in South Sikkim. This village had the maximum Rais population and this was considered an ideal choice for providing homogeneous culture settings. Total 150 samples are collected for research. Both Qualitative and Quantitative method, open and close ended questionnaire, and Participant observation were employed to understand the meaning of actions, defining situations and the process that responded construct the situation through their interaction process, and for seeking additional information Interview method was used because the information received

from the respondents provides deep insights regarding their age-old rituals, values and practices in their society.

Findings and Discussion

1. Changing Cultural Patterns and Societies' Response Towards It: Field View

Many sociologists have defined social change as inevitable. Modernizations helps in bringing the changes in human interactions and relationships that transform culture and social institutions. It involves alteration of the social order of a society and changes in all areas of human thought and activity. The cultural change among Rais community of Sikkim can be observed in terms of change in religious values, attitudes, ideas, beliefs of individuals and is the result of multi-factorial process like spread of education, process of urbanization, occupational mobility and frequent contact with other native cultural groups.

As Constructivists (Durkheim and Mead) strongly believed that society and cultural are interconnected and interrelated thus, any change in the culture values and beliefs bring a corresponding change in the whole social order in a society. In this connection the traditional Rais community was based on joint family structure sharing joint property, common kitchen, common worship, close blood ties and absolute power of the head of the family. The Rai families are Patriarchal, Patrilocal and Patrilineal in nature.[4] But with the modernization[5] joint

[4] Patriarchy system is a system in which the father or a elder male has absolute authority over the family. Patrilineal is a system in which children trace their decent from their father line and patrilocal residence is structured by a rule that a man remains in his father's house and brings his wife to live his family after marriage.

[5] Modernization in sociology defines the transformation from a traditional, rural to modern, urban and advanced society. It may include high-speed computer, modern outlook, rational society, use of modern technology.

family system is gradually disintegrating, as earlier rural joint family was the unit of both production and consumption. But with modern economic system the family no longer functions as a unit of production. Nowadays, Rais community prefers nuclear family rather than joint family and one of the major reasons for the disintegration of joint family was the attitude of the older generation imposing their views and thoughts on the younger generation giving rise to feeling of discontentment and unhappiness. Living under same roof does not have personal space. Thus, the nuclear family will give an opportunity to become positive liberal to become more responsible members of the society. As far as intrapersonal relation is concerned avoidance relationships are maintained between mother-in-law and son-in-law, daughter-in-law and father-in-law, sister-in-law and elder-brother-in-law. A free relationship exists between younger sisters-in-law and younger brother-in-law, grandparents and grandchildren. Boys are still considered as economic assets and a lot of parental aspirations rest on them.

Two main forms of kinships[6] are found, firstly, Relationship based on blood relationships; secondly, Relationships created by the bond of marriages. Kinship behavior varies based on the nature of the kin. For instance, father, mother, in-laws uncle and aunt are highly respected but relationships with Sali-bhena are in joking relation among Rais culture. As slowly due to occupational mobility, out migration of people for higher educational purpose, emergence of nuclear families resulting to the dissolving of kinship ties, the new direction of socialization process children's, change in terms of mate selection, freedom of choices, change in the process of rituals celebrations has also been affected by the secularization found in these villages.

[6] Kinship is the human relationships and is based on the ties of blood, marriage or adoption.

Marriage is an important social institution. It is the relationship, which is socially approved by the society though sanctioned by custom and law. Traditionally, Chori Biha,[7] arranged marriage, Zari Biha or marriage by paying penalty[8] was a common phenomenon among Rais community of Sikkim. But nowadays such marriages is gradually being replaced by the love marriage in which the concerned boy and girl spend some time to know each other then they can either decide to marry or not depending on how far the two parties like or dislike each other.

There is no dowry system among Rais community. Traditional marriage systems like Sororate and Levirate marriage[9] among Rais community has been replaced by modern love or elopement forms of marriage but marriage with outside caste (Scheduled Caste) is strictly prohibited as since ages, ancestors had made the system rigid, violators can be ostracized by the family and community as well. But nowadays factors like educational development, involvement of women in economic activities outside household and technological development (mobile, Facebook, computer etc.) has brought several new challenges to the family and other institutions as well.

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[7] Chori Biha means when a man takes a women away from her home secretly without informing her parents, is called theft marriage. In this case the man may like the women all of a sudden, which the woman may not be noticing. All of a sudden the man wishes to marry her when he meets her on some occasion or gathering like fairs and market place.

[8] Zari Biha is a process of taking the wife of another man in her consent for the purpose of marriage; in such case certain amount of cash is paid as a penalty by the women's new husband to the earlier one.

[9] Sororate marriage is a type of marriage in which a husband engages in marriage with the sister of his wife after the death of his wife. Whereas Levirate marriage is a type of marriage in which the brother of a deceased man is obligated to marry his brother's widow.

The Rais followed the traditional ways of economic system which was based on the customs, and time to time honor beliefs. They follow subsistence economy by using traditional tools, based on rain water harvesting and produce for their own consumption. But now their agro-based production has reached the market as a result of advancement in transportation facilities, the Rais of Sikkim supply their produce at the local and regional levels.

The villagers derive their major source of income from agriculture. Labour in both the surveyed villages was classified into three categories – household labour, wage labour and exchanged labour. The school going children participate in less laborious work like weeding, plucking and transplanting during their holidays. Seasonally, wage labour is employed even from outside their family and other communities.

2. Religion and Conversion

As Constructivist (Luckmann, Mead and Durkheim) said that human being is capable of producing reality. People construct reality through the process of Externalization, Objectification and Socialization. Individuals in a society can adapt the new culture and adaptation is the dynamic process by which individuals socialize them to unfamiliar and new emerging cultural attributes in the existing social structures of a society. This process is possible through Enculturation,[10] Acculturation[11] and finally Assimilation.[12] In this process the dominant cultural traits get transformed

[10] Enculturation is the process by which the individual learns the traditional content of a culture and assimilate its practices and values.

[11] Acculturation has different meaning in this context refer to replacement of the traits of one culture with those of other which refer to adaptation of a different culture by an individual.

[12] Assimilation is the process whereby individuals of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture of a society.

due to the frequent interaction and assimilation of the new culture. New cultural embrace resulted in social change and institutional differentiation. As societies grow, more scientific tendency such as urbanization, increase in mobility, caste free occupational opportunities are created in towns that lead to the creation of new patterns of culture, this process more over to enhance the society's adoptive capacity to accomplished task necessary for its survival. Originally the Raìs of Sikkim were neither Hindu nor Buddhist. They follow the religion of Animism[13] and are nature worshippers. Shamanism and Samkhalung are the oldest religion among Rais. Earlier Shamans (priest) enjoyed high social status, were respected and considered to be the healer and a connector between God and human beings, but now they no longer obtain similar high status like before because today people have become more aware of the contemporary needs of the society and are more career-oriented, as their economic compulsion compel them to work outside.

The present Rais culture, religion and rituals have undergone several changes such as meat and blood offering to the Samkhalung which were central element in the earlier rituals have now been substituted by fruits and flowers. Earlier the deities were pleased by offering of animal sacrifices and alcohol but now offering of blood and alcoholic beverages to the deities are avoided, because Rais consider that pouring of animal blood to the altar is the most polluted and unholy practice. Therefore, there is a massive paradigm shift in the traditional knowledge and practices. Such changes brought about many drawbacks in the age-old practices that initially gave meaning and identity to their culture. These changes are

[13] Religion of animist, the ancestor worshippers who believed that the sole exist even after the death and this soul need to be protecting in the hearth (three erect stone Samkhalung).

also grounded in financial burden for many of the household, hence economic perspective has a vital function. This is one of the reasons why the culture is changing.

Rais of Chemchey village and Neez Goan were converted into three different faiths, they are-

i) The Rais who have converted to heavenly path religion and Christianity, they both stopped practicing traditional Rais Shamanist culture and they have shifted their faith from Shamanisms to self healer.

ii) The Rais who still follow Hinduism and Shamanisms, but do not prefer animal sacrifices to the Samkhalung instead they offer fruits and milk.

The underlying reason for their conversion to Christianity was for the sake of avoiding illness and to escape from the practice of untouchablity which has driven the stronghold of it from traditional Hinduisms and in Christianity there is no such notion of untouchablity, purity and pollutions. Rais rituals such as birth, marriages, funerals and others minor religious rites are very expensive which cause family to be in debt. Therefore, because of the economic considerations majority had converted to other religion. Converted Rais had completely stopped participating in traditional Rais culture leading to a clear separation from the naturist Rai and Hindu Rai but these religious boundaries were socially constructed through the process of assimilation and enculturation of the new cultural values and practices, now it has become their normal lifestyles. Thus this is the process of construction and reconstruction of their identity and culture. But many of the non-converted elderly respondents still do follow the traditional Rais cultures and still believe in Shamanism. This is how they are constructing and giving meaning for their

existence and newly emerging culture and religion. Thus, Rais community is adjusting or existing between the tradition and modernity.

Berry (1992) and Redfield et. al (1936) have demonstrated that life's goal is to adjust to varying degrees to our surrounding to overcome struggle and change oneself. They believed that every individual have the capacity to adopt new environmental challenges and can construct the social meanings for the human survival. When it comes to the Rais community of Sikkim, they are dwindling between the phases of change in their age-old cultural practices and the new ongoing cultural practices in society. The Rais of Chemchey village and Neez Goan have experienced the cultural fusion between the modern and traditional ethics in relation to joint and nuclear family systems, changing marriage values like intra-caste marriages, love marriage, process of selection of mates in connection with modernity.

Emile Durkheim identified economic growth such as increase in population, urbanization, and industrialization, advancement in science and technology which results in dissimilarity of individual in the society which is the important factor for social change. The solidarity of traditional society was based on common consciousness, likenesses, and homogenousness mentally and morally. Such common set of norms, values and morality which guide and control individual behavior. As the society developed, the growing development of the division of the labour brings change in the societies from mechanical to organic solidarity which develops out of difference rather than likeness as a result their mental and moral similarity will disappear.

As Margaret Mead provides the insights of the relationship

between personality and culture.[14] Culture is so interconnected and interdependent; culture has the power to easily influence the majority, and socialization pattern which in turn shapes individual personality because distinctive socialization practices in different societies and culture. Each community has a unique culture and history of its own. Modern societies are dominated by rational ethics which replaced the traditional ethics, the Rai community with the increasing institutional differences we find the various changes such as the caste exogamy marriage, change in family structure, weakening of kinship bonds. Therefore, such change is not regarded as something desirable but it is a condition for the existence of the society which maintained group solidarity.

Similarly, traditional kinship, clan based society transformed into modern cultural assimilated society. Modernization has led to the cultural gap between traditional and modern societies, though it has enhanced human standards in many areas like medical facilities, growth of smart town and cities, education imparting scientific and rational thinking, it has improved the quality of life of the people.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to study the changing cultural patterns of Rais community of Sikkim because culture is the important factor that shapes the ways of thinking, acting and interaction among the individuals and live in a general. Based on the field research it can be concluded that there are multiple

[14] Margaret Mead (December 16, 1901-November 15, 1978) was an American cultural Anthropologist who featured frequently as an author and speaker.

Cultural included share values belief and norms of a specific group of people, therefore culture influence the manner we learn, live and behave as culture is an important shaper of individual personality.

cultural and behavioural modifications found among the Rais community of Sikkim.

The impression drawn was, with urbanization, level of educational development, changing role of women, emergence of nuclear family has given new social structures (family, marriage, economy, religious beliefs) to Rais community of Sikkim. Field work shows that older generations are less influenced by modernization and religious conversion as they wanted to preserve their old customs for generations to come. Education plays an important role where there is a move from ascribed status to achieved status. Gradually modernization which provides platform that gives way to better occupation, good living condition and finally leading to change of traditional norms and values of a society. Such change is not regarded as something desirable but it is a condition for the existence of the society which maintained group solidarity.

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