

Culture Change among the Tribes of Northeast India: Some Conceptual and Methodological Issues

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Culture has been a key concept in anthropological sciences. Ever since the discipline of anthropology or its precursor, ethnology, began to describe and analyse “other cultures”, scholars have been busy reporting on “tribal cultures”. Sophisticated theories, methodological innovations and statistical analyses are being made everyday with a view to explaining the cultural phenomena. And certainly, it is good sign for anthropological enterprise and as long as this exercise is on anthropologists will keep on contributing to the human heritage of knowledge. The academic debates on the nature of concepts, theories, interpretations and their relevance of the discipline will turn out to be tonics for the enterprise.

Coming to the Northeast Indian tribal scene, a number of conceptual and methodological issues emerge before undertaking a serious understanding of the nature of the discipline: Who are the “tribes” in the region? What is the basis on which one identifies, classifies and separates them from the non-tribes? In what ways are they related to the administrative identification of the Scheduled Tribes? Are they the same as described by the British ethnographers during the colonial rule in the region? With the establishment of about a dozen universities in the region and progenies of yesterday’s “tribes” being trained in the skills of anthropological sciences what types of anthropological knowledge are they adding to the core of the discipline? Anthropology claimed to be a science of “other cultures” and thus, anthropological reporting in third person and in non-native language was justified in the past. What type of

anthropology is being created by the new generation of trained native anthropologists and for whom are they writing or to whom are they addressing?

Once we have a relatively clear picture of the subject, the next valid question arises is what should be the logical bench-line for uncovering change in individual cultures: pre-literate stage, pre-British one, pre-Christian, pre-state stage or pre-independence phase? I hasten to add that individual scholars must have their ways to decide their bench-line dates. Still, in view of the massive quantum of change in the lives of the tribes, it will be more rewarding conceptually to draw the bench-line as close as possible to the earliest form of undiluted cultural traits. As a student of anthropology for the last four decades, the writer of these lines is optimistic about the prospect of anthropology. However, he feels that the discipline of anthropology will be benefited if it considers some of the above questions in right earnest and provides some rationale to the on-going exercise.

Academic Context of Anthropology

It goes without saying that “tribe” and “culture” are among the key concepts of anthropological instruction and research. According to the *Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia*, anthropology is the ‘study of human beings, particularly their evolutionary history, biological variation, social relationships, and cultural history’. While Joseph H. Greenberg, in the *International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, suggests that anthropology, the ‘study of man, is the most comprehensive of the academic disciplines dealing with mankind’, he found its definitional and programmatic claims of vast scope mask(ing) a factually disjunctive accumulation of relics.¹ Although in principle anthropology has always had an interest in societies of all types, in practice, it has evolved a focus on primitive, or preliterate peoples, most frequently defined as those that did not have writing at the time of their first contact with the West. In the words of Edmund Leach, the contemporary primitive peoples were “living fossils”; ‘their savage customs were horrid survivals from antiquity which serve to illustrate the stupidity and depravity of that beast like behaviour of our primitive ancestors’.² The subject matter—study of man—naturally presumes that ‘all men are equal’, but in view of the early Anglo-Saxon anthropologists only when “men” means “people like us”, then where do the “others” fit in? And that is why ‘the variety of men came to be discussed under such vaguely defined labels as “peoples”, “races”, “nations”,

“tribes”, and more recently, “cultures”, “language groups”, “speech communities”, and “social formations”.³ And these writings and discussions took place in English, French, German, Russian and Spanish languages alien to the peoples who were the subject matter of such exercises. The style was scientific and reports were made as objective as possible conforming to the claimed scientific rigour, invariably unknown to the most knowledgeable of the subjects.

With the European renaissance, a spate of scientific inventions and geographical discoveries were initiated leading to establishment of European colonies all over the world. In the process, the colonialists came in contact with peoples unknown to them in terms of languages, living conditions, polity, society and other traditions. More significantly, the colonialists discovered to their amazement that the earth was inhabited by human beings unlike them, who were racially different and their traditions demanded close attention for an effective political control over them. Works such as Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and *Origin of Man*, E.B. Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* and L.H. Morgan’s *Ancient Society* laid the foundation of an evolutionary ethnology, which proved extremely useful to the colonial administrators in placing the White colonialists at the top of the universal evolutionary order of the peoples of the world. Anthropologists began to collaborate with colonial administrators in many ways and in due course of time anthropology became an integral part of the syllabi of their training curricula. Similarly, anthropology turned out to be handy tool for the evangelical campaigns among the distant preliterate communities and Christian missionaries took help of ethnological expertise to reach and spread the holy gospel. Very soon, anthropologists came to be employed as the Governors to the various tribal reserves in the United States of America and as “Government Sociologists” in British South Africa. The last nomenclature did not imply their training or theoretical interests, but ‘simply recognized the unpopularity in African circles of the word “anthropology”, a term thought of as meaning the study of “primitive peoples”’.⁴

The tone and utilitarian aspects of the colonial anthropological literature did not appeal to many of the colonized peoples. In this context, it is worthwhile to quote a paragraph from Adam Kuper’s seminal work on the history of British Social Anthropology: ‘A painting used to hang in the ante-room of former President Kwame Nkrumah (the first President of Ghana). The painting was enormous, and the main figure was Nkrumah himself, fighting, wrestling with the last chains of colonialism. The chains were yielding, there is thunder and lightning in the air, the earth is shaking.

Out of all this, three small figures are fleeing, white men, and pallid. One of them is the capitalist, he carries a brief case. Another is a priest or missionary, he carries the Bible. The third, a lesser figure, carries a book entitled *African Political Systems*: he is the anthropologist...'.⁵ And we shall like to add that the towering African nationalist leader, Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of independent Kenya, was trained in anthropology by none but B. Malinowski himself at the London School of Economics.

Among the variety of conceptual tools, the idea of culture was the most crucial in anthropological enterprise. Various definitions were provided by E.B. Tylor in 1871 in the following words: 'Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.'⁶ Writing almost one hundred years after Tylor, the doyen of American anthropologists, Margaret Mead emphasizes its contemporaneity when she finds anthropology 'as a field science, whose members work with fresh field material, studying living speakers of living languages, excavating the earth where archaeological remains are still *in situ*, observing the behaviour of real mothers' brothers to real sisters' sons, taking down folklore from men's lips, measuring the bodies and sampling the blood of men who live in their own lands—lands which we have to travel in order to study the people.'⁷ She adds: 'We, that is, the White anthropologists, have to travel to lands of the "tribes" for field-work. The basic descriptive technique is field study by observation and participation and verbal interviews of relatively small groups, typically organized on tribal basis. This emphasis tends to become qualitative than quantitative. It is the study of "other cultures", reported in third person, not necessarily for the subjects, but for others, who may try to understand subjects' culture in non-native tongues.'⁸

New Challenge to the Anthropological Enterprise.

Portuguese anthropologist Joan De Pina-Cabral informs that France's principal funding body for anthropological researches—CNRS—was contemplating in January 2006 of striking anthropology out of its disciplinary list and attributing it to a subsidiary position within the field of history. A heated debate ensued concerning anthropology's independent position within the CNRS funding structure and, ultimately, in the face of national and international outcry, the proposal was dropped and the change

was not implemented.⁹ Does it remind the audience the lack of efforts to fill the vacant posts in the Anthropological Survey of India and the frequent suggestion to take it to the stable of the pure scientific set-up such as Department of Science and Technology (DST)? Pina-Cabral suggests that the move to drop anthropology from CNRS should be seen as a sign that the public understanding of anthropology is not what it should be and the issue is in bad need of further debate.

The celebrated British sociologist, Anthony Giddens, defined anthropology in 1996 as: 'A discipline which deals with an evaporating subject matter, staking claim to a method which it shares with rest of the social sciences anyway, and deficient in its core theoretical traditions.'¹⁰ However, he was generous enough to see some areas where anthropology may still be relevant and he lists three examples: 'the resurgence of ethnicity', 'revival of tribalism', and 'continuing importance of religion and ritual'. So what do we learn from the above? It is a fact that the traditional baggage of "primitivist trope" has been largely discarded by most of the anthropologists over decades. However, 'anthropology continues to be read as a study of primitive both by the general public and by non-specialist scientific public.'¹¹ In this way, 'the study of man to embarrass women' is reduced to the study of only the primitive man. Perhaps there is a need to reinforce the premise with the practice by encouraging all men to reinvent anthropological sciences. So there is another front which needs to be attended to by the anthropological establishment.

Anthropology and the British Administration

Coming to the Indian situation, when the British established their hold on India, the early encounter was not necessarily unpleasant. A number of the British army, trading and governing personnel had intimate relations with a variety of Indians at various levels. Similarly, their interests also varied from making money and extending frontiers of the Empire to learning art, craft, language and lore of the Indian society. At least some of the Englishmen had a streak of proselytisation to Christianity. They tried to convert the high caste Hindus and Ashraf Muslims and did not meet with the desired results. Then they turned to the communities on the social margin of the Indian society and found many of them away from the great traditions of the Hindus and the Muslims. Needless to say that the British administration issued licence to the Christian missionaries to concentrate on the peoples on the frontiers as a strategy for evangelical

activities. The 'Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857 appeared to be a turning point in the Indian administrative history in more than one way. By then, travellers, adventurers, missionaries, explorers, traders and administrators had joined the ethnographers on 'reporting on queer, exotic, barbarian and savage tribes' spread across the globe within the British Empire. Ethnographic investigation proved to be a boon to the colonial administrators for collecting data on life and lore of the colonized peoples so that they could rule over them more effectively.

In that surcharged atmosphere of post-1857 phase of the Indian history, it was Alfred Lyall, who initiated a debate on the nature of the Indian society.¹² And it was agreed as a policy to show India as a divided entity between castes, tribes, races, regions, religions, languages, food habits, dresses and what not and it was made loud and clear that India was just a geographical entity held together by the British might. Moreover, it was presumed that it was in their colonial interest to show India divided in various ways enumerated above. The census operations, district gazetteers, 'peoples of India' series of publications and tribal monographs were used to show the variety within India with ethnographic support and purposefully collated write-ups were touted as scientific treatises. It may be remembered that all through eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, British scholars did not distinguish between "tribes" and "castes" in Indian social situation. So much so that while what came to be known as the tribes were invariably termed as savage, barbarian, primitive, wild, etc. And there were references to identities like Brahmin tribes, Rajput tribes, Jat tribes, Muslim tribes, etc. indicating that there was hardly any difference between castes and the tribes in those days. Events of 1857 led to a racial polarization, in which the British went all the way to establish White man's racial superiority. Incidentally, this also marked the beginning of ethnological investigation all over the world. Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1858 followed by his *Origin of Man* and Louis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society* in 1871. The age of geographical discoveries, scientific explorations, and a number of technological inventions preceded this. Australia, Latin America, Africa, and the bulk of Asia were already divided among the European imperial powers. Science was the key word of the age; "progress" was the *mantra* of the period; and White man of Anglo-Saxon extraction was taken to represent the apex of human civilization. African and Asian tribesmen were considered as 'the White man's burden, who were deemed "half devil and half child"'.¹³ 'That was also the heyday of the museums. Science teaching was focused around show cases exhibiting specimens classified

by types—fossils, rocks, insects, stuffed birds, caged animals in zoo—fixed entities, changeless, everlasting.’¹⁴ There was also a new movement led by the botanist Sir C. Linnaeus for establishing botanical gardens all over the world, which did not only have scientific motives, but also commercial ones. L.H. Morgan’s evolutionary formulations were taken to be the final truth.

Human beings were “objectified”; they were scientifically measured and photographed as specimens representing a type. Their indices were to be established so that generalizations (principles) could be made. Edward Tuit Dalton reports in his *Descriptive Ethnography of Bengal* how a grand design of ethnographic mapping of India for the sake of scientific understanding was proposed in 1868. It was proposed that two specimens of every Indian community (as their nominated representatives) were to be sent to Jubbulpore, at the centre of India, to be measured and photographed with a view to developing an understanding of the Indian peoples. Unfortunately for the sake of the British science, the Chief Commissioner of Assam spoiled the game. He informed his superiors in Calcutta that he would not risk a rebellion on hand, as his specimens might die on their way to or from Jubbulpore because of the hot climatic conditions between his domain and the place of proposed ethnographic fair in Central India. The imperial government could not dare to risk such an adventure and the ethnographic fair could not be held on time. However, Dalton was asked to complete the *Descriptive Ethnography* on the basis of his own data, reports from administrators, missionaries, explorers, travellers, and, in fact, anybody who could volunteer to report and photograph the subjects. And that is how Dalton’s famous *Descriptive Ethnography* was compiled, which became a model for the future *Peoples of India* volumes.¹⁵

In course of time, such volumes were published on United Provinces, Punjab, Bombay Presidency, Madras Presidency, Central Provinces and Berar, and Rajputana. The first population census of India was conducted in 1872, for which British ethnographers’ help was sought in formulating the questions to be asked to the respondents. Since then, India is one of the few countries of the world, which has regularly conducted census operations every ten years. From the beginning, anthropologists were associated with its operations. Herbert H. Risley was the Census Commissioner for 1901, who in course of time published *Castes and Tribes of Bengal* and *Peoples of India*. John H. Hutton was the Census Commissioner of 1931 operation and his data on castes and communities are still considered as the most authentic and are used by governments

and political activists. It was Hutton, who used the term, "scheduled castes" for the communities known as such today and identified seven attributes for a caste to be so listed. The volumes on different provinces were written for British administrators in a rounded manner. Locations from where the data were collected were not mentioned, differences in practice were ignored within a community and efforts were made to show the distinctions between the communities. Administrators, missionaries, explorers, adventurers and petty government officials provided the data for these volumes. It is interesting to note that data on origin, food habits, religious beliefs, social practices such as marriage, dress, ornaments, industry, tools and implements and even hair-do of the communities were described to show them different from others. Similarly, the photographs of the community specimens were taken from front and sides, besides sex-wise indices. Politics, conflict, inter-relations and Indian linguistic roots were under played.

From the volumes on the provinces, the British descended to the level of districts by writing district gazetteers. Apart from ethnographic details on the communities, the gazetteers included place names, distance from one place to another, roads and communications, even location of the dak bungalows, and night shelters for officials on tours. It is apparent that these volumes were compiled as handy information books for the convenience of the travelling administrators, who were transferred frequently. Coming to the North East Frontier India, then known as Assam, communities were turbulent, hostile, and prone to raiding settled habitations and tea plantations. Such communities were labelled as head-hunters. Like North West Frontier Agency (NWFA), it was also considered to be difficult to be administered. For that they had evolved a two-pronged strategy: conversion to Christianity and an indirect but effective administration under political officers. The political officers were invariably drawn either from armed forces or police service. The Governor of Assam, Bampfylde Fuller, ordered in 1903 a series of publications known as *Ethnography of Assam* to be written by competent administrators and missionaries with long exposure to the tribes and such volumes were first edited by Major P.R.T. Gurdon and then by Dr. John H. Hutton. These monographs had a common pattern: general description, domestic life, laws and customs, religion, folklore, miscellaneous, language and appendices. Over a dozen monographs written by the scholar-administrators and missionaries were published on the important tribes, beginning with P.R.T. Gurdon's *The Khasis* in 1904 and ending with J.P. Mills' *The Lotha Nagas* in 1937. In this way, Khasi, Garo, Lakher, Lushai,

Angami, Sema, Rengma, Ao, Mikir, Cachari, Lhota Naga, etc. were covered by these monographs. In fact, these monographs became the most authoritative sources of information on these communities, as these were invariably the first written documents on institutions, practices and customs of the respective communities. Even today, these monographs continue to serve as the most authentic references on the communities of the region.

In the year 1873, the Inner Line Act was passed, by which communities residing in the hills were prohibited from crossing an imaginary line to the plains. Similarly, any non-tribal missionary, explorer, traveller, businessman, wood-cutter, hunter, and honey collector was to seek written permission from competent authorities to enter such designated areas. The British intention was to safeguard the tea plantations in the plains from tribal raids. Similarly, they intended to provide security to the non-tribal entrants to the hills from the tribes and tried to see that they did not exploit the "simple" hill communities. The Governor of the province was to administer such areas at his discretion. Present day Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram came under such dispensation. The Government of India Act, 1919 declared these areas as "Backward Tracts" and kept them away under the special powers of the governors separate from the legislative purview of the province of Assam. In the year 1935, these backward tracts of Lakhimpur, Sadiya, and Balipara frontier tracts, Naga Hills District, and Lushai Hills District were termed as "Excluded Areas" and the Garo Hills District was clubbed among the "partially excluded areas". It may not be out of place to inform the readers that the Government of India appointed J.P. Mills, a bureaucrat trained in anthropology, as the first Tribal Advisor to the Governor of Assam in 1940s, followed by another bureaucrat, Nari K. Rustomji. And for the last ten years, 1953-1964, it was Verrier Elwin, who advised the Governor of Assam on tribal affairs. Once the Constituent Assembly met for drafting the future Constitution of India, it made the provision for listing such excluded and partially excluded areas under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India with special dispensation.

Tribes in Independent India

Tribal communities had attracted the attention of Indian social reformers, political activists and the Hindu ascetics from western India. On the basis of their faith, customs, institutions and living in the contiguous hilly tracts, especially in the western peninsular India, these good-doers termed the

tribes as “backward Hindus”. On the other hand, the British administrators, missionaries, and anthropologists found the tribes a different world all together and they were to be naturally treated separately. While the former charged the latter for treating the tribes as museum specimen, the latter found the tribes being brought under the discriminative caste-ridden Hindu system. In this context, the acrimonious debate in 1940s between the assimilative sociologist G.S. Ghurye and the missionary turned Congress activist turned ethnographer, Verrier Elwin¹⁶ is relevant. Ghurye charged Elwin for following a policy towards the tribes, which he termed “isolationist” and maintaining them as ‘museum species for study by the anthropologists.’¹⁷ This was vehemently denied by Elwin while continuing to plead for a slow pace of development for the tribes so that they could absorb the shock of change smoothly. It is to the credit of the independent India that a rational, humane and scientific tribal policy for the integration of the tribes in the larger Indian society was evolved by two great humanists, Jawaharlal Nehru and Verrier Elwin. In course of time, this policy came to be known as the “Tribal Panchsheel”, five correlated aspects of tribal development and administration.¹⁸ The framers of the Constitution of India had made a commitment that in the future democratic set-up weaker segments of society such as tribes would be accorded special dispensation to catch up with the others.

Tribes were accorded special treatment along with “untouchable” castes in the Constitution of India by providing special measures for their representation in the policy making bodies, creating avenues for their socio-economic advancement and taking care of their over-all welfare. They were listed for such a treatment initially for a period of ten years, which was later extended indefinitely. As the resources were limited in early 1950s, welfare measures were also modest. Now, the measures for the tribal welfare have been increased in quantity and quality and, consequently, the quality of their life must have improved, though one must hasten to add that tribes continue to remain one of the least developed segments of the Indian population.

Now there is an academic and also a common sense problem: Who are the tribes? What makes them distinct from other populations? Are the Scheduled Tribes the same as what anthropologists consider as tribes? Anthropologists who claim to have specialized on the study of tribes have advanced many definitions, which create problems in evolving a universally acceptable definition of the phenomenon.¹⁹ Andre Beteille examines some of the definitions provided by leading anthropologists and shows that most of the definitions are either contextual to the tribe

under study or they refer to a list of the characteristics found in the tribe studied by a particular author. So much so that even the most standard and obvious source of definition of the phenomenon gives about half a dozen meanings of the term “tribe”.

What is a Tribe or Who are Tribes?

The Oxford English Dictionary provides a definition of tribe, which may lead to the following: (i) Tribe has varied meanings; synonymous with family, lineage, or even community with defined territory. (ii) Tribe means ‘an organization of peoples along ethnic lines’. (iii) Tribe is ‘an administrative category as in Solon’s Athens’. (iv) Tribe is ‘a political division of people as in ancient Rome’. (v) Tribe is ‘merely a geographical or a territorial category as in the Bermudas’. (vi) Tribe is ‘a community of peoples claiming common descent and generally practising endogamy. (vii) Tribe is ‘a simple society guided by a headman or a chief’.²⁰ However, this inability of the scholars to provide a comprehensive and universal definition of tribe does not necessarily display their academic inadequacy. It is also pertinent to understand that the extent, spread, variety, stage of technology, and sophistication of culture are all responsible for making it so difficult to define them in an all acceptable way. Look at the scenario from the vanishing Red Indians to Arunta, Onge, Birhor, Santal, Angami, Khasi, Monpa, and Bhil. How do we describe all of them in a single definition? Thus, we are forced with accepting a working formula by identifying the salient features of the tribe. Thus, we assume ‘a tribe to be more or less homogeneous society having a common government, a common language/dialect, and a common culture’.

For the policy framers, above anthropological predicament of defining a tribe was of no help, as various pressure groups were in no mood to wait for an ideal definition of the tribe. They acted on the second best option they had. The Indian policy makers were aware of the “tribal tracts”, excluded and partially excluded areas. Then there were hill districts. All these regions were known to be abodes of tribes. There were also census reports in which communities were enumerated by castes and tribes. It became obvious that by the time of 1931 census, the distinction between tribes and castes had become an issue of some importance. Tribes came to be viewed more and more in religious and not just in ecological terms. ‘If a group could be shown clearly “Hindu” in its religious beliefs and practices, it was a caste; if it was (an) “Animist”, it had to be treated as a “tribe”’.²¹ Indian society in 1940s presented a confusing array in terms of

hierarchy, economy, religiosity and ecological expanse. Demand on the political economy of the time was so pressing that special provisions had to be made. It is instructive to know that prior to terming the “tribes” as “Scheduled Tribes” in the Constitution of India on the pattern of the Scheduled Castes these communities were variously termed by the British administrators as “primitive tribes”, “aboriginal tribes”, and “backward tribes”. However, ‘before promulgating the list of the Scheduled Tribes in 1950, the state governments were requested to suggest tests for determining as to which of the tribes should be treated as Scheduled Tribes. The criteria suggested by 14 state governments were mentioned in Appendix IV of the First Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (1951). These criteria offered conflicting views. However, the following appeared to be the features common to the tribes in various states: (i) tribal origin, (ii) primitive way of life and habitation in remote and less easily accessible areas, and (iii) general backwardness in all respects’.²² Thus, what construed as the political management in the form of Scheduled Tribes has to be seen in relation to then existing politico-economic scenario of the country. Thus, it is difficult to identify a single way of satisfactory classification of 427 tribes originally listed as the Scheduled Tribes in 1950. The present writer is not aware of any community ever been de-listed from the above, but the current list of such communities has 698 entries and demand for enlisting others is still on.

The list of Scheduled Tribes in India has the image of being economically backward, but it does not mean that all of them are equally and similarly backward. There are communities, which are extremely vulnerable from economic point of view such as Bighorn of Chotanagpur. Then, there are tribes like Nocte, who are Vaishnavite Hindus; others are similarly, Buddhists, Christians, nature worshippers and even Muslims. They are spread from extreme north of the country, Ladakh to the south, Andaman Islands and east in Manipur to west in Rajasthan. Some of the tribes are located in only one small corner of the country, while there are others that are spread over many states. There are tribes whose number is in double digits and others, whose size run into hundreds of thousands. From cultural point of view, some of them have a tradition of very rich heritage and others have a simple form. Way back in 1950s, the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) conducted “cultural traits survey of India”.²³ Some three decades later, the AnSI similarly mapped out the country from cultural and social points view through its massive project called “Peoples of India” and published a series of volumes on various

states. From political points of view, the Scheduled Tribes were organized in states, principalities, chieftainships, elders' councils, village panchayats and some other forms of administration. Sum total of the entire arguments is the conclusion that except being listed as socially and economically the most backward communities in the country, the Scheduled Tribes among themselves have very little in common. And that explains partly absence of an all India forum for the Scheduled Tribes.

Tribal Scene in North East India

Coming to Northeast India, its geography and recent history have conspired to give it a distinct regional identity, the region of seven sisters: Arunachal, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, and now added is the state of Sikkim. All these states have sizeable presence of Scheduled Tribes within their limits. Four of them—Arunachal, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland—have each more than 60 per cent of their population as Scheduled Tribes. Consequently, all the seats from these states to the Indian parliament are reserved for them. Similarly, all the seats in state assemblies except one in Arunachal, Mizoram and Nagaland and except five General Seats out of 60 in Meghalaya are reserved for the Scheduled Tribes. Out of 30 seats in the Indian parliament from the region, two-thirds are reserved for Scheduled Tribes. These four scheduled tribal states are located on the international borders and tribes live in their distinct territories, which are traditionally exclusive to them. Moreover, the Constitution of India has guaranteed prevalence of their customary rights within their territories, which means no act of parliament will be automatically applicable to these states. These states get 90 per cent grant-in-aid for their maintenance from the Central Government. All of them have their universities funded by the Central Government. With the exception of Arunachal Pradesh, literacy rate in tribal states is higher than the national figure. In comparison to their demographic size, they are reasonably well represented in the all India services compared to their counterparts from other states. The elite among them is highly westernized in their daily style of life and they normally imbibe western values with ease. Recent colonial history and locational advantage of being on the international boundary give them extra advantage to negotiate favourably with the Central Government.

Most of the Scheduled Tribes of Northeast India are demographically small in size. And that is why none of the three largest Scheduled Tribes—Bhil, Gond and Santal—are from Northeast and their problems are also

basically different, as these large tribes live side by side with the hierarchical Hindu caste society. Commenting in a different context, a perceptive scholar has the following to record: 'The tribes of Central and Western India are completely different from tribal communities in North East, where there is better education and other facilities and indeed, where tribal political elite have been in power for 50 years, as in the case of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills, which became Meghalaya in 1972. One could remark that so-called primitiveness of the tribes is more in the Fifth Schedule states (outside the North East region), where education, political awareness and empowerment as well health facilities are extremely poor and income levels at the bottom. The mainstreaming of these groups, where their lands have been taken over by plain settlers and others, has not really helped them very much. Indeed, it has devastated their culture, their environment and their social standing as well as their economic status.'²⁴

Anthropological Instruction and Research in Northeast India

Indian scholars like S.C. Roy have published monographs on tribes even before the science of man—anthropology—was introduced as an academic discipline in any university in India. However, formal anthropological training to the Indians began with establishment of the Department of Anthropology at Calcutta University in 1920, when scholars from Calcutta were sent to do fieldwork among the tribes of Assam.²⁵ Steps were taken in 1940s to lay the foundation of the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI), which undertook field studies in the region. A new impetus was added when the University of Gauhati was established in Assam a year after Indian independence and the Department of Anthropology was included among the academic disciplines to be taught. And that was when the Universities of Delhi, Lucknow and Ranchi began teaching anthropology and occasionally sent their scholars to the region for anthropological explorations. Dibrugarh University started teaching anthropology from 1965 and the next decade saw addition of North-Eastern Hill University and Manipur University with instructions in science of man. By the last decade of the twentieth century, almost half a dozen of the universities from the region was imparting training in anthropology. And almost all the students getting trained in these regional universities are from the region and bulk of them hail from the 'tribal' communities. They are taught anthropological theories and concepts through the medium of English; they are trained in the traditional fieldwork

method of data collection through participant observation and write their dissertations in typical Malinowskian tradition in English. There is a tendency to select one's own community for doctoral research and often under the supervision of a faculty member from one's own community. Many a time, the incentive for such a study comes from a desire to correct some alleged distortion crept in the earlier studies. They are invariably inspired to seek for the origin of their communities, institutions, customs, and traditions and try to uncover the nuances of various aspects of their socio-cultural set-up.

The above practices are in old tradition of social/cultural anthropology in letter, but not in spirit. We are aware of emic and etic approaches to socio-cultural phenomena and a happy cohabitation between the two is always welcome, because such efforts will certainly enrich our understanding of the cultural phenomena. But scholars may like to ponder over the regionally emerging trends. Does anthropology continue to be a study of other cultures? What should be the medium of language for data collection and report writing? What should be the length of field stay for a meaningful study for members of the community under study? Who should the reports be written for? In other words, is such an exercise within the ambit of anthropological tradition of studying other cultures?

This trend is in fact universal. Even the anthropology students at the universities of Copenhagen and Aarhus in Denmark are encouraged to study their own communities! Then, what type of anthropology will it be and how different or similar will it be from the main anthropological traditions? In case it is not possible, then should it not be considered as 'sociological anthropology', in which instead of historical reconstruction, a general theory of comparative sociology is considered the goal of anthropology?²⁶ In this context, we may remind the readers of the above reference from Pina-Cabral about educating the public and non-specialist scientific public, who normally consider anthropology as a study of tribes, who are equated with backwardness and primitive world.

There is another problem and this originates with the study of changing cultural phenomena. Study of the aspect of change requires bench-line data from where variation can be measured. In case of the tribal communities of Northeast India, what should be the bench-line for understanding the tribal culture?

Our first problem in Northeast India is to identify the 'tribes'. Let us ask the obvious question: Do the communities studied by the British scholar-administrators such as Gurdon, Hutton, and Mills continue to be

'tribes'? If they are not, how can they be entitled to be 'scheduled tribes'? And what makes them different from other non-tribal communities? In case they are tribes, are the tribes and Scheduled Tribes co-terminus? We feel that these simple questions beg answers from the community of scholars.

Similarly, we would like to raise the issue of bench-line data for understanding culture change among the tribes of the region. The writer of the present article remembers his request to Milton S. Sangma, a Garo historian and intellectual, some years back to identify aspects of indigenous Garo culture. Sangma, an American Baptist Christian, informed with all the pathos in his voice that as the practitioners of non-Christian Garo traditional culture were hardly in existence, people like him had to do something to reconstruct the traditional Garo culture. Here it will not be out of context to remind us the controversy on culture change *vis-à-vis* Baptist missionaries among the Aos between two contemporary ethnographers, J.P. Mills and W.C. Smith, in 1926. It is true that the factors playing crucial role to initiate momentous change in communities may differ from case to case. Somewhere it may be the introduction of a new religion such as Christianity; elsewhere it may be the British occupation of the tribal territory; in a third case, it may be the attainment of statehood for the community alone or along with others; somewhere else it may be the introduction of literacy/education, which may impact the change, and still in other cases, it may be the initiation of the legal provisions extended to a community. Naturally, there may be a single or multiple factors responsible for culture change among the tribes, as elsewhere. So we are back to square one: what should be logical baseline for a meaningful cultural understanding in the region: pre-Christian, pre-British, pre-literate, pre-independence, pre-scheduled tribal status? Let us not forget that our intention is to understand culture change. Only a logical bench-line may possibly delineate boundaries of individual cultures before an appreciable distortion in indigenous culture was wittingly or unwittingly introduced.

No community in the region is any more in complete isolation. Now we know that it was not true even of the past. Thus, stable uniformity among the institutions within even the smallest of the communities is no more possible. Forces of monetized economy, introduction of Christianity, incorporation of the hill region within the state system, new means of transportation and communication, extension of welfare activities, media exposure and host of other forces have compelled the ethnic intelligentsia to evaluate their customs, institutions and values afresh. A segment of

more articulate among them apprehends that non-ethnic individuals may misrepresent their traditions in a negative light outside the region. With a view to avoid such a possibility, they at times stop welcoming external good doers inclusive of anthropologists among them. Thus, if a committed anthropologist desires to follow in the footsteps of B. Malinowski for fieldwork among the tribes of Northeast India today, he should be ready to face some unpleasant music.

Anthropological enterprise in India in general and in Northeast India in particular is doing well.²⁷ No doubt tribe and culture continue to be two key concerns of the discipline. The new generation of anthropologists has naturally travelled considerable distance from the pioneers in the field. With the coming of native scholarship, a new dimension has been added to its richness. However, this novel development demands proper assessment and direction. In the words of Levi-Strauss, 'what we call the Renaissance was a veritable birth for colonialism and for anthropology. Between the two, confronting each other from the time of their common origin, an equivocal dialogue has been pursued for four centuries. If colonialism had not existed, the elaboration of anthropology would have been less belated; but perhaps also anthropology would not have been led to implicate all mankind in each of its peculiar case-studies. Our science arrived at maturity the day that Western man began to see that he would never understand himself as long as there was a single race or people on the surface of the earth that he treated as object.'²⁸ Let us celebrate the innate humanism of the anthropological enterprise in these above words of Claude Levi-Strauss, the master craftsman of anthropology.

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