

Hidden History of the Tangsa Tribe of India: With Special Reference to Tikhak and Youngkuk Tangsa Sub-tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam

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Abstract

The Tangsa or Tangshang or Hawa tribe is one of the indigenous tribes of northeast India. The Tangsa tribe follows their unique culture, tradition, dialects, beliefs, festivals, and food habits. The Tangsa tribe is known as hill dwellers inhabited in the hills, mountain ranges, and valleys of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam in northeast region of India. Formerly, they lived in the areas of Indo-Burma borders. Mostly, the Tangsa tribe is found in Burma (Myanmar) and Yunnan province of China. They possess a rich cultural and migratory history tied closely to the Southeastern frontier of Assam. This article aims to describe a brief description of the Tangsa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, it also focuses on the history of migration of the Tikhak and Youngkuk Tangsa sub-groups of India.

Keywords: Tangsa, Tikhak, Youngkuk, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam

Introduction:

The Tangsa or Tangshang/Hawa tribe is also known as the Tase tribe in the world. But most of the people prefer to call themselves as Tangsa which represents their language and community as well. The Tangsa community is dominated in the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh and in the eastern part of the Tinsukia district of the state Assam (Konwar, 2017). Tinsukia district is situated at the extreme north-east corner of Assam. The term Tangsa is a common name given to a tribe inhabited the eastern hills of the central part of the Tirap frontier Division along the Indo-Burmese border of the country India. The tribe Tangsa consists of a numerous sub-tribes, the Longris/Lungris, the Longchangs/Lungchangs, the Yoglis/Juglis, Mueshaungx/Mossang, the Reras/Ronrangs, the Kemsings/Kimsings, the Shankeys, the Thamphangs, the Mukloms/Mugloms, the Tikhaks/ Taikhaks, the Ponthais, the Longphis/Lunghis, the Taipis and the Havis/Haves. The Tangsa or Tangshang have lived and moved in the Patkai hills as what is now the India-Myanmar border for a very long time, but in the last several years there has been a progressive movement of Tangsa people down to the plains of Assam from the hills of Burma (Myanmar).

Objectives

The main objectives of this paper are given below:

1. To indicate the habitants of the Tangsa tribe in India.

2. To focus the historical background of the Tangsa tribe in India.
3. To point out the historical background of the Tikhaks and Youngkuks (Tangsa sub-tribe) in India.

Methodology

This paper is based on analysis of oral history, folk stories, and folk songs followed by in-depth literature reviews on the theme. Personal interviews with the help of participant observation followed in this study.

Discussion

The Tangsa or Tangshang or Hawa people, also known as the Tangsa Naga (counted under other Nagas) in Assam. In India, the Tangsa are one of a number of groups categorized as other Naga tribes in the Indian Constitution. Prior to the coining of Tangsa, in India at least, each of different sub-tribes was known by its name, often in combination with Naga, as on pre-world war II where tribal names include Tikhak Naga, Muklom Naga, Mossang Naga, Yogli/Jugli Naga, Ponthai Naga and so on. Early of the languages within the Northern Naga group has been named by the ISO (International Organization for Standardization), following Ethnologies, with the element Naga as the first part of the name. The association of Tangsa with Naga is contested by some members of the community; particularly some who have not converted to Christianity, or who have been in India the longest (Burling, 2003). They are recognized as Scheduled Tribe (Hills) in Assam. 'Naga' is a generic term commonly used to identify diverse ethnic groups inhabiting the region that spread across the present Indian states of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and the north-western region of Sagaing state in Myanmar. The term developed over the years to describe not only the loosely shared cultures of these various groups but also the political aspirations for nationhood (Stockhausen, 2019).

Origin of the Tangsa tribe

The Tangsa or Tangshang or Tase/Hawa tribe belongs to Tibeto-Burmese ethnic group inhabiting in the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam in India, and across the border in Mongolia, East-West of China, Sagaing Region and parts of Kachin State of Burma (Myanmar). They have ancestral origin in the Yunan provinces of China. They believed that they have originated in the native land of China, are often known as Muwa in China. The Tangsas also recognized as Trans-Patkai tribes who trace their origin in the highlanders of Burma (Myanmar) in the south as their ancestral homeland. They are very rich in oral culture, literature, and interpret their own route of migration in the sub-tribe level (Baruah & Das, 2021). They have migrated into the plain areas of North Eastern region of India at different phases of time. Initially, the Taikhak/Tikhak Tangsa, Jungkuk/Youngkok Tangsa, and Muklom/Muglom tangsa have arrived several centuries ago; while the Joglei/Jugli and Mossang have also moved to India during first phase of 19th century. Other like Rera/Ronrang Tangsa arrived may be 70 years ago, Cholim/Cyolim Tangsa landed India before 50 years, and the Hakhun Tangsa even more recently migrated in India (Morey, 2017).

The term- 'Tangsa'

The word 'Tangsa' is originated from the two Tangsa words 'Tang' means 'hill' and 'Sa' means 'people'. The meaning of 'Tangsa' denotes 'hill people' (Dutta, 1991). The literal meaning of the word 'Tangsa' is 'hill people' or 'people of highlands'. It has been mentioned that the word 'Tang' means

‘Up-stair posterity’ and ‘Sa’ means ‘son of Tang’ or ‘children of Tang’. Similarly, the word ‘Tang’ refers three conjugative meanings: Tang means Up-stair, Conqueror, and hill people. according to Dutta, the word ‘Tangsa’ derived from the two Tangsa term ‘Tang’ and ‘Sa’, ‘Tang’ stands for ‘sacrifice’ and ‘Sa’ means ‘small’. That is groups, which made ritual sacrifice for small things such as pigs and cattle’s including buffalo. Those tribal people who practiced only animal sacrifice were called as Tangsa even in their ancestral habitat in Burma (Myanmar) (Barua & Das, 2021). Thus the word ‘Tangsa’ carries a significant interpretation.

According to the records, the Tangsa tribe is located in northeast region of India since several centuries. On the basis of the data of 1981 Census of India and ethnographic studies around 84,000 to 100, 000 total population of the Tangsa tribe inhabited predominantly in the state of Arunachal Pradesh (Changlang district and Tirap district) with some estimated sub-groups within the broader umbrella of the Tangsa tribe in India. The Census Survey of India, 2011 recorded around 0.1 million population of the Tangsa tribe in India. Historically, some of the sub-groups of the Tangsa tribe settled in the state Assam (Tinsukia district) including the Taikhaks/Tikhaks, the Jungkuks/Youngkuks, the Mossangs/Muixshvungx, the Longris/Lungris, the Hakhuns, the Shankeys/Sankeys, the Reras/Ronrangs and so on. While the numbers of specific sub-group found varied, they were recorded as the Part of the Scheduled Tribe population in Arunachal Pradesh in the 1981 Census of India.

Sub-groups

Dutta (1991) mentioned that the Tangsas are a large tribe comprising a number of sub-tribes. Each sub-tribe has a number of exogamous clans.. According to Stephen Morey, a linguist, there are around 70 different sub-groups of Tangsa tribes within Tangsa/Tangshang, each of which has an identifiable linguistic variety. There are 35 sub-tribes of Tangsa community found in India with more in Burma (Myanmar)-(Morey, 2014). In India, the Tangsa tribe and their sub-tribes have been categorizing into two larger groups based on their common ancestry and shred cultural practices associated with the festival Moh-Mol. The two broader groups into which the Tangsa sub-tribes can be categorized are: the Pangwa and the Tangwa (Non-Pangwa) groups. The Pangwa group includes more than 20 sub-tribes of Tangsa who claim to be descendants of “Tai” mean grandfather and “Homjamwi”, ‘Wi’ means grandmother. These Tangsa sub-tribes celebrate Wihu-Kuh and Chabuh-Kuh festivals as Pan-Pangwa identity. This group consists of Kimsing/Chamchang, Lungri, Lungphi, Mossang, Tonglim/Cholim, Hallang, Gajha, Botey, Thamphang, Shangkey/Shanke, Nagiamong, Lungkhi, Jugli, Hachang, Thamkok, Kkalak, Hakhun, Rera/Ronrang, and Shangwal. Whereas the Tangsa (Tangwa or Non-Pangwa) group contains sub-tribes such as Longchang/Lungchang, Tikhak/Taikhak, Junkuk/Youngkuk, Nokjah/Nokja, Kato, Muklom/Muglom, Havi/Have, and Ponthai. All these sub-groups speak different dialects of the Tibeto-Burman family which are intelligible among some groups but in some cases they are so divergent as to be unintelligible between some groups as well. They use Assamese pidgin as lingua franca and young generations are Assamese creole as well as Hindi pidgin (Rekhung, 2023). Constitutionally, the Tangsa tribe listed under Scheduled tribe (Hills) of India. For Morey, more than 17 sub-tribes of the broad Tangsa Community found in northeast region of India with their unique culture and tradition (before 2014). The study observed, at present time, more than 35 sub-clans of the Tangsa tribe identified in northeast India.

In Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, some significant Tangsa sub-tribes inhabited since several centuries, they are Muklom, Longchang, Mossang, Jugli, Kimsing, Tikhak, Ponthai, Ronrang, Mungrey, Lungpi,

Havi, Sangwai, Yongkuk, Hakhun, Langching, Sakieng and Thamphang Tangsa sub-tribe. According to the surveys, All Assam Tangsa Students Union (AATSU) and Tangsa National Council (TNC), 2021, Assam, Longri/Lungi, Motai/Maitai and Cholim/Tonglim Tangsa sub tribes are also identified in Assam. There is more than 25 sub-tribes occupied Assam since several centuries. Around 25,000 (Approximately) population estimated in the bordering regions in the northeast direction of upper Assam (Tinsukia district of Assam). About 1 lakh population of the Tangsa tribe occupied Arunachal Pradesh. More than 200 (hundred) Tangsa villages settled in Arunachal Pradesh, on the other hand, in Assam, around 35 (thirty five) villages found (All Assam Tangsa Student Union, 2021). Comparatively, According to Joshua Projects, All Assam Tangsa Student Union and Joshua Project, around 2400 (Approximately) Tikhaks and about 200 Youngkuk Tangsa sub-group estimated in India.

Migration

All the Tangsa and their sub-tribes tribes did not migrated together; each sub-tribe has their own vision of migration. There are also differences of opinion about the number of sub-tribes of Tangsa. The Tangsa tribe and their sub-tribes are inhabited in India since several centuries, having own tradition, culture, and beliefs.

Commonly, all the Tangsa sub-tribes shared that human beings were first created at Masoi Sinrapum by some supernatural beings for whom, however, they called different names like Pra, Sikia, Kau Hawa, Rang Phra and so on. They believe that there was a big tree at Masoi Sinrapum from which two human beings, a man (Dombe) and a woman (Niwa), emerged and created this world with all the creatures. They regard this big tree as the Supreme Being 'Sikia', 'Rang Kau Hawa' or 'Rang Phra'. After creating the world and creatures, Dombe and Niwa flew away into the sky and vanished. Both of them are regarded as Gods or 'Phras'. The Lungri/Longri Tangsa sub-group shared that they migrated from Masoi Sinrapum to their present habitat coming across the Patkoi/Patkai range through the Nyapket pass. They came via Khangtao, Tennai, Wakrap, Munkam/Munkham, Hangja/Honju, Sangti, Sangkia and Kekolim areas. In each of these places they stayed for at least a generation or two. Crossing the Patkoi/Patkai Range, they moved to the state Assam side and settled down on the banks of the river Namchik and surrounding locations of the Patkoi/Patkai Range.

Morey (2017) stated that different Tangsa sub-groups have moved into the plains of North East India at different times (Assam). The Taikhak/Tikhak, Jungkuk/Yongkuk and Muglom/Muklom appear to have arrived several centuries ago; while the Joglei/Jugli/Jogli and Mossang have also been in India since at least 1200 A.D and probably before. Others like Cholim/Tonglim and Rera/Ronrang arrived maybe 70 years ago, and the Hakhun even more recently (around 50 years).

Basically, the Tikhaks and Youngkuks located in the surrounding areas of Patkoi/Patkai Range, Dihing river valleys, Malow Hill, Mulong Hill, Tirap River, Tikok Hill of Tinsukia District of the state Assam in northeast region of India. Tangsa is an ethnic group highly concentrated in the Patkoi/Patkai Range especially in the Margherita sub-divisional area of Tinsukia district of Assam. They inhabited in under Tirap Mouza in Patkoi/Patkai Range areas and surrounding of the river Tirap. The term 'Tirap' was the name of the beautiful river along which it was located; and it was the same river one crossed near Lekhapani at Tirap Gate area. Many other terms such as the Tirap Frontier Tract, the Tirap Tribal Belt Area and The Tirap Transferred Area, also holding the word Tirap (Ruscheweyh, 2017). Mostly, the Tangsas are habited in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Tikhaks

According to Simai (2008), the Tikhak Tangsa sub-tribe is one of the largest sub-tribes of the Tangsa community after the largest Muklom/Muglom and Lungchang/Longchang sub-groups. According to oral history, the Tikhak Tangsa have migrated from Mung En Muwa (the motherland Muwa). They are one of the Hawa (Tangsa/Tangshang) tribes and belong to the erstwhile Muwa of the southwest of the country China. The Tikhaks are known as the pioneer sub-tribe (among the Tangsa) to plant their feet in India. Presumably the process of mass ‘exodus’ took place during AD 11th century from the South West Yunan of China where more than 300 dialect speaking Hawa (Tangsa/Tangshang) tribes were inhabited. The Tikhak Tangsas moved through different area towards south namely Java, Sham, Combodia, Sumatra etc. Then they arrived in North Burma (Myanmar), travelling Thailand, Laos etc. The Tangsa (Tikhak) arrived in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam through the pathways of Pangsou or Pangsu or Pan Saung of Patkoi/Patkai range entailing many hardships. The Tangsa people practiced their folklores and folkways. Earlier, the Tangsa folklore related with many obstacles that the people faced on their forward journey to Dibrugarh district (Thampu Chup) in Assam for many generations. Eventually, the Tangsa (Tikhak) joined the Katos/Kotos (a type of Tangsa tribe) and settled at Dibrugarh district for several years. In that period, they suffered from diseases (epidemic) like Katos. Then they moved back to the locations of Dihing-Patkoi/Patkai Ranges in Assam. Later they also decided to settle themselves at the areas of Lido/Ledo (Lito in Tikhak Tangsa dialect), now they are concentrated in Nonglai, Long Basti/Long Gaon/ Long Keng etc, in the areas of Lido/Ledo/Lito (Simai, 2008). Then they separated into two groups. One group ascended the hilly area and established at Malow hill, Mullong hill, and Tikhak/Tikok Colliery and Ledo (Lito) Colliery areas of the Tinsukia district of Assam, and nearby areas of Namtok circle (Longpha, Longran, and Kothung village), Rangrin Kan, Nampong, Tikhak Taipy, Namgoi, Typong, Longvi, Longman, Honkap and Kovin village, now situated near the river Tirik (Namchik) of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Youngkuks

Dwayne Graybill mentioned that the term ‘Youngkuk’ is a compound of two words: young which means ‘water’, and kuk means ‘upper’, or ‘higher’. ‘The name thus implies “the people of the head waters of a river”. The Youngkuks believe they originated at a place in the south known as Masoi Sinrapum. During their migration they crossed the Tennai Wakrup River and the Patkoi/Patkai range, and established their first village in their present habitat in the Namchik River valley now known as Chhotam Pinjam. Again, Simai (2008) expressed that the Youngkuk Tangsa sub-tribe believes that they emerged at Monun Khong sometimes in AD 1500. They came to present locations of Tirap Transferred Area of Assam when the Tikhak Tangsas of the second group after first group Kato/Koto had already resettled at Lido/Ledo (Lito in Tangsa) from Dibrugarh. They are larger population than Kato in the state Assam. Their villages are mostly located in Tinsukia district of Assam and by virtue of their original tribe a few Youngkuks are retaining village administration, namely, Kengia/Kengya/Keniya and Lakla village (Assam) and in the Changlang district (Arunachal Pradesh) in Taipong, Tirap Sakan, Khachang, Old Champo, Old Dokpe, Kamlao, Rangrin Kan etc., (Simai, 2008). Likewise, the Rera/Ronrang Tangsa believes that they originated in a hill called Masoi Sinrapum, which is supposed to in the east beyond Burma (Myanmar), from which they migrated a few centuries ago and settled down in a place called Lamjong. At Lamjong, they divided into two chief groups, one of which was settled in a place called Thowa, while the other came to Hangjong area. From Thowa, they came to Ka-Su. After staying there

for a fairly long period, they came to Umpong, where they did not stay long but pushed further on till they reached their present settlement, across the Patkoi/Patkai Range. They think that the major factor of their migration was economic reason. They were moved to the state Assam and other geographical locations since centuries ago in search of fertile land for cultivation and high density of forest for their livelihood, far away from their historical place, and so reached their present habitat (Dutta, 1959). Subsequently, they migrated to the various geographical locations where they live at present, crossing areas difficult hills (Malow, Tikok, Mullong and so on) surroundings of Dihing valley, Namchik valley, Patkoi/Patkai and Tirap mountain ranges in India.

Earlier, like other tribal society, the Tangsa community also faced educational, social, economic, political, and cultural issues. They suffered with epidemic and displacement due to socio-political and natural troubles. Gradually, these hill dwellers went to different plain location for their livelihood and safety. Currently, the Tikhak's and the Youngkuk's assimilated with broader society in India. Most of the Tangsa villages occupied by other community's like- Nepali, Assamese, Bengali, Bihari, other tribes (Sema, Mishng, Adi, Chakma, Lisu, Singpho, Nocte) etc. they are well amalgamated with other communities. The amalgamation processes caused endangered status of Tangsa culture, beliefs, language, and customs. Now, the Tangsas are trying to preserve their indigenous faith and cultural aspects by observing festivities and occasions. They are promoting their oral history, folk-music, folk-songs, folk-tales, and folk-dances form part of their cultural heritage. Still they are surviving with social, educational, and economic problems.

Conclusion

The Tangsa tribe is scattered population of India. Mostly, their habitats found in Burma (Myanmar), and some sub-tribes identified in north-eastern region of India. The Tangsa tribe is one of the unpopular tribe who played vital role in Indian history. They are one of the ancient tribe of India. Previously, the Tangsas were warriors. They were individualistic and had loved self-governance. They had their own political governance structure. For several times the Tangsas were the dominant tribe in the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh (Simai, 2008) in India. At present, the Tangsa tribe is facing cultural, religious and lingual assimilation. It results endangered status of the Tangsa society and identity crisis. However, it is also significant to acquire modern techniques and ideologies to collect innovative and scientific knowledge at present era.

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