



TRIBAL LIFE AND CULTURE IN YESHE DORJEE THONGCHI'S SONAM: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract : This paper attempts to investigate the cultural, religious and social life of the Brokpa tribe often referred to as “Minaro” community in the novel Sonam written by Y .D Thongchi. Thongchi is a prominent writer and novelist in Assamese literature. In 2005 he won the Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel “Mound Ounth Mukhar Hridoy” and is also a recipient of india’s prestigious Padma Shri award in 2020. “Sonam” was his first Assamese literary work wherein he has given us a descriptive portrayal of the nomadic Brokpa tribe along with a beautiful background of the Monpa and Brokpa community. He wrote about the social and cultural diversity of the community in which a woman is socially allowed to marry more than one man. The novel is a tragic story of love where things starts to fall apart. The story revolves around a Brokpa family in Sakteng village of East Bhutan.

IndexTerms - Sonam, Monga, Brokpa, Cultural, Social, Tribe

Introduction:

The novel “Sonam” was published in 1981 which was also translated into English by Mridula Baruah in 2001. The novel discusses the social practices of the tribal community where the loopholes of such practices are pointed out which creates a negative impact into the lives of these tribal communities. In this study we will try to focus on the particular tribe which is mentioned in the novel itself. Y.D.Thongchi was born in 1952 and hails from west Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. He was an IAS officer and after his retirement he engaged himself in literary works and was also the President of the Arunachal Pradesh literary society. He completed his schooling from Bomdila and later did his graduation from Cotton College, Guwahati and post graduation from Gauhati University in Assamese literature. The Himalayan region of Bhutan, India, Tibet is home to many tribal communities, among them Brokpa is one major nomadic tribe. The story of Sonam is all about the social traditions of this Brokpa tribe. This tribe practices polyandry between their siblings (male). They are basically yak herders. The story has three main characters namely Sonam a woman, Lobjang sonam’s husband and Pema Wangchu, sonam’s second husband who ends up being the villain of the story .

Objectives of the Study:

1. To critically analyze Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi’s portrayal of tribal life in his novel “sonam”.
2. To find out about the life led by the brokpa community.

Methodology Adopted in the Study:

The proposed research is done using descriptive method. The study is done mainly based on data collected from secondary sources which include research papers, journals, articles and the novel “sonam” itself. The paper is aimed at casting light on the social norms and issues of the tribal life as mentioned by Y.D Thongchi in his novel.

About The Novel Sonam:

Sonam is one of the most popular works of Y.D. Thongchi. Here the author has discussed social issues like polyandry and polygamy which are rarely seen in other communities. The author analyses the social norms and customs of the community and by doing so he points out the social conflict that arises due to such traditions. The author has described human values and faith that they have in their culture which works as the fuel which lights conflicts within families of the community. The novel "Sonam" starts with one happy couple but in due course of time another person gets involved with them. In the beginning Sonam's husband Labjong express his anger on Pema Wangchu who happens to be the lover of Sonam but later accepts him as Sonam's second husband. Sonam eventually gives birth to Rinchin and Tasi as both of them are Labjong's children. Eventually Sonam deeply falls in love with Pema Wangchu without knowing his intentions and as time went by, the story which began as a beautiful love story ended up being an unthinkable tragic story.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:

Von Fürer-Haimendorf (1982) has investigated the Monpa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The study discussed about his observation on the population of various tribal communities of India from the period 1940 -1980. The research area was in subansiri, kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. The study includes tribes like Chenchus, Konda Reddis, Kolams, Sherdukpens, Monpas, Khovas, etc.

Kumar (2018) in his paper discussed about the marriage system of the novel Sonam and revealed that polyandry system needs devotion, sincerity, faith and ability to understand to be successful. The study finds that the characters of the novel lacked these qualities and that is the reason why the marriage was ineffective and failed eventually.

Kumari (2020) investigated the Brokpa culture while traveling across the western part of Arunachal Pradesh. During her visit she stayed at a local's house which she briefly discussed in her paper along with that she also mentioned about the needs and struggles of the community in their day-to-day life.

Tshering (2022) in his study states that Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi tries to give an insight on the tribal life and customs. The study found that the novel contains historical information associated with the Brokpa community. The study also found that as an insider, Thongchi witnessed the tribal life of the monpas and depicted the same in his novel Sonam.

Das (2023) mentioned about the descriptive nature of the short stories of Y.D. Thongchi and stated that the readers would find the stories very uncommon as the stories are based on the primitive tribe of the unexplored part of the world.

Polyandry Custom:

Polyandry custom of marriage is practiced in several parts of the world. The term derives from two ancient Greek words, "Polys" meaning many and "Andros" meaning man. Though it is an old custom it is still alive in the isolated places of Asian, African, and few other countries. There are two kinds of polyandry. Firstly Fraternal polyandry and secondly Non-Fraternal polyandry. In Fraternal polyandry, usually the other husbands are fraternal brothers of the groom while in non-fraternal polyandry, the other husbands are usually not fraternal brothers of the groom and in such marriages when the wife spent time with each husband the others cannot claim exclusive right over the wife. In polyandry custom the major ceremony usually takes place with the eldest brother who represents all his other unmarried brothers. There is no privileged right of sex over the wife and such encounters are pre-scheduled. Such tradition has its own advantages and disadvantages. Population control, no dispute over family property, economic stability strengthens, these are some of the advantages while, filing for divorce is usually easy, bad effect on the health of a woman are some of its disadvantages. The existence of such traditions can be traced back to 2900 BC. Usually discrimination is not seen while raising the children in such marriages because it may be difficult to trace the biological father. Though in the past this tradition of marriage was very common but nowadays such marriages are happening in lesser number and it is slowly becoming rare custom.

Tribal Life and Beliefs:

The story takes place in the Himalayan region where the weather is usually cold due to low atmospheric pressure when compared to the plains. The brokpas in order to protect themselves from such cold weather usually wear boots made from leather which are up to knee high and wear clothes or vests made from deer skin which are usually covered with fur to provide warmth, while the woman wear dresses made from raw silk which covers them from top to their waist and also wear black shawls along with skirts made from wool to keep them warm. Brokpa women love jewelry and are excellent weavers. The brokpas travel across high altitude ground every year. Usually they travel hundreds of kilometers with their livestock. They follow their designated routes while grazing their livestock. They pay two kind of taxes; firstly they pay taxes to the respected communities for grazing on their grounds and secondly to their traditional governing body (raizee). Responsibilities are divided among the men and women of each family. The man usually look after their livestock and do chores like milking and processing, while the women of the family takes care of things like setting up camp and cooking. The total population of the community is estimated at around 4000 to 6000. The Brokpas are also religious as they worship the mountain, water, flower, earth. In the Indian region the brokpas mainly follow Buddhism while some of this community which stay on the border of Pakistan follow islam religion. The brokpas rely on herbal medicines they also have their beliefs in spirit, herbal remedies and also perform exorcism when required. The Brokpas has distanced themselves from the evolving world and has remained same in terms of beliefs and customs. They also follow polyandry custom as an integral part of their life. The Brokpas are said to be the last of the Aryans. They are believed to be the descendants of Alexander the great. The Brokpas have a high knowledge of the high altitude grounds, they seem to be very adaptive in nature because of their genetic capabilities.

Tribal Culture and Customs:

The Brokpa community lives mostly in caves in huts built with stone and Woods. Generally this houses are 50 to 60 years old where we can generally see the the designs from the early days. Since time has changed and to keep up with the present world the Brokpa community has to face many hardships the main reason why they are able to keep their cultural alive is because they have isolated themselves in the beautiful regions of the Himalayas and by doing so they have deprived themselves from the day-to-day things that communities from the plains typically enjoy. Churpi, a kind of cheese often found in the houses of the community is made from the fermented milk of yak. Mostly the tribe consume meat, milk and ghee as these have higher nutritional values and the demand stay high for such food items. Depending on the weather the brokpa tribe take their livestock to higher altitude which usually is for six months approximately (May to October) and during the cold season which is usually from November-April, they take their livestock to the lower altitude ground where it snows less compared to the higher grounds. Changes in ecosystem does play crucial role in hampering the lives of these community. As of now sudden weather changes and unexpected whether conditions impact the life of this community in a harsh manner As this results in low productivity of ghee, milk, chhurpi, etc. In Brokpa culture they cultivate foods like grapes, apples, walnuts, apricots and also some vegetables. Festivals like Lopa, bonona are very unique to what we experience in our plains. In Lopa festival people from every age group let it be children or old are invited to join. The challenges mainly faced by this community is mainly from the emergence of modernization as this will create an impact on the tradition and culture and preserving the same seems to be a great challenge since change in rituals in micro level is already taking place. Polyandry marriage is also a rare phenomenon which can be seen taking place among the community. It does create an impact on the lives of women as they happen to be married to two husbands at the same time. Normally both husbands are often found to be brothers but as mentioned in the novel the other husband of Sonam is not a brother of her his existing husband Labjong.

Findings of the study:

While critically analyzing the story, it is found that the customs that the community follow has made it difficult for families to cope up with. Customs such as polyandry marriage has had a bad impact on the lives of the women of the community. Apart from

social conflicts and household conflicts we can also see the unhealthy practice of having more than one sexual partners. Another point of discussion that rises as result of the polyandry marriage is that there will be no land dispute among families if a single wife is shared among the brothers of each family. The Brokpa community lead a hard life for the survival as living on these icy mountains is not an easy task in daily basis. It is also founded this community shares its bloodline with the Aryan race. Moreover in daily life they also suffer from unexpected whether shifts as well as communication with the developed region. Emergency treatments are also a point of question when one lives in such areas.

Conclusion:

In the novel Sonam Y.D Thongchi describes the life of the Brokpa community in such a manner that it creates a picturesque story in our mind. The story does not only describe about the polyandry marriage custom but also the hardships that one goes through because of such traditions. He has mentioned certain points where we see the impact on Sonam, the main character on which the novel is based on and the impact on Sonam describes the impact on other woman of the community too. In the authors writings social reality portrayed without any filter which teaches us about the traditional customs and life of the community.

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