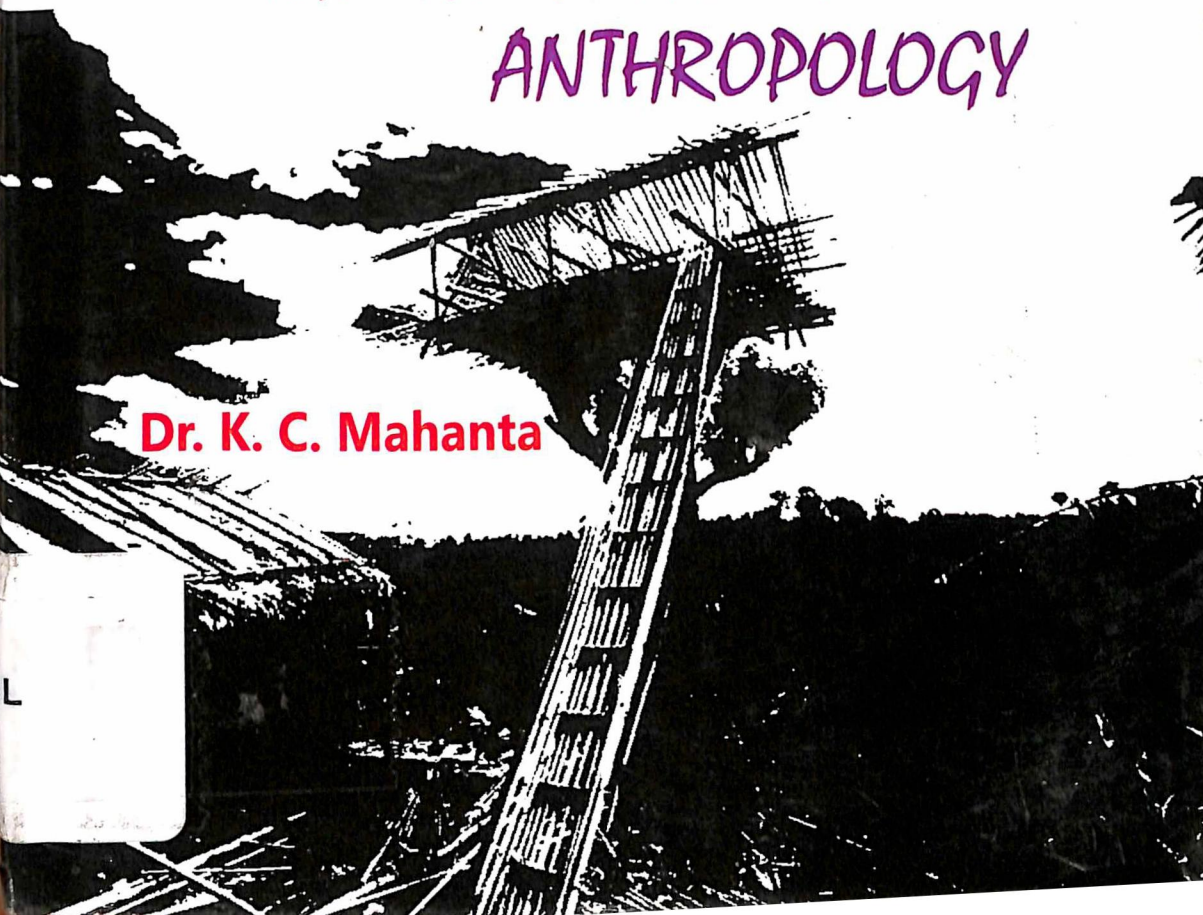




North East India

*THE HORIZON OF
ANTHROPOLOGY*

Dr. K. C. Mahanta



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NORTH EAST INDIA

The Horizon of Anthropology



K.C. MAHANTA



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Preface

This collection contains an assortment of the norms and practices of the tribal and non-tribal multi-ethnic communities of North-east India. The work is the outcome of prolonged and protracted field-work among the people over a period of three decades from early seventies to late Nineteen. That was the period of heavy initial impact of western as well as mainland Indian socio-cultural norms and practices on the tribal and non-tribal populations of the North-east. In the wake of the impact of the outside influences, the indigenous people of the region began to come steadily under the vortex of great traditions. In fact, these last three decades of the last century could virtually be treated as hiatus between steadily vanishing traditional age-old norms and practices on the one hand and the emerging neo-West-oriented elements of socio-cultural life on the other. The work highlights the people's ways of absorption of the neo-elements in their socio-cultural life.

As the traditional ways of life are fast disappearing from the north-eastern region under the impact of multiple alien forces and factors, many of the essays in this collection should serve the purpose of bench-making the trend and quantum of change in the foreseeable future.

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Anthropology and the Community: An Overview

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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The Classical Concept of Family in India

Introduction: the Concept

The concept family that naturally involves its multiple forms and functions defies a precise definition that could have a universal application. Families come into being through marriage. It is inevitable that differences in marriage affect the composition of families. Other factors also affect the concept. For a comparative analysis one needs the concepts to be on the most general level that may be applicable to all societies at large. In fact, on account of the wide range of variations in forms, it is well-nigh impossible to define the concept on a universal scale. It may be said that definitions of the family vary from society to society according to how people conceptualize the three relationships that develop in the family. First, there is the conjugal relationship that exists between husband and wife. In most but not in all societies, conjugal relationship is considered basic to the family structure. In terms of the number of husbands and wives involved, the conjugal relationships may be monogamous, polygamous or polyandrous. Then, there are the maternal and paternal relationships, those between mother and child and father and child. Both these relationships get broadened encompassing more than a single generation resulting in extended families. It might be noted that maternal relationship is always a part of the definition of family regardless of the paternal relationship in contrast. One may thus

find numerous definitions of family depending on the conceptualization of relationships. Basically on a world-wide general context, a family contains people who are linked by sexual and affinal relationships and also those linked by descent and collateral relationships, and further by secondary relationships, that is, by chains of primary relationships. It is widely felt that the concept, as it is most often used, is ill-adapted to comparative analysis. However, Murdock (1949) on the basis of data from his sample of 250 societies, asserts that "either as the sole prevailing form or as the basic unit from which more complex familial forms are compounded, the nuclear family exists as a distinct and strongly functional group in every society" and that it universally performs "four functions fundamental to human social life the sexual, the economic, the reproductive and the educational". Murdock's position has gained wide acceptance.

The universality of small kinship-based domestic units with reproduction, sex-regulation and socialization is obviously an empirically established fact. All these features have striking universal regularities. Notwithstanding their ubiquity, conceptual distinctions need to be assessed for comparative analysis of other aspects of human society. Ever since the dawning of civilization in the human society sometime in the dim prehistoric time, inculcation of social norms often referred to as socialization has stood out as the heart of one of the most primary social processes.

In the context of the above observations, the classical concept of family in India could be treated as a unique feature of the land when viewed from an integrated perspective of the people of India in the classical period as forming a single culture. The concept of family in India could thus be defined as being based on unique modes of social life of the Hindus that involves the notion or concept of consanguinity, real or make-belief, brought up through adoption. One must in this connection note that the classical concept of family in India essentially involves the connotation of Hindu family by and large. And the concept in of family, as enunciated above, is to be derived from and based on, numerous mythological evidences contained in the large number of Indian classics and the Epics. The Hindu notion of family has a sacramental basis; ritual and

ethical conceptions provide the essence of cementing bond, the one that is ever enduring and that no amount of extraneous factors or physical separation over space or time can ever snap. From classical perspective a Hindu family consisted primarily of those who belonged to it by consanguinity and also of those who had been brought into it by adoption. Most ancient law-givers acclaimed family to be a pivotal feature of socio-religio-cultural life and treated consanguinity to be its most essential ingredient. The Hindu socio-cultural norm has provided for adoption of a male young fellow as a son who becomes ritually as good as a blood-related one. To a Hindu, a son is an absolute need to obviate the most baneful unlucky socio-ritual life that is a spontaneous development in one's life on earth and that is cleared by a *putra*, that is, a son by offering *pinda* or oblation in the mortuary rite. The adopted son ritually becomes an inalienable part of the socio-ritual life of the adopter. Sir Henry Maine (1891 :165) spoke of early type of family in India as belonging to it through consanguinity and adoption.

The ethos of the life of a Hindu in India is based on and derived from religion. A family is united mainly by spiritual, religious and psychological bonds that bind the members of the present generation with one another and with those of succeeding seven generations. Most of the profane factors of life require ritual sanction and sanctity. Attainment of serene and sublime ritualism is a life-long aspiration and is relentlessly pursued for realization, a fact that becomes manifest in the day to day life of a Hindu. A family, in the course of its existence, aims at attaining *punya* or religious merit through its assortment of doing righteous and socially benevolent deeds. An aura of ritualism pervades the working patterns in the life of Hindu family in general. The life pattern is so shaped and so conducted as to carry the ritual significance that is treated as the hallmark of life. A Hindu aspires after attaining salvation after death for his own self and aims at ensuring that of his ancestors by means of offerings made by a son or a son's son or a son's son's son lawfully begotten in marriage. If a man is not blessed with a son to perform his funeral rites and make mortuary offerings, his manes remain disembodied or forlorn and suffer in a state of misery. It is a male progeny that paves the

way to heaven and ensures a place there. In the classical years in India, social life used to be drifted towards attaining the coveted salvation of life and getting oneself assimilated with the Infinite. The basic age-old concept is still in vogue amidst an array of utter materialistic aspirations.

A Hindu family is an institutional repository of filial and fraternal solidarity. It prescribes that brothers should remain together in the parents' house after they marry. The cohesive bond remains strong till the father, acting as the patriarch, is alive and influential. The bond slackens after both parents are dead. The *Mitakshara* of the twelve century, the chief treatise of Hindu law, has strengthened this concept of filial- fraternal solidarity. Under this code each male is entitled to an equal share of the family property from the moment of his birth. This creates ground for a joint living - a common domicile and a common monetary pool. Under this ancient law family-women had no other vested rights in the family property.

Hierarchy in Hindu Family

Among the members of a Hindu family hierarchical authority prevails. It is the parents who exercise paramount authority over the children with the sole aim of socializing them. Children remain dependent on the parents for years.

Hierarchy in the family is mainly based on age and sex. Men have more assertive authority in contrast to women in traditional Indian family. And also elders have greater authority as compared with younger members of a family. A difference in age even by a few days is sufficient to establish who is superior in status and ritual. position.

As all kinship relationships are weighed through ritualistic perspective, a husband is ritually superior to his wife and stands as a subject of real deference from her. Notwithstanding this ritualistic disparity between a man and his wife, the marital life is hardly affected owing to any lack of conjugal love and devotion. In fact, the devotion of the Indian wife is indeed unparalleled in the world. The conjugal love of an Indian couple, is a fine harmony between compatible disparity and sentimental moral bond of mutual

obligation that endures even after death. A woman goes on performing her multiple roles within the confines of the household taking care not to go beyond the socially approved limits. A man in contrast has a much wider and loftier move beyond the domestic limit in the open world. A wife in all her relations with her husband is expected to follow the Hindu scriptural ideal of being a *pativrata*, meaning one following the husband's will and authority in all respects (Karve : 1953:78).

A wife's deferential behaviour is manifest at all social levels. A wife does not take her meals before her husband has them; she scrupulously avoids uttering the name of her husband lest it should be taken as a disregard or disrespect and sin should befall her. On the other hand a mother has a preeminent position with regard to her children. A widowed mother may wield a good deal of influence on her son. Often a grand mother or a grandfather is seen to have overriding influence in a joint-household.

Among brothers, authority rests with the elder. The respectful compliance shown to one's father is virtually implicit in the relation between a younger brother and his elder brother. The eldest son of a family who succeeds as head of a joint-family commands allegiance and obedience from his younger brothers and their wives and children. And the eldest brother's wife exercises the paramount authority in most of the women's affairs in the joint-household.

For smooth functioning of a joint household certain norms are to be invariably followed. It is imperative on the part of the eldest brother of a household that he should conform to the wishes of his mother; a wife should abide by the advice of her husband, and the dominant father should defer to the wishes of his father. These norms are generally adhered to in the interest of smooth functioning of a joint family. Nevertheless there arise occasions when there occur deviations from the ideal pursuit of norms of behaviour. But the hierarchical norms have age old history behind them and have powerful influences on Hindu family conduct.

In accordance with the Griha-sutras enjoined on a Hindu family, the home is supposed to be the dwelling place not only for the living members of the family, but also for the fathers and all deceased fore-fathers and also for the children and grand-children

who are yet to come. Every Hindu family takes care of upkeeping the family traditions - *Kula dharma* and *kula parampara*, and these are expected to be retained unimpaired and unblemished by future members of the family. The living members of the family are mere trustees of the home, which with all its material acquisitions belong to the *pitri purusha*, the ancestors, for transmission to the *putras*, the sons. A Hindu family in fact an assemblage of persons that gets renewed throughout ages without a breach of continuity. The psychology of spiritual continuity forms the basis of Hindu family. The *griha* or the home of a Hindu family is constantly hallowed by various rites and rituals invoking deities to guard it against untoward mishap and to ensure happiness and prosperity of its inmates. The original builder of a house lits the sacred fire with invocations of the blessings of Agni, the sacred Fire, the presiding deity of the home.

Method of Study

It is known that anthropology envisages the study of man at all levels of his bio-socio-cultural development, past and present. Anthropologists habitually develop the tendency to focus their attention to the living present. Concern for urgent anthropology keeps the option wide open for building up an ethnographic storehouse of data of vanishing man's ways of life for use and study by future ethnographers. A work on classical concept of a living community calls inevitably for resort to historical reconstructions of culture history. Bidney (1964) is of the opinion that by a careful study of the culture history of a given society it is possible to reconstruct some of its non-recorded culture history, for example, from a study of its myths and legends it is possible to reconstruct the thoughts and beliefs of a previous age. At times the firm faiths of a people may become the myth in the next generation. Sidney (Ibid.) further opines that in the process of historical reconstruction, many primitive religious traditions have become folktales, while the folktales of one culture have often been used to rationalize or validate the rituals and customs of another. Mandelbaum (1972: 9) reports a biologist once using the folklore motif of the magic well to describe the study of bees. Our study of the classical concept of

family in this paper makes an attempt to include the basic perspective and mode of development of the concept ever since its inception in the form of an assessment of culture history contained in the Hindu myths and mythological tales and chronicles. An attempt to do this for a large land like the Indian sub-continent is to undertake a task of doubtful feasibility. A good deal of difficulties and hazards are involved "in making statements claiming to hold good for Hindus all over India" (Srinivas : 1966 : 2). Yet the attempt is expected to help formulate certain generalizations that will certainly not be far from factual classical scene that is ever typifying the sub-continent. Most classical mythological and scriptural narratives are sources of ethno-historic material on the basis of which culture history of ancient systems could be built up.

Family Forms in India

In all societies of the world the family is the most basic fundamental institution for varieties of life - functions of the individual and the society. The family serves as the seed-bed of one's virtue as a human being and acts as the source of reputation accredited to an individual in his or her life. Reputation spouts in the family of orientation, and its attribute to an individual is inseparable from the latter. Domestic patterns set a line of norms, adored as the life-goals of a family, that are followed generations after generations. The great variety of family forms found the world over are based upon particular definitions and their domestic roles. The most overriding common factor characterising invariably each form of family structure is visualized in the relation of parent and child, of husband and wife, and of sibling and sibling. In India the cycle of family is most obsessively desired to be a recurrent one. A family comes into being through marriage and mating and gets expanded through birth of children. The eventual marriage of the children causes dispersal of the family, finally often leading to separation and establishment of new households.

Families in rural India are characterised by certain significant distinctness which are basically typically Indian. These are to be seen first in the wide sharing of family relations as an ideal model and second, in the prevalence of the common perspective of

hierarchy in the family which is based on castes and socio-economic fluidity.

The first thing that strikes one while considering the Hindu family is its joint nature. All members of the family live together in the same abode. Age-old Indian codes and customs postulate that it is desirable for married sons to live, work and share property with their parents and to remain together after their parents have died. But brother's sons are not under the same obligation to stay together as are two true brothers. Fission of a larger family beyond an optimum size results in small family groups, called nuclear families, each consisting of a married couple and their children. When the sons come of age and get married, the family becomes what is known as a joint family, that comprises two or more married couples.

A joint family is not a merging of two or more disparate nuclear families. It is rather a natural spontaneous growth of an original family having a common kitchen and a common pool of income. Normally it is seen that the joint family includes three generations, but sometimes it may also include ascendants, descendants and collaterals upto seven generations. Joint families are often regarded as epitome of *patria potestas* of the father in India. The notion of a patriarchal family with the prominent figure of a dominant father is ever present in Hindu family conception since Vedic times.

Classical Vedic Aryan literatures are replete with references to parental powers as exemplified in the episodes like robbing Vjasravas of his eyes, offering of Nachiketas to Yama etc. These myths are without doubt indicative of Hindu family being patriarchal with a rigorous all-powerful father in the Vedic period. Under the injunctions of the post-Vedic Dharma-sutras, the father is the object of the deepest reverence for the sons. He is the first of those in the family to whom respect has to be paid by the children of the family. The father is the *Guru*, the preceptor, of his son. Other classical works also speak of considerably high position of authority of the father in the family. But Kapadia (1966 : 220) remarks that from what has been gathered from data available, it could be concluded that patriarchal family was not the only form of

family organisation. The Dharmasutras and another post-Vedic work, the Manusamhita, provide us with sample material concerning the nature of the family organisation of the time and the modification it underwent during the period. The Dharmasutras and the Manusamhita spoke eloquently about the tradition of the patriarchal family persisting side by side with the trend towards individual families. A reference in the Grhyasutras to the establishment of a new house at the time of marriage or at the time of division of paternal property indicates the waning of the patriarchal family and simultaneous ascendancy of individual family. Kapadia (Ibid.) observes that the Vedic evidence bears out the fact that the old patriarchal family got transformed into a joint family and that there was a growing tendency towards disintegration of the joint-family into individual families.

The pivotal point to be understood with regard to disposition of family property vis-a-vis the nature of control could be had from post-Vedic literatures. Infact, information concerning disposition of property is very scanty. Macdonell and Keith (1912) observe that the Vedic passages negate the idea that the property of the family was legally family property; it was the property of the head of the house, normally the father. In Vedic literature there are instances of setting aside the son's claim to property. Concerning the question of impartibility of family property, nothing could be ascertained from the Vedic literature. But there are explicit indications that the eldest had a privileged position entitling him to the spiritual heritage of the family. In consonance with this tradition, one may refer to a Vedic passage speaking of Prajapati establishing his eldest son, Indra, by means of full moon rite. The Sutra-writers in later years in pursuance of the Vedic tradition advocate for a special portion of the family property for the eldest son.

The Dharmasutras and the Manusamhita lay down certain norms concerning law of inheritance and partition. Manus maintains that the eldest son alone could take the whole paternal property and that the others should live under him as they did under their father. However most of these classical literatures are contradictory and need careful sifting to have the correct picture. While the eldest son had the pre-eminent position in respect of possession of parental

estate enjoining the other brothers to live together under him amicably, at the same time, there was acclaim for separate living if there was desire to gain spiritual merit on the part of the brothers. The Dharmasutra-writers were clearly against the impartible nature of property and the patriarchal form of family. Apastamba is of the opinion that "all sons who are virtuous inherit". And he directs that the father should divide all his wealth during his life-time equally among his sons. Gautama also supports the view that the whole property should go to the eldest son who should support the other brothers as the father. He, however, added that 'in partition there is greater spiritual merit', and that 'the partition ought to be effected in the father's life time', Baudhayana, following the Vedic tradition of Manu, stood for equal shares to all the sons without any distinction, referring at the same time, to a Vedic passage acclaiming the eldest son to be the recipient of the parental wealth. Vasistha advocated for an extra share for the eldest.

The Vedic tradition of impartibility of family property was consistently supported by the Sutra-writers. However, they formulated a different rule of partition especially based on religious grounds tending to bestow spiritual merit or *punya*. According to the post-Vedic Sutra-writers, partition of family property was to be treated as a matter of grace, and accordingly forcible partition against the father's wish was ruled out. Thus, during the Sutra period, partition of the family property in accordance with the father's wish and control came to be justified. In course of time the Sutra-writers' lead for partition developed into a social convention. But considering the preeminent position of the first son, as one who by his very birth relieved his father's spiritual debt to the manes of the family and helped him achieve fulfillment of *dharma*. Manu argued in favour of the patriarchal tradition. The first son was accordingly entitled to inheritance of family property. Primogeniture came to be legitimately practised. A Hindu eldest son is virtually a patriarch who is supposed to treat his other brothers, the dependants, well.

Notwithstanding this express position of the eldest son, partition of family property did not escape Manu's consideration. As already stated, the father was ordained to divide the property

in his lifetime and also the absolute control that was exercised by him. With regard to the unequal shares in the property, Manu and other classical law-givers especially recommended the share of the eldest and that of the others. Though the Dharmasutras and the Manusamhita did not lay down any precise allotment, the father's authority became circumscribed by these scriptural injunctions relating to unequal allotments.

Yajnavalkya, the law-giver after Manu, enjoined on the father to let him separate the sons by giving the eldest the best part of the property or by giving them equal shares to all. Narada also recommended a large share to the eldest son while distributing the property among the sons by the father himself. But Narada appears to be more in favour of impartibility of patrimony than its distribution among brothers. He states that the head of the family receiving the property by right of inheritance is independent with regard to it, whereas wives, sons, slaves and other attendants are all dependants having no right of inheritance. A man attaining the age of sixteen is independent if his parents are dead. The father, the mother and the eldest son being independent can have authority in regard to relinquishment or sale of the parental property. A son is debarred from having any transaction concerning the property without authorisation from his father.

From the above delineation it could well be noted that in the Vedic as well as post-Vedic Sutra periods the patriarchal family system prevailed with the eldest son as the head and functionary of the family affairs. Most of the Vedic and post-Vedic classical law-givers recommended the eldest son as the sole inheritor of the parental property, though partition of the patrimony and distribution of the shares among son was also not altogether ruled out. But hardly was the daughter taken note of as a claimant to paternal property. In the seventh century B.C. it was Yaskacarya who dealt with the subject of daughter's share in the patrimony. He recorded both positive and negative views concerning the daughters' entitlement to a share in the patrimony along with the brothers. The classical works of Yaskacarya's time treated of daughter's right to patrimony as a disputed question. Yaskacarya himself favoured only a brotherless daughter's case of inheritance

as a genuine one. Manu, too, favoured the inheritance of paternal property, like Yaskacarya, by a brotherless daughter. Yajnavalkya of the Purana period from the first to the third century A.D. was the first to recognise categorically the daughter as heir to property immediately after the lineal descendants and the wife. It is enjoined on the father that he should look upon his daughters with the tenderest feeling. The Mahabharata also prescribes that daughters are to be looked upon by the parents as the goddess of prosperity. The daughter must be given in marriage by the father at the proper time.

The whole history of the Hindu family reveals the fact that ever since Vedic times the joint corpus of the family was sought to be kept intact by upholding the absolute control of the head of the family over property. The occasional trends to nuclearise the family was sought to be harmonized with the interest of the joint family. The ancient Indian law-givers did the utmost researching to seek for an ever-lasting enduring domestic relationship that could ensure the much-need stability of the family for continued prosperity of the society. A strife-free family organisation was the most desired objective of an agrarian society as India has ever since been. Ancient Indian philosophers could, well stipulate that the objective could be achieved and retained through attribution of a pre-eminent position to the eldest young man of the family organisation. Accordingly the eldest son of a family is the pivotal figure of the joint family system in India.

The joint-constitution of family life has ever since been in perfect tune, with the socio-environmental nature and situation of the vast land of India. The joint family is characteristically peculiar to the Hindus. The system was most rationally and scientifically thought out to be a most befitting one to a non-industrial people as those of India. The traditional Hindu ideology has its perfect reflection in the joint-family system in India. It has proved quite formidable and resistant to all indigenous forces of metamorphoses keeping the age-old system more or less unimpaired.

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The Problem of Tribal Tradition and Identity in Assam

Abstract

It is since the beginning of the fifties of the twentieth century that westernization and urbanization began to appear in the North-eastern region on a substantial scale. Under the impact of the neo-elements entering North-east India since 1950, the tribesmen of both the hills and the plains of Assam have been experiencing myriads of changes. Neo-elements of culture are being borne into this region by the non-tribal upcountry immigrants from the heartland of the country who are permanent and/or semi-permanent settlers in the North-east. These have verily changed the age-old traditional material and aesthetic life-ways of the tribesmen of Assam, notwithstanding the administrative following of Nehru's five fundamental principles concerning socio-political deals with the tribesmen. It has been noted that over the last fifty years or so forces of change are working on the tribesmen so heavily that tribal identity could hardly be kept in tact over the next fifty years or so in the context of the global dissemination of scientific and technological innovations in all walks of life.

Introduction

In Assam there are tribesmen both in the hills and the plains. Most tribal habitats are located in the most inaccessible, remotest regions being situated far off from the din and bustle of urban complexes. It is a fact that the Assam tribesmen both in the hills and the plains have lived age-old isolated life; they never in

the history of their habitations felt the need of having thorough transport and communication in their own locality. Nowhere in the tribal land the notion of distance and remoteness baffled a tribal mind. Distance or remoteness was structurally considered to be a part of the way of life. Since known historical times each sedentary tribal group has lived the isolated self-content subsistence pattern of life within the periphery of its own little tradition (Redfield, 1941). Such an isolated age-old secluded life, in the course of its long history of existence, had had occasional contacts for some dire material needs to be fulfilled with the nearest centre of urban life where abounded centres of great tradition (Redfield, 1955). The occasional interaction between a little and a great tradition, eventually get established as a perpetual phenomenon, the former receiving feed-back from the latter. In the process, the little tradition borne by the tribesmen, get enriched and redefined as a result of protracted contact with the Assamese, the non-tribal bearers of great traditions. Notwithstanding the occasional casual interaction between these two distinct groups of people, the tribal folks did never lose their cultural ethos and have since maintained their socio-cultural life in a steady form, with little metamorphosis over hundreds of generations till recent years. The tribesmen of Assam consistently manifest an almost obsessional adherence to the norms, practices and patterns. It can reasonably be asserted that tribal norms and patterns die hard, and the tribal life gets very much characterised by a good deal of consistency, stability and immutability. These features are formed in the social life through highly effective kinship bond that remains ever saturated with emotional feeling of attachment and a sense of dependability in the face of most unforeseen eventualities of life. Kinship relationships ramify all aspects of socio-cultural life - material, spiritual and aesthetic-binding individuals in an unbreakable bond of fellow-feeling.

Tribal Tradition

A socio-historical perspective in the life of a tribal community shows that its norms and practices get built up over the generations with little mutability or any trace of dynamism in the formative

process. These are moulded and shaped and become steadfastly adhered to in the people's life. The multiple socio-cultural ways and means, modes, methods and practices adopted and imbibed by each and every community member get steadily but constantly internalized into a norm and pattern, that becomes an inherent part of the individual's personality. It becomes bound with the person concerned, developing a sense of emotional attachment and a sense of impartibility from the mass of acquired socio-cultural features. Most of the people's norms and practices get cemented in the people's psyche, through constant intra-community interaction. In the internalization of behaviour patterns, kinship relationships play a key role, as stated above. As a system, it imparts the sense of obligation and responsibility. It also provides a sense of security against various odds in the life of an individual. Man reposes confidence in the efficacy of the kinship system of the community. The notion of joint responsibility intrinsic in the kinship relationships acts as a great safety valve at the time of facing unforeseen eventuality or life-crises.

The aforesaid general characteristics are clearly manifest in the behaviour patterns of the tribal groups of Assam. Being aloof and geographically isolated as they lived till practically mid-fifties of the twentieth century, the tribesmen build up and nourish the community as the most dependable and reliable support in life. An individual outside the periphery of the community is an anathema and is never worth living his or her life. It provides a person with ground for internalizing the behavioural patterns - the social norms - as a member of the community. These are jealously guarded and most assiduously preserved. Folklores and folktales get built up around the traditional norms, their effectiveness and impact on the society are greatly admired and great social values are assigned to them holding them in great esteem. Not unoften verses, songs and ballads are composed depicting the glorious and heroic exploits of the clan-heros who are not infrequently elevated to the status of mythical beings with superhuman qualities. Protracted internalized norms that are perpetually practised and followed are invariably given an aura of sacred heritage hallowed by the names of the ancestors. Any deviation from the established norms tinged with

the sacrosanct memory of the lamented forefathers are fraught with grave misfortune or adversity in the family.

Tribal and Non-tribal Habitations

In Assam since long before the advent of westernization and urbanization, the tribesmen used to have differential degree of exposure to non-tribal behavioural patterns and customs and material components. The Assam tribesmen, irrespective of their abode in the hills or the plains, were exposed first and foremost to the non-tribal Assamese people inhabiting the sprawling Brahmaputra valley. The two groups of people, namely the non-tribals of the Brahmaputra valley and the tribesmen of the hills and the plains of Assam, have had since dim historical past their own distinctive ways and means and norms of conduct, differing in speech, food-habits, economic pursuits, ritual beliefs and practices and various other socio-political and aesthetic ways of life. The tribal people living in the plains, the plains tribals, have had, however, easier and more frequent access to the Assamese plains-dwelling than the hill-dwelling tribesmen had. But on historical perspective and empirical study, it could be well understood that the Assamese and the tribesmen maintained a marked distance in all sorts of socio-cultural relationships, barring occasional exceptions. Both the groups of people maintained their own separate distinctive socio-ethnic identity and existence without any active, perpetual interaction whatsoever except on a few definitive occasions. There are explicit variations in the ways of life lived and followed by the tribal and non-tribal people of Assam. Such variations are seen in respect of spoken languages, aesthetic ways and manners of life-ways followed and the material conceptions and belief-patterns pursued by the two groups of people. Basically Assamese has been serving as the lingua franca among the various ethno-linguistic groups; it, nevertheless, provided impediments at cementing social bonds. Apart from the language barrier, adoption and practice of diverse ways and means to eke out livelihood and following of varieties of aesthetic and ritual beliefs and practices have virtually kept the two groups of people quite emotionally distinct and separate with little interaction between them for hundreds of generations.

Materially and intellectually relatively advanced non-tribal Assamese people of the valley as being precursors and torch-bearers of sophisticated advanced life-ways in Assam were obsessed with a notion of superiority in relation to the followers of the 'lowly' ways of life, that is, the tribal ways. The notion of superiority in the behavioural ways on the part of the non-tribal Assamese people has since been acting as a hiatus between the tribal and non-tribal folks in Assam.

Notwithstanding the aforesaid socio-cultural barricades and disparity inhibiting emotional integration and interaction between the tribal and non-tribal groups of people, occasions in the past were not lacking for transient get-together and exchange of news, views and goods and services. Regular weekly markets in the neighbourhood of a cluster of Assamese villages were the only forum for get-together and it served as a means of communication between the tribal and the non-tribal Assamese folks. These markets used to provide the two groups of people with opportunities for inter-personal communication and for selling and buying or exchanging of household goods and agricultural produces. Tribal men and women were regular visitors to the weekly markets in the plains with their home-grown saleable produces. And on their way back home, they would buy scarce goods like salt, match boxes, kerosene oil, mill-made clothes, glass wares and glass beads and cosmetics, etc. The markets thus served as the most regularly haunted ground for transient but important social interaction once in a week since dim remote past. Ethno-social history of the people of Assam speaks eloquently of these weekly get-togethers as occasions for binding on everlasting social friendship, at times not excluding the ritual friendship or the classic concept of being *Shakha* between a tribal and a non-tribal individual.

Enculturation at Work

In the context of the above delineation, it is pertinent to assess the tribesmen's attitude to their socio-cultural ways of life that has in recent years come under the vortex of formidable forces from outlandish sources. Present day tribal cultures, however isolated and remotely situated they might be, are constantly subject to on-

coming stresses and strains in the form of myriads of alien norms, practices and ways of life that are invariably accompanied with numerous material gadgets with extraordinary devices for manipulation and labour saving utility. These material components that are available with utmost ease from international markets serve as the source of aesthetic pleasure and comfortable life-ways at minimal effort. These having had universal appeal and acceptability have achieved naturally spontaneous entry into the households of the tribesmen of Assam over the last few decades. Apart from the outlandish material components, one can visualize unprecedented development spurt in many other socio-cultural aspects of life. The structural change in the Assam tribal cultures come to the forefront, when one ponders over the indigenous tribal concepts of distance and time. In the classical pre-development days, these concepts were the part of the total life, whereas presently these are conceived of as having distinct separate entity and value, and accordingly in tune with the changed notion, the work-norm gets re-adjusted and mobilized. Also the concept of value in the input of human physical labour has diminished, but it has come to be enhanced with the addition of man's intellectual propensity and contents. The list of in-coming material wealth and intellectual contents that have reached and influenced all sections of population everywhere not excluding the tribesmen of Assam, can well be lengthened to comprehend the enormity of the unprecedented spurt of the formidable outlandish discordant forces in the form of industrialization and urbanization and westernization. In Assam, these have penetrated every nook and corner of the society, including the age-old secluded and isolated tribal population. People of the first and second ascending generations in the tribal societies of Assam in their prime of life had never been accustomed to witnessing such unprecedented development dash in every aspect of socio-cultural life.

Presently, with the acquisition of new mostly alien material goods and adoption of heterogeneous modes, practices and norms of life, inevitably there has ushered in a good deal of metamorphoses in the age-old traditional ways and means of life. Empirical observations in the Assam tribal life have shown that traditional

tribal family, marriage and kinship systems and ritual patterns and belief-system, etc., among various tribes and communities are undergoing steady modifications over the last few decades under the impact of the modern west-oriented forces. It might be noted that metamorphoses in the material and aesthetic behavioural patterns of the tribesmen of Assam have come about relatively rapidly in the post-1950 decades compared to the earlier years, thanks to the recent development of transportation and communication in the international as well as national spheres. Apart from the changes in the social norms and practices, cultural and age-old practices have manifested large-scale changes. Primitive hunting and gathering as means of subsistence livelihood have diminished, and intensive production methods are being widely resorted to in the recent years. Other domestic practices like weaving, dress and personal decoration patterns, cooking methods, house-building material-cum-process, agricultural practices, etc., have also manifested changes, and new methods and practices are being resorted to by the plain and hill dwelling tribesmen of Assam.

The recent development in the means of transportation and communication has resulted in great mobility of men and material, concepts and ideologies, norms and values into the tribal habitations. Influx of non-tribal traders, businessmen, industrialists and skilled and unskilled labourers and a host of various other workers has considerably metamorphosed the indigenous tribals psyche concerning their obsessional attachment with the place of birth and pursuit of primitive vocations.

On the backdrop of the above delineations, in view of the rapid culture contact with in-coming alien material and immaterial cultural elements, the ethnographer tends to believe that in no time the traditional tribal cultures would be on the verge of disappearance and be replaced by modern west oriented neo-culture complexes. In consonance with this belief, however, so far the tribesmen of Assam have not opted for, or been swept away wholly by, neo-culture components. On the contrary, the indigenous tribesmen's choice is still a determining one. A good many neo-element is despised and hardly finds any access into the tribal

community life. People's choice still has its exclusive role and it is this that sifts the ones acceptable from amidst the despicable or the detestable.

Nehru's Principles of Tribal Development

Notwithstanding the people's incompatibility to certain norms and patterns of in-coming culture elements, on account of these being highly formidable and mobility prone, it was feared that the tribal cultures might be overwhelmed and swayed by the alien in-coming ones. More specifically, around the very on-set of the second half of the twentieth century, apprehensions ran high that the Assamese, the dominant non-tribal community in the Brahmaputra valley, would eventually overwhelm and engulf the primitive satellite groups of tribesmen. In the pan-Indian context, the Assam tribesmen's socio-political position was thought to be volatile and vulnerable, and liable to be quickly battered and vanquished. The portent of swallowing up small isolated groups of tribesmen by the pan-Indian dominant immigrants or neo-settlers was indeed alarming. The fear from this ominous eventuality was needed to be assuaged. In this context it is worth referring to the Foreword by Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India at the period, to the second edition of *Philosophy For NEFA* by V. Elwin. With regard to the tribal problems in India, Nehru evolved five fundamental principles for tribal development which he mentioned in the Foreword.

The five fundamental principles are as follows :

- (1) *People should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them.*
- (2) *Tribal rights in land and forests should be respected.*
- (3) *We should try to train and build up a team of their own people to do the work of administration and development. Some technical personnel from outside will, no doubt, be needed, especially at the beginning. But we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory.*
- (4) *We should not overadminister these areas or overwhelm them with multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through and not in rivalry to, their own social and cultural institution.*

- (5) *We should judge results, not by statistics or the amount of money spent, but by the quality of human character that is evolved.*

The scrupulous adherence to these fundamental principles of Nehru over the last several decades have preserved the tribals' inherent basic rights and interests and saved them from ruthless exploitation by neo-settlers, traders and usurious money-lenders. At the same time over the years, norms for tribal administration have been followed as to enable the tribesmen to develop their own genius. Over the last half a century, tribals have nowhere been overwhelmed in Assam nor is there any trace of decline of the tribal inherent ethos thanks to the scrupulous observance and following of Nehru's principles.

This, however, does not mean that tribal societies in Assam have remained steady and unchanged. Myriads of changes that have occurred both in the material as well as non-material life-aspects, as noted in the foregoing pages, have virtually enriched the quality of tribal life, refined the traditional methods and practices and last but not the least, widened the area of exploitation of the livelihood means of the people. Development in term of acquired material components and improvement in the system of roads, transportations and communications, eradication of erstwhile infectious killer diseases have cumulatively made present day tribal life more comfortable and aspiration-prone than life in the first half of the twentieth century. By and large the improvements have come about without any perceptible erosion in the tribal traditional ethos of life.

Conclusion

In the context of the aforesaid observations on tribesmen's socio-ethnic existence in Assam, it is worthwhile to understand if the newly acquired, highly disparate material elements of culture in combination with the new ways and means of life would keep the tribesmen's socio-ethnic identity unaltered in course of time. Could the aforementioned Nehru's principles be effective in shielding the tribesmen's basic identity in tact?

Global enculturating forces that are presently swaying world-wide are indeed formidable sparing no indigenous culture of the world on a small or large extent. These forces emanate from the phenomena of industrialization, westernization and urbanization. Against these in-coming phenomena, survival of any non-Western cultural identity, in view of multiple elements constituting the culture, is somewhat more volatile and susceptible to change, being loosely or weakly integrated than a non-tribal one. A non-tribal culture as it generally becomes based on protracted history behind it, it turns out to be more resistant and less resilient than a tribal culture. A non-tribal culture, therefore, can relatively withstand the external onslaughts compared to a highly volatile tribal culture.

Further in the face of the non-traditional alien advancing elements of culture intruding into the land of the Assam tribesmen over the last few decades, the geo-physiographic and bio-socio-cultural environments have deformed considerably necessitating a good deal of re-adjustment of the pristine traditional tribal life-ways. In the wake of continuous re-adjustment, in almost all aspects of traditional life patterns, there would inevitably be ever more increasing inflow of alien elements without any respite. Under the rapidity of inflowing forces, hardly could the optimum level of absorption and imbibition of the alien elements be determinable. Under such emerging circumstances, over prolonged period within the life-span of the present day and forthcoming youngsters, associate forces like horizontal and vertical mobility are likely to effect dispersal of population on a wide scale resulting eventually in obliteration of tribal identity. Tribalism may, in the context of universal globalised culture, turn out to be an anathema.

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Hill Tribes of North-East India

North-east India is a hilly rugged expanse lying between 22 north and 29.5 north latitudes and 89.70 east and 97.30 east longitudes and comprising seven geo-political units, namely, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura. Considering the region's certain salient factors like geographical position, socio-historical background, ethnic composition and its distinctive cultural heritage, it may be treated as forming one geoethnic unit. The whole of North-east India consists of several distinctive river basins, all disjointed and not forming one integrated basin system. The region consists of four important plains, the largest being the Brahmaputra plain (56,480 Sq.Km). Myriads of distinct disparate ethno-linguistic communities have had their abodes since late prehistoric and proto-historic times. The 2,700 Kms. long Himalayan mountain ranges of the region are the exclusive habitations of nearly 3 million multi-dialectal tribesmen belonging to more than 100 distinct tribes and subtribes. With regard to the nature of habitation - highlands or lowlands - the tribal population of the North-east are referred to as hill tribes or plain tribes. All the tribes of North-east India are basically Mongoloid. They came to this part of the country in successive hordes at different intervals of time from different directions from across the far-flung Himalayas - north and north-east and also from

the South-east Asiatic regions. Remains of Hoabinhian culture of Vietnam came to be recovered from Nongpok Keithelmanbi locality No.1 of Manipur suggesting immigration from South-east into the North-east. The Hoabinhian culture of Nongpok Keithelmanbi has been dated to 5,000 to 6,000 years before present (Singh: 1988). Immigrations of South-east Asiatic peoples in successive hordes have been an uninterrupted process over several millennia till late 19th century when the Britishers asserted their administrative suzerainty over the interstate line of demarcation. The Mongoloid population living in this part of the country are called Indo-Mongoloid.

North-east Indian tribesmen live both in the hills and the plains. Plain's tribals abounding in the Brahmaputra valley far exceed the hill dwellers. In Assam there are only two tribal groups, namely, the Karbis and the Dimacha Kacharies inhabiting the Karbi Anglong Hill District and North Cachar Hill District respectively.

The Karbis also called the Mikirs by the Assamese are also thinly distributed in the North Cachar Hills, Kamrup, Pragyotishpur, Nagaon, and Sonitpur district. They are a Tibeto-Burman speaking people. They are believed to have immigrated from Central Asia beginning from several hundred years B.C. The Karbis are an agriculturist folk. They live in typically unclear family. Since time immemorial the Karbis had been animistic believing in multiple deities. The Dimacha Kacharies like the Karbis also belong to the Boro group of people speaking Tibeto-Burman language. The term "Dimacha" literally means the "son of a big river". The term "Dimacha" is also said to be derived from 'Hidimba', legendary Pandava hero Bhima's consort. The Dimachas were originally believers in multiple gods and deities. Presently Hindu tenets have very much entered into their spiritual life ways.

The state of Meghalaya is the homeland of the Garos, the Khasis and the Jaintias. "The Garos who speak Tibeto-Burman language, are a matriarchal people. They call themselves "Achik-Mande" meaning "Man". Tibet is believed to be their original homeland. It is also believed that a section of the Garos once settled in Koch Bihar for a few centuries and later on spread into Mymensing district of present Bangladesh.

The Khasis are also a matriarchal and matrilineal people. In a family authority is vested on the mother; property is inherited by the daughters and descent is matrilineal. After marriage the girl does not go to her husband's house but remains in her mother's house with her husband. The Khasis, unlike the Tibeto-Burman speaking Garos, speak an entirely different language called Monkhmer, that belongs to the Austro-Asiatic linguistic family. The Khasi language has similarities with some South-east Asiatic languages and also most curiously, with the Munda language of Central India (Das : 1996).

The Jaintias mainly inhabiting Meghalaya also have thinly distributed settlements in the district of Cachar and other hill areas of Assam. Before the coming of the British, the Jaintia kingdom, known as Jaintiapur, covered a wide range of regions including the town of Sylhet on the one hand and stretching from the foot of the hills overlooking the Barak valley to the Kolong river of the district of Nagaon. Nothing is definitely known about the origin and migration of the Jaintias. Since the Jaintias have close resemblances with the Mon-khmer people of Indo-China, they are assumed to have come to the present habitat from South-east Asia. According to Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee (1951) the term "Jaintia" is derived from the word "Jain-tein" which is a synonym of "Synteng". So the assumption goes that the Jaintias and the Syntengs are one and the same people.

The Jaintias, like the Khasis and the Garos, have the matriarchal system of family structure. Traditional animistic beliefs and practices have definitely got strengthened through adoption of Hinduism on a marked scale. Agriculture is the prime occupation of the people. The Jaintias have strongly knitted village organisation. During the self-rule of the Jaintias, there were regional chiefs called Dolois. Dolois were elected by the people. They have dual functions - religious as well as administrative. In the Jaintia society, Doloiship plays an important role in all traditional matters of the village.

Nagaland is the habitat of various Naga tribes like the Ao, Angami, Sema, Lhota, Konyak, Rengma, Phom, Chang and others. Guha and Basu (1931) identified Australoid ethnic strains in some

skulls found in Nagaland. Haddon (1924) also suggested a Indonesian ethnic element among various Naga tribes. Geophysical conditions and socio-cultural factors of Nagaland have kept the Naga populations completely isolated from one another for thousands of generations.

While the Meiteis are a numerically dominant people inhabiting the valley region of Manipur, some Kuki-Chin tribes like the Aimol, Hmar, Paite, Thado, Vaipei, Purum etc., and also some Naga tribes like the Kabui, Tangkhul, Khoirao, Maram, Liangmei, Rongmei, Mao, Zemei, Kom, and Kharam inhabit the hilly regions of the land. Traditionally all these tribesmen are animistic polytheist people believing in various natural and cosmic bodies. They all practise both plain and shifting cultivations for simple subsistence living.

The Mizos are a major tribe living in Mizoram. However, a large number of non-Mizo Kuki-Chin tribes also live in Mizoram. They are the Hmar, Pawi, Lakher, Paite, Thado etc. These non-Mizo tribesmen are very much akin to the Mizos, though they have their own ethnic identity.

The original inhabitants of Tripura are the Tripuri (Tippera), their language belonging to Tibeto-Burman family. The Riangs who were originally inhabitants of Mizoram now live in Tripura. The Maghs immigrated from Burma and settled in Tripura. The Chakmas form another tribe of Tripura. All these tribes are Indo-Mongoloids.

A large number of Indo-Mongoloid tribes live in Arunachal Pradesh. The State is sparsely populated having about 25 major tribes, some of which are named as follows: Adi, Aka, Apatani, Bangro, Hill Miri, Khampti, Miji, Mishing, Monpa, Nishi, Nocte, Sherdukpen, Singpho, Sulung, Tagin, Wancho etc. As per 1971 census, the Adis registered the highest population (99,372) and the Bangros, the least population (1,085). These various tribes speak slightly different tongues and have socio-cultural patterns of their own. All these tribes came down from the north across the Himalayas and narrate different histories of migration to this land. The tribes collectively share the common tribal heritage of a highland population.

Since time immemorial the hill tribes of the North-east have been jealously keeping intact the traditional socio-cultural lifeways without much intake of incompatible elements. At the same time over the last half a century, steady changes have come over spontaneously, the Arunachal tribesmen having imbibed a good many pan-Indian life-pattern without forsaking the tribal ethno-cultural identity. But the key element of the tribesmen's life patterns, namely, 'spiritual belief and practice system' have become much contaminated and thereby alienated over the 200-year alien rule of the country through intrusion of outlandish elements. It augurs ominous consequences dissension, mistrust and disruption - in the society.

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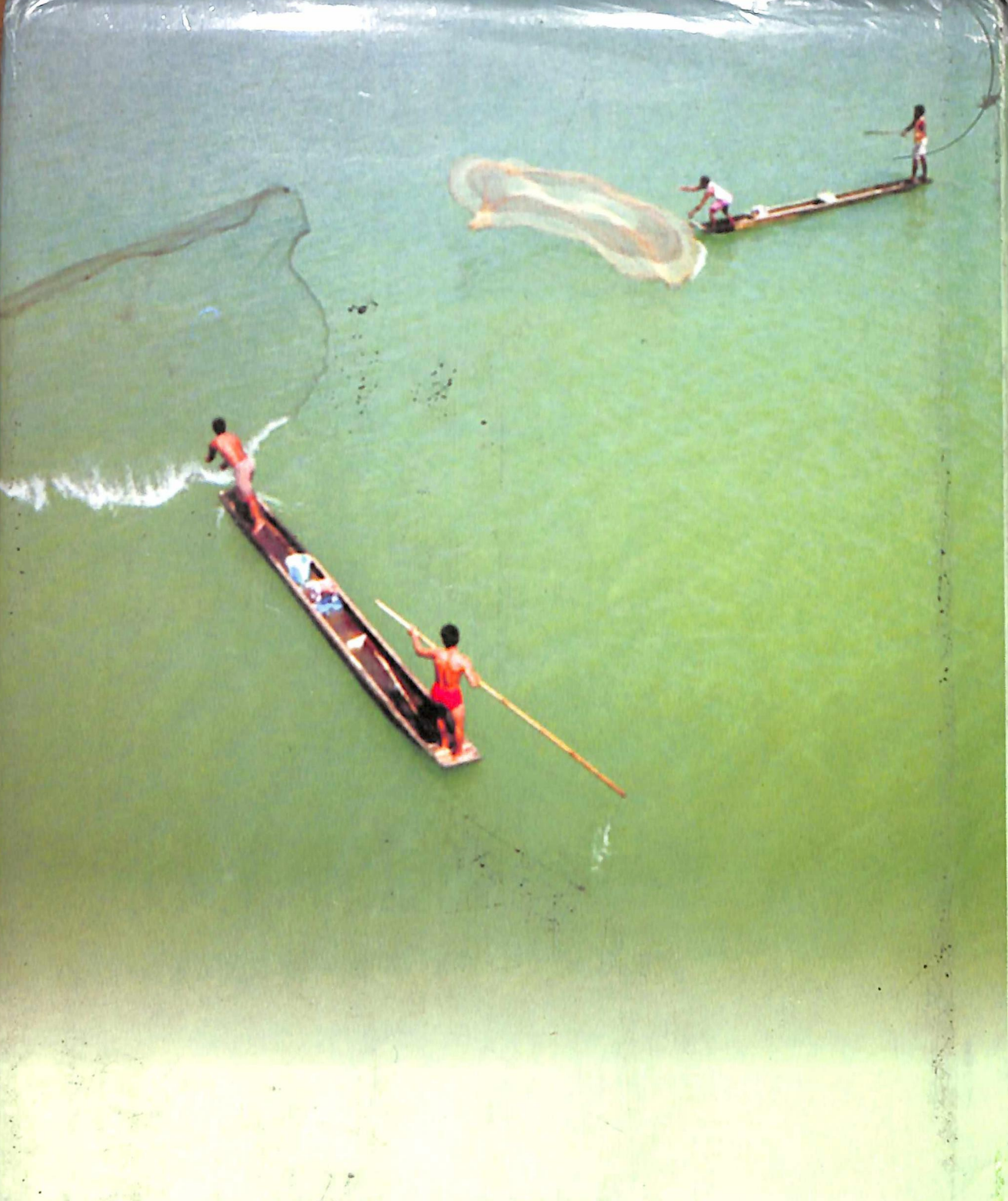
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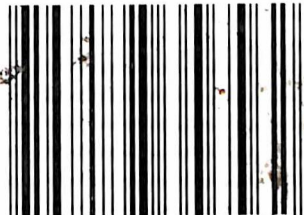


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