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ENVIRONMENT AND TRIBAL HANDICRAFTS IN THE HIMALAYAS

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The study of 'tribes' in India is no longer an exclusive field of anthropologists. While some anthropologists themselves have digressed from their beaten track many political scientists, economists and sociologists have 'intruded' into the traditional domain of anthropologists. The tribal societies themselves have undergone considerable transformation after independence calling for more interdisciplinary researches.

It is precisely the change that the tribal societies have undergone in the last few decades that has created problems regrading a proper definition of a 'tribe'. The way anthropologists defined it in the earlier half of the present century is no longer accepted by anthropologists today. Their property relations, social structure, religio-cultural practices, etc, have all changed so much that it is indeed difficult to find a ubiquitously acceptable definition of a 'tribe'. As a consequence, there is no alternative today but to rely on the administrative definition, which though originally based on anthropological definition has assumed an almost independent entity.

Despite definitional problems it is broadly agreed that the Eastern Himalaya contains one of the principal concentrations of tribes. The Central and Western Himalayas have more of caste and Islamic cultures rather than tribal culture. In higher altitude areas, however, there are tribes even in these Himalayas though administratively not all are recognized as such.

There are two specific problems related to the topic chosen here apart from the problem of defining a tribe. One, there is no proper consensus or even academic exercise about what one should mean by 'tribal handicrafts'. Does it mean handicrafts by tribals ? For tribals ? Or of tribals ? In this regard, Pal (1978) has combined all the three aspects in "tribal crafts" and "associated tribal crafts". The author expressed his reservations about such an approach earlier and

argued why it is more appropriate to include only the first question. Thus he (1988) has defined it as: "those objects which are manufactured by the tribal people", and has also maintained that it is more important to see who is manufacturing rather than what is being manufactured or for whom ?

The second problem lies with the conceptualization of the term 'environment'. It has been defined by Webster's (1968) New Collegiate Dictionary as "the aggregate of all the external conditions and influences affecting the life and development of an organism". But Marston Bates (1968) has raised a lot of difficulties in treating environment and organism as separate entities. He argues in this important article that these two cannot really be distinguished from each other for they "represent interacting systems".

But the problem here is can handicrafts be a party to the "interacting system" which the environment is ? Handicrafts is a commercial enterprise, an economic activity with culturo-religious significance, a profession for livelihood as well as fulfilment of artistic forays. Thus it is indeed difficult to treat it as an 'organism' yet the environment has important bearing on it and vice versa. Thus, though conventionally it should not have fallen under the scope of environment, it is better understood in relation to the same.

Of late, environment is used in a rather loose sense, which sometimes appears far removed from the dictionary meaning given above. It is common today to come across expressions like 'business environment' (Tandon, 1975), 'social environment' 'cultural environment', 'political environment', 'economic environment' and even 'class-room environment', and 'family environment'. The basic principles used in all such expressions are same and these expressions simply indicate conceptual proliferations.

In this chapter, the author has tried to link the various aspects of environment with tribal handicrafts. But since the experiences are primarily drawn from Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalaya the text is confined to this region only. Related informations on other Himalayan regions could not be made available, which would otherwise be used for comparative analysis

Physical Environment

In Darjeeling and Sikkim, as elsewhere in Eastern Himalaya, there is a close association between physical environment and tribal handicrafts. Bamboos and timber being available in plenty a major share of the tribal handicrafts is related to these. This is more true of domestic handicrafts than commercial handicrafts of the tribals.

Pottery, iron, copper or bronze works are almost nil, because these would not develop in the absence of the raw materials there. Weaving is an old and important handicraft of the tribals but the basic raw material used earlier was wool and not cotton. Even when the latter was used it was an imported material from the Indian plains. Use of cotton as a weaving material became popular only after infrastructural facilities were available to facilitate the import of the same.

Infrastructural development has not only made it possible for the tribals to do new crafts but also modify or modernize the traditional crafts. For instance, they have been able to replace the piquants with chemical paints and smoothen the surfaces better with flint papers. Availability of iron nails of all shapes and sizes has also revolutionized the shapes of their products. Most importantly, such development has made handicrafts less tedious and more refined though artistically more artificial too.

The rapid and large-scale deforestation that took place in the region after seventies has, however, threatened the very survivability of tribal handicrafts. As a result even timber is being often imported. Quality timber in particular being increasingly scarce and therefore costly, the prices of their products have soared up beyond the reach of many middle class tourists and potential buyers in the region itself.

This aspect should perhaps need a serious attention because without this the very human existence is threatened. Handicrafts may survive on imported raw materials but the human beings will die of suffocation in the new, forestless "biome" created by themselves (Bates, 1968). It is better realized earlier that every natural resource, including air is scarce (Cottrell, 1978).

The physical-environmental costs of tribal handicrafts are not much. Pollution of air due to this is practically nil. Nor much of garbage problem has been faced until now due to the limited scale at which they are operated and because the wooden dusts are taken away by the craftsmen for using them as fuel and even the crumbs of woollen or cotton threads are taken away for making cushions or pillows. And a few dozen of exhausted paint containers do not make any nuisance.

The strain on bamboo and timber reserves is significant but more of these are used up every year for building or repairing thousands of houses or making simple furniture. What is most noticeable, however, is the direct health hazards caused by handicrafts. The craftsmen, especially the woodcarvers, are reported to have often fallen prey to diseases like tuberculosis and jaundice. Similarly the

craftswomen often suffer from respiratory problems. Thus, while indirect health hazards are practically nil, direct hazards are prominent.

Economic Environment

One of the important reasons why tribal handicrafts in the region have been confined to the state-sponsored centres is their economic environment. The hill economy being what it is, tribal handicrafts should have played an important role in it but until now it has not held any significant place in the region's economy.

Thanks to the legal ban on the transfer of tribal lands to non-tribals from the British days itself, the problem of landlessness has not really arisen among them as yet. Thus they have been able to continue with agriculture as their mainstay of life and animal husbandry as subsidiary occupation. Some Bhutias are still engaged in trade and commerce but most of them are engaged in agricultural works only.

The Lepcha-Bhutia tribals also have an easier access to the service sector which suddenly boomed in Sikkim after 1975. There were unlimited opportunities not only for the tribals of Sikkim but also for the tribals of Darjeeling. Service sector meaning security, easy life, pension and above all prestige, even the school drop-outs began to clamber for fourth grade jobs and they got them too. By 1979 or so almost every class VIII passed tribal youth was employed in this sector.

Thus the people engaged in handicrafts today are actually either illiterate tribals or the Tibetan refugees who have settled there since 1959. In Darjeeling also, it is primarily the Tibetan refugees who are occupied in the handicrafts work.

In both Darjeeling and Sikkim, handicrafts are treated as a residual job not only by the people at large but also by the craftsmen themselves. They have no job security, no fixed income, no leaves, and no pensions. Given the opportunity, no craftsperson has any bones about leaving this profession. What bothers them more than anything else is the low social status attached to this profession. The parents of a girl would prefer to give her to a peon earning much less than a craftsman.

Such a situation has throttled the growth of handicrafts all over the region. Private entrepreneurs have shown practically no interest in it because they know that they cannot compete with the state-sponsored centres which have a well-coordinated system of acquiring raw materials and marketing the finished products. Such centres can

also afford to incur losses or pay the workers higher but the private entrepreneurs can do neither.

It should also be noted that such handicrafts cater mostly to the needs of the middle class, for decorating their living rooms. Wherever the carpets are used by poor people those are woven by themselves and not purchased from the market. Certain articles like *chokishe* or table, *bhodin* or sofa-set, and *cheosum* or altar have smoothly combined art and utility but the art part often becomes a little costlier for the common masses.

Of all crafts in the region carpets are an important export article. Though the exact volume of foreign exchange earned from it is difficult to guess, it is broadly agreed that their carpets have an almost unlimited demand in overseas market. It may be noted that most of the carpets exported from this region have exquisite Tibetan designs woven on them.

Thus tribal handicrafts have added a new colour to the economic environment. While the industrialists and capitalists clamour for machine-race, the poor, hapless craftsmen and women hold on to the ideal of combining art and productivity. And they are least bothered who is making the best out of their hard labour. Though carried out at cottage level, the workers are not free from exploitation by their employers (Subba, 1983-84)

Cultural Environment

The cultural milieu of the region is primarily Buddhist. Fluttering of prayer-flags, *chhortens* or receptacles of worship, and monasteries stud the mountains everywhere. And the Buddhist sacred symbols or centres are sacred not only to the tribal Buddhists themselves but also to a large number of Tibetans, Nepali Buddhists and Hindus.

Thus it is quite natural that most motifs, symbols and signs carved on woods or woven on carpets and bags are primarily related to Buddhism. For instance, the most common designs are: *dhug* or parasol, *pema* or lotus, *pel-behu* or eternal knot, *ser-nya* or golden fishes, *gyaltshen* or victory banner, *tar-chen-bhum-pa* or vase, *dhum-kar-yel-kel* or conch shell, *khor-lo* or sacred wheel, dragons, elephants, *mahakal, pancha dhyani* Buddha, etc. Of them, *mahakal* is usually carved on wooden masks and used during monk dances and the last is painted on embroidered on *thankas*. Not only the designs but also the colours used are based on religious texts.

Other common objects of tribal handicrafts are of ornamental value. Such articles include *seling sampo* or hat for women, *sampa* or

boot for women, *lachcha* or hair ribbon, *namchusey* or earring, *ghow* or necklace, etc.

It appears that the tribal handicrafts in Sikkim had Tibetan influence even before the first Tibetan King, Phuntsog Namgyal, was consecrated in 1642. For instance, it is written:

> The earliest known art forms in Sikkim do not go back before the 15th-16th century A.D. These are rather crude carvings in relief placed upon *chhortens* (receptacles of worship). The first *chhortens* were built after Tibetan models and other shapes were fixed by definite measurements and design (Singh, 1969).

This citation does not obviously relate to tribal handicrafts for domestic use. The domestic crafts must have been there from the most ancient times. They could not have carried out hunting and shifting cultivation without some basic implements like bow and arrow or the straight sword called *ban* and dibbler.

It should be added here that the tribal handicrafts particularly in Sikkim have been patronized by the State not only to keep some tribals employed but also to protect the Buddhist culture and religion. The Government Institute of Cottage Industries established in 1957 at Gangtok has a technical training centre open only to the tribals. That is why this Centre used to be earlier known as 'Protection Centre'. Thus tribal handicrafts in Sikkim are more a medium of satisfying their cultural ethos than a means of livelihood.

There is a tacit resentment in some non-tribal people about this Centre not being open to other communities, including Buddhists. Though these communities have not been at all affected in any way due to the restriction imposed on them they sometimes question why they could not learn the art of doing this. The Buddhist groups in particular should have been allowed to learn and contribute to the sustenance of the Buddhist culture there.

Luckily, the tribal handicraft centres have not turned into an eyesore in the cultural landscape of the region. In Sikkim this has been forestalled by the availability of jobs and land for cultivation while in Darjeeling there is no restriction on the non-tribals to produce tribal handicrafts or to undergo training in this profession.

Political Environment

Sikkim was for long a theocratic kingdom. The Indian assistance in Sikkimese administration, which began in 1888 with the appointment of J.C. White as the first political officer, was non-interfering type. The cultural ethos and identity of Sikkim were respected by Indian

political officers and later 'dewans' as far as possible. This continues even after Sikkim became the 22nd State of India, following a state-level revolution that started in 1973.

It has been now over 17 years that Sikkim is an integral part of India. Yet many Indians from far flung areas ask a Sikkimese about the procedures of getting visas to enter into Sikkim. East of Teesta and south of Rangit is still called 'India' or 'Company Area' and the other side of these rivers as 'Sikkim'. On the other hand, some Sikkimese Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis still call themselves 'Sikkimese' as differentiated from Indian like Biharis, Bengalis, Marwaris, Punjabis, Keralites, etc.

It is this Sikkimese identity that has kept the sense of regionalism strong there. Kazi Lhendup Dorjee, the first Chief Minister of Sikkim, lost power in 1979 precisely because he joined the Janata Party which came to power at the Centre in 1977. The Sikkim Sangram Parishad, despite its multiple weaknesses, has thrived mainly on this sentiment of the Sikkimese people.

It is such a sentiment that makes the State Government patronize the tribal handicrafts there. The handicrafts, apart from providing some employment makes cultural justification for their political issues. And it is this factor which neutralizes the otherwise Nepali dominated politics of this state. But even among them, contrary to what Chaudhuri (1987) writes, the 'pure Hindus' constitute not more than 16 per cent of their total Nepali population. Furthermore, the fact that the tribals have reserved seats in the state assembly, which the Nepalis do not have except the single Scheduled Caste seat out of 32 seats cannot be overlooked. Thus seat reservation has given the tribals some scope to bargain. Besides, many top bureaucrats are drawn from ex-landlord families of tribal communities and the party in power cannot ignore this fact.

Thus, despite numerical predominance which does count in Indian democratic set-up, the political position of the Nepalis in Sikkim is not as strong as it is usually made out to be, and their position in West Bengal is even worse. Even if they were politically powerful they could not have ignored the Buddhist sentiments because they have a fair number of Buddhists within themselves and even the so-called pure Hindus have every respect for Buddhist religion, philosophy and followers. The patrons of tribal handicrafts therefore are as much Hindu Nepalis as the Buddhist Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis are.

It is the fragility of their political position that makes them allow the handicrafts to be a monopoly of the Lepcha-Bhutias though their strong position would not have made much of a difference either.

Conclusion

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that environment and tribal handicrafts have a close association. Both the stagnation and growth in tribal handicrafts can in fact be explained largely in relation to its environment. A few more words may be devoted here to supplement this point.

Tribal handicraft in the region has experienced many ups and downs in its history of over four centuries now. There was practically no commercial handicraft until the Tibetans came to Sikkim in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries. Such handicrafts saw a steady rise till the Indo-Tibetan trade was on. Then came the crisis period which began in 1962 and continued till 1975. In this period there was very limited activity in the sphere of handicrafts due to the stoppage of raw material supply from Tibet and the time taken to adapt to the new materials available in India itself.

The post-1975 period saw all-round development of Sikkim drawing people from all over India, from as far off places as Punjab and Kerala. There was limited skilled manpower available then in Sikkim, which had compelled the government to encourage people from outside. These 'outsiders' including the defence personnels whose number had increased in Sikkim after 1962, were most responsible for giving a big push to the tribal handicrafts in Sikkim and also partly in Darjeeling. Almost eveyone of them bought at least one such craft before returning home during vacations, sometimes for themselves and sometimes for their close relatives and friends.

The Indian curiosity about the Buddhist culture and traditions not only made the handicrafts a viable profession but also made them culturally more conscious. The tribal solidarity efforts are being more and more prominent today.

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