

## The Meches of Assam: Their Process of Acculturation

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**ABSTRACT:** The Meches are a scheduled tribe in the plains districts of Assam. They are a numerically small tribe. Although their main concentration is found in the Mechpara area of present South Salmara subdivision of Goalpara district, they are found in small pockets in Khowang area of Dibrugarh district and also in Parkhowa area of the Karbi Anglong District just on the border of the Nagaon District. In the \*Sonitpur district also some Mech villages are there. The Mech families who are at present found in Khowang area of Dibrugarh district had migrated from Goalpara district during pre-independence days. A good number of Mech families had migrated from the Goalpara district to the Dayang Reserved Forest area of Golaghat district also bordering Nagaland and settled there. The Mech families who are at present found in different parts of Tinsukia district migrated from Dibrugarh, Golaghat and Sivasagar districts during post-independence period (1950's-1960's).

According to scholars, the word Mech has been derived from the Sanskrit word Mleccha. In the Mahabharata, the Puranas and other writings the word Mlecha has been distinctly mentioned as a race and the language spoken by those people. The word Mlecha is believed to be derived from the word Mech or vice-versa. In 1880, B.H. Hodgson first applied the generic name Bodo to Bodo group of language while writing about the Mech people living in the terai of modern Darjeeling district | B.H. Hodgson, On the Origin, Location, Numbers, Creed, Customs, Character and condition of the Koch, Bodo and Dhimal people with a general description of the climate they dwell in, Journal of Asiatic

Society of Bengal, 1849, Vol.-XVIII, PP. 702-747) Lalir in 1903, G.A Grierson, while compiling his famous linguistic Survey of India, adopted this generic name Bodo to denote the Meches, Koches, Garos, Rabhas, Dimasas, Lolungs, Tripuris etc.

Mech Tribe belongs to Kachari group of tribes. They belong to Mongoloid race. The Mech; people lived in the Dooars region of West Bengal and parts of Western and Eastern Assam. In ancient time the tribe which is called Mech in this part of the country were numerous and widely scattered. They spoke their own Tibeto-Barman Mech dialect. But now in Assam, they have got influenced by the Assamese language and speak Assamese. Another aspect that we have to consider here is as to whether the term Mech is a corruption of the Mlecha. It is a well known fact that in ancient Kamrupa those ethnic groups whom we regard as the scheduled tribes of Assam today were called Kirata( S.K Chatterjee, Kirata Janakriti 1951). These Kiratas were also called "Mlecchas" by the non-Kiratas or Aryans. If the term Mech is a corruption of the term "Mleccha", in that case all the ethnic groups covered by the generic term Kirata would have also been

covered by the generic term Mleccha. The scholars have failed to prove why only a section of a specific ethnic group was called Mech which is supposed to be corruption of the term "Mleccha"

The Mech is a scheduled tribe in the plain district of Assam. At present, they are numerically small tribal group. In Pre-independence time, their main concentration was found in the Mechpara area of present South Salmara of Goalpara District. Now-a-days, surprisingly the Meches are only found in small pockets of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Karbi Anglong, Sonitpur, Dhemaji, Lakshimpur and Nagaon districts of Upper Assam. According to the first census report of 1871, the population of Mechs only in Goalpara district were 29,877. According to Rev.S. Endles book, 'The Kacharis' in 1911 the population of Meches were 93,900 in Goalpara and surrounding districts. From this and some other record and accounts we can come to the conclusion that till early parts of the 20th century the Meches were the most numerous tribal group in Assam. According to W.W. Hunter in his book A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol.-2, 1879. They are known as Mech in the western part of the Dwars, but in the more eastern parts they are called indiscriminately Mech or Cachari and again further east, in Assam, they are called by the name of Cachari alone, losing the name of Mech altogether."

One of the important aspects about this tribe is that according to 1871 census their population was 93900 and after hundreds(100) years their population according to 1971 census came down to 2570 only and again in 2011 census the population of Meches are 7500 only. The fall in number in last 130 years is aspect significant aspect about this tribe.

Another important aspect about this tribal group is that the Meches who introduce themselves as Mech today are now in the course of rapid acculturation with the surrounding Assamese speaking Hindus of Assam.

According to N.Vasus (Social History of Kamrup, 1922, Vol.-1, P-98) "Meches and the Kiratas belong to the Asura dynasty. They were Mechas and so abbreviated into Mech."

ET. Dalton (Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal. 1872 pp-89-92) says that the Meches are found in recently annexed Bhutan Duars. They extend from there in a western direction into Nepal Terai, Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling and Jolpaiguri Duars. The climate of Terai was harmful to others but suited them the best. They keep good health even in dangerously malarious Terrain. The original tribal inhabitants of Kamrup were overthrown by tribes from the north.

E.T. Dalton (Tribal History of Eastern India) says that the Meches and the Kacharis refer to the same stock of people. Even if they are not one and the same people at least they had a Common origin. The Meches are found in the Goalpara district of Assam and the Terai areas of the Himalayan starting from Bhutan Duars" in the east and the Konki river in the west. Dalton also believes that the large tract Called Mechpara which was under the Zamindar during British regime took its name from the inhabitants, Viz. the Mech.

G.A. Grierson, (Linguistic Survey of India, Vol- III Part-II, 1903 P-1) also opines that "Mech" is a Corruption of "Mlecha". They ruled Pragjyotishpur for four thousand years and began to decline from the\*\*\* kiratas in Kamrupa were called "Mlecchas" and the term "Mech" is a corruption of the term "Mleccha"

Quoting Hamilton Buchanan in Jolpaiguri District Handbook on 1951 Census, it is stated that the Mech is a tribe of Kamrup. Gait regards the Kacharis as the original or earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley. According to him, the Kacharis are identical with the people called Mech in Goalpara and North Bengal.

Sunder (Survey and settlement of western Dawars, 1985) says that the Mech and Kacharis are the same people. In the Duars they call themselves Bodos.

Captain Pemberton (Bhutan, 1938) described that Mech Haragovinda Katham was in possession of Bhothal,

Maynaguri, Chengmari and Gopalganj in Bhutan Duars (Now in Jalpaiguri, Western Duars.)

B.H Hodgson (Miscellaneous Essays, Vol-I & II, 1880, Mech, Bodo and Dhimol) describes that the Meches have come from Morong (Nepal) and country of Kichoks in Nepal, some say Mech and Kachari belongs to the same race, some of the Mech of Assam call themselves Rajbangsis. They Non-Aryan Yogini Tantra calls them Mlechas or Kavach.

Since pre-independence period Assam has been witnessing proliferation of different ethnic identity movements. For understanding the background of such identity movement The Meches are an important tribal group of Assam. This important Tribal groups of people either being threatened with extinction or are being assimilated and therefore they need to be studied on an urgent basis. As far as our knowledge is concerned, till today not a single scientific research study has been done about this tribe. In ancient times they were numerous and aboriginal tribal community of ancient Kamrupa. A systematic study and records of their society, economy, social stratification and most importantly cultural beliefs and practices of this tribe is very important for our greater Assamese society. Otherwise traditional cultural practices, beliefs and knowledge of this tribal community will be lost forever.

The Mech, one of the most popular races in ancient Assam, constituted the largest tribal group in ancient times extending from the pre-Vedic age down to the 16th century A.D. The Mech of present Assam are the Mlecchas or Kiratas of ancient Kamrupa. They were inhabitants of the border areas of Aryan habitations of that time. They spoke non-Aryan language or Kuvasa. That's why they were denominated as Mleccha, Kuvas Kachari (In Bengal's Darjiling Terai area there is a sub-caste of Mech namely Kachra-Mech. The name Kachari may come from this Kachra-Mech) etc. The word Mleccha comes from Pali and Prakrit language. In Pali and Prakrit its form is milakkha and Milakkhu respectively. During this long period, the Mech or the erstwhile Mlechha were the ruling monarchs in Assam under various dynasties with a short interruption during the reign of the Barbhuyans. Those, who had been living in caves, mountains and forest regions of, particularly, Northern and Eastern Himalayan regions ever since the Prehistoric Age, and known as the Adivasis (aborigines), were called for the first time 'Kirat' or Mlecchas by the later Vedic Aryans. The tribes of other parts of India including the trans-Himalayan region in the north having more or less the same pattern of settlements appeared in ancient Indian, Greek and Roman texts under the same denomination. Even the tribes of the Gangetic India, whose settlement patterns were completely different from that of others, received the same name. Historically, linguistically and culturally the word 'Mleccha' underwent several transformations in ancient times. Different appellations have been used for them in Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit languages in inscriptions of different times and in Greek and Roman texts, which are interchangeable. They were known by different names in different regions. They had racial affinities with other tribes in most of the parts of the country. However, they formed a series of allied, yet distinct tribes or clans. Our study has conclusively proved that the term 'Mech' is derived from the ancient term 'Mleccha'. The term 'Mech' was used to refer to the non-Aryan people collectively by the Aryans and it was a derogatory term. Hence, several non-Aryan groups belonging to the umbrella group of Mech, after coming under the influence of Hinduism, began to introduce themselves by various separate identities like Khen, Koch, the Kacharis, Dimasa, the Bodos etc in order to show their separate identity from the negative burden of the pejorative term "Mlechha" or 'Mech'. However, there remained a minuscule group as remnants which still introduce themselves as the Mech people. They may be numerically very small, still they retain a historical legacy which is the most ancient among all the tribes of Assam.

This study reveals that since pre-historic time frequent and successive waves of changes swept over the great Mech community. Till the reign of Bhaskar Varman and even to much later the Mech maintained the pride and glory of their culture, language and religion. Elements of Hindu culture and civilization started to penetrate in the social structure of the Mech with the extension of Buddhism from the time of Bhaskar Varman. Then successive waves of Hinduism came, like tantricism, Saktoism, Saivism and lastly in

the form of Vaisnavism. The entry of Hinduism to the Mech society was not an easy process in an unrestricted way. In order to gain stronghold over the Kirata-Mechs, Hinduism had to compromise with the socio-cultural conditions of the time. Hinduism swept over the entire geographical area inhabited by Pre-historic Kirata-Mech people. After the successive waves of Hinduisation, came the waves of Islamisation with liberal, egalitarian and humanitarian ideals. Successive waves of changes swept way the structural and functional systems of the Mech society, eliminating their socio-cultural identity and transforming demographic boundary of the Mech to the periphery into a limited jurisdiction.

Every wave of changes gave a fatal blow on the structural and functional system of the Mech, dismantling their socio-cultural identity. The Mech people have valuable contribution in the construction and extension of Aryan culture, language, value, ideals, religion etc. The Mech people consciously sacrificed their ancestral culture, language, religion etc in favour of Aryanism. This valuable contribution of the Mech to the Assamese Civilization in the vast area of Eastern and North-eastern India is completely ignored by the builders of Indian nationalism. The glorious history of these people was put into the intellectual garbage. The growth and development of a society, positive or negative, is a continuous process starting from the tribal stage to 21st century modernism. It is based on a sequence. In order to understand the society we must go through the entire historical process of changes. In certain time, the change in the society is directed to a totally different direction from the on-going one, conditioned by a factor or number of factors.

The nature, process, direction and condition of changes are different from society to society, civilization to civilization and time to time. The direction of change in the Mech society, till the arrival of the English people in India, was guided by the principle of cultural assimilation and directed to assimilation into the Hindu or Islamic social structure sacrificing their own social identity in favour of the Hindu or the Islamic society. Arrival of British people in India set a new tradition of social change. The British introduced democratic polity based on the principles of liberty, equality, democracy, justice, fraternity, welfare and development etc. The people were also granted certain fundamental rights as well as right to protective discrimination. Earlier direction of change was towards assimilation but during British period, the direction of change took opposite turn. Instead of assimilation, the process of restructuring and reassertiveness of self-identity began. Emergence of socio-cultural consciousness amongst the Mech since 1900 and the recent movements for the development of language, literature, culture, education and political autonomy are conditioned by basically the new-scientific, rational and intellectual environment created by the British government. The Mech intelligentsia of the early part of 20th century had the opportunity to utilise these conditions in favour of restructuring their society, culture, history, language etc. They also capitalised on other factors like their glorious history, culture and civilization of the past etc in favour of identity movement. The Mech society and culture, which was on the verge of extinction in the successive waves of Buddhism, Hinduization and Islamization, regained its life to revivalism under new socio-political and constitutional order conditioned by the British government. The extension of Aryanisation and process of deMechization (the gradual loss of Mech identity and nomenclature) are two sides of the same coin. The conditions for Aryanisation are the conditions for deMechisation. The Sanskritisation is a continuous historical process conditioned by a number of factors. We cannot evaluate this process of social change as good or bad, just or unjust under the 21st century concepts of equality, liberty, democracy, justice, humanity etc. It would be totally absurd to blame the builders of Assamese nationality of 19th century or Hindu Kings and Brahmin Pundits or some other else for destructuring of the Mech society, culture, tradition etc since prehistoric time. The conditions which led the formation and development of Indian nationalism were the conditions governing the formation and development of Assamese nationality. We cannot detach it from the historical process of Hinduisation and Aryanisation. It would not be scientific to examine the restructuring of the Mech Society on present standpoint as good or bad, just or unjust under the 21st century paradigm of equality, liberty, democracy, justice, humanity etc. Rather it would be proper to examine the matter on the basis of contemporary socio-cultural, economic, political, religious conditions of the past. The studies also

show that, in the process of Aryanisation and Hinduisation - primary role was taken by the autonomous kings;

Brahmins were just an instrument to execute the political desire of the absolute rulers. Causes of Social disparity and conflicts are always basically conditioned by economic factors. Economic backwardness, unemployment, poverty and other socio-cultural reasons constitute primary reasons for the Mech unrest. Under this condition, the demand for autonomy among the Mech in upper Assam gained momentum since 2003 after the signing of Bodo Territorial Council accord. As a result, the state govt under the chief minister Tarun Gogoi granted a kind of autonomous rule in the form of development council in 2011 to the community for their economic and cultural development. It may be considered that the amicable settlement of the ethnic movements lies in the fulfilment of basic economic and socio-cultural needs of the people through sophisticated political and economic instrument for progress and development.

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