



North East India

THE HORIZON OF
ANTHROPOLOGY

Dr. K. C. Banta

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This collection contains an assortment of life-patterns of the multi-ethnic tribal and non-tribal communities of North East India. The work reflects the life-ways of the people since around the onset of the closing three decades of the last century. That was the period of heavy impact of Western as well as pan-Indian socio-cultural norms on the people of this region. The work highlights the people's ways of absorption and assimilation of the neo-West-oriented as well as pan-Indian socio-cultural elements in their emergent life-patterns.

As the North Eastern people's traditional life-ways are fast disappearing under the impact of multiple forces and factors, the work in this collection should serve the purpose of bench-marking the trend and quantum of change in the foreseeable future.



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Anthropology and the Community: An Overview

Ever since the emergence of human society, it has been most probable that kinship has been serving as the dominant organising principle at all levels of socio-cultural development. As societies have increased in scale, complexity and centralization, other organising principles—especially community — have substituted kinship as the prime binding factor. It is worthy to note that kin-groups are all 'localized' — “local groupings”. One of the smallest such local groups is the family. In the context of universal notion of politics occur territorial units and larger spatial blocks. In between them come communities that are virtually local groupings in the midrange.

A community stands next to the family in importance as a social unit. A member of a society invariably encounters and recognises the community shortly after birth. As the individual advances in age, various unique norms and patterns of the community at large get imprinted upon the very personality of the individual. Every individual as a member of a society has his/her neighbours that come in a grouping called hamlet or band. These various units are invariably associated with the build-up of the individual personality and so reflect the notion or concept of community. A community is thus minimally defined as the shared recognition and commitment to social oneness or social identity among those people who share the facilities and problems of a single,

nucleated civil centre. It is a group of people, all of whom live within a limited area — a valley, the shores of a lake or a city block. Families know each other or at least recognise enough common interest so that they can act together in certain ways to meet mutual problems — renewal of the solidarity of the people of the group.

Despite having different customs, common ways of acting are certainly there, both in the folk and urban levels of integration. These are manifest at times in the pursuit of common socio-economic endeavours as also in the professing of socio-political or socio-religious objectives and goals at the folk level and at the larger and wider level of a whole nationality. In the urban level also, local groups do exist. Steward (1955) called them sub-cultural groups. The member of a local group knows the streets or pathways and the stores and institutions of his home neighbourhood. He is familiar with the good places and also the places to be avoided.

Notwithstanding these positive factors, the most significant binding factor, i.e., kinship recedes into the background or often gets obliterated and its impact diluted with the rise of cities, or movement to cities in the developing countries. With the rise of large-scale urbanization, the traditional concept of kinship relationship and rights and obligations is seen to acquire new substitutes in the form of nepotism, neighbourliness and friendship that obviously work within the periphery of local community. Under the changed socio-cultural milieu, the notions of neighbourliness, friendship and fraternity, co-linguism or co-religionism etc. have become uppermost in the day to day interpersonal relationship in the local community set-up. Spread of urbanization both in the rural and tribal regions has resulted spatially in kin-group segregation, indicating the precedence of community over kinship.

Also in the developing countries in the residential localities, separation results according to, or on the basis of, dialect, district or village of origin. The boundaries that delineate a community get diffused and often they widen as in the case of metropolitan cities where anonymity among the dwellers is an index of socio-economic life.

A definite pattern of in-group feeling is the hall-mark of a community. The members display some cohesiveness in the pursuit

of common social goals and aspirations. The solidarity of the local community is expressed through acts like community fishing, festivity, feasts etc. Redfield (1962:177) states, "The folk societies of Mexico are local communities characterised by highly homogeneous culture". At times it becomes difficult to decide whether the group identity is in any sense positive or is merely an aggregation of negative identity feeling — feeling of being discriminated against as "small farmers", "slum-dwellers", "backward tribals", "low-caste artisans" etc.

The classical model of community framed ever since anthropology appeared as a social science discipline is still being used as a workable model for comprehensive study of various tribesmen and people the world over. The in-built cohesive forces of the classical model is strong enough to withstand the formidable forces flowing over the last century or so in the shape of industrialization, urbanization and modernization. The classical concept of a fishing or agricultural or trading community conveys the notion of solidarity being cemented by one or more of the multiple factors like language, religion, ways of life, food-habit etc. Identity or notion, in fact, provides the cementing force for the build-up of the notion of community.

Anthropology in relation to community basically implies the study of multiple socio-cultural problems that beset man's attempt to live a social life. Study of community forms the basic theme of anthropology. In fact study of community life provides the clues following which ethnographers or social planners could prepare blue-print for the welfare and betterment of social living. Also, study undertaken under the rubric of Urgent Anthropology is but the documentation of ethnographic data of vanishing community life under formidable impact of oncoming alien cultures. During colonial era applied anthropological study did have administrative utility remotely of hardly connected with people's well-being and development. Anthropology in the colonial era primarily devoted itself to understanding the natives' norms and age-old traditions in order to minimize probable conflicts between the ruler and the ruled. Short of any welfare and development measure among the natives, the sole purpose of anthropological study was smoothening the road for perpetual continuance of the colonial system.

Applied anthropology proper, vis-a-vis systematic community study, began in the aftermath of the colonial era that commenced in 1947 with the attainment of Independence by India. In fact the commencement of successive five-year plans in 1950 heralded the onset of development-biased applied anthropology in India. Notwithstanding this plus-point in the application of anthropological knowledge, it was rather Sarat Chandra Roy, an advocate turned ethnographer, who provided the goading by undertaking systematic ethnographic study of certain North Indian tribes and communities ever since the beginning of this century. Treating anthropology as an applied discipline was not a smooth course, however; anthropologists themselves obsessed with theoretical orientations could hardly favour anthropology becoming an applied science discipline.

For this, early anthropology confined its study to man's cultures and his prehistoric antecedents as well as his physical types and variations. Over the last four decades or so, the discipline could get rid of its theory-bias and is fast leaning toward becoming an applied science with a new thrust or orientation. This is observable in the shift of value system of the classical anthropological study. Modern anthropologists are now more devoted to studying development-oriented plans and programmes than social systems or cultural patterns and norms. Under the changed tenor, study of tribal development has rather become the key subject than that of tribal ethnography. Modern anthropology is steadily developing a new orientation that aims at dealing with problems that the community faces in the normal course of its development.

Development of science and technology, producing household goods for material comfort in enormous quantity in the Western world, is likely to bring about change in the tenor content of material culture among the communities in the developing nations. The mass of people have already become quality conscious, and there is a rat-race to acquire and possess the best of the quality goods out in the market. This has increased and widened the scope of anthropological study of our tribal and rural communities to a greater extent than ever before. And as a holistic discipline,

equipped with modern scientific technique of field investigation, anthropology is the most suited science. It can rightly be credited with bringing out the most authentic and correct perspective of 'social dysphoria' (Radcliffe-Brown: 1964:214) afflicting societies from time to time. Unfortunately, in our realm of social planning by Government agencies and subsequent redressal of people's grievances, anthropologists are hardly taken into confidence. Perhaps, anthropological perspectives of most telling social problems of our communities are most imperfectly understood by the framers of plans and programmes to the detriment of the society at large.

The attitude is likely to be produced by the notion of people's culture being projected only as art and creativity. This is an act of sheer underestimation of an important social science discipline. It goes without saying that art and creativity are very significant part of the totality of a people's achievement, both ancestral and self-acquired, but cannot pass for one and all. Another detrimental side is that development is weighed against economic benefit accrued to the target community. Over and above an increase in per capita income of target population, it is social norms and processes that may inhibit the people's responses or receptiveness and may pose impediments at achieving desired goals. These are all ingrained in man's socio-cultural behaviour that is steadfastly held on.

It is unfortunate that the modern role of the anthropologist as the path-finder to development planning is mistaken for his old role as a trouble-shooter in abnormal social situations. In this connection it might be safely asserted that the role of action anthropologist, that is, the one both as a planner and executive, is far more worth-taking considering the changed tenor of anthropological study indicated above. An action-anthropologist like a physician diagnoses the causes of malfunctioning of a community and prescribes remedial measures aiming at restoring the social health. It involves the question of psychological drive and motivation. Action-anthropologists who naturally develop a philanthropic bent of mind are most likely to prove their expertise worth adopting.

Further, anthropological expertise could directly be taken help of by the community members for socio-economic planning and betterment of life. For all community development plans and projects in the tribal and rural areas of our country, anthropologists are technically competent to offer consultancy service directly to the people in need of skilled advice for development of domestic or village-level planning. This aspect of consultancy service in applied anthropology could be encouraged.

Notwithstanding the trend toward convergence of world cultures to a modern unitary whole, following utmost rapid development of communication and other universal features and phenomena, communities as discrete bodies are unlikely to disappear or be irrelevant. Their importance and relevance in anthropological studies will rather be heightened as important units of assessment and measurement of our perpetual and unending tendency to widen further and further in modern world, not excluding our own society, scientific assessment of public welfare measures is an absolute requisite so as to enable planners and administrators to undertake development measures to minimize the widening gap.

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