



Tribes of North-East India: A Study on 'Hajongs'

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ABSTRACT

The Hajongs are the descendants of the Mongoloid race. They form a Sub-Section of the Bodo-Naga section under Assam-Burma, a group of Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan family. Numerically and sociologically, they are one of the important tribes of North-Eastern India, particularly of Assam. They are spread all over Assam with main concentration in the lower Assam, across North-East India and Bangladesh. At present their population is more than 1,00,000 in India and 30,000 in Bangladesh. The most concentrated areas of the Hajong population is found in Goalpara, Dhemaji, Darrang, North Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Cachar, Dhubri, Chirang, Nagaon, Kamrup and Tinsukia districts of Assam, Garo Hills in Meghalaya and Sylhet and Mymensingh districts in Bangladesh. The Hajongs also found in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh.. In this study an attempt has been made to discuss about their origin and Socio-Political and Economic status in the Pre-Independent and Post-Independent India.

KEYWORDS : Hajongs, Problems, North-East

Introduction:

North Eastern region of India is a home of different tribal communities who have influenced for centuries in the formation of its society and polity. The Hajongs are one of those tribes whose culture is an integral part of this society. Originally, Hajongs are a branch of the great *Kachari* group of people. Initially, the whole Bodo language speaking Tibeto-Burman group was known as the *Kachari*. The word *Kachari* as a racial name for the Bodo linguistic group of people appears in all early books and Government records. The Census Report of 1881 listed 12 sub groups under *Kachari* race. Their names are *Kachari* (including Boro, Sonowal etc.), Mech, Lalung, Hajong, Garo (plains), Rabha (Totila), Madhahi, Mahalia, Saraniya, Chutia, Koch and Rajbanshi. So, from this list it is clear that, the Hajongs are a Sub-Tribe of the great *Kachari* group of people. Their language is fall under Bodo group of language.

Methodology:

In this study, both historical and analytical methods, which include mostly field study and interview as a source of data collection, have been followed. This work has also been prepared on the basis of secondary sources such as relevant books, articles, journals, souvenir and research thesis to substantiate the findings of the study.

Objectives:

1. To study their origin and the name Hajong.
2. To find out the causes what forced them to become displaced and refugee.
3. To examine their earlier and present Socio-Political and Economic condition.

Like other branches of the *Kachari* group of people, the Hajongs were also originally a ruling race. But due to lack of authentic history of the Hajong rule we have to depend on some mythologies which are orally going on. According to one popular mythology, the Hajongs are the descendants of Kartayabirjarjun, one of the greatest Khatriya Kings of the Mahabharata era. The saint Parasuram who was responsible for killing his father Jamadagni ultimately had killed in the process. His queen Swarupa Devi was in the family line at that time. The queen fled away from the capital and took refuge in the hermitage of the sage Kamdatta in ancient Kamrup. She gave birth to a son who came to be known as Padangksu who occupied the ancient Hajo Township including the temple there. According to this mythology, Kumar Bhaskar Barman was the next generation of Padangksu, ruled the Hajo Kingdom. During the last King of this dynasty Bharat Barman, the Hajo Township was destroyed and about twelve thousand people fled away to the Garo Hills. The place in the Garo Hills where they established their first settlement was called *Hajari* or *Baro Hajari*. From that place they, in course of time, spread to different places in Garo Hills, Goalpara in Assam plains of rivers Simsang, Susong etc.

According to another mythology, after the death of Kumar Bhaskar Barman, his son Bharat Barman became the king of Hajo Kingdom and

the kings of his dynasty ruled about 1000 years. One of these later kings, Detsung was at war with another king Padmanabh. Detsung was defeated in the battle and he had to buy peace by offering his daughter to Rubha, the eldest son of the king Padmanabh. Later on, king Rubha was killed by Dharmapal, the king of Kapili Kingdom in the mid 14th century and his people abandoned Hajo and fled to different directions. Some of the people fled to Noqreq or adjoining plain areas of river Kospa (Kalunadi) of western Garo Hills. Some settled in Doshkhanaya or Sherpur Pargana. Some of these people settled in river-bank areas of the river Simsang or Sumeswari. A large number of this inhabited land is now under Bangladesh.

On the other hand, some scholars and writers opine that the Hajongs are a branch of the Koches. According to the book *Koch Beharer Itihas* the Koch dynasty of the Kamatapur was established by Hariya Mandal or Haridas Mech. He was a leader of Chiknajhar of Khuntaghat. Later, he established himself as ruler of Khuntaghat with his skill and power. On the other hand, in the meantime the eastern side of the Chiknajhar, one powerful land lord named *Hajo* ruled independently. Hajo had two beautiful daughters named Hira and Jira. For the protection of his kingdom and to maintain good relationship, Hajo gave married his both the daughters with Hariya Mandal. But in course of time there arose differences, between Hajo and Hariya on the matter of administrative rule and regulations because Hariya was so much fanatically Hindu. This difference increased more during the rule of the Koch king Bishwa Singha. As a result of differences, later, the followers of Bishwas Singha introduced themselves as *Rajbanshi* and followers of Hajo introduced as *Hajbanshi*. So, it is believed that the followers of Hajo or Hajbanshi are known as Hajong. According to A Guha, before Bishwa Singha there was no use of the word *Rajbanshi*. On the other hand, according to S, Endle, Hajongs are a branch of the widely spread Bara race. The tribal name is of uncertain derivation, but it is not unlikely that it is connected with the kachari word for mountain or hill (*ha-jo*) and this supposition received, perhaps, some little confirmation from their present habitat that is the southern slope of the Garo Hills and the sub-montane tract immediately adjoining it. It is possible that these people may be the modern representatives of the

inhabitants of the old kingdom of Koch Hajo, which corresponds roughly with the present district of Goalpara. It is known that during the period 1600-1700 this part of the country was over run by Muslim invaders, when many of the inhabitants probably took refuge in the Garo Hills, returning there from and settling adjoining plains at the foot of these hills. Even in the 19th century, during the invasion of the Burmese in Assam many Hajong people left Assam and fled to Sylhet, Cachar etc secured lower areas. But it is clear that, there were no existence of Hajong people in the Hajo area in ancient period. Regarding this matter Paresh Hajong, a popular person of the Hajongs said that the origin of the name *Hajong* is outside of the Hajo area. Descendants of *Hajo* when entered *Barohajari* leaving Hajo, they got this name given by others. Whatever may be the reason, a section of kachari origin

people fled from Koch Hajo area and settled at Garo Hills. Later they got the name *Hajong* given by the Garos. Indeed, Nogreq Hill areas has been the habitant of the Garos since long past. The Garos are also agriculturalist. The method of cultivating of the Garos was in primitive stage. They practiced jhum cultivation in the hill slopes by cutting forest, burning it and then planting vegetables, paddy, maize etc. On the other hand, king Rubha's peoples were cultivated with the help of cow and plough in the lower plain areas. They cultivated paddy, mustered seeds, vegetables, Mah, Marapat etc. by new methods. It was new for the Garos. The new ploughing method of these people, the Garos compared with digging of earth by worm. So the Garo named them as *Hajong*. In Garo language *Ha* means earth and *jong* means worm. *Hajong* means like a worm of earth. So, it may establish the Hajongs are a branch of the Kacharis and modern representatives of the Koches. After leaving earlier royal and administrative activities, the Hajongs engaged in the cultivation mainly at the fertile soil of the Humeswari, Bhogai, Kaspa etc river areas. They also established there Kamakhya, Kali etc. temples near the rivers to worship. The feudal lords of Mymensingh granted lands for these temples.

From the above discussion it is clear that the Hajongs are very ancient inhabitants of the North eastern part of India. They were a ruling race. In course of time they spread from Garo Hills area to different parts of the sub-continent which included India, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan. So we have found their population spread before partition at the North Sowerkona (Goalpara District of Assam), in the South Jangkona (present Bangladesh), Jamkona (Bangladesh) at the East and Morkona (Garo Hills district) at the west. Except these four places there were no inhabitation of the Hajongs till 1945. According to the Ccensus Report of 1891 the Hajongs are Hills tribe. In this census Report the Hajong have been considered as a separate tribal ethnic group. Numerically the Hajong population is very small. However, may be, they lived in scattered way. In fact, they lived in the border areas of Assam, Meghalaya and East Pakistan.

As a result, after partition of the Indian sub-continent into two separate sovereign states India and Pakistan in 1947, the Hajongs divided into two independent states. It is important to note that the Garo Hills lie next to the international border, north of Mymensingh District, and immediately East of the extremely porous Goalpara district, through which the immense stretch of Brahmaputra and its tributaries flow into Bangladesh, on the other side of the international border live the same communities with similar tradition and dialects like Hajong, Garo, Koch, Banai, Dalu, Rajbanshi etc. on such a situation after partition of India great numbers of all these communities cross over the border and take refuge in Garo Hills where they meet and merge with their own community.

This aspect of kinsip definitely plays a part as they are assured of the sympathy. In January 1964, due to socio-political and communal unrest, many minority groups from Sylhet and Mymensingh districts steamed into the eastern tip of India like Tripura, Mizoram and Meghalaya. Infact, during 1964 mass exodus, there were nine transit camps under Dalu area of Garo Hills district. These camps were on the Indo-Bangladesh border belt of Garo Hills, namely, Machangpani, Bhogai, Chandabhoi, Bilkona, Deplipara, Dalu, Magupara, Mineng and Dindini refugee camps. Other transit camps were Baghmara, Sibbari and Purakhsia etc. Even the refugees shifted from those above mentioned camps to other interior camps, like Rongnabak, Ganol and Rongram of the Garo Hills district and to Matia Molonggaud Panchali area of Goalpara district of Assam in these remotest refugee relief camps. It is notable that, in 1964 influx, the refugees were not only Hajongs but also there were other communities like Garo, Koch, Banai, Dalu, Rajbanshi, Bengali, Bihari etc. There were total 28,132 numbers of refugees and among them 13,842 were Hajongs. On the other hand it is also known that some refugees were directly gone to the plains of their own accord. In November 1964 up to the 8th February, 1965 total 1,556 nos. of refugees shifted to the Dudhnoi and Srirampur refugee camps. Even in 1966 some refugees from Rongram, Ganol and Rongnabak camps were shifted to matia and other neighbouring places of Goalpara district of Assam. It is known that in matia camp there were six camps and the number of persons was around sixty to seventy five thousand. Many Garo refugees and other communities including Hajongs were shifted to Goalpara and other districts of Assam.

Now question arises what reason forced them to cross the border

and which made them to stay at different refugee camps. If we search the reason, then, we will find different causes which compelled them to leave their place where they lived since long past. For example, after the formation of Pakistan, cases of frequent rioting, looting and robbery occurred. These were made by the majority i.e. the Muslims in North Mymensingh district. All the immovable properties of the minority communities were looted, burnt and movable properties were forcibly taken away by the majority community in East Pakistan. The attitude of the East Pakistan authority was not favourable to the minority communities. In fact right after the partition, harassment was started over the minorities by the Muslims. During 1960s this situation turned to worse. The Muslims ill-treated the minorities e.g. Garos, Hajongs, Koches, Banais, Dalus, Bengalis and Rajbanshis. Most of the time victims were women. Houses were set on fire by the Muslims. The causes lie in the expulsion of Muslim from Bihar State of India. Many Muslim refugees from Bihar were present in adjacent villages. In Mymensingh alone there were around 40,000 Muslim refugees from Bihar. Actually the Muslims of East Pakistan wanted only Muslim Community to live in their country.

Even political leaders indirectly supported them in their acts of persecution. In January 1964, large ghastly killing of minority group in East Pakistan, the victims were Garos, Hajongs, Koches, Banais, Dalus, Bengalis and Rajbanshis etc. The Muslims used to molest minority girls, tried to marry them forcibly and convert into Muslim. Sometime young men arrested and tortured. They used to harass mainly the uneducated. Many times they were asked to leave their places. They were repeatedly threatened that if they would not vacate their lands and homes they would be killed. They treated them immensely inhumanly. Women and girls were abducted and their honours and dignity were violated by the Muslims. Even the Hajongs and Garo's villages were set to fire by Muslims with the help of the East Pakistan Rifles. Although lawful complaints filed by them for these in the court of law or in the police station, no legal action was taken by the authorities concerned against the culprits. For this anti-social and inhuman elements, which were causing deep apprehension and anxiety, compelled them to leave their country.

It is also important to note that among the minorities the Hajongs, Garos and Koches were the first to flee. Main causes of the persecution were the political movement among the Hajong and Koches. These two communities joined the communist party and they threatened to dare the thanas, for this reason the people threatened to arrest them in return. The Muslims were of the opinion that if they tolerated the aggressive behaviours of the Hajong and Koches, some day they might harm the Muslim community. Due to this feeling of insecurity they drove out Hajongs and Koches.

However, after expulsion from East Pakistan the Hajongs were refuged in different refugee camps of Garo Hills and Goalpara district. Later, they were rehabilitated in different districts like Goalpara, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Darrang, Tinsukia, Changlang district and Garo Hills of undivided Assam. At present Assam the Hajongs are found in Goalpara, Darrang, North Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Cachar, Dhubri, Chirang, Nagaon, Kamrup, Dhemaji and Tinsukia districts. According to the Census Report of 1977 there were total 44,655 numbers of Hajong population in Assam plains. On the other hand, according to the data collected by the social organization of the Hajongs, the *Assam Hajong Jatiya Parishad* in 2000, there were total 80,000 numbers of Hajong population in Assam. However, after partition of India the Hajongs were recognized as Scheduled Tribe (ST) in Garo Hills district of undivided Assam and West Bengal only. Later, by the North Eastern Area (Re-organisation) Act, 1971 they were recognized as ST (Hills) in whole of Meghalaya, Autonomous Districts of Assam and other hills states of North East region. But major number of the Hajongs inhabiting, in scatters, in the plain districts of Assam, had not been recognized as ST (Plains). For which they were deprived of their genuine ethnic status for long fifty two years. After a prolonged demands of the Hajongs, the Government of India, by the ST and SC Order (Amendment) Act, 2002 of the Indian Constitution, granted the Hajongs the status of ST (plains) of Assam, vide Govt. of Assam, Order No. TDA/BC/87/93/46 dated Dispur, the 1st April, 2003. On the other hand the Hajongs who were rehabilitated at Tinsukia district, have recognized as ST (plains) in Assam in 2004. But they got right to vote in 1971.

It is important to note that once ruling race, the Hajongs are, at pres-

ent, socially and economically most backward community in the entire North-East India. Socially, they are so backward that they failed to occupy any prominent or influential position in any mainstream society. Even some sections of the Assamese society do not have clear information about the Hajongs. When Hajongs are one of the numerically small tribes of Assam, at the same time, they are lesser known due to lack of comprehensive literature and studies on them. As such, some people of in upper Assam think that the Hajongs are Bangladeshi. It is very unfortunate for the Hajongs that, due to socio-economic and political reasons, the Hajongs were dispersed in different geographical locations which made them weak socially, economically and politically as an ethnic group. On the other hand, partition of India made a section of Hajongs refugee. Due to political division of this sub-continent, the aboriginal tribe of Assam, the Hajongs had to suffer from torture, deprivation and exploitation. They are treated as the illegally migrated Bangladeshi nationals.

Conclusion:

Entire Hajong inhabited areas are under flood affected areas. Hajongs are basically agrarian people with agriculture being their main sources of earning livelihood and traditionally, they are found living near the river sides. As such, they are found near the rivers like Jinjiram, Simsang,

Jiyadhol, Ronganadi, Dehing, Tirap etc. So, these areas are often affected by flood every year. Their cultivable lands are covered with sands brought by flood water and thus made unsuitable for cultivation. They suffer losses in terms of livestock, crops, houses etc. They often have to move to safer places leaving behind their houses. Even, many rehabilitated people left their villages in search of safer & suitable land. Thus, their very survival is at jeopardy, not to speak of the development of their economy, society, education, language and culture. Even they have not a single political organization to voice for their problems and change their situation. Though they have a few socio-cultural organizations but those are also not so active and incapable to cover entire Hajong inhabited areas. Their literary percentage is also very low due to lack of educational institutions and infrastructure in the Hajong inhabited areas. Maximum Hajong people remains busy in earning two time meal. On such a situation it may be conclude with this word that, at present, the Hajongs are most backward community of the entire North-East India.

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