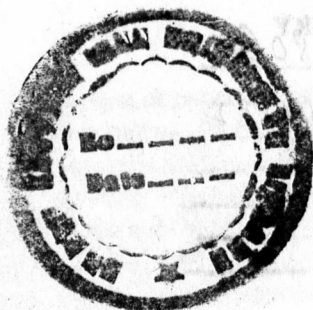


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ETHNICITY, CULTURE AND NATIONALISM IN
NORTH-EAST INDIA

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Edited by *Agrawala*

M.M. AGRAWAL

North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong



INDUS PUBLISHING COMPANY

NEW DELHI

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First published in 1996 by
Indus Publishing Company
FS-5, Tagore Garden, New Delhi

ISBN 81-7387-055-1

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Published by M.L. Gidwani, Indus Publishing Company
FS-5, Tagore Garden, New Delhi 110027, and printed at
Elegant Printers, Mayapuri Indl. Area, New Delhi

Foreword

The present volume is a collection of papers presented at a seminar on Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism: Problems in the Context of North-East India. The seminar was held in the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong in the month of September 1995, with financial assistance from the ICSSR, Regional Centre, Shillong.

The broad objective of the seminar has been to evolve a fresh understanding of the issues and problems that beset this part of the country. The seminar aimed at removing some of the misunderstandings and misconceptions through its deliberations, and to contribute to the ongoing dialogue in evolving conceptual tools and analytical framework for an authentic understanding of the problems.

As the mounting tension between the dominant discourses on nationalism and the various forms of local movements are intensifying, such a seminar can throw some light on the dark areas of our nation-building enterprise vis-a-vis identifying the areas of strength and weakness. In the context of perplexing insurgency and economic backwardness of the North-East region, the spirit of such a seminar is likely to illuminate the path of reconciliation and co-operation among various communities and the agencies of the state.

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Analysis of the Concept of Culture

JAGAT PAL

The purpose of this paper is neither to defend nor to reject any definition of culture nor even to give a historical account of the development of the concept of culture. What it intends is to present an analysis of the concept of human culture and through the analysis an attempt has been made to show that the notion of culture has two different kinds of meaning: general and specific. The general meaning of the notion of culture remains constant throughout its application, while its specific meaning changes from one context to another.

The concept of culture is highly a vague concept. It has varieties of uses. But when we reflect upon its uses in the domain of human beings, we find that it is not a simple concept. It does not stand for any single object, event or property. It is a complex concept. It stands for a complex phenomena which has several dissimilar elements like the elements of belief, thought, value, ideal, emotion, ritual, custom and aesthetic etc. And these elements of culture are manifested in the activities of the individuals or the group of individuals or the society of the groups of individuals in different form like the forms of language, art, myth, dance, music, prayer, worship, painting, drama, poetry, architecture, aesthetic appreciation, manner, food habit, housing pattern, style of clothing, science and technological development and product etc. The culture of the individual depends upon the culture of a group and the culture of the group depends upon the culture of a society of which they form as a part. So is the vice versa. The culture of the society depends upon the culture of its groups and the culture of the group depends upon the culture of its individuals who form the group and the society. But to say this does not mean that neither the culture of the

individual has distinct identity from that of the culture of a group nor does the culture of the group has distinct identity from that of the culture of a society to which they belong as parts. Each culture has its own distinct identity. The culture of the individual is different from this culture of a group and the culture of the group is different from the culture of a society. The culture of the individual comes and goes but the culture of the group or the society remains till their existence. Death of the culture of the individual does not mean death of the culture of the whole group and death of the culture of the whole group does not mean death of the culture of the whole society of which they form as a part. But in spite of their being distinct they are related and relatedness is not opposed to distinctness. Relatedness and distinctness can go hand in hand.

Since the individual is related to the group and the group is related to the society, the influence of the individual on the group and the group on the society or the society on the group and the group on the individual is bound to happen. The influence of the society on the individual is quite obvious in the matter of food, clothing, housing, education, sex and security etc. The individual members of a society are influenced by the norms of the society to which they belong. But to say this does not mean that the individual members do not have influence on the society. The individual members influence the society to which they belong through their creative and intellectual activities. They revolt against the evil practices of the society. They change and modify the social norms. They set new practices and trends in the society in which they live. Our Indian society is full of such personalities like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, Gautam Buddha, Mahabir, Guru Nanak and Kabir etc. These people have changed the culture of the Indian society to a large extent. Whatever might be the case the individual, the group and the society acquire the cultural properties through their interactions. Cultural phenomena are not isolated phenomena. They are interconnected phenomena. Human beings promote their cultural values and interests through the reciprocal activities. Each culture, no matter what it is, influences and is influenced by another culture related to it. We can say from this point of view that phenomena of culture are social phenomena and the concept of culture is a social concept because its values are pursued and sought

in the society through the interpersonal and reciprocal activities of the people of the society. The individual members, the group and the society all play significant roles in the developments of the human culture in different ways. Since the individual, the group and the society are structurally and functionally so related with one another, influence of the one on the other is quite a natural.

In fact, the meaning of the notion of culture cannot be understood apart from and independent of the human nature because the notion of culture is grounded in the human nature and the human nature is of such kind that human beings always strive for the fulfilment of the needs and the satisfaction of the desires. And the fulfilment of the needs and the satisfaction of the desires of the individual or the group or the society are not possible to attain without involving the other individuals of the society in most of the cases. The cultural properties are not inborn properties. They are acquired properties which the individual members or the group or the society possess through their interactivities or functions. We can say from this point of view that the meaning of the notion of culture consists in the behaviour or the function patterns of the individuals or the group or the society. It is a way of living which is build up by the people of the society individually or collectively through the interpersonal relationships. Through the interpersonal relationships they promote their cultural life and transmit the values of culture from one generation to another generation. When we say that a man or a group or a society is cultured or uncultured, we say it on the basis of the behaviour or the function patterns and the behaviour or the function patterns of the individuals or the group of individuals or the society of the groups of individuals are judged and evaluated on the basis of the cultural values embodies in the culture. When the individuals, the group and the society do not follow the norms of culture, they are characterised as uncultured. But when they follow the norms of culture or do not deviate from them, they are characterised as cultured. The notions of cultured and uncultured are linked with the norms and the values of culture. That is the reason why understanding of the meaning of culture requires understanding of the behaviour or the function patterns of the individuals, the group and the society. And understanding of the behaviour or the function patterns of the individuals, the group and the society

requires understanding of the antecedents of the behaviour or the function patterns from which they originate. The behaviour or the function patterns of the individuals, the group and the society originate from the cultural beliefs, ideas, knowledge, values, attitudes and ideals etc. The element of belief, idea, knowledge, value, attitude and ideal constitute the theoretical foundation of the system of culture by referring to which the behaviour or the function patterns of the individuals or the group of individuals or the society of the groups of individuals have to be understood and interpreted and not outside of them. Any attempt to understand the meaning of culture outside the elements of the system of culture is bound to fail. One can say from this point of view that culture is a body of the elements of belief, idea, knowledge, value, attitude and ideal manifested in the activities of the individuals, the group and the society in different forms like arts, music, paintings, myths, symbols, rituals, customs, manners, language, aesthetic appreciations, science and technological advancements, architectures, food habits, housing patterns, style of clothing and material products of different sorts. The meaningfulness of cultural life consists in the attainment of the values and the ideals of culture, which fulfil the needs and satisfy the desires of human beings for which they strive in life. Human life, in fact, is nothing but a series of end seeking activities.

Although the notion of culture is associated with certain beliefs, ideas, knowledge, values, ideals, attitudes, rituals, customs, aesthetic appreciations, music, arts, myths, symbols, architectures, language, food habits, clothing, housing and manners etc., but it is not essentially associated with any particular system of these elements of culture, which could be said, is found invariably in all its application. The notion of culture can be viewed from two different angles: generic and specific. From the generic point of view we can say that the notion of culture is always associated with certain beliefs, ideas, knowledge, values, ideals, attitudes, rituals, customs, aesthetic appreciation, music, arts, myths, symbols, architectures, language, food habits, clothing, housing, manners etc. and the generic characteristic features of these elements constitute the general meaning of culture which does not change from one context to another context. It remains constant throughout in all its application. While the specific meaning of culture changes from one context

to another context due to variations and specificities of the elements of culture out of which its specific meaning is constructed. In this respect the culture of the individual is different from the culture of a group and the culture of the group is different from the culture of a society of which they form as a part. Not only this, the culture of one society is also different from the culture of another society. The culture of the Khasi society, for example, is different from the culture of the Naga society and the culture of the Naga society is different from the culture of the Mizo society despite the fact that they all form as the constituent parts of the culture of the tribal society of the North-east India. What is true of these societies of India in relation to one another as well as in relation to their classes of which they form as constituent parts could also be said of the other societies of India. To say this, however, does not mean that between the two or more than two individuals, or the groups or the societies there cannot be common elements of culture. The specific elements of culture may or may not be common between the two or more than two individuals or the groups or the societies.

Take for example, the elements of religion. The elements of religion no doubt are considered as essential elements of culture. But when we think of religion many things come to our mind such as worship places, sermons, prayers, rituals, creeds, sacred days, sacred scriptures, God and spirits etc. But none of these elements constitutes as an essence of religion because these elements vary from one religion to another religion. Some religions like Christianity and Hinduism believe in the existence of God. But some religions like Jainism and Buddhism do not believe in the existence of God. Some religions assert that sacred doctrines sacred days, sacred places, sacred scriptures are the essential elements of religion, while other religions do not. Some religions believe in the doctrines of Karma and transmigration of soul which other religions reject. The elements of religion vary not only from one religion to another religion or from one society to another society but also within the society. Take, for example, the Hindu society. In the Hindu society the religion of Shaivism is different from the religion of Vaishnavism and the religion of Vaishnavism is different from the religion of Vedanta. But from this we should not conclude that religious elements cannot be common between the two or more than two

different cultures of the societies. The culture of the Khasi society no doubt is different from the culture of the Naga society and the culture of Naga society is different from the culture of the Mizo society but even then they share religious elements, that is, the elements of Christianity among them. What is true of religion could also be said of the other elements of culture. What follows from this is that although the notion of culture is associated with certain beliefs, ideas, knowledge, values, ideals and attitudes etc. but it is not essentially associated with any particular system of beliefs, ideas, knowledge, values, ideals and attitudes etc. Because these elements of culture vary from one context to another context due to their specific characteristics. But whenever they vary, they make changes in the specific meaning of that culture. Since the very fact that the elements of culture in certain respects differ from one society to another society, understanding of the culture of one society does not mean understanding of the culture of another society. In each new case the lesson of learning of the meaning of culture would be different because of the difference found in the specific nature of the elements of culture. In other words, in each culture we have to learn something new in order to understand that culture fully. Nonetheless, the specific meaning of culture should not be muddled with its generic meaning because both the meanings of culture are different and distinct. Understanding of the generic meaning of culture does not require understanding of the specific meaning because the generic meaning of a culture is independent of its specific meaning. But to say this does not mean that the generic meaning of a culture is unconnected with its specific meaning. The generic meaning of a culture is well connected with the specific meaning of the culture, but their connectedness is not opposed to their independency since both the elements of meaning of a culture can go together. If we identify the generic meaning of a culture with its specific meaning, it would amount to mean committing the mistake. Which meaning, between the two meanings of culture, is a fundamental and which one is not is a matter of different opinion. But whatever might be the case, the universalizability of culture is possible on the basis of the generic elements. We can meaningfully talk about the unification of different cultures of a society by subtracting the generic elements from the specific

ones. This is not only logically but also practically quite possible, provided that the individuals of the different cultures will and make necessary adjustments with one another.

However, we must not forget while discussing the two different meanings of culture that the elements of culture from which the notion of culture is constructed, are themselves different from the notion of culture. The elements of culture are the constituent parts of culture and culture is a complexity of these elements. Since no complex phenomena can be understood apart from and independent of its constituting elements, understanding of the complexity of culture is not possible without understanding of its constituting elements, while understanding of an element of culture is possible without understanding of another elements of the same culture. Since the meaning of culture is different from its constituting elements, change or modification in anyone of the elements of culture does not mean change or modification of the whole culture. So if somebody has changed his or her own religion or food habits or style of clothing or certain values and beliefs, it does not mean that he or she has lost his or her whole culture. What it means is that he or she has changed or modified certain elements of his or her own culture and to say this is not say that he or she has lost his or her whole culture. Saying this would amount to mean the identification of the meaning of culture with the meaning of its constituent part(s) and that is a mistake. Because the whole is not a part nor the part is a whole. Both the notions, that is, the notions of whole and part are two different notions although are related. But their relation is not an organic relation like the relation of body and its organs. In fact, even if we wish to maintain our own cultural identity in the absolutistic term, we cannot do it because of the internal and the external influences of the elements of culture.

One might get this impression from the foregoing analysis of the notion of culture that it is the notion of culture and not the elements of culture which is full of complexities. But this is not correct. The elements of culture themselves are full of complexities. They stand for a complex phenomena that has several dissimilar elements. Take for example, the concept of religion. The concept of religion is a complex concept. When we think of it many things

come to our mind such as religious beliefs, religious values, religious practices, religious doctrines etc. which constitute our conception of religion, no matter what religion is. And these elements of religion are full of complexities, whose understanding always requires understanding of the other elements associated with them. So it would be wrong to say that the elements of culture are not themselves full of complexities. To understand the complexity of culture we have to first understand the complexity of the elements out of which it is build up and to understand the complexity of the elements of culture we have to first understand the simpler elements which constitute them.

Despite the fact that the notion of culture is full of complexities, it admits internal changes, modifications and necessary adjustments because of the dynamic nature of the elements of culture. Take, for example, the element of knowledge with which the notion of culture is essentially connected. The notion of knowledge is a dynamic notion. It is not a static notion. For any culture to survive it has to take into account the developments of knowledge and taking into account the developments of knowledge amounts to mean making certain changes, modifications and necessary adjustments as and when it is required in the existing culture. When we take into account of our culture the latest developments of knowledge, our culture in fact, becomes more meaningful and up-to-date which are needed for any culture to survive. Since there is no finality in knowledge, the process of culture cannot be final. So long as humanity continues to live, there will always be some growth in knowledge and growth in knowledge means growth in culture. In the course of the developments in knowledge new facts may come to light and these new facts may necessitate internal changes and modifications in the elements of culture for it to be significant. And these new facts may come to light from any source, internal or external to the system of a culture whose assimilation in culture are not evil. They may be positively necessary for healthy growth of a culture.

If whatever I have said is true, it is quite obvious from it that no matter what culture is, whether it is the culture of the individual or the culture of the group of individuals or the culture of the society of the groups of individuals, its system is bound to be an

open system. It cannot be a closed system. There is no doubt that we must preserve our culture. We must keep our culture intact. We must appreciate our cultural heritage. But all this does not amount to mean that we must preserve and glorify the bad elements of our culture. We should march towards the betterment of life. We must not incorporate or leave out certain elements which are needed for the growth of healthy cultural life. In fact, a dogmatic and static cultural system is bound to die because for any culture to survive it has to take into account the latest developments in knowledge which serve as means to fulfilment of the human needs and satisfaction of the desires.