

THE PROCESS OF ACCULTURATION AMONG THE TEA TRIBES; A CASE STUDY OF TEZPUR AREA, SONITPUR, ASSAM

Dr Parag Nath*

Abstract

Acculturation, Integration and Assimilation are three responsible stages of culture change process. This process of acculturation is followed by the process of integration due to using of common elements. The tea tribes are not merely a single community but a huge cluster of Munda, Chaontal, Urang, Kol, Bhil, Bhumis, Ghatowal, Gowala, Pradhan, Kurmi etc. They have their own culture, language and distinctive life-styles to assert their own Identify. The early part of 19th century can be marked as the milestone of the entrance of the tea tribes to Assam. It is become clear from a primary field investigation made in different tea garden of Tezpur area that the process of acculturation is in operation actively between the two societies. The topic of this paper intended to make an analysis of changes that have been operating among the tea tribes of Tezpur area, through process of acculturation. Language, Festivals, Folk beliefs and superstitions are taken as the parameter of the domain of which the frequent and unavoidable contact with the Assamese society.

Key words: Tea Tribes, Acculturation, Culture, Language, Festival

* Assistant Professor, Sankardev College, Shillong, Meghalaya

Introduction:

We all know that every thing in the world changes. Culture also faces various kinds of changes with the change of society, life styles of people, communication, climatic and geographical variation with the development of science and technology etc. There are basically several factors of cultural changes. When a weaker culture comes in contact with a dominant one, then the weaker culture acquires elements consciously or unconsciously and undergoes some sort of changes. Sometimes few individuals of one culture whether as migrants, captives or travelers or cultural connoisseurs may also invite changes to another culture. Diffusion is another significant factor for contributing cultural changes.

Acculturation, Integration and Assimilation are three responsible stages of culture change process. When there is a dominant culture and encompassing that dominant culture, there are other weaker groups or culture, feel a tendency to acquire and enrich themselves with the elements of the dominant culture. This process of acculturation is followed by the process of integration due to using of common elements. At last, a stage comes when the weaker groups acquire almost all the qualities or characteristics of the dominant culture and meet the almost common ways of life. This ultimate stage is known as Assimilation. Acculturation studies have been motivated by the realization that there are no pure or “Uncontaminated” cultures in the world today. Secondly, the conjectural studies of diffusionist about what happened in unrecorded history had also to be supplemented by more authentic studies of a scientific value in order to develop theoretical and explanatory ideas.

Acculturation is precursor to Assimilation. Acculturation is sometimes called “behavioral assimilation” to distinguish it from integration or social assimilation. It is also a process of cultural homogenization by adopting the elements of the dominant culture and decaying or discouraging his or her culture.

Tea tribes; A general account:

The tea tribes are not merely a single community but a huge cluster of Munda, Chaontal, Urang, Kol, Bhil, Bhumis, Ghatowal, Gowala, Pradhan, Kurmi etc. They have their own culture, language and distinctive life-styles to assert their own Identify. The early part of 19th century can be marked as the milestone of the entrance of the tea tribes to Assam.

The two famous successive events, discovery of tea plants in 1923 A.D. and the Yandabu Treaty in 1826 A.D., the East India Company began to enhance the periphery of tea gardens in close collaboration with the British government and local aristocrats. At that time, due to the crisis of cheaper workers in the local area, they began to supply uneducated scrupulous labourers with the help of local agents from Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Tamilnadu motivating by various means.

The opening of Assam Company in 1838 and Jorhat Tea Company in 1859 began a new chapter of circulation of luck. With the failure of the collective effort of labour collection, Bibuting Agency House was established in 1860 for the same purpose. The workers had to confine themselves to the hard and fast rules of the company and faced uncountable atrocities.

“The primary object of British rule in India is to benefit the European capitalist and merchant, even if necessary, at the sacrifice of justice and humanity” (from an article published in “ The Bengalee” in 1901)

They had dedicated themselves for the welfare of the tea gardens with a desperate mood for disability to go back to their homelands and the appeal of the hearts to meet their dearest ultimately turned to a cry in the wilderness.

Within this one and half century, these ill fated people have been cultivating the Assamese language and culture to a considerable extent along with their own.

The *Jumoir folkdance, Jahli, Domkoich, Tuchugit, Kathi Dance, Jahli Git, Uria Nritya* performed and originated in *Karam Parab, Chahrai, Gram Puja, Tuchu Puja, Manasa Puja* are dedicated for the propitiation of local gods and goddesses and other natural spirits. They have been integrating their vernacular elements to the Assamese culture in a very polished way. Elements incorporating the similarities of theological themes between the *Bahag Bihu* and the *Karam Puja* can be cited in the jumoir -

*“Assam desher Baisakh Bihu
Karam paraber saman re
Sristir katha ache gatha
Dunate saman re.”*

(The Bohag bihu and the Karam puja both are enriched with themes of creation. So both are in equal status.)

The tea workers are also contributing to the Assamese Vaishnavite society by the adoption of this faith directly or indirectly. Their contribution to the greenery of the surrounding of Assam is worth mentioning. Yet they have been deprived of the fundamental rights and other amenities to a large extent which is quite pathetic for the entire society.

It becomes clear from a primary field investigation that day by day tea tribes are universalized by modern education, acculturation with the neighboring people.

Objectives:

The main objectives are as follows:

- a) An analysis of changes that have been operating among the tea tribes of Tezpur area, through the process of acculturation.
- b) To observe some traditions and customs that practiced years after years since the days of their living in place of Northern India.
- c) Cultural conservation of the tribe in the tea gardens under the British rule would be explored

Area of study:

The Tezpur sub-division of Sonitpur district, Assam is my field of this paper. Tezpur is situated at a distance of 181 kilometers east from Guwahati and within the 92-93 east altitude and 26-27 north longitude. Topologically this area is a plane area. In true sense, Tezpur is a successful creation of almighty as it really enjoys a complete natural surrounding with abundance of flora and fauna, ponds and rivers. I have taken three numbers tea garden (Adabari, Belsiri and Hahsora) of Tezpur sub-division as an area of my study.

Acculturation among the Tea tribes

It is become clear from a primary field investigation made in different tea garden of Tezpur area that the process of acculturation is in operation actively between the two societies. The topic of this paper intended to make an analysis of changes that have been operating among the tea tribes of Tezpur area, through process of acculturation. Language, Festivals and ceremonies Genes of oral literature and Folk beliefs and superstitions were taken as the

parameter of the domain of which the frequent and unavoidable contact with the Assamese society.

The outcome of the study shows that tea tribes are multiple languages speaking people. They have forgotten a large part of their original language. Except some minor difference the tea tribes dialect is largely acculturated with the Assamese language. Now a day they speak perfect Assamese language with the outsiders and also among themselves. Only with the village mates, with other tea tribes and in festive occasions, they talk in their dialect on behalf of intimacy and integration.

Since festivals and ceremonies are the external expression of one's culture, so its mobility and feasibility are comparatively faster than other components. Now-a-days, with the development of science and material comfort, the attribute and ethos of the people undergo a drastic change. As one of the consequent of it, we can cite about the removal of sublimity or sanctity of minds towards the deity in puja and filling the whole atmosphere with decorative exaggeration, merriment and festive moods.

If we look into the Karam Puja festival, then we find except a few cases, almost all practices and rituals are observed with the same paraphernalia possessing similar notion and aspiration with the Bihu. Some songs are filled with fertile aroma like the Bihu song and some are enriched with devotional-appeal like the songs sung in *Husori* and *Rasalila*. Dancing postures are also noticeably abundant with vulgarity like the Bihu dance and *Rasa Nrtya*. Rendering of gratitude to the mother earth is the basic ethos in both Bihu and Karam festival. It would be a matter of shortsightedness if someone declares that these elements are borrowed from the Assamese society completely. In the field of Festivals and ceremonies, it is observed that the tea tribe celebrates the Bihu with heart and soul. Marriage ceremony, birthday ceremony, puberty attainment ceremony etc. are observed with almost same kind of paraphernalia of the Assamese society. A confluence of both little and great traditions are clearly visible in the field of festivals and ceremonies.

If we keep sight at the oral literature prevalent in Assamese society, we discover that the basic theme concentrating the oral literature in both the societies is similar to a considerable extent. Besides these, there are lots of folktales, ballads, folksong, folk game and other aspects of oral literature which are similar in themes or in languages in both tea tribe and

Assamese society. In some fields of Oral literature, it is a very hard nut to crack that to which society it belonged first. With the advent of the waves of westernization, sanskritization and modern education, same kind of oral literature are circulated besides acculturation.

The Assamese society is the amalgamation of both tribal and non tribal people. So there are lots of beliefs and superstitions shared commonly by the inhabitants. Ways of livelihood, geographical and ecological variations have lots of contribution to the beliefs and superstitions current in any society.

Assamese society has been waved by the snake worship in the form of Manasa puja or Nag Panchami since time immemorial. Lord Shiva is the vernacular chief deity here whose neck is curled round by various snakes. So beliefs and superstitions relating the snake is obviously present here. The snake is the matter of great discourse in the fields of pregnancy, wealth, soul of dead body etc. in Assamese society.

Conclusion:

From these evidences, it is clear that the process of acculturation is in operation actively between the two societies. Lots of other factor including the education, socio-political institutions, organizations etc. has been operating on behalf of this process. Yet it is a matter of uncertainty, whether the tea tribe people are completely acculturated in this field or it is like one way traffic. It may be an argument to put forth on this matter that some similar elements may be nurtured individually in both the societies due to the primitively of mind and similarity of logical thin

Though few scholars have written books on the tea tribes and few souvenirs are published describing their activities, yet it is a single drop in the vast ocean. This paper is trying to burn like a spark only but how it would lit the gloomy night is depended upon the readers' view. It is extremely hoped that future scholars would progress further in socio cultural studies, burn the entire darkness of ignorance on such types of communities.

References:

- Devid, L. & Melvin, E. (ed.) (1986) Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology (Vol. - 1, 2, 3, 4), A Henri Holt and Company, New York.
- Datta, B. et al. (ed.) (1994) A Handbook of Folklore Material of North east India , ABILAC, GUWAHATI - 78124
- Tasa, Dewram (1996) Cah Bagisar Jati-Janajati, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Jorhat - 785001
- Kurmi, Sushil (1983) Cah bagisar Asomiya Sampradai Assam Sahitya Sabha Jorhat - 785001
- Choudhuri, Prasenjit (1989) Asomor Cah Bonua Aru Unois Xotikar Bidoto Xomaj Students Stores, Guwahati - 781001
- Melville J. Herskovits (1974) Cultural Anthropology Oxford & IBH Publishing Co.
