

Religious Beliefs and Practices among the Meche Community of Eastern Tarai, Nepal

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ABSTRACT: Meche community lives in Jhapa district of eastern Nepal and considered as endangered ethnic group with a total population of 4867. The Meche and Bodo of Assam of India are considered as of same ethnic group. They have an egalitarian society without any class or caste system but maintain *gotras* or septs. They are followers of the Hindu religion and worship the God Shiva. The God Shiva is represented by a *Seudi* plant which is planted in the north eastern side of courtyard. The sacred plant is called *Bathau*, a representative of the Shiva and worship the *Bathau* in every household. The Meche people believe, the universe is inhabited by numerous invisible supernatural beings and powers which always influence 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 worship by sacrificing animals but nowadays many households offer fruits instead of animal sacrifice.

INTRODUCTION

Nepal is considered as an excellent repository for diverse caste/ethnic groups where more than 125 caste/ethnic groups of Mongolian, Australoid and Aryan stocks have been inhabited with about 123 mother languages (CBS, 2012). The country has recognized 59 ethnic groups as indigenous nationalities based on their mother languages and traditional customs under the recommendation of Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), a forum of the indigenous nationalities (HMG/N, 2002). NEFIN and the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) defined as those ethnic groups and communities that have their own mother tongue and traditional customs, distinct cultural identity, distinct social structure and written or oral history of their own (NEFIN and NFDIN, 2004). The ethnic groups (*Janjati*) can be divided as Hill ethnic group and Tarai

ethnic group based on physical location of the country. NEFIN and NFDIN classified the 59 indigenous groups into five categories based on a set of socio-economic indicators. These include endangered, highly marginalized, marginalized, disadvantaged and advantaged ethnic groups (NEFIN and NFDIN, 2004). Meche community is considered as an endangered ethnic group whose total population in Nepal is only 4867 (CBS, 2012). The Meche community lives in Jhapa district of eastern Nepal Tarai which is an eastern most Tarai district of Nepal bordering India marked by Mechi river with the West Bengal. The majority of Meches live in two municipalities (Mechinagar and Bhadrapur) and having 20 village Development Committees (Jalthal, Dhajjan, Bahundagi, Chakchaki, Duwagadi, Gherabari, Baniyani, Jyamirgadi, Kumarkhod, Maheshpur, Pathariya, Pirthiwinagar, Sanischare, Shantinagar, Sharanamati, Goldhap, Anarmani,

Chandragadi, Charpane, Lakhanpur) of Jhapa district. They are simple and hardworking people. Physically they are medium sized strong people with sharp eyes, flat nose, sparse facial hairs, thick hairs, thick lips, round face and dark in complexion (Diwasa and Subedi, 2009).

There are different opinions regarding the origin of Meche. The Meche and Kirata belong to the Asura dynasty, they were considered as *Mlecchas* which is abbreviated into Mech (Vasu, '22). The Bodos, Kacharis and Meches are the same group of people (Grierson, '03). Grierson ('03) also says that Mech or Meche is a corruption of *Mleccha*. Bodos living in Jalpaiguri area of India and Tarai area of eastern Nepal call themselves Mech or Meche since they are settled on the bank of Mechi river (Grierson, '03). Hamilton (1810) describes Meche as a tribe of Kamrupa, he was the first man who described about the Meche and Rajbansi of Nepal during his visit in the then Bijayapur state of eastern Nepal (Hamilton, '90). Dalton (1872) says that the Meches are found in Bhutan Duars, they extend to westerly direction into Nepal's eastern Tarai, Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri Duars. Hodgson (1880) describes that the Meches have come from Morang (Nepal), the country of *Kichoks* in Nepal and are closed to Dhimals (cited in Sanyal, '73). Risley (1881) pointed that the Meches are not descendants of Nepalese people (Bordoilo, '91).

Sanyal ('73) describes the Meches and Bodos of India are same group of people. The Meches belong to the great Bodo section of Tibeto-Burman speaking people. It is considered that the Bodos migrated into India through Patkoi hills between India and Burma and gradually spread themselves into the whole of Assam, Tripura, North Bengal of India and parts of Bangladesh including the eastern Tarai of Nepal. It is considered that, during their migration to India, they marched towards different directions. One group went along the river Brahmaputra and established themselves in the whole of Assam up to Goalpara district and parts of Jalpaiguri district and Cooch Behar district under the name of Bodo or Bara. Another group went towards the West along the foot of the Himalayas up to the river Mechi, bordering India and Nepal and settled on the north bank of the river known as Mech or Meche. Later they spread to

Darjeeling Tarai, Baikantapur in Jalpaiguri district, and again marched further east and settled in the Duars. It is said that a group of Mech people, again moved further east, crossed the Sankosh river, and went towards Goalpara in Assam. Due to repeated floods in Duars and eastern bank of Tista river, a large number of families migrated towards Assam (Sanyal, '73).

The Meches are an egalitarian society. They do not have any class or caste differences. However, they maintained five or seven principal *gotras* or septs which are associated with the objects other than human. It might be the remnants of some form of totemism as probably practiced earlier. The common *gotras*, found among the Meches of Nepal are the following: *Sampram-ari* or *Campram-ari* (the priestly class), *Narzin-ari*, (the warrior class), *Basumat-ari* (landlords and cultivators) and *Machh-ari* (leopard, tiger and fish hunter). The suffix 'ari' means sept or gotra.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach was followed to collect the data. Data collection techniques were ranged from interviews, participants and non-participant observations, and to literature review. Data were collected during 2013 to 2014 from the Meche community of Dhaichan and Jalthal Village Development of Committees of Jhapa district. Most of information was taken by interviewing with the elder or knowledgeable persons including village head (*Makhal*) and village priest (*Roja*).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since time immemorial, the religious beliefs and practices have become an indispensable part of Meche life. The Meches believe that the universe is inhabited by numerous invisible supernatural beings and powers which always influence the daily activities of their people. They have a horde of deities which are malevolent. If one of them actively intervenes in their affairs, they always try to appease the deities through a religious practices. Traditionally Meches are followers of Hinduism. They describe themselves as Hindus of the Shiva sect and worship Shiva. They call *Bathau* for the Shiva and *Balikhungri* to Parvati (Bordoilo, '91). *Bathau* is worshipped in every Meche

household and is considered the most important God. The concept of idols of Gods in Meche community is developed lately probably under the influence of Hindu culture. The Christian Meche was not reported during the field survey, a small number of followers of *Brahmaism* are also reported in Meche community who use *Brahmo* or *Brahma* as their surname.

They worship house, celestial bodies (sky), rives, lands, birds and animals. They worship the God of the forest (*Hagramodoi*) for protection against carnivorous animals, also the snake Goddess (*Manasha*), Sakti or Lakshmi (*Mainou*), etc. by believing that they possess immense power. They have main four types of Gods and Goddess (deities), these include, 1. The Gods and Goddess worshipped at house are called *Nonimodai*; 2. The Gods and Goddess worshipped at river are called *Doinimodai*; 3. The Gods and Goddess worshipped at forest are called *Hojonimodai*; and 4. The small deities inhabiting in numerous places are called *Jamanmodai*.

The *Nonimodai* is found at village courtyard or household courtyard by making a small house where they established Shiva, Parbati (*Balikhungri*), Lakshmi, Kali, etc., including the images of various Hindu Gods and Goddess at the wall of the *Nomaino*. The *Bathauis* a the principal deity of Meche. They worship the annual *Bathau Puja*, at *Nonimodai* usually from *Baishak*, the Nepali first month (April) to third month *Ashad* (June). They offer betel leaf, betel nut and sacrifice animals or fowls. Recently they have started to sacrifice fruits instead of animals in many houses. They believe that the worshipping is for general welfare of family, cattle and village as well as good production of crops and to ward off the evil spirits.

In every household at the north eastern side of courtyard, they raise a circular shaped soil mound of 2-3 feet high and fence by a bamboo splints which is tied with 5 small thin bamboo splints in a crosswise manner. Culturally they have a deep feeling and respect with the five number, for example, 5 sided *Seudi* plant, 5 holed flute, and 5 rites in social life, etc. The 5 rites include Birth (*Jalam*), hair cutting ceremony (*Khanaichhhinai*), marriage (*Hawa*), religion (*Daharamshibinai*) and death ritual (*Marchhokhungnai*). Similarly, 5 deities include earth (*Aailong*), river (*Aagrang*), air (*Khoila*), light (*Sanjaboli*) and sky (*Raj khungri*) (Meche, 2068 B.S.).

The fence of *Bathau* plant has also 5 ties. There is an open place at the western side for moving towards the *Seudi* plant. At the middle of the mound they cultivate a *Seudi* plant (*Euphorbia roylea*) which represented a Shiva or *Bathau*, they call *Siju* for *Seudi* plant in their language, and considered a most sacred plant for *Seudi* and sacred place for *Bathau*. They believe that the tree has a soul like man, and the tree soul is capable of being transferred to man and animal and vice versa (Sanyal, '73).

At the *Bathau*, they offer a metallic trident (*trisul*) and a *damaru* (a musical instrument of *Shiva*) in most of the houses. They also put the *rudrakshyamala* (a garland made by fruits of sacred *rudrakshya* plant) and a photo of *Shiva*. Usually the worshipping of *Bathau* and *Balikhungri*, is held in each month on every Thursday, and some worship daily in their house. There is a pantheon of deities located at the periphery of *Bathau*, these are known as *Nautha* Gods and exist in nine different forms and traditionally they are worshipped by sacrificing animals and birds. The *Nautha* Gods represent as *Aabrang*, *Awalakhumbur*, *Khaila*, *Kharji*, *Manasu*, *Sandaniwarali*, *Buliburi*, *Rajabarai*, *Gongorwarai* (Diwasa and Subedi, 2009). The *Makhal* and *Dera* deities are also established on the two sides of *Bathau*. If any children fall sick then they perform *Naun puja*.

A big annual worshipping of *Bathauis* is performed by *Roja* (priest). The *Roja* performs the *Bathau puja* by chanting mantras and offering flowers, fruits, sweets, etc. Traditionally they worship the *Bathau* by sacrificing ducks, pigeons, chicken and pigs. Now-a-days, they have started to offer fruits instead of animals. However, animal sacrifice is common in the feasts and festivals. They also celebrate different types of *Banthau puja*. For example, the *Bagrau puja* is performed before eating the rice of new harvest. They perform *Baugrapuja* when the first rice crop is reaped. They collect some grains of rice crop from field and offer that to the *Bathau* on the name of their ancestors by cooking it. They do not consume the new crop or fruit without offering to the ancestors at *Bathau*. After worshipping and completing the rituals they serve the *prasad* to the family members.

Similarly, *Khidaipuja* (special and largest *Bathau puja*) is celebrated from three days to one week. The

Khidaipuja is usually performed by rich family and sacrifice during this *puja* is done usually of 7 pigs, 5 goats, one duck, 50 to 100 pigeons or chicken and including many fruits (Machh-ari, 2060 B.S.). The *Roja* invites the *Bathau* (Shiva) and *Balikhungri* (Parbati) by chanting mantras. They believe during this *puja* Shiva and Parbati enters the *Nomaino*, if the *puja* is not done properly, then there may be loss of one person or other misfortunes may happen in the village. They invite relatives and villagers during this *puja*. After *puja*, they entertain a feast with rice, meat and drink and organize a special *Mosanaya* dance. But now-a-days due to poor economic condition, it is rarely performed in the villages or may be considered as almost non-existent for years.

The consort of *Bathau* is also called *Mainab*, she is considered as the principal Goddess in Meche community. The *Mainab* is recognized by different names such as *Balikhungri*, *Hodonggri*, *BurauMainab*, *Lingrinadin*, *Kali*, *Lakshmi*, etc., they worship her for the good production of crops and prosperity of family and of property. Usually, they install the *Mainab* at the north-east corner of the internal room of *Nonimodai*, which is called as *Ishing* room. They put an earthen pot by erecting about three feet long bamboo pole and then put an earthen pot at its tip. During marriage ceremony, they sacrifice a pig to the *Mainab* for the success of marriage.

Meches also worship the land, call as *Aamati puja* which is held usually on the 8th of *Ashad* (June) of Nepali month, they believe that the land was evolved on this day. They believe that the mother earth is like a human mother. They follow the same idea and customs of agriculture even after they have shifted from slash and burn cultivation to settled agriculture with the bullocks and the plough. They worship the land by offering fruits and lighting incense and can't plough and dig the land on this day. In some villages, the *Amati puja* is performed on any day after 15th of *Jestha* to 8th of *Ashad* (Machh-ari, 2060 B.S.).

Dainimodai (river deity), the life of Meche is closely interrelated with the river for different activities such as irrigation, drinking water, fishing, etc. They regard river as a sacred place where various deities inhabit. They worship all the rivers distributed from Brahmaputra river of India to Kankai river of

Jhapa, Nepal. They worship the river Kankai and Koshi as Goddess, and the river Mechi as a God.

Gavinimodai (village deity), the village area outside the residential houses is also considered as a sacred place where numerous deities live. Meches perform this *Gram puja* during *Baishak* (April), the first month of Nepali for the welfare of whole village and warding off evil spirits. The *Makhal* (village head), *Roja* (priest) and *Phanthol* (helper of *Roja*) collect the rice, money, from each house to perform this *puja*. They purchase animals, fowls and fruits from the collected money. In a particular day, all villagers assemble outside the village at a sacred place and build three to four small sheds of thatched roof as abodes for the deities. They clean these sheds and sacrifice the animals or fowls, but in many villages now they have started to offer sweets and fruits instead of sacrificing animals. After completing the *puja*, the meat of sacrificed animals / fowls or fruit / sweet is shared by each house as a *Prasad*, the blessed food.

CONCLUSION

The religion of Meche community is characterized by belief in a number of pantheon of supernatural power. Traditionally Meches are followers of Hinduism, the God Shiva (*Bathau*) occupies the supreme position in their pantheon of deities. They also believe that the universe is inhabited by numerous Gods and Goddess which always influence their daily activities. They perform different rituals to appease these deities and offer sacrificial blood to the deities, but nowadays many among the Meche society have started to offer the fruits and sweets instead of blood offering. Their religious life and rituals may have influenced the Bodo people of Assam.

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