

# Locating Jolha Women in the Cultural Sketch: A Case Study in Dhemaji of Golaghat District, Assam

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## **Abstract:**

If we want to throw focus on women in changing social scenario the study will cover the traditional and emerging status of women in concern to their education, family life, economy, culture, religion etc. Like other ethnic groups the Jolha women also played an important and vital role in the changing scenario of the society. The Jolhas entered Assam during the British period. In the British period, with the opening of the tea gardens labourers were brought to Assam to work in the tea gardens from Chotanagpur, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. These people are now spread over in various part of Brahmaputra Valley basically in the Tea Garden and also outside of the same. Amongst them the Jolha women of Dhemaji of Golaghat district are observed and studied to find out the changes in cultural field. In this paper an attempt has been made to explore the changes that took place among the Jolha women regarding their cultural activities. For the study both primary and secondary data have been collected. The secondary data has been collected from published materials like books, articles and information gathered from the field study. As there is limited source of secondary data about the past of Jolhas, personal interview method had been adopted.

**Keywords:** Jolha, Dhemaji, Muslim, women

## **Introduction**

The role and status of women have undergone notable changes and have made remarkable progress in certain aspects of socio economic field. If we want to throw focus on the status of women in changing social scenario, the study will cover the traditional and emerging status of women in concern to their social and economic status. So, like other ethnic groups the Jolha women also played an important and vital role in the changing scenario of the society. The Jolha is an ethnic group of the tea community of Assam and considered to be the subject of importance in the social and cultural history of Assam and in the same way; they become an integral part of the broader Assamese society through assimilation and acculturation. The historical or any present works are unfortunately silent about the Jolhas who came to Assam as tea garden labourers during British period and since then have been staying in Assam with particular identity.

## **Objective of the study**

In this paper an attempt has been made to explore the identity of Jolhas and especially the changes that took place among the Jolha women regarding their cultural activities marriage, dresses and ornaments,

rite and rituals etc.

### Methodology

The present study would cover entire Jolha community of Assam. For the study both primary and secondary data has been collected. As there is limited source of secondary data about the past of Jolhas, hence some source people are selected to explore their past through interview. The secondary data has been collected from published materials, Historical books, articles published in the news papers and information gathered from the field study and also from the President and Secretary of the *All Assam Tea and Ex Tea Garden Jolha Association*. To find out the changes that took place among the Jolha women regarding their cultural activities, Dhemaji, the ex tea area of Golaghat district is purposively selected. The investigators have been collected data by direct interview method through the designed schedule. Besides, personal discussion with the respondents is also held. The selected area has been visited by the investigators several times.

### The Jolhas

Assam, particularly the Brahmaputra Valley of India is a meeting point of various ethnic groups, as various population groups of different ethnic identity entered the Valley at different intervals of time laying the racial and cultural foundation of the people of the region. The Modern Indian History also shows that a series of migration took place in Assam and the tea garden labourers were formed a major part of the immigrants. The Jolhas are one of the ethnic groups of those tea garden labourers, living in Assam with their ethnic identity Brahmaputra Valley.

In the British period, with the opening of the tea gardens labourers were brought to Assam to work in the gardens from Chotanagpur, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal (Saharia, U.C., 2005, p.2). The influx of labourers i.e. Adivasi Communities may be describe as a forced migration to Assam during the pre independence period. These people came from different region of the country having different ethnic identity. They were mostly Hindu, Christian by conversion and Muslim by religion. The Jolhas were brought to the land from the districts of Bihar like Hazaribagh, Dumka, Ranchi, Giridi and Purulia. Like other Hindu and Christian counterparts the Jolhas were also kept captive within the tea estate by the British planters and led to a sub human life. In 1840 A.D. Assam Company imported 652 nos.of labourers from Hazaribagh only to Assam (Ahmed,T :2006: p.11). They engaged here in the tea gardens as *Girmitia* or bonded labourers. In course of time, when they became free, many of the Jolhas left the tea estate and settled down in Government wasteland or plot provided by garden authorities. Traditionally, the Jolhas were weavers who were brought to the land and were forced to work in the tea gardens in the British regime. In Assam they were no more connected with their traditional occupation and some of them were gradually switching over to present day diversified occupation other then tea garden engagement. Later they were come to be known as ex tea garden labourers. Both tea garden and ex tea garden workers form a group of people as they came from different region and belong to different ethnic group but in Assam they are regarded as one unit. They were officially recognized as More Other Backward Classes as per Assam Government notification No.TAD/BC/268/1975/37 dated. 27<sup>th</sup> November 1975 , but the Governor of Assam enlisted Jolha community as a separate entity at Sl. No 32 in the list of OBC of Assam and removed the community from the list of communities of Tea Garden and Ex-Tea garden tribes of Assam under MOBC at serial 81 by the notification No.TAD/BC/391/2015/27 dated 19<sup>th</sup> of September, 2022.

### **The Jolhas and Their Concentration**

The word “Jolha” means weavers. In Bihar the prime occupation of these people was weaving and it was a male dominated profession. But in Assam they were forced to work in tea gardens instead of their ancestral profession i.e. weaving. Though weaving is no more the only engagement of the Jolhas they like to give their identity as ‘Jolha’. The Jolhas are inhabited in ten districts of Upper Brahmaputra Valley such as Tinisukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Charaideo, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur, Biswanath Chariali and Baksa. According to Assam of Assam, the population of Jolha people of Brahmaputra Valley is 83,049 excluding the Barak Valley and BTAD area. Among 278 Jolha inhabited area, there are 101 Tea Garden area and 177 village area where the ex-tea people are living with diversified livelihood. In some tea garden area also people are living who are not involved in the tea garden anymore. The census was carried out by the organizations like *Chah Sramik Aru Praktan Chah Sramik Jolha Jati Sanmilani* and *Assam Chah Janagusthi Jolha Yuva Chatra Parishad* in the year 2022 only.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The main objective of our study was to explore the changes that took place among the Jolha women regarding their cultural activities. For the study 100 women of the age of bellow 60, were selected, interviewed and also their day to day life was observed by the investigators. During the study it became clear that the changes that took place among women of Jolhas of tea community is differed from the ex tea community. The social status of women depends on the traditional and emerging status of women in concern to their culture i.e marriage, education, family life, religion etc.

### **Jolha women in changing Cultural Scenario**

#### **Marriage**

There was two type of marriage that exists among the Jolhas. Usually they prefer Negotiated Marriage, but Non- negotiated Marriage also prevailed among them. Regarding Negotiated Marriage the girl and sometime the boy also had little opportunity in selecting her or his spouse. Regarding marriage, in present day condition, after getting education they are allowed to have a say about her or his choice in both tea and ex tea garden area. In some cases the consent of the girl is often sought before finalization of marriage as Islam gives every right to the girl regarding marriage. Non- negotiated marriage is seems to be more preferable among the youth of the Jolhas particularly in tea garden area. Due to the long procedure of negotiated marriage, poor economic condition the boys and the girls often avoid negotiated marriage basically in tea area as it is too expensive as mentioned earlier. But in Dhemaji non-negotiate marriage are not common as in tea garden area. They usually preferred negotiated marriage.

Like the other societies, the child marriage was also prevailed among the Jolhas prior and after coming to Assam. The women of the age of 80 and above in Dhemaji informed the investigators that they were getting married when they were 10 to 12 years of their age. In present day scenario Child marriage is not prevalent among the Jolhas but it was observed during the field investigation that in some cases the boys and girls married even in their age of 21 and 18 years respectively.

Prior and even after coming to Assam though they embraced Islam the law of Islam were not totally followed by these people like *Mahr*, *Talak*, and the rituals of marriage were a mix of Islam and Hinduism. The *Mahr* is exist among the Jolhas as in Islam is a bright side regarding the status of women. *Mahr* is the amount that the groom promised to offer to the bride if Divorce or *Talak* occurred between

the two, which resulted in the low rate of Divorce or separation among them as in other Muslim community.

*Durra Mora* was a punishment that existed among the Jolhas. If a boy and a girl eloped without the consent of parents, the couple had to pay a *Donda* (fine) followed by a punishment called *Durra Mora*. For this punishment a sting was prepared with long piece of cloth to beat the girl and also the boy, they had to face the punishment from 51 to 101 times. But this type of practices no more prevailed among the Jolhas any more even in Dhemaji ( Begum, A , Personal interview, 17<sup>th</sup> of December, 2011)

Cross-cousin marriage and marriage with other sect of Muslim are common in the society which was not present in their traditional society. It was also observed that though they were strictly endogamous, inter-religion marriage is found in a few cases in Dhemaji, Girls from Hindu and Christian religion are married by the boys of the village with the consent of the parents of both the side. It was noticed during the study the efficient, well educated boys of the Jolhas usually married girls from other class of Muslims particularly from Gariya, but a girl from the Jolhas are not found to be married in other Muslims of Assamese society in the studied village settings. The parents are of the opinion that they support their son in marrying girls from other religion as the girl often convert herself to their religion.

There are no dowry system and the articles that given to the bridegroom in capacity for their day to day use are considered as gift only which is one of the brighter aspect of the status of Jolha women. Usually no demands are made from the groom side. Voluntary dowry is offered to the bride is approved in Islam but the demand oriented dowry is opposed in Islam. Likewise, there is no any hard and fast rule of Dowry among the Jolhas of Dhemaji as well. Voluntary dowry system is exists among them and usually no demands are made from the groom side.

Variation was noticed regarding popularity of marriage forms and it was found that Monogamy is the most popular forms of marriage and continuity is maintained in the village setting. Thus, no change in noticed in the forms of marriage which have been prevailing among the Jolhas since their distant past.

Polygamy is not popular among them though it is permitted by the *Sariyat* under some special condition. Any instance of separation was not found among the 100 respondent during the field study.

The Divorce is permissible in Islam only in case of emergency. When all efforts for reconciliation have failed, both the husband and wife may go for *Talak* or *Khula*. When the proposal of Divorce proceeds from husband it called *Talak* and when it takes effected from the side of wife called *Khula*. But among the Jolha people especially in the studied village *Talak* or *Khula* is not found during field study and they are also unaware of the law especially about *Khula*.

## Family

The joint family system was there among the Jolhas of both tea and ex tea community. The head of the family, especially male, is considered as supreme authority in every affairs of the family. The elderly woman even if she is the mother of the head of the family is not considered as the supreme authority. The joint family system is exists to some extent among the tea community comparing with the ex tea community. Continuity is found regarding the role of the head of the family.

In a family of the tea community the division of labour is equal among man and woman. Both had to work inside or outside home with mutual understanding. Even now, this is continued in the tea garden areas. Regarding division of labour in a family, in ex tea garden people like in Dhemaji, women have to work their household duties mostly while man has to perform their duty outside home. Like other village people women of Dhemaji also forward their help to the men folk in doing agriculture.

The husband usually consults with his wife in important matters of the family. The women have the freedom to express their views to their husband, but the final decision usually make by the husband only. The women have to take permission of her husband or in-laws while going out elsewhere other then going out to their garden duties. Continuity is also found regarding this issue.

Majority of the respondent in ex tea garden area like Dhemaji as women usually does not go out for their livelihood and perform their household duties such as cooking, cleaning house, utensils and cloths, shopping etc. as it is difficult to afford a domestic servant with their limited income they get help from her husband, relatives, grown up children to some extent, specially from the grown up girl child. Usually in a family of a tea community a girl has to perform a lot of duties. She helped her mother by taking responsibilities of the younger siblings, while going out to the garden duties and also in the household duties. It was the traditional scenario of the Jolha society.

After coming to Assam the women had a little exposure to the outside world as they were in tea garden area. But as the time passes by, the women, particularly in the ex tea area like Dhemaji are having more exposure viz. they used to move here and there according to their own wish though they are not always economically independent like the women of tea area as they have every facility of getting their education as well.

### Religion

The women debarred from participating in *Namaj* in *Masjid* (Mosque), going to the *Kabarsthan* (cemetery) and participating in *Zanaja* (The *Namaj* performed in the *Kabarsthan* for the peace of the soul). They performed their *Namaj* in their home only as like their counter part of Assamese Society.

Veiling the head is very a common practice among the married woman of the Jolha people as they considered the practice is necessary for maintaining their dignity, position and also religion as Islam always advocated 'Aboor' i.e. to cover the body as much as possible. But the unmarried girl does not cover their head with veil.

### Education

The literacy rate of Jolha women is almost similar with their male counterpart. It was found that the entire 100 respondent are literate as their male counterpart. The maximum education level is degree course. The number of the literate women from 60 and above were vary low in comparison to the male of same group which proves that the female education was neglected in the pre independence period.

The investigation shows the percentage of school and college going boys and girls is almost equal which proves that the sex discrimination in the field of education is not prevailed among the Jolha community. In fact the mothers take more initiative in educating their girl child.

There is no instance of continuing education after marriage for both men and women in Dhemaji which resulted in low rate of higher education of male as well as female. Continuity is there regarding education after marriage.

### Dress and ornaments

The dress patterns of the Jolhas are same as that of the Assamese Muslims of the society. There is no difference in the dress pattern of the Jolhas of tea and ex tea people. It is come to the knowledge of the Researcher during the interviews that a change had taken place regarding the dress among the Jolhas. Regarding dresses a little change are found as while coming to Assam, The womenfolk used to wore a



short *Kurta* having pocket in it known as *Jhula* with Marcin *Saree* but it is not common among the Jolha women. The little girls used to wear a frock type dress known as *ghangri*. The woman folk are used to wear *Saree* in their day to day life and also in socio-religious functions. Now-a-days, however the unmarried girls and newly wed brides are wearing, *Saree, Kurta-Paijama* etc. Like other society the Jolhas, particularly women are found to be very much fond of ornaments. While coming to the land they brought some ornaments with them which can be considered as a security on that condition. A list of ornaments is given bellow that were used by Jolha women prior and after coming to the land.

Part of Body	Name of the ornaments
Nose	Luluk, Karlaphool
Ear	Kanphool
Neck	Chandra Haar, Chikli, Hansli, Harcol*
Wrist	Churi, Bala, Ponhsi
Arm	Bazu, Bankh
Lower leg	Paison, Paury, Gormol

[\**Harcol* was a necklace of silver coins which are generally wear by Adivasi women, and most of the Jolha women had this *Harcol* with them while coming to Assam which could hardly be found in their custody.]

It is noticed during observation that most of the Jolha family does not have these types of ornaments in their home and though they have these in their custody, they hardly used these in their day to day life instead the wear the modern ornaments available in market while of gold, silver and other metal in their capacity. While coming to the land the womenfolk used to wear *Sindoor* but later on they used *Chandan* or *Aphson* instead of *Sindoor* which is no more practiced by them. It is worth mentioning here, that even now they include *Aphson* among the cosmetics of the bride in *Logon diya* which is observed before two or three days of Marriage. *Khodna* (Tatto) was found in the hands and legs of the old ladies in the field which proved that *Khodna* was prevailed among the ladies of Jolhas somehow before sixty years. The age old ladies of above 80years informed us that they do this in their body out of fashion only.

### Music, Dance etc.

Music and Dance, in one word 'Entertainment' is a part and partial of human life but all these are not getting an importance place of the life of the Jolha people like the other Muslim of the world. Regarding music and dance a change has found, better to say that all these gone to the dark from the life of these people.

During the observation it came to the knowledge of the investigators that the Jolhas have lost most of their distinct ethnic feature in course of their living in Assam. While coming to the land the Jolhas were well versed in *Marchia Geet* (Autochthonous song contains tragic history of Karbala). They were used in singing these songs in the month of *Muharram* (the first month of Islamic calendar) when the Moon first appeared in the sky. The women folk used to sing the *Marchia* songs in the processions of *Taziya* in the Muharram. These *Marchia* songs are no more practiced by the Jolhas. Like *Biyanam* of Assamese society, *Shadigeet* (*Shadi*-marriage, *Geet*-song) were sung by the ladies assembled for the occasion of the marriage ceremony which are not familiar among the young girls but the elder ladies even now are continuing this tradition in some places. Coming under the influence of Islam all these has gradually gone into dark which is prevailed among their Hindu counterpart thereafter. They used to take part in

the Jhumar, the traditional dance of the tea community as informed by source persons. But after embracing Islam the Jhumar is no more practiced by the women of this ethnic group as dance and music are prohibited in Islam.

### **Conclusion**

In ex tea areas like Dhemaji women are enjoying a considerable upward gradation comparing with the traditional period and also in tea garden areas which can be called as a result of the spread of education, communication with the outside world, influence of media etc. among them. Though the women of the ex tea villages are more often not the dual earner of the family like tea garden areas, they enjoyed a much more exposure comparing with the women of tea garden areas. Being a part of the Assamese Muslim society the Jolhas have been trying to acculturate themselves from that of 170 years i.e. from 1840 A.D., yet at a later stage they became conscious to retain their identity as a separate ethno cultural group. As a result the Jolhas are trying to maintain the continuity in the basic structure of marriage and family and at the same time accept the both change and continuity regarding the status of woman.

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