

Cultural Changes in the Meche Ethnic Group of Jhapa District, Nepal

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ABSTRACT: Meche community of Jhapa district is classified as an endangered ethnic group of Nepal with a total population of 4867. They are called as Bodo tribe in Assam province of India. The study is based on field survey of Dhajjan and Jalthal area of Jhapa district as well as literature review related to Meche people. They are influenced by Hindu religion and worship the God Shiva, Goddess Parvati, etc. The Meche people believed, the universe is inhabited by numerous invisible supernatural beings and powers which always influenced their daily activities. They worship house, celestial bodies (sky), forests, rivers, lands, birds and animals considering as abodes of supernatural beings and powers. Traditionally they worshipped by sacrificing animals but nowadays many households offer fruits, betel leaves, sweets instead of animals sacrificing. Baishagu Bachchhar and Chhorkhela are the main festivals of Meches. Nowadays, their festivals have been influenced by their Hindu neighbours. Makhalgiri is their traditional political institution. Several cultural changes have been observed in their rituals, festivals, and life cycle ceremonies as well as dresses and food habit. These have been discussed in the present paper.

INTRODUCTION

Nepal is a multiethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-cultural country which houses 26,494,504 population of 125 caste/ethnic groups and 123 languages (CBS, 2012). The country entered into a new state structure the Federal Democratic Republic with the promulgation of new Constitution in September 2015. Nepal has legally identified 59 indigenous nationalities, referred to as *Adivasi Janjati* (ethnic groups) based on their mother language and traditional customs (HMG/N, 2002). The National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) formed in 2006, defined the ethnic groups, as those having their own mother tongue and traditional culture and yet do not fall under the conventional fourfold *Varna* of Hindu. NFDIN classified the ethnic groups into 5 categories, *i.e.*

endangered, highly marginalized, marginalized, disadvantaged and advantaged groups. Meche is considered as one of the endangered groups of *Adivasi Janjati*, who live in Jhapa District of the eastern Nepal. The total population of Meche in Nepal is 4076. Among them, the population of male is 1876 and female is 2200 (Population Census Report, 2011). The Meche community occupies 0.55 percent in the total population (688109) of Jhapa (Population Census Report, 2011).

Meche also lived in India, mainly in the Dooars region of West Bengal, Dimapur, Nagaland and Assam, where they are commonly known as Bodo tribe. They speak mainly the Bodo language, a Tibeto-Burman dialect, has been influenced by the Indo-European Assamese language (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mech_tribe). The name Meche is supposed to be derived from the Mechi River that flows at the Terai region of eastern Indo-Nepal border.

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It is believed that some ancestors of these people had resided in the region adjoining the Mechi River and subsequently they were named as Meche or Mech, however, there are different views regarding their name with Mechi river. These are straight forward people with black complexion, medium sized body, sharp eyes, flat nose, sparse facial hair and thick lips. Majority of Meches lived in Jhapa district and some populations are also reported from Morang, Sunsari and Saptari districts (Machhari, 2060 BS).

There are different opinions about the distribution and origin of Meche. Campbell (1839) wrote that the Meche's settlement was spread from Brahmaputra river in Assam India to Kankai River in Nepal. Hodgson (1880) described that Meches have come from Morang, a country of Kichoks in Nepal. Sanyal (1973) narrated a mythical story about the origin of Mech people. Mech and Limbu used to live together in the past (Sanyal, 1973). They were driven out from the north-eastern corner of India, Burma and Tibet. They fled along the foot of the Himalayas and came to the low lands of the present Darjeeling district in the midst of thick forests. The Limbus did not want to stay back there. They started towards the hills making the way by cutting trees. The Meches started a few days later. They tried to follow the track but lost the way and came upon the river Mechi between Darjeeling and Nepal. Some of them preferred to live on the banks of river Mechi. They called themselves Meches or Mech. It is believed that the Limbus of Nepal and the Meches of India belong to the same tribal group (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mech_tribe). In a past century ago, the Meches used to practice 'shifting (slash and burn) cultivation that is cutting and burning the forests and then sowing different seeds in each hole made by dibblers and sowers. They had no idea of cultivation with bullocks and the plough (Hodgson, 2001). In the later years, by the loss of forest area and strict government rule for forest protection, they adopted settled cultivation. Nowadays, they are mainly dependent on agriculture for their living. It is assumed that Meches communities were arrived before the Krishna's Gopala clan who later reigned the region. At present, the ancient community is in a state of endangered list of ethnic classification due to their low population (Diwas and Subedi, 2009). The government of Nepal provides some social security allowance for

these people.

Usually, they prepare a homemade wine (alcohol) for their own consumption and to sell at local markets, they also weaved cloths with the thread produced at home by a primitive handloom. The males usually make baskets, fish traps and other items out of bamboo. The Mech families are mostly joint or extended. The boys usually do not take a separate house after marriage. Separation is done by the head of the family according to necessity. Girls after marriage go to their husband's house. In a Mech family, only sons inherit father's property. Daughters, both married and unmarried do not have any right to the property. However, they may get support for maintenance. They have an egalitarian society without any class or caste system but maintain *gotras* or *septs*. They have five or seven principal *gotras* (septs) which are associated with the objects other than humans that might be the remnants of some form of totemism as probably practiced earlier. The most common *gotras* are — *Sampram-ari* or *Campram-ari* (the priestly class), *Narzin-ari*, (the warrior class), *Basumat-ari* (landlords and cultivators), *Moch-ari* and *Hajo-ari*. The suffix 'ari' means sept or *gotra* (Meche, 2068 BS). They worship any object possessing super-human power. They worship rivers (Mechi, Kankai), celestial bodies and the god of the forest (*Hagra Modoi*) for protection against carnivorous animals. They also worship *Manasha* (the snake goddess) and *Bathou*, which is represented by a *Euphorbia* plant or *sijo* plant. *Bathou* is worshipped in every Meche household by considering as an important god. Later on, they started worshipping several Vedic and Hindu gods like Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti, etc. too. The Meches have no written history of their own over centuries but managed to keep their customs, traditions, culture and language since many years, which have done by oral traditions in the form of storytelling, religious rituals, songs, dances and legends, etc. Now they are losing grips on them with changing times, modernization and globalization. Some of the reasons for these are: they are still poor, simple, ignorant, less educated with very little access to good housing, clean drinking water, health care and sanitation. The majority of Meches still live in mud or simple houses with leaking thatched roofs in the villages. Meches proud their traditional culture. However, the new generations do not fully follow their customs, traditions, culture and language as a result several cultural changes have been observed.

METHODOLOGY

Information about the cultural changes among the Meche people was taken from both primary and secondary sources. Primary information was taken from the field study conducted during 2014-2015. The Dhajjan and Jalthal villages were selected as study area. Interviews and discussions held with the senior and knowledgeable Meches including village headman (*Makhal*), priest (*Roja*), advisor of village head (*Phanthol*), school teachers, etc. The secondary information was taken from the published relevant literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religious Practices

Meche people have a strong faith on deities who worship house, celestial bodies (sky), forests, rivers, lands, birds and animals by considering as abodes of supernatural beings and powers. They considered that the principal abodes of deities are house (*Nonimodai*), village and surroundings (*Doinimodai*) and river (*Gaminimodai*). They believe Hindu religion and worship the God Shiva and Goddess Parvati and always try to appease them by sacrificing large number of animal pigs, ducks, chicken, pigeons, etc. They performed different kinds of rituals/ pujas, *Bathau* and *Khidai* pujas are major ones which celebrated as festivals. Every household constructs a *Bathau* (a worshipping place) in the north eastern side of courtyard where a *Seudi/Sijo* (*Euphorbia royaleana*) plant is planted which represents a God Shiva. Nowadays, some households, started to worship the Hindu sacred Tulsi plant (*Ocimumsp.*), particularly, if female is from Hilly Brahmin family. Every New Year Month they performed the *Bauthau* puja by sacrificing large number of animals but nowadays many households celebrate this puja in an interval of 4 years offering chickens, pigeons, fruits and betel leaves instead of pigs, goats sacrifice. The *Khidai puja* is another expensive puja, during this puja large number of relatives and friends are invited for a great feast with meat and alcohol for three to seven days. At present they performed the puja only one day and instead of animal sacrificing they offer fruits and sweets. There are many households who did not performed this puja since a several years due to

poverty. There was no records of change in their religion in the study site but some Meches have adopted the Christian religion (Diwas and Subedi, 2009). The uses of flowers, fruits and sweets to avoid the slaughtering of animals for offering to gods and goddesses during their rites and rituals is not only by the influences of neighbouring Hindus, they also do it due to their low economic status.

Festivals Celebration

Baishagu Bachchhar is a main festival, celebrated during the New Year (*Baishak*, the first month of Nepal) with a great joy by arranging a feast to relatives and friends. Traditionally it was celebrated in each household, but nowadays they decided to celebrate it in village-wise to reduce the expenses. All the Meche community of village assembled in a house of village head or in any suitable location to celebrate the festival, the expenses is also participatory (Siwakoti Olee, 2016). *Chhorkhela/Tihar* is another important festival of Meches, celebrated during Tihar festival, they celebrate by cleaning the surroundings, livestock and agricultural equipment, they also sacrificing pigs and worshipping the *Lakshi* (Goddess Laxmi). Dancing and singing with great joy is regular item in of the festival. They honoured the *Roja* (community priest) in the next day of *Chhorkhela* festival by presenting a pot of local beer with some money. Nowadays some of Meche households start to celebrate the festival by preparing *sel roti* (rice flour bread) and offering flowers garland and *tika* (*bhai tika*) to brothers as celebrated by their neighbours of hilly community. They also start to organize *Deusi Bhailo* (a special dance and sing played in Tihar). The money and food items collected during this program used to celebrate a feast in the *Makhal's* house. They also celebrate *Dasain* (adopted from hilly people) and clean the house, sacrificing the animals and wear the new clothes. They celebrate it from *Fulpati* to *Dashami* by worshipping Goddesses Durga, Kali and other deities, but they didn't put the *Dasain tika* in their forehead. In addition, they celebrate *Siruwa* (adopted from Rajbanshi ethnic group), Shivaratri, Ekadashi, etc., after influencing by other neighbouring Hindu communities culture. *Dhol parba* is also important festival of Meche, celebrated during *Falgun Purnima* as a holi festival.

Life Cycle Rituals

Birth Ceremony: Traditionally, Meches consult with *Roja* (priest) if any complication is seen to pregnant women, the exorcist (*Roja*) performs some rites to get rid from the evil spirits or witches. The *Roja* is considered himself as a messenger of God and also treats the patient with medicinal herbs along the rituals. He observes the divination for the delivery (*Khathi nai-nai*) by chanting the *mantras* on a glass of water or little oil, which is given to the pregnant woman to drink for easy delivery. In case of complication during delivery, the exorcist promises to offer something like *puja* after the safe delivery of the child (*Bakhal khacha-nai*) (Meche, 2015).

Traditionally, they never practice to carry a pregnant woman to hospital or health post for delivery. As a first ritual, they perform the *Gothomodai* ritual for the safe labor and healthy child and mother. When labor pain started they call the *Jathan khalamgra* (an experience woman of Meche community) and usually takes the women in *Nomâino* (a sacred house where Gods and Goddesses remained) where only limited women are allowed and start to treat her as per the advice of *Roja*, but nowadays the woman for delivery can remain in any comfortable place including hospital. Similarly, they started to take the woman in nearby health post or hospital to deliver the child but still prefer to take the advice of *Roja* before going to hospital. After the born of child, the umbilical cord is cutting out by using sharp bamboo strips, five bamboo blades are used for male child and seven for female child. The placenta is usually buried near the ladder of main house *Nomâino* in order to keep away the child from enemy or evil spirit. Traditionally a cock is sacrificed at the door of *Nomâino* in case of male child and a hen for the female child in the first day of child born and meat is given to mother, this ritual is known as *Sudimudi khacham-nai*, and *Dauduwari hathad-nai* (Meche, 2015). However, at present in many households the *Gothomodai*, *Sudimudi khacham-nai*, and *Dauduwari hathad-nai* rituals are not commonly practiced. The mother is taken special care until the umbilical cord of the child falls down, it falls out usually in three to seven days. When umbilical cord of child falls down then the mother goes to the well and takes bath then worships the deities and water

bodies to terminate the pollution period. An amulet is made and tied around the neck or waist of baby from the dried fallen umbilical cord/ naval which is believed that by doing so the evil spirits will not harm the child. During pollution period the new mother is prohibited to touch well, water-taps, vegetables, fruits from field and sacred items of the house. A ritual is performed to terminate the birth pollution, however, there is no any special ceremony for a name giving ritual. The name of child is based on various things such as day or month of birth, occupation of father, structure of child, etc. Nowadays, under the influence of neighbouring Hindus, they have started to give the Hindu names for their children such as Ram, Sita, Hari, Rita, etc. There is a practice of first hair cutting ritual of new baby which is performed by barber (*Chhebar*). Usually, it will take within a month, however, there is no fixed date for it. They provide some gift to the barber in the form of liquor, food, cloth, money, etc. Some of the Meche families also perform the first rice feeding ceremony by the influences of Hindu neighbours.

Marriage Ceremony: Meches practice tribe and clan endogamous marriage, however, they are very strict to marry with cross cousin and blood relatives. Marriage has been taken among the Meches of Nepal, they also practice to marry with Mech / Bodo tribe of India. Traditionally, they practiced to marry within their own community, however, nowadays, the inter-caste marriage with neighbouring Tarai and Hilly people is commonly practiced. The suitable marriage age is between 16- 25 years. They have a practice of bride price (*Madam thakha*), the amount of bride price was high and indefinite in the past but now they reduced the amount in an affordable level (up to Rs 125) to continue the culture to compensate the bride's parents for the loss of daughter service in their house. They usually practice the turmeric colored pieces of betel nut for the invitation to relatives and friends now they also started the invitation card.

There are eight different types of marriage system in Meches community of Nepal (Meche, 2015). The arranged marriage (*Sangnanai lainai haba*) is most accepted and regular form of marriage system which takes place by the consent of both concerned families. Traditionally, in arranged marriage, the groom does not go to the bride house to take her, on his behalf,

some relatives and friends go to bride's house with three jars of house brewed alcohol and sufficient numbers of areca nuts and betel leaves. The groom party spends one night in bride house where the marriage rituals performed and next day they will return with bride. Parents play the important role to negotiate, however, they takes the boy's consent first about prospective bride then initiate the process through the *Goida* (middle man). They start the marriage proposal (*Gongkhan*) by putting a coin in front of girl's house *Bathau*, if coin is not returned it is assumed that the proposal is accepted. In this type of marriage, a lot of formalities and money is involved. It takes about one week to complete the marriage rituals.

The love marriage (*Dan khathnai haba*) is going to popular among them at present which is less expensive too. If parents are not agreed then the boy and girl eloped and go to some relative house for stay until situation is normalized. In a normal situation, marriage will be performed. The forced marriage (*Bananai lainai haba*) was also practiced in Meche community. In this system a girl is forcefully brought by the boy and his parties to his house and marriage ritual will be performed later on. The consent of girl and her parents is not taken necessarily. Similarly, a Meche girl also enters forcefully into the boy's house without any consent of boy (*Khathson-nai haba*), and she stands in front of *Bathau* to declare herself as a wife of the concerned boy. The family also accepts these practices. Nowadays, forced marriage practice is not found which is replaced by love marriage. They have also adopted to put vermilion on forehead and wear a *pote mala* (a symbolic necklace of Hindu married women) around the neck as well as the groom goes to bride house to bring the bride. Traditionally, the bride goes to parent's house and has also a taboo to enters the *Nomaino* of parents' house only after one year of marriage, but at present they return the parents' house only after passing one to four weeks of marriage. The bride and groom also wear the sari, blouse, suit-pant, etc., instead of traditional dress *Dokhna thausi* (bride) and *Dhoti* (groom). Many household start to discard the hen and cock sacrificing during marriage ceremony. After bringing the bride in groom house a formal marriage rituals take place in *Bathau* alter in a shamanic manner by the *Roja*. Traditionally, it was compulsory to

sacrifice a pair of hen and cock (*Daujor hathad-nai*) during the occasion, now it is replaced by a pair of banana fruit. Nowadays, some Meches completed their marriage process within one to two days by the influences of Hindus.

Death Rituals: Traditionally, Meches bury the dead body, later on they also adopted the cremation system. In the past, very few people participated in funeral process as well as destroyed the deceased person's house considering as abode of *Gathaisa* (dead spirit) which causes misfortunes if they continue live there. Nowadays, due to lack of land and money they continue to remain the same house where the deceased person was lived but still they dispose all the goods and belonging of dead person at the cremation or burial grounds. They had a system of feeding the favorite foods on the name of deceased person at burial or cemented day which is started to avoid at present. The death pollution (*Thainai*) of Meche completed from 3 to 9 days. If a baby dies before teething it completed within 3 days and otherwise 5 to 9 days. When the *Abcha garmai* ritual is performed the mourners resume their normal life. They have no practice of an annual ceremony to pay the respect and commemorate the deceased. However, at present they started to observe the *Jib-chalan* rite adopted from neighbours Rajbanshi. Rajbanshi's *Dhami* are used to perform the rite.

Food and Dress

Meche people prefer to eat rice and vegetables, with green chilly and salt. They prefer pork, fish and home brewed rice wine. *Fefto* (rice cake), *vakka*, *ghonghi*, etc., are traditional food items but now the young generations prefer to eat fast food items. Similarly many Meche households avoid sacrificing animals they eat vegetables and food. *Kamijbuchla*, *Dhoti*, *Gaji*, *Linkhigan*, *Sakhapor* are traditional dress of men and *Dokhana*, *Shaw*, are traditional dress of women. They wear their traditional dresses mainly in wedding, festivals and rituals. Nowadays, many young people adopted pant, shirt, T-shirts, kameez and trousers by boys and kurta, salwar, sari, blouse by females.

Traditional Institution

Every Meche village has a traditional village

council which gives the decision on all important community matters, disputes and levies penalties against defaulters, who acts as a leader and keeper of traditional norms and values. The council is headed by *Makhal*, who is selected on the basis of comparatively wealthy and knowledge person. The *Makhal* is supported by *Roja and Phantol*. *Roja* is concerned with all religious rituals and ceremonies of the community. *Phantol* is assistant of *Roja* who helps the *Roja* in religious matters. The combination or association of the authorities is called *Makhalgiri*. A *Barkhichawa (messenger)* is selected to disseminate the information to the villagers of each and every works done by the *Makhalgiri*. The Meche people usually did not go to the contemporary government units to settle their social and communal issues, unless they think that they did not get proper justice from the village council, otherwise they fully obeyed and accepted the decision made by the *Makhalgiri*. However, the contemporary political system didn't recognize the traditional communal institution, hence, they need to go in present government institution for their needed document which reduces the values of their traditional institution. In addition, they also formed various social intuitions (*Meche Samaj Sibiyari Afat, Meche Mahila Uthan Sangh*) for strengthening their ethnic identity.

CONCLUSION

Meches are considered as endangered ethnic group of Nepal with unique cultural identity. They have no written history of their own over centuries but managed to keep their customs, traditions, culture and language since many years. However, now they are losing grips on them. They have a strong faith on deities and the principal abodes of deities are house (*Nonimodai*), village and surroundings (*Doinimodai*) and river (*Gaminimodai*). They believe on *Batha. uism*, worship the God *Shiva* and Goddess *Parvati* and are influenced by Hinduism. They celebrate the Hindu festivals in addition to their traditional festivals.

However, due to economic pressure they can't afford for the rituals for festivals, marriage. Many Meche people are adopted the rituals and festivals of neighbouring Hindus. The modernization and assimilation processes are also making a huge pressure for changing their traditions and culture. However, the tribal people never swallowed up by any cultural or religious adoption/incorporation.

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