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CULTURE IN NORTH-EAST INDIA : A NON-PROGNOSTIC PERSPECTIVE OF FUTURE

SOURMEN SEN

The north-eastern region of India can be divided into two culture-zones on two counts. First, the tribal-non-tribal divide and the second, a movement away from folkloric stage. This division can be made by understanding culture both in the Tylorian formulation of that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society,¹ as well as the aesthetic expression of man's response to his physical and social surrounding which assumes the function of changing the emotional content of human consciousness. We shall, however, be concerned, in the context of this paper, with the second i.e., the aesthetic expressions.

The division of the zone into two, tribal and non-tribal, in terms of cultural growth (folkloric and non-folkloric) is actually linked with the general sequence of development. It is obvious that the cultural expressions of a literate society will differ from those of a non-literate one and that mythology cannot sustain itself in high-tech environment. Mythology shapes the forces of nature in the imagination and through the imaginations; it vanishes with real mastery over them.² Culture, like life, is a process of adjustment.

1. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, (John Murraray, London) 1871, p. 1.
2. Karl Marx, "The Arts and the Development of Society", *Readings in Marxist Sociology*, Ed. Tom Bottomore and Patrick Goode (Clarendon Press, Oxford) 1983, p. 167.

But before we probe the questions of culture-change and social dynamics, we are to identify the two culture-zones in North-East India. The cultures of the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland belong to the tribal category. This also includes the cultures of some parts of Assam, Manipur and Tripura where there are tribal concentrations. Culture in this category is essentially folkloric although new literature and culture has also emerged in recent times. In the non-tribal category are the dominant cultures of Assam, Manipur and Tripura characterized as non-tribal and recognized by their non-folkloric temper.)

Thus the actual distinctive factor is mobility in terms of social development following growth in the material base of culture. The manifestations of culture such as art and literature become autonomous only in an advanced and complex society. In simple tribal societies, art and literature cannot acquire an autonomous character. This is due to the backwardness of productive forces and tardy development of economy and commerce. Under a complex production system art itself becomes a product and awaits consumer preference.)

The folkloric aesthetic expressions are generally need-based and a direct outcome of a collective social consciousness. These expressions are marked by the absence of individuality.) A collective consciousness and will is reflected in the works of art even if it is created by an individual artist. Art is a weapon of the human collective in its struggle for survival. The artist's attempt is to adjust. He does not suffer from alienation. The artist in the complex society, on the other hand, definitely suffers from alienation. The individual in him emerges and assumes the role of a critic. The tribal culture is collective and participatory with total psychic involvement of all the individuals as members of a composite group. The cultures of the first culture-zone of North-East India belong to this category.

The culture that falls in the second category—the non-tribal culture—has developed in Assam, Manipur and Tripura under a feudal order. In Assam, the introduction of the *khel* system with forced labour during the Ahom rule brought in new agrarian relations. A system of commercial exchange was also introduced. In the process the tribal way of life faced gradual dissolution and a new situation was created when new cultural expressions were

available.) The religio-cultural movement launched by Sankaradeva also introduced fresh stimuli. The *Bhakti* movement was surely something alien to the tribal way of life. But due to the genius of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva an assimilation between the tribal mood and the new *Bhakti* cult was possible. As the movement spread it began to receive royal patronage. Thus, the new culture initiated by Sankaradeva gradually became the dominant Assamese culture.

In Manipur also the *Vaishnava* cult, with royal patronage, altered the cultural pattern of the erstwhile tribal society. In Tripura the *Manikya* kings, who belonged to the Tripuri tribe, adopted Hinduism of *Sakta* variety. They adopted Bengali culture and language and brought *Brahmans* and *Kayasthas* from the capital of the Kingdom of Gaur to reconstruct the society on Gaur model.

Thus in Assam, Manipur and Tripura new cultures emerged through the influence of Hinduism of either *Vaishnava* or *Sakta* variety, under royal patronage in a new feudal social order with altered social relations.

(The British colonial administration did not bring much of a change in the tribal societies of North-East India which were deliberately kept out of contact with the rest of the country. Feudal order continued in Tripura, Manipur and Assam.) (In Assam, however, because of changes through spread of commerce, communication and education, though in a restricted scale, brought changes in the cultural milieu.) (The changes in commerce, expansion of communication and education were introduced in the interest of British trade, particularly the tea industry, but in the process, a middle class emerged in Assamese society which pioneered a new aesthetic expression on western liberal romantic model.)

(The tribal cultures, however, remained in the folklore level. Only the Khasi scene differed to an extent possibly due to more direct western contact through English education and the emergence of an educated middle class engaged in white collar jobs and professions. This educated section was also engaged in trade. The movement launched by an association, called *Seng Khasi*, formed in 1899 by a group of educated youths, for the protection of indigenous culture in the face of challenge posed by Christian proselitisation under the patronage of the colonial rulers,

establishment of a printing press in 1896 and publication of books in Khasi language, helped the setting of a new trend. By the third decade of this century a new literature in Khasi started emerging with the writings of the great Khasi poet, U Soso Tham. But the Soso Tham phenomenon was an isolated event in the tribal cultural locations in North-East India.

The post-independence scenario, particularly in the tribal zone, is not much different from the pre-independence one. Although the life style of the people has changed considerably through increased participation in politics, trade and commerce, bureaucracy and profession, not much of new literature and art has emerged with the exception, to an extent, of the Khasi literature. In an account it has been shown that while the achievements of the hill people of North-East India has been phenomenal, specially after independence, in the fields of politics, bureaucracy, administration, white-collar jobs and professions, the progress made in their language and literature is rather discouraging.³

I have examined elsewhere how the cultural growth of a community is linked with the changes in the material base.⁴ Culture takes new direction, diction and form due to these changes. When the tribal mode of production and the simple-tool economy gets replaced by the introduction of advanced techniques, new social forces emerge bringing in altered social relations. The integrating forces of a simple tribal society get rather weak. Their culture takes a turn and their art and literature, as well as, religion, science and politics, become abstractly conceived. Modernity in cultural sense means an attitude of individuals in a society that has separated itself from itself. Art no longer remains a weapon of the human collective.

But nothing happens accidentally and there is always a process. We have seen already how a change in the agrarian system and introduction of a feudal order with commercial exchange brought changes in cultural expressions in Assam. But

3. A.P. Sinha, 'The Status of Literature Hill Societies of North-East India.' Paper presented in a *Seminar on The Status of Literature of Hill Societies of N.E. India*, Department of Anthropology, NEHU, 1982 (mimeographed).

4. Soumen Sen, 'Sequences in Cultural Development: A Perspective of Tribal North-East India', *Paper presented in a Seminar on Sequences of Development in N.E. India*, NEICSSER, Shillong, 1985. (mimeographed).

there also we see 'a traditional cultural heritage that exist at two levels, one the old legacy of pre-literate times, with primitive, artless and vigorous rhythms and simple patterns and the other, the widespread residue of the *Bhakti* movement.'⁵ Simultaneously, significant modern art and literatures have also developed. This has happened because of the spread of commerce, modern communication, advanced education and urbanisation.

(In the situation that obtains in the hill tribal region of North-East India we also face a paradox—whether economic and industrial growth that bring about radical changes in the social structure due to new production relations would not disturb the rich folk cultural traditions. At the same time there would be a compulsion of moving away from folk tradition in order to accelerate economic growth by galvanising the process of development. Many a changes must have to be encouraged even at the risk of disturbing the traditional setting. A change in the socio-economic set up will invariably bring a change in the cultural fabric. For instance, there may be potential loss of traditional culture due to rapid industrialisation and urbanisation.)

(In the face of this paradox, the challenge is two-fold. First, retaining the cultural tradition and second, a perspective planning for future. But no separate plan for cultural growth is possible. Culture emanates from social growth based on material development. Culture will assume an autonomous character with all signs of modernity, assimilating tradition in the process, only when the economy and society are modernized. But nothing can be imposed. The growth must take place from within by a rational exploitation of resources, both material and human. The plan-push must rely on unfolding.)

(Culture will then unfold itself for a movement to the next historical phase. The acquiescence of folklore stage with the pshycic and physical involvement, will be replaced by a critical attitude only when society, by the interplay of historical forces, pushes itself to the next phase. Only then culture will assume an autonomous character. A critique of society takes both the society and culture to future and that is a continuous process.)

(The cultural leadership thus should look into the future with

5. Hiren Gohain, 'Literary Movement in Assam'. *Assam: A Burning Question* (Spectrum, Guwahati) 1985, p. 97.

a critical attitude to the present. This criticism is not directed against the cultural tradition but the material condition in which the people live. If the life-pattern of the people is to improve, the cultural leadership must cry for it. With a change in the material condition of life, culture itself will take a significant turn enriching tradition in the process. But then this critical faculty is never omnipotent. It is the product of a change since "a new man" is the product of "a new social order")