MODERN ASSAMESE LIFE AND CULTURE

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A Culture in the Throes of Sharp Transmutation

Maheswar Neog

Culture is always in a changing process. It is never a closed house or a derailed railway train that cannot move. The changes, however, are sometimes slow and even imperceptible in degree, and at other times the transmutation is phenomenal and inconceivably speedy.

There is a talk that you hear everywhere that Assamese culture is being swamped by other cultures and must now be saved from the catastrophe of certain annihilation. This call of culture in danger is indeed very alarming. But if we go to the question, where Assamese culture is ailing, it would be difficult to find a clear reply. Culture itself is such a vast and comprehensive thing that to define it is to define life. Culture is the way of living, nay, it is life itself. What you eat, what you drink, what you put on your body, how you would like to shape your body, what language and what matter you speak, how you behave in public and private to yourself and to others, what you believe and what you do not, what you fear and what you do not, etc., etc., are all only phases of your culture. When we call a culture by a particular name, we have sometimes an ethnic concept behind our mind, or we do recognise a culture by grouping together the speakers of a language, or it is some geography or some religion that dictates our idea of a culture.

The concept of Assamese culture is mostly based on people's affiliation to, and knowledge of, the Assamese tongue and their belonging to the geographical entity called Assam. One day nearly whoever called himself an Assamese or spoke the Assamese language consistently or sporadically, lived in or belonged to some place in Assam. After the political fragmentation of the old Assam, there are left many Assamese speakers beyond her borders. Do they or do they not carry survivals of Assamese culture with them ? Think of those Assamese who were taken prisoners by the Burmese in the third decade of the last century. The succeeding generations of these people must have merged completely with the Burmese, even though they might still have preserved pieces of bark written manuscripts or tattered Assamese finery only perhaps to draw a tear or a deep sigh. Think also of those Assamese who fled in the years of Burmese occupation of Assam to Bengal and other non-Assamese areas in Cachar and Sylhet and some of them still living there in isolated groups and preserving a little of their language and customs. The fragmentation that the days of our new-found Indian freedom brought to Assam has or will be alienating many, many of us from the Assamese identity. The tribal people of Arunachal who claimed Assamese as their own have now been slowly alienated from us whether or not through the machination of "rats that cut the holy cord asunder." Assamese culture must be all the poorer for this great loss. This is how political geography has been causing cultural landslides.

In the last century there was another cultural battle in Assam and that was in the linguistic field. It was a war between the Assamese language and Bengali and not between the Assamese people and the Bengalis. Bengali took the place of Assamese as official language under the new British regime and as medium of instruction in the schools. Had this been allowed to continue, the Assamese language would have by now easily and completely lost its identity. The Assamese people, however, took the matter easily, and nobody thought of raising a voice of protest. It was the

missionaries of the American Baptist Mission, invited by the rulers of the day to do evangelical work in Assam, that realised that things were really 'rot in the state of Denmark' and took up a twofold programme of protesting and working so that the local language might come to its own. A local officer, Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, joined hands with the Baptists in their task. But the battle had to be continued over a decade and a half even after Phukan's untimely death to come to a happy consummation. This took the province to the eighth decade of the last century, when only real constructive work in the field of language and literature could steadily stem ahead. It took the shape of a literary movement only in the last part of the next decade. Bacause of the confrontation with the Bengali tongue, which spoke heavily upon the progress of Assamese, the latter tongue had now to advance warily lest its identity might be challenged again. A chaste style, meaning an avoidance of the Sanskrit element as far as practicable, became almost the call of the day. Hemchandra Barua, Lakshminath Bezbarua, Padmanath Gohain Barua, Hemchandra Goswami, Satyanath Bora and others, who excelled in this style, therefore, became ideal writers for others to emulate. A Sanskrit laden vocabulary was looked upon with an amount of suspicion, a Bengali or Hindi loan-word stood in need of weeding out, as if Assamese culture must be garbed only in the spoken homely word. In this Lakshminath Bezbaroa officiated as a kind of sentinel for the maintenance of the chastity of the language. He was ever ready with his chastising word for the wrong word and wrong construction. But this force ceased to apply even when Bezbaroa had a few years to live ; and since his decease it is nobody's business to see that the language maintains its own good indigenous standard. The uncontrolled Stevenson jogs along its own course. What would have been termed bad Assamese half a century back has to-day a free course. One can to-day merrily make an admixture of words and idioms from different sources. With the expansion of Assamese teaching widely up to the higher education level this liberty grows into license. This is the

prevailing state of Assamese linguistic culture, in which lack of discipline becomes a trait. The need for the creation of new terminologies for administrative and educational purposes has added to the wealth of vocables, but this also does sometimes make for confusion. The cinema world (which is mostly domineered by Hindi) and the expanding mercantile sphere (which also has a markedly extraneous element) add to the disorder.

What food do the Assamese people take and what have they been taking over centuries ? It could almost be said that to-day they consume food preparations which never formed a part of their forefathers' usual menu a century ago —except perhaps the barest of them, that is, boiled rice. The Assamese used to call themselves Khārkhowā Asamiyā, 'alkali consuming Assamese' as a distinctive food of theirs was alkaline preparations mostly from burnt plantain trees, which was at one time also a substitute for common salt, whether obtained from a few rare salt springs in the hills or bought from British merchants at prohibitive cost. This name and this habit have slowly been lost later through easily imported salt and also perhaps because the food value of alkaline dishes has been managed to be forgotten. Very few do now-a-days relish tengā-māchar ānjā, fish cooked with acidic fruits. The balancing of kahār and tengā, in fact, formed the proper skill in Assamese culinary taste. This has now been overtaken by too much spicy and hot dishes, which would perhaps best characterise Bengali eating. The typically Assamese condiments (khārali, pānitengā, sukān kharichā and pakā kharichā), which originally are perhaps contributions of the tribes of Assam, are to-day replaced by āchār (pickle) in its variety. We do never lose a sigh when the typical Assamese festival called bihu comes sans all the old basketfuls of varieties of pithā (ghilā, kholāchāparyā, sutuli, pheni, etc., etc.) and the creamy curd which you could play with like a snow-ball. Our physique has lost the capacity to relish pithās. We have, therefore, to "observe the national bihu festival with other's cakes", as the Assamese phrase goes.

In dress and costume the old Assamese character is absolutely lost. An Assamese pāguri of any sort is rare to see ; it perhaps was the first casualty among items of dress with the onset of colonialism. The Assamese are a nation of weavers, because spinning and weaving generally is not attached to any seggregated 'caste' except white 'Asamiyā pāt' spun from white silkworm cocoons. It was once the unavoidable qualification of an Assamese woman, whether a noble's wife or a rustic belle—to be a 'sipini' or artist and be able to weave—weave dreams or not—in the language of Mahatma Gandhi. A woman unskilled in spinning and weaving won the stigma of the name of 'thupāri' to signify it ; and this meant loss of marriageability.But who cares a d-n for it to-day ? One never seeing a loom gets the most handsome groom. Both spinning and weaving suffered with the import of mill cloth—whether from Lancashire or Ahmedabad. This also changed the very pattern of culture as spoken in dress. Who can to-day think of putting on a golden silk (mugā) dhoti (noting that this word has come to currency by the displacement of the good Assamese name, churiyā) on his loins and a warm eri (endi silk) cloth gāti wound round the upper part of the body ending in a knot at the top—all this in place of tweed suit ? A tailored coat was one day a rarity and came into Assam with the Muslim darji. The dress of men changed very rapidly in the early part of the British regime. The dhoti became wider and wider in size and in use. The mid part of the body acquired coats of much a wide variety, a shirt and a guernsey. In place of all this there could be a light kurtā, mysteriously called pānjābi in Assam and Bengal. European styles have freely been accepted. Shoes (pānai) and slippers (phānati) were once a rarity ; but new shops brought them in plenty and richness of variety ; and the result we do very well know : A modern Assamese would scarcely be recognised by an Assamese from the 18th or even the 19th century A.D. Lakshminath Bezbaroa once expressed the hope that even if in the matter of dress, the Assamese men went astray, Assamese women should stick to the traditional pattern and thus

boost our honour. But that hope also has lost ground and is at present willy-nilly gone. When after my college days at Gauhati I returned to that centre of education to be the Office Secretary of Gauhati University Trust Board in 1944, I was invited by the Gauhati A.S.L. Club to give a talk on modern Assamese literature. Nalinibala Devi presided. Rising to make her presidential remarks, she turned suddenly all furious as she happened to eye on a girl student in a simple sāri. To the poetess that was the very height of loss of national prestige. But nobody would see the thing in that light to-day in 1985. Not only sāris but items of wardrobe from the distant North and even over the seven seas have come to be acclimatized on our ladies' skin—the shālwār-kāmeez, the maxies and minies and what not ! The cinema and T.V. have contributed considerably in this matter whether or not you have the fitting body and have only the physiognomy of the good old Bhādais and Āikans, Rahdais and Rangilis. The costly cosmetics and scents have joined the precession to the most miserable cottage.

Let me not expatiate on other aspects of transmuting culture. You can by no means assert that all these modernising changes which I have already recounted have brought urbanity, the fine quality of real culture, to our outlook and behaviour. Many a writer on newspaper columns has raised the voice of objection and protest against the silly, slang-garbed and even obscene words uttered in front and behind him in the streets of the city (sic !) of Gauhati. All the mighty expenditure on dress and cinema and television has only brought us mimicry on the wrong side but not fine tastes and manners ! This does not do credit to our new culture.

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