

Tribal transformation in Assam: A village-level study of Thengal Kachari tribe of Assam

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2025, 28(01), 408-413

Publication history: Received on 21 August 2025; revised on 30 September 2025; accepted on 03 October 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2025.28.1.3366>

Abstract

This paper investigates how modern forces such as modernization, globalization and Information and Communication technology (ICT) are reshaping the socio-economic lives of the Thengal Kachari tribe in Assam focusing on four villages in Jorhat district of Assam. A mixed methods approach was employed and data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and secondary sources from 25 respondents in each village total of 100 respondents. In recent years the Thengal Kachari tribe has experienced rapid transformation due to new infrastructure, improved connectivity and increasing exposure to global networks. The Thengal Kachari tribe is one of the oldest Bodo group of the Mangoloid family. This tribal group historically inhabiting in a vast area of Assam, including Karbi Anglong, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, and Sonitpur. The study examines the changes in various areas, including education, health, economy, life style, culture, family system etc. The findings reveal the high mobile phone access, widespread perception of cultural erosion, and moderate ICT based income, declining of traditional practices basically among the youth. The Thengal Kachari experiencing socio-economic advancement together with cultural changes. These findings contribute to broader discussions on globalization, identity and tribal resilience focusing the need for culturally sensitive ICT and development policies.

Keywords: Modernisation; Globalisation; ICT; Socio-Economic Change; Thengal Kachari

1. Introduction

The Thengal Kachari tribe is an oldest tribe of Assam, belonging to Bodo group of larger Mangoloid family. Today they have primarily inhabitant in Karbi Anglong, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, and Sonitpur district of Assam. Like the other indigenous communities this tribe has witnessed significant changes largely due to the processes of modernization, globalization, and the influences of Information and Communication Technology. This all have contributed to transforming their way of life.

“According to **Risley**, they derived their name ‘Thengal’ from an ancestor, who is said to have ascended to heaven leg foremost. (Sengupta,2003).

This plains tribe of is an offshoot of the larger Kachari group. The Kacharis are also identified as the “Bodo-Kacharis” in the Brahmaputra Valley. Kameswar Brahma also wrote, “The Bodo people of the eastern part of Assam, who settled in the Cachar district, especially in North Cachar of Assam, call themselves Kacharis.”

“However, as a result of modernization and socio-economic shifts, the intersection of financial situations, religious views, and cultural traditions within the Thengal Kachari group is always changing. The Thengal Kachari depends basically on the natural resources.

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Binita Barooah in her monograph 'The Sonowal Kacharis of Assam' (1998:1) mentioned that "... the Kacharis had no written records or history in their languages and references of them can be had only in the Buranjis (Histories) of Assam. The Origin of the term 'Kachari' is very difficult to trace and the term seems to be unknown to the people themselves."

Dr. Nanda Bora in his work "Asomor Thengal Kachari Itibrata" explores the history and cultural heritage of this indigenous community. He discusses in details about the origins, historical evolution and unique cultural practices of the tribe. He also explores the changes the tribe experiences in different field.

N.N. Acharyya (1996:82) said that "The origin of the word Kachari is difficult to trace. Different scholars and traditions have put forward various opinions regarding the matter. Moreover, as per their physical features and general appearance, they are like Mongolian type, and this would point to their original home being somewhere in Tibet or China."

According to Garo tradition, their forefathers believed to be the offspring of Hindu and Tibetan blood, descended from the northern mountains and halted at Cooch-Behar and then they moved through Jogighopa, and crossing the Brahmaputra to Dalgoma, and finally settled in the Garo Hills. Sir Edward Gait observed that Kacharis are "very closely allied to the Koches and also, so far as the language is concerned (they are close) to the Chutias, Lalungs and the Morans of the Brahmaputra Valley, and to the Garos and Tipperas of the southern hills."

C.A. Soppitt said that the Kachari race originally inhabited the hills and slopes to the north of the Brahmaputra, and then gradually extended through central Assam to the Mymensingh district, the headquarters of the Raja being established at Guwahati."

Sidney Endle's "The Kacharis" (1911) present in detailed about the larger Kachari community, with their subgroups such as Bodo-Kachari, Sonowal-Kachari, Thengal Kachari, Saraniya-Kachari, and so on. This book provides a complete picture of the tribal culture, their social organisation, and historical evolution. The author traces the tribe's beginnings, migration, and contacts with nearby tribes in detail.

The Mongolians of the China-Tibetan language group, believed to have migrated to Assam and Nepal from China, around 2000 BC. They were referred as "Kirat" by ancient Sanskrit speaking Indians. These communities were believed to be engaged in production and trade of silk and jute. Historically these commodities linked to the term "Ser" or "Seres" in Chinese, referring to silk. Thus the communities involved in the trade of silk they were called as "Seraitis", "Kiraitis" or "Kiradia". In India it became known as Kirat. Therefore, the Kirat nation refers to the people of Central Asia who traded in the jute cloth of China.

The Kirats usually lived along large rivers or mountains. Scholars believe that the name Kachcha + Ari > Kachari is derived from Kakshawat in Sanskrit by adding 'Ari' to Kakshat > Kachchat > Kachcha because they lived along rivers, mountains and hillsides.

Dr. Banikant Kakati mentions, "Various guesses have been made about the origin of the word kachari, but it seems likely that the word is connected with Sanskrit kaksata, a hypothetical formation parallel to Sanskrit kirata, a frontier dweller"

These Kirat or Kachari people of the Mongolian group living in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam call themselves Boro or Boro Fisha." There is no word for 'Kachari' in the Boro-Kachari or Dimasa Kachari languages.

Bora (2000) and Borah (2005) state it was after the war of 1526 A.D. in which Ahoms was defeated, two expert young Kachari soldiers, Jong Bahadur and Chakrdsdhvaj came along with some of their families to establish a separate Kachari kingdom on the bank of the Doyang River at Kachamari (Golaghat). During that time of war Jong Bahadur, the Kachari soldiers fought very bravely wearing "Thenga" (Pantaloons). But that time they used Thenga (pantaloons) as everyday attire. Therefore this ethnic group were called as Thengal by other people and latter they are known as Thengal Kachari as a separate Kachari community.

Baruah (1998) express that the Thengal Kachari community served the Ahom kings and wore a unique uniform consisting of a long shirt or Thenga shirt that touched their heels which might have led to the name "Thengal".

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the effects of modernization and globalization on traditional socio-cultural practices.
- To analyze the role of ICT in shaping the economic activities and livelihood of the Thengal Kachari tribe.

- To evaluate the socio-economic changes within the Thengal Kachari tribe due to modernization and ICT integration.

1.1. Study Area

The study was conducted in four villages located under different Gaon Panchayats in Titabar, district Jorhat, Assam.

- **Nagabat Thengal Gaon**
 - A remote village under Raidanjuri Gaon Panchayat, 30 km from Titabar town.
 - Predominantly Thengal Kachari, with a mix of Ahom, Tea Workers, and Chutia communities.
- **Bhuluki Chuk**
 - A purely Thengal Kachari village under Madhapur Gaon Panchayat, 13 km from Titabar town.
 - Minimal interaction with other communities.
- **Layet Nachungi**
 - Located 2 km from Titabar town under 82 No. Birinasayek Gaon Panchayat.
 - Predominantly Thengal Kachari but influenced by nearby diverse communities.
- **Mordholi Kachari Gaon**
 - Village under 64 No. Thengal Gaon Panchayat, 3 km from Titabar town.
 - Proximity to diverse social groups despite being predominantly Thengal Kachari.
 - All the four villages chosen for the study located under Titabar Development Block under Titabar sub division of Jorhat district. This village has been chosen because a maximum number of populations of these villages are Thengal kachari tribe.

2. Methodology

For this study a mixed method approach has been utilized, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data and for primary data the respondents were selected through purposive sampling method. For the study 100 respondents (25 from each village) were selected. The secondary data are collected from journals, books, magazines, newspapers, articles and internet sources etc. Case studies of families and small business has done and has attempted to analyse how changes has occurred in their life due to the process of globalization, modernization and also due to impact of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). The researcher has focused on certain approaches and views of scholars such as Anthony Giddens, Manuel Castells, Arjun Appadurai, Samuel Huntington and tried to find out the applicability of their ideas in the circumstances of Thengal Kachari tribe...

2.1. Review of Related Literature

Anthony Giddens in "Sociology" (4th ed., Polity Press) expressed, "Social Change is the deep shift in the basic structure of a social group or society. Social change is a constant phenomenon in social life, but in modern age it has become especially intense." [1]

Daniel Lerner, in his book The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East (1958), introduces a model of modernizing the Middle East (1958), introduces a model of modernization highlighting three main attributes that's are Empathy, Mobility and high participation... According to him, modernization fosters a societal shift from traditional values to more progressive, inclusive, and participatory models. [2]

According to Anthony Giddens 'Globalization' is the "Increasing interdependence of communities and countries in the world as Social and economic relationships come to stretch globally." [1]

2.2. Findings and Discussion

Remarkable changes have been occurred in the selected village for a few decades. The changes have been noticed in every area of life like socio-cultural, economic, infrastructure, health and hygiene, transportation etc.

2.3. Socio-Cultural Impact of Modernization and Globalization:

Due to modernization and globalization traditional lifestyle of Thengal Kachari tribe has shifted. Their traditional cultural practices such as their distinct folk traditions, festivals, social norms, have undergone changes and at risk. younger generation basically live in semi-urban area are giving away the traditional practices.

Table 1 Impact of Modernization and Globalization on Socio-Cultural life of Thengal Kachari tribe

Aspect	Village 1 (%)	Village 2 (%)	Village 3 (%)	Village 4 (%)	Overall (%)
Perception of Cultural Erosion	70	75	68	60	68
Loss of Traditional Practices	55	62	58	50	56
Adoption of Global Fashion & Lifestyle	72	77	70	69	72
Reduction in Participation in Cultural Festivals	44	40	42	45	43
Change in Social Norms (e.g., Marriage, Family)	45	48	50	42	46
Increased Influence of External Media (TV, Social Media)	60	62	65	58	61
Desire for Modern Education Over Traditional Knowledge	70	75	72	70	71

The data reveals that majority of the Thengal Kachari population of the selected villages perceives that modernization and globalization have contributed to cultural erosion. Table shows that there is a notable decline in traditional practices. The younger people of the villages are highly adopting global fashion design and lifestyle. Thus cultural values shifted towards modernity. Overall 43% of respondents decline in participating in traditional festivals which reflects the loss of interest in such traditional cultural practices. Social norms particularly of marriage and family life are evolving. Nearly two-thirds of total populations are reporting external media as a strong influence in changing cultural changes. 71% of the population desire to seek modern education rather than preserving traditional knowledge.

Table 2 Data on ICT usage and Economic Impact Among the Thengal Kachari Tribe

Aspect	Village 1 (%)	Village 2 (%)	Village 3 (%)	Village 4 (%)	Overall (%)
Access to Mobile Phones	90	88	93	94	91
Use of the Internet for Business	15	10	8	12	11
Participation in E-commerce	4	3	2	6	4
Average Monthly Income from ICT	₹4,000	₹5,500	₹4,200	₹6,000	₹4,675
Traditional Livelihoods (Agriculture, Weaving)	70	65	72	60	67
Youth Migration to Nearby Towns	25	22	20	27	23

The data of the table shows that the tribe has high access to mobile phones that is 91% but the adoption of ICT for business and gradually they focuses on e-commerce that is 11% for business and 4% for e-commerce. Traditional livelihood like agriculture and weaving still dominated with 67% but changing to modernity. The data shows that the tribe slightly engaged in ICT based income. Youth migration to nearby towns is moderate with 23% indicating the influence of urbanization. Overall, while ICT and modernization have brought some connectivity, the tribes socio-economic life changes gradually which was primarily shaped by traditional livelihood like agriculture, weaving etc.

2.4. Socio-Economic Changes within the Thengal Kachari Tribe Due to Modernization and ICT Integration

The integration of modernization and ICT has led to various socio-economic changes which transformed the tribe's traditional way of life and accept new opportunities.

Table 3 Socio-Economic Changes within the Thengal Kachari Tribe Due to Modernization and ICT Integration

Area of Change	Traditional Aspect	Modernized Aspect	Impact
Infrastructure	Lack of basic amenities (roads, electricity, water, sanitation)	Motorable roads, electricity, water, sanitation facilities,	Improved living standards, better access to services
Economic Activities	Primarily agricultural (subsistence farming)	Agricultural modernization, business, and government services	Increased economic opportunities and diversified livelihoods
Technological Integration	Minimal technology, use of traditional farming tools	Mobile phones, internet connectivity, modern farming tools	Enhanced connectivity, access to global knowledge
Cultural Changes	Traditional dress, food habits, music, and sports	Adoption of Western food, dress, music, and sports	Cultural fusion and hybridization
Family Structure	Predominantly joint families	Rise in nuclear families, especially in urban and service sectors	Changing social dynamics, influence of urbanization
Health Practices	Reliance on traditional medicine	Use of allopathic treatment, access to modern healthcare	Improved health outcomes and access to medical facilities
Education	Limited access to formal education	Access to higher education (graduates, postgraduates, professionals)	Improved literacy and educational attainment

From the above table it is seen a clear transformation in the Thengal Kachari tribe's life due to the impact of modernization and globalization. The change is from traditional to modern values, leading to a more pluralistic society. At the same time the tribe is trying to preserve their traditional culture despite the growing influence of western culture. Modern ICT tools has significantly expanded the economic opportunities of the tribe and engaging in broader markets like online markets and improving agricultural practices. Educational landscape have shifted, with technology in knowledge and skill development and pave the way for global learning resources. As modernization exposed the tribe to new ideas it has also led to some cultural erosion. At the same time it is seen that digital platform helps in preserving their traditions.

The infrastructural development has been taking place, electricity, drinking water, health and sanitation, mobile and internet, and so on facilitated at the villages. Their primary livelihood was cultivation and livestock rearing which now changes to various govt, semi-govt or private jobs, different kind of business, and some migrated to different parts of country. Others those engage in agriculture and livestock rearing activities they used modern technology on that. At the same time their traditional food habit, cooking system, dress pattern has changed.

The family structure has shifted. Nuclear family has becoming more common basically among those who live in urban area or engaged in service. The house pattern has changed from traditional type made by bamboo, woods etc to modern concrete house. Preference of western-style clothing increases among younger generation over traditional tribal dress. In health section a tremendous changes has taken place. Faith on allopathic medicine has increase and using traditional medicine declined.

As Daniel Learner expressed, three main attributes such as empathy, mobility and high participation along with rational attitudes has seen in this Thengal Kachari society of studied villages. They have the ability to understand the point of views of others, a lot of mobility can be identified. At the same time high participation is seen in different aspects of life. Identity clash as pointed by Samuel Huntington in his Theory of Clash of the civilizations may take place. Hybridization process has also seen in this tribal's life.

3. Conclusion

Some changes have been observed among Thengal Kachari tribe in every aspect of life like road and connectivity to infrastructure development, education to health and hygiene, culture, family structure, dress pattern, food habit, games and music and so on. The findings of this study cannot be generalized. So, more research in this aspect is needed to verify the findings.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgements

The authors thankfully acknowledge the support of community peoples of the study areas that's Nagabat Thengal gaon, Bhuluki Chuck, Layet Nachungi and Mordholi Kachari Gaon.

Discloser of conflict of interest

The authors have no any conflict of interest.

Statement of informed consent

The authors informed all the respondents about the purpose of the study.

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