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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ETYMOLOGY OF A NAME: 'BHOKSA'.

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Abstract

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Introduction:-

The states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand in India are home to a number of tribes such as Tharu, Bhoksa, Raji, Bhotia ,Khasa and others. Among these Bhoksa and Raji come under the category of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Around seventy five tribes have been listed as PVTGs by the Government of India. Tribes which come under the category of PVTGs are those who follow a pre-agriculture level of technology, have a stagnant or declining population, have low literacy , and are living on subsistence economy.

The present paper discusses the diverse views and stories that abound the term "Bhoksa', who are they and where did they come from. Census of India mentions that population of the Bhoksa is 46771. They are mainly rural bound. Only about 0.8% live in urban areas. A nominal percentage (0.7) among them have attained education up to graduation.

The Name - "Bhoksa":-

Each tribe is specific, unique in terms of its culture and each tribe has a name. Believing in the belief that nothing comes out of nowhere, one is left thinking as to how a tribe got its name. There are legends and myths that are interpreted to arrive at an answer and there is usually more than one answer. It is interesting to find that the word 'Bhoksa' has been variously spelt in secondary sources like, Bhogsa (Nesfield 1885),Buksa (Nag and RorBurman 1971), 'Bhoxa' (Hasan 1971) 'Buxa' (Hasan 1979; Bhist 1999), Bhoksa (Singh K.S. 1994; Hasnain 1991), and 'Bhuksa' (Singh L.R. 1998) , Pati and Jagatdeb 1991; Mohanty 2004).

There are different views to explain the term 'Bhoksa'. One view given by the Bhoksa is that their ancestors had long beards and bore resemblance to the mountain goat called 'bok'. It is from the word 'bok' that the word Bhoksa came up.

Some Bhoksa believe (Hasan 1979; Bhist S.D. 1999) that it was the British who gave them their name. They say that the British officials looked down upon the Bhoksa with condescending attitude and called them 'bogus' (useless). The Bhoksa believe that with time , the word 'bogus' became 'Bhoksa' . According to yet another view given by the Bhoksa , the word 'Bhoksa' comes from the Hindi word 'Busa'. They explain that in the early years

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of their settlement in the Tarai region, they had to struggle for existence. Procuring food from the difficult terrain of the Tarai was a very difficult task. They had to survive on whatever they could find like roots, animals and ate these even when they had rotted. The Hindi word for food gone rotten is 'Busa' and so it is from this word that they got their name Bhoksa.

The word 'Bhoksa' is derived from the words 'Bhakshi' or 'Sarva Bhakshi' or 'Bhakosane Wala' meaning devourers, as explained by Hasan (1979) and Bhist (1999) in their respective studies. The outsiders called the Bhoksas 'bhakshis' as they ate all jungle animals like horse, deer etc. It is also held by some that the word Bhoksa comes from the Persian word 'Eksa' which means 'uniform' and there can be a possibility that this name was given by the Mughals. They found it unique that tribe had no caste or sub caste differences among its members and they appeared as 'one' or 'eksa' [Hasan 1979; Bhist S.D. 1999].

Bhoksa believe that when their ancestors settled in the Tarai during the reign of the Mughals, they hid in dense forests (Lukka). They were called Luksa from which the word Buksa or Bhoksa was derived.

It makes for a rather interesting research to unravel the tales, myths, facts and beliefs about the origin of a community, its antecedents and its name. Such exploration leads towards invaluable information about the community and helps in restoring the facts in oral tradition.

Bhoksa: Antecedents:-

Apart from inhabiting areas of Bijnore, the Bhoksa are spread over the areas of Bhabar and Terai regions of Uttarakhand. They inhabit two main areas of the locale - the foothills of Dehradun district in the Garhwal region and the Tarai area of Nainital district in the Kumaon region. The Bhoksa of the two areas share similarities in their way of living and practices. However they do not like to acknowledge the similarities. Each group is endogamous and considers it beneath its dignity to enter into marital relations with the other. Geographical distance seems to be the reason for the lack of camaraderie between the Bhoksa of the two areas. They trace diverse roots of their lineage. The Bhoksa of Tarai consider themselves to be Rajvanshi and Chandravanshi Rajputs whereas the Bhoksa of the Garhwal region claim to be the descendents of the Kushavanshi or Nagvanshi Rajputs. The Garhwal region Bhoksa are popularly known as 'Mehra' or 'Mehre' or Mahre Bhoksas. Amir Hasan has worked extensively in the tribes of Uttar Pradesh. He was in the Uttar Pradesh Civil Services. As the Tribal Welfare Officer, he brought forth the life and problems of lesser known, almost isolated tribes of Uttar Pradesh, Bhoksa being one of them. Hasan [1971:102] informs that the word Mahre comes from the Persian word 'Mahram'. The meaning of Mahram is, 'a knowledgeable person'. The Bhoksa tell that their help was sought by the Raja of Tehri Garhwal in hunting animals in the forests. As the Bhoksa were well aware and informed about the area, they helped as guides in these hunting expeditions as they had sound knowledge about the area and the forests. Bhoksa came to be addressed as Mahram - the knowledgeable people. With the passage of time 'Mahram' came to be popularly pronounced as Mehre. The Bhoksa of Garhwal tell about yet another incident connected to the title 'Mehre'. They say that they were called Mahre by a British officer who was guided by a bhoksa to his camp when he lost his way in the wood.

The origin of the word Mahre or Mehra is shrouded in ambiguity, according to Crooke (1896). The word Mehre or Mehra is used for the Kahars, who were considered as people who could be well trusted and who could enter the inner compartments of women (Mahila in Sanskrit) [Hasan 1979:23]. Hasan is not "convinced that the word Mahre or Mehra has Sanskrit origin. He writes that the correct term used for the Kahars is Mahra but for the Bhoksas it is Mahre or Mehre. The resemblance of name as applied to the two communities (Kahars and Buxas) appears to be incidental".

At the invitation of Raja Sukhdeo Shah of Tehri, the Bhoksas came to the region from beyond the river Ganga. The Raja needed them as guides in his shooting expeditions [Crooke 1896; Hasan 1979]. Crooke maintains that Bhoksas of Kumaon and Garhwal are semi-hinduized people having Mongoloid ethnic strain [Crooke 1896]. Now, the Bhoksas of Dehradun do not like to be addressed as Mahre. Instead they call themselves Kushvanshi Rajputs as they claim to be the descendents of Kusha, the son of Rama and Sita. Hasan [1971:100-101] writes that the Bhoksas maintain that they are Rajputs divided into Chandravanshi, Suryavanshi and Rajvanshi Rajputs. The Bhoksas of Dehradun known as Mehra claim to be Kushbansi Rajputs. Legends and myths become a rich source of information to know the antecedents of a community. "Myth, in a sense, a prototype history since it is a selection of ideas composed in narrative form for the purpose of preserving and giving significance to an important aspect of the past. Although myths cannot be used as descriptive sources on the past their analysis can reveal the more emphatic

assumptions of the society. Myth record what people like to think about their past and to that extend even some modern histories are not always free of an element of myth making" (RomilaThapar, Ancient Indian Social History : Some Interpretations , Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1979, pp 294-295).

According to a myth (Hasan 1971), Sita , wife of Rama left her son Lava with a blind rishi (ascetic) in the forest. A female monkey holding her dead child closely to her chest accused Sita of leaving her child in the care of a blind man who was incapable of looking after himself. The monkey's words had such an effect on Sita that she retraced her steps and took away the child when the 'rishi' was in meditation. When the 'rishi' found the child missing he collected some Kush (dry grass) and created a new baby. Later when Sita realized that taking away the child from the 'rishi' was not the right thing to do, she went back to the rishi with Lava only to find Kush, an exact replica of her son. At the 'rishi's' instance Kush too, was adopted by Sita as her son. The Mehra (Bhoksas of Dehradun) claim to be the descendents of Kush and in this way, link themselves with Sita and Rama.

There are diverse views about the antecedents of the Bhoksas. The Bhoksa and their neighbour , the Tharu claim royal descent. Tharu is a tribe. The Tharu are spread over a vast tract at the Indo-Nepal border and inhabit the districts of Lakhimpur-Kheri, Gonda, Bahraich, Balrampur and Gorakhpur in the state of Uttar Pradesh and Nainital and Udham Singh Nagar in Uttaranchal. They are also found in parts of Bihar, Bengal, Assam and Nepal (Maiti 2011) Like the Bhoksa, the Tharu also live in the region of Terai . The Tharu hold the belief that the ruler of Terai was defeated by an invader in the remote past . The date of the invasion is not clearly known. Having lost to the invader, the women of the royal family escaped to the forests with their attendants in order to save themselves from falling into the hands of the invader. Their attendants were low caste people - the 'chamars' and the 'sais'. eventually intermarriage between the royal ladies and these men gave rise to two groups - Tharu and Bhoksa. The Tharu say that they are the descendents of the Chamars were as the Bhoksa claim to be the descendents of the Sais. That way the Tharu and Bhoksa claim to be sharing their roots. Yet each of them considers itself to be the superior of the other and do not like to enter into matrimonial alliance with the other.

Some Bhoksa explain that their ancestor Raja Jagatdeo of Rajasthan had two sons - Chittaur and Nandhaur [Hasan 1979:21]. It is believed that the Tharu are the descendents of Chittaur and the Bhoksa are the descendents of Nandhaur. The Bhoksa hold the Goddess called Kashipur Ki Devil in great reverence. She is regarded as a parochial form of Goddess Durga. The Bhoksas tell that that Raja Jagatdeo was a devout follower of Goddess Durga and as a manifestation of his faith in her , he offered her his head. The Bhoksa continue to worship the Kashipur Ki Devi with the 'nariyal' (coconut) , the nariyal symbolising the head of Raja Jagatdeo. The Bhoksa narrate that the Raja Jagatdeo and his people sought shelter in the Terai after being defeated and chased by the Mughals. Terai became their refuge and they finally settled in the Terai.

Henry Elliot gives a slightly different account about the ancestry of the Bhoksa. According to him that some Bhoksa claim to be the follower of Udyajit, brother of the Raja Jagatdeo , the Raja of Dharanagar and say that they are Panwar Rajputs. It is commonly believed that the Bhoksa came to Terai from Dharanagar which can be located in the region of Rajasthan. Udyajit had quarrels with his brother Raja Jagatdeo and was forced to leave home . Udyajit and his followers . after wandering for some days finally settled in Banbasa on the bank of river Sarda. The Raja (King) of Kumaon sought the help of Udayjit and his followers to save his territory from the neighbouring rulers. He won over his invading enemies and in return for the help rendered by Udyajit, he and his followers were allowed to live in the Raja's territory.

While tracing the antiquity of the Bhoksa, one comes across their mention in the masterpiece work of statecraft of the Mughal era , 'Ain-i-Akbari' written by Abul Fazal.

Diverse views about the roots of the Bhoksa and their history of migration renders little concrete information. What is even more significant is the fact that Bhoksa convey a rare streak of communal wisdom by asserting that all the Bhoksa are equal and there is no hierarchy of high and low amidst them. Ambiguity about their identity makes them look at it with least significance. They emphasize that not all their ancestors were the descendents of Raja Jagatdev or had royal blood. They belonged to different castes like Nai, Chamar, Bania, Teli, Jat and Thakur or Kshatriya. However, they realized that in order to derive the maximum benefit from the difficult area of their habitat i.e. Terai and to make a comfortable settlement there it was necessary to do away with caste feeling and work together as equals. Thus they unanimously decided to merge all the castes into one and took oath over 'noon-Iota' or salt and water. Ever since the Bhoksas have been casteless. One view regarding the origin of the Bhoksas has been

given by W. Crooke who states that many Bhoksas claim that they came from Dakkhin while other Bhoksas say that they came from Delhi and they were expelled from the Dakkhin by the Marathas [Hasan 1979:21].

Conclusion:-

Bhoksa is an indigenous community. They settled in Terai much before the area was colonised by migrants from other areas. Government records such as the Gazetteers do not give much information about the origin of the Bhoksa. Ethnographic study carried out by the author bring forth the views of the Bhoksa themselves about their nomenclature as well as about their antecedents. The responses of the Bhoksa convey their mind set and their sense of pride in their culture. Myths and tales as sources of authentic information may always be debated, but there is no denying the fact that they mirror the deep seated beliefs and views of a people which they deem to be correct. An exploration of a tribe's name help in reaching nearer to the history of the origin, which otherwise is lost in antiquity.

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