

Tirbal Tradition and the Problem of Identity in Assam

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KEY WORDS Little tradition. Sedentary tribal group. Subsistence living. Protracted contact. Non-tribal Assamese. Tribal development.

ABSTRACT The hill and the plain's tribesmen of Assam(India) have been subjected to myriad of changes in the politico-socio-cultural life following large-scale advent of urbanization and westernization ever since the fifties of this century. The steady flow of non-tribal up-country men and materials from the heartland of the country is verily distorting the age-old traditional and aesthetic way of life of the tribesmen of Assam. The present-day tribal people's concern to keep their socio-political identity in tact is likely to be metamorphosed in the wake of uninterrupted penetration of alien elements of culture. Tribal identity will certainly prove to be fragile considering the advent of the modern national and global trends to usher in scientific and technological innovations in all walks of life.

INTRODUCTION

In Assam there are tribesman both in the hills and the plains. Most tribal habitats located in inaccessible and remote regions, are far off from the din and bustle of urban complexes. It is a fact that the Assam tribesman both in the hills and the plains have lived an age-old isolated life; they never in the history of their habitations felt the need of having thorough transport and communication in their own locality. Nowhere in the tribal land the notion of distance and remoteness baffled a tribal mind. Distance or remoteness was structurally considered to be a part of the way of life. Since known historical times each sedentary tribal group has lived the isolated self-content subsistence pattern of life within the periphery of its own little tradition (Redfield, 1955). Such an isolated age-old secluded life, in the course of its long history of existence, had occasional contacts for some dire material needs to be fulfilled with the nearest centre of urban life where abounded centres of great tradition (Redfield, 1955). The occasional interactions between a little and a great tradition, eventually get established as a perpetual

phenomenon, the former receiving feed-back from the latter. In the process, the little tradition borne by the tribesman, gets enriched and refined as a result of protracted contact with the Assamese, the non-tribal bearers of great traditions. Notwithstanding the occasional casual interactions between these two distinct groups of people, the tribal had not lost much of their cultural ethos and thereby maintained their socio-cultural life in a steady form, with little metamorphosis over hundreds of generations till recent years. The tribesmen of Assam consistently manifest an almost obsessional adherence to the traditional norms, practices and patterns. It can reasonably be asserted that tribal norms and patterns die hard, and the tribal life gets very much characterized by a good deal of consistency, stability and immutability. These features are formed in the social life through highly effective kinship bond that remains ever saturated with emotional feeling of attachment and a sense of dependability in the face of most unforeseen eventualities of life. Kinship relationships ramify all aspects of socio-cultural life – material, spiritual and aesthetic – binding individuals in an unbreakable bond of fellow-feeling.

Tribal Tradition

A socio-historical perspective in the life of a tribal community shows that its norms and practices get built up over the generations with little mutability or any trace of dynamism in the formative process. These are moulded and shaped and become steadfastly adhered to in the people's life. The multiple socio-cultural ways, modes, methods and practices adopted and imbibed by each and every community member get steadily but constantly internalized into a normative pattern, that becomes an inherent part of the individual's personality. It becomes bound with the person concerned, developing a sense of emotional attachment and a sense of

impartibility from the mass of acquired socio-cultural features. Most of the people's norms and practices get cemented in the people's psyche through constant intra-community interaction. In the internalization of behaviour patterns, kinship relationships play a key role, as stated above. As a system, it imparts the sense of obligation and responsibility. It also provides a sense of security against various odds in the life of an individual. Man reposes confidence in the efficacy of the kinship system of the community. The notion of joint responsibility intrinsic in the kinship relationships acts as a great safety valve at the time of facing unforeseen eventuality or life-crises.

The aforesaid general characteristics are clearly manifested in the behaviour patterns of the tribal groups of Assam. Being aloof and geographically isolated, as they lived practically upto mid-fifties of this century, the tribesmen build up the community as the most dependable and reliable support in life. An individual outside the periphery of the community is an anathema and is never worth living his or her life. It provides a person with ground for internalizing the behavioral patterns – the social norms – as a member of the community. These are jealously guarded and most assiduously preserved. Folklores and folktales get built up around the traditional norms. Their effectiveness and impact on the society are greatly admired, and great social values are assigned to those holding those in great esteem. Often verses, songs and ballads are composed depicting the glorious and heroic deeds of the clan-heroes who are frequently elevated to the status of mythical beings with superhuman qualities. Protracted internalized norms that are perpetually practised and followed are invariably given an aura of sacred heritage hallowed by the names of the ancestors. Any deviation from the established norms tinged with the sacrosanct memory of the lamented forefathers are fraught with grave misfortune or adversity in the family.

Tribal and Non-tribal Habitations

In Assam since long before the advent of westernization and urbanization, the tribesmen used to have differential degree of exposure to non-tribal world. The Assam tribesmen, irre-

spective of their abode in the hills or the plains, were exposed first and foremost to the non-tribal Assamese people inhabiting the sprawling Brahmaputra valley. The two groups of people, namely, the non-tribals of the Brahmaputra valley and the tribesmen of the hills and the plains of Assam, have had since dim historical past their own distinctive norms of conduct, food-habits, economic pursuits, ritual beliefs and practices and various other socio-political and aesthetic ways of life. The tribal people living in the plains have had, however, easier and more frequent access to the Assamese plain dwellers than the hill-dwelling tribesmen. However, in an historical perspective it could be well understood that the Assamese and the tribesmen maintained a marked distance in all sorts of socio-cultural relationships, barring a few exceptions. Both the groups of people maintained their own separate distinctive socio-ethnic identity and existence. There are explicit variations in the ways of life lived and followed by the tribal and non-tribal people of Assam. Such variations are seen in respect of spoken languages, aesthetic ways and manners of life. Basically Assamese has been serving as the lingua franca among the various ethno-linguistic groups; it, however, fails to bring a true cultural synthesis among various ethnic groups.

Materially and intellectually relatively advanced non-tribal Assamese people of the valley as being precursors and torch-bearers of sophisticated advanced life-ways in Assam are obsessed with a notion of superiority in relation to the followers of the "lowly" ways of life, that is, the tribal ways. The notion of superiority in the behavioral ways on the part of the non-tribal Assamese people has been acting as a hiatus between the tribal and non-tribal folks in Assam.

Notwithstanding the aforesaid socio-cultural barricades and disparity inhibiting emotional integration and interaction between the tribal and non-tribal groups of people, there has been transient get-together and exchange of news, views and goods and services. Regular weekly markets in the neighbourhood of a cluster of Assamese villages are the only forum for get-together, and those serve as means of communication between the tribal and the non-tribal

Assamese folks. These markets use to provide the two groups of people with opportunities for interpersonal communication and for selling and buying or exchanging of household goods and agricultural produces. Tribal men and women are regular visitors to the weekly markets in the plains with their home-grown saleable produces. And on their way back home, they buy scarce goods like salt, match-boxes, kerosene oil, mill-made clothes, glass wares and glass beads, cosmetics, etc. The markets thus serve as the most regularly haunted ground for transient but important social interaction once in a week. Ethno-social history of the people of Assam speaks eloquently of these weekly get-togethers as occasions for binding on everlasting social friendship, at times not excluding the ritual friendship or the classic concept of being *shakha* between a tribal and a non-tribal.

Enculturation at Work

In the context of the above delineation, it is pertinent to assess the tribesmen's attitude to their socio-cultural ways of life that has in recent years come under the vortex of formidable forces from outlandish sources. Present day tribal cultures, are constantly subject to on-coming stresses and strains in the form of myriads of alien norms, practices and ways of life that are invariably accompanied with numerous material gadgets with extraordinary devices for manipulation and labour saving utility. These material components that are available with utmost ease from international markets serve as the source of aesthetic pleasure and comfortable life-ways at minimal effort. These having had universal appeal and acceptability have achieved naturally spontaneous entry into the households of the tribesmen of Assam over the last few decades. Apart from the outlandish material components, one can visualize unprecedented development spurt in many other socio-cultural aspects of life. The structural change in the Assam tribal cultures come to the forefront, when one ponders over the indigenous tribal concepts of distance and time. In the classical pre-development days, these concepts were the part of the total life, whereas presently these are conceived of as having distinct separate entity and value, and accordingly in tune with the

changed notion, the work-norm gets re-adjusted and mobilized. Also the concept of value in the in-put of human physical labour has diminished, but it has come to be enhanced with the addition of man's intellectual propensity and contents. The list of in-coming material wealth and intellectual contents that have reached and influenced all sections of population everywhere not excluding the tribesmen of Assam, can well be lengthened to comprehend the enormity of the unprecedented spurt of the formidable outlandish discordant forces in the form of industrialization, urbanization and westernization. In Assam, these have penetrated every nook and corner of the society, including the age-old secluded and isolated tribal population. People of the first and second ascending generations in the tribal societies of Assam in their prime of life had never been accustomed to witnessing such unprecedented development dash in every aspect of socio-cultural life.

Presently, by nearly the fag end of this century, with the acquisition of alien material goods and adoption of heterogeneous modes, practices and norms of life, inevitably there has ushered in a good deal of metamorphoses in the age-old traditional ways and means of life. Empirical observations confirm that traditional tribal family, marriage, kinship systems, ritual patterns, belief-systems, etc. have been undergoing steady modifications over the last few decades under the impact of the modern west-oriented forces. It might be noted that metamorphoses in the material and aesthetic behavioural patterns of the tribesmen of Assam have come about relatively rapidly in the post-1950 decades compared to the earlier years, thanks to the recent development of transportation and communication in the international as well as national spheres. Apart from the changes in the social norms and practices, cultural and age-old practices have manifested large-scale changes. Primitive hunting and gathering as means of subsistence livelihood have diminished, and intensive production methods are being widely resorted to in the recent years. Traditional weaving, dress and personal decoration patterns, cooking methods, house-building material-cum-process, agricultural practices, etc. have also manifested changes, and new methods and

practices are being resorted to by the plain and hill dwelling tribesmen of Assam.

The recent development in the means of transportation and communication has resulted in great mobility of men and material, concepts and ideologies, norms and values into the tribal habitations. Influx of non-tribal traders, business men, industrialists and skilled and unskilled labourers and a host of various other workers has considerably metamorphosed the indigenous tribals' psyche concerning their obessional attachment with the place of birth and pursuit of primitive vocations.

On the backdrop of the above delineations, in view of the rapid culture contact with in-coming alien material and non-material cultural elements, the ethnographers tend to believe that in no time the traditional tribal cultures would be on the verge of disappearance and be replaced by modern west-oriented neo-culture complexes. In consonance with this belief, however, so far the tribesmen of Assam have not opted for, or been swept away wholly by, neo-culture components. On the contrary the indigenous tribesman's choice is still a determining one. A good many neo elements are despised and those hardly find any access into the tribal community life. People's choice still has its exclusive role and it is this that sifts the ones acceptable from amidst the despicable or the detestable.

Nehru's Principles of Tribal Development

Notwithstanding the people's incompatibility to certain norms and patterns of in-coming culture elements, on account of these being highly formidable and mobility-prone, it was feared that the tribal cultures might be overwhelmed and swayed by the alien in-coming ones. More specifically, around the very on-set of the second half of this century, apprehensions ran high that the Assamese, the dominant non-tribal community in the Brahmaputra valley, would eventually overwhelm and engulf the primitive satellite groups of tribesmen. In the pan-Indian context, the Assam tribesmen's socio-political position was thought to be volatile and vulnerable, and liable to be quickly battered and vanquished. The portent of swallowing up small isolated groups of tribesmen by

the pan-Indian dominant immigrants or neo-settlers was indeed alarming. The fear from this ominous eventuality was needed to be assuaged. In this context it is worth referring to the Foreword by Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India at the period, to the second edition of *Philosophy for NEFA* by V. Elwin. With regard to the tribal problems in India, Nehru evolved five fundamental principles for tribal development which he mentioned in the Foreword.

The five fundamental principles are as follows :

- (1) People should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them.
- (2) Tribal rights in land and forests should be respected.
- (3) We should try to train and build up a team of their own people to do the work of administration and development. Some technical personnel from outside will, no doubt, be needed, especially at the beginning. But we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory.
- (4) We should not over administer these areas or overwhelm them with multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through and not in rivalry to, their own social and cultural institutions.
- (5) We should judge results, not by statistics or the amount of money spent, but by the quality of human character that is evolved.

The scrupulous adherence to these fundamental principles of Nehru over the last five decades has preserved the tribals' inherent basic rights and interests and saved them from ruthless exploitation by neo-settlers traders and usurious money-lenders. At the same time over the years, norms for tribal administration have been so followed as to enable the tribesmen to develop their own genius. Over the last half a century, tribals have nowhere been overwhelmed in Assam nor is there any trace of decline of the tribal inherent ethos, thanks to the scrupulous observance and following of Nehru's principles.

This, however, does not mean that tribal societies in Assam have remained steady and unchanged, Myriads of changes that have occurred both in the materials as well as non-material

life-aspects, as noted in the foregoing pages, have virtually enriched the quality of tribal life, refined the traditional methods and practices and last but not the least, widened the area of exploitation of the livelihood means of the people. Development in terms of acquired material components and improvement in the system of roads, transportations and communications, eradication of erstwhile infectious killer diseases have cumulatively made present day tribal life more comfortable and aspiration-prone than life in the first half of this century. By and large the improvements have come about without any perceptible erosion in the tribal traditional ethos of life.

CONCLUSION

In the context of the aforesaid observations on tribesmen's socio-ethnic existence in Assam, it is worthwhile to understand if the newly acquired, highly disparate material elements of culture in combination with the new ways and means of life would keep the tribesmen's socio-ethnic identity unaltered in course of time. Could the aforementioned Nehru's principles be effective in shielding the tribesmen's basic identity intact?

Global enculturating forces that are presently swaying world wide are indeed formidable sparing no indigenous culture of the world on a small or large extent. These forces emanate from the phenomena of industrialization, westernization and urbanization. Against these incoming phenomena, survival of any non-Western cultural identity, be it tribal or non-tribal, is a doubtful proposition. A tribal cultural identity, in view of multiple elements constituting

the culture, is somewhat more volatile and susceptible to change, being loosely or weakly integrated than a non-tribal one. A non-tribal culture as it generally becomes based on protracted history behind it, turns out to be more resistant and less resilient than a tribal culture. A non-tribal culture, therefore, can relatively withstand the external onslaughts compared to a highly volatile tribal culture.

Further in the face of the non-traditional alien advancing elements of culture intruding into the land of the Assam tribesmen over the last few decades, the geo-physiographic and bio-socio-cultural environments have deformed considerably necessitating a good deal of re-adjustment of the pristine traditional tribal life-ways. In the wake of continuous re-adjustment, in almost all aspects of traditional life patterns, there would inevitably be ever more increasing inflow of alien elements without any respite. Under the rapidity of inflowing forces, hardly could the optimum level of absorption and imbibition of the alien elements be determinable. Under such emerging circumstances, over prolonged period within the life-span of the present day and forthcoming youngsters, associated forces like horizontal and vertical mobility are likely to effect dispersal of population on a wide scale resulting eventually in obliteration of tribal identity. Tribalism may, in the context of universal globalized culture, turn out to be an anathema.

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