



Globalization and tribal identity crisis in north east India: A challenge

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Abstract

The land of seven sisters North-east India bears distinct socio-political characteristics. This multi ethno-cultural society is also known for its internal conflicts and strife for identity. As a region sharing boarder with neighboring countries, illegal migrants, human trafficking, internal boarder dispute with each other are common problem which made it quite instable and underdeveloped one in comparing to the rest of the country. North east India a home of different ethno-cultural and linguistic group, globalization emerged as a factor which led to ethnic assertion and conflicts in most of the part of this region. Quest for identity, expectation towards community concern, impact of national affairs on culture made it more critical, insecure and quite truculent. Globalization now plays a key role to increase the tension of conflicts between ethnic groups and the feeling of deprivation in terms of resource sharing led it to insurgency, inharmonious and politically unrest. The methodology of this paper based on secondary evidences collected form published books, journals, reports, article, news paper and online sources. In this paper a descriptive-analytical has been employed.

Keywords: individualism, identity crisis, ethnic extremism, traditional skills

Introduction

Globalization is becoming an increasingly controversial topic as shown by recent protests around the world. The basis of globalization is an economy pursuing the highest profit at any cost. Consumerism, the use of goods based on artificially created needs, is its way of ensuring the producer's high profit. Industrialism and consumerism have turned man into a factor of production and nature a resource only to be exploited for meeting man's never ending desire. Crop growing and handicrafts forms the basis for socio-economic development of most of the societies in Northeast India. Its traditional practices are drawn from generation to generation. But the knowledge inherited by the tribal people is at jeopardy because of the impact of globalization. No doubt, the information technology has narrowed down the time involved in the diffusion of agricultural and biotechnology and is currently emerging as a potential factor in uprising the agricultural system. Beyond the economic and political debates, it is presumed that globalization is a challenge to cultures, in particular, to marginalized communities and their identities. Interestingly, when we look around us today we find what is specific and local acquires the object of global desire while the so-called global circulates freely, unhindered in the local market. In such a scenario where the local and the global seem to overlap, the discursive articulation of the difference of identities and social and cultural practices become more crucial (Baral and Kar 2004). In the context of the tribes of Northeast, it is feared that globalization may bring in large-scale commodification of their cultures and would erase their unique identities that are so far consolidated mostly on the premise of ethnic difference.

Globalization and identity crisis in Northeast India

Identities in Northeast are mostly constructed around ethno-

nationalisms. The politics of identity therefore centralizes difference as the most important marker thereby recognizing cultural difference of which an identity is a producer as well as a product. The politics of difference holds good so far as there are no boundary crossings, but it becomes problematic and looks skewed when the boundary of exclusivity is blurred under let us say intense democratization of a society with increasing acceptance of the other or under globalization blurring all boundaries ^[1]. It thus gestures toward an internal contradiction that while excluding the other it seeks to be recognized by it. Therefore, difference is not self generative but always another- contributed marker.

When we come to the Northeast region of India, the ongoing process of globalization makes the region more complex. The Northeast region is well known to be a confluence of ethnic and linguistic diversity. The different religions and cultures make the region even more complex. From ethnic point of view the people of the region may conversely be divided into two broad groups, the "Indid" and the "Mongoloid" "Indid" group mostly comprises the Hindu castes and the Muslims, while the "Mongoloid" group includes various tribes, both in hills and in plains and also other Mongoloid populations that have not been referred to as tribals. The main linguistic groups are Tibeto-Mangolism, Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman and Austric. In fact, the region is the homeland of multi-culture tradition, religion, language and diverse ethnicity.

1. Individualism, amid shortages and self centredness took the form of hardened ethnic identities

Many tribes claim to be the sole representative of all, or demand the exclusive right over land, forests or jobs in a given area. For this, each tribe tries to create a new history to

¹ Kailash C. Baral, Globalization and Tribes of Northeast India

show itself as the sole owner of the depleted resources. One can see this trend in the hardened ethnic identities of many indigenous movements in the Northeast (Mishra 2000) or in the assertion of many tribes in Eastern India that they alone truly represent the whole of tribal India. Such attitudes have resulted in the break-up of many all India tribal organisations, because one or another tribe or region dominated and failed to respect the ethos of the rest. They have also led to many conflicts such as Bodo-Adivasi, Dimasa-Hmar and others in the Northeast ^[2].

In the post-independence period the NE region is experiencing in rapid change due to developments in various spheres – political, religions, and socioeconomic fronts. As a result of the rapid developments and of the regional economy, the traditional culture in undergoing changes at a rapid stride. People are becoming more and more apathetic towards their traditional culture. The globalized tendency which is divided into three worlds like first, second and third world is diminishing with a comeback of changing system of values, a transformation in the notion of what is good and what is bad, what is desirable and what is undesirable. The status, identity, social position and other kinds of self-definition – who we are, what we are, and so on – are now determined and displayed by what we wear, what we eat, what we buy and how we spend our leisure ours. The global people equated with greed, extreme individualism, conspicuous consumption, and a kind of blatant dependence on goods and lifestyles to establish their identities old wants, traditionally satisfied by indigenous goods and services are being replaced by new events, requiring goods and services from abroad for their satisfaction. This destroys local self-sufficiency and jobs and brings in global dependence of the region.

Globalization results in a changeover from the tribal community ethos to a totally new culture and system, and this without adequate preparation. Slowly the tribal communities absorb the value system of this culture. They internalise alteration not because of abundance of consumer goods, but because of the shortage of resources caused by their alienation in the name of national development. One of the consequences is the demand for exclusive rights over land and jobs in many regions of the Northeast and elsewhere (Baruah 1999). These processes get a new interpretation in the context of globalization. On one hand the tribals are exposed to the consumerist ideology, and on the other they experience more deprivation and joblessness. So, greater disappointment enters their culture. Thus, various indigenous and tribal people of the NE region are very much apprehensive about losing their identities and culture. This apprehension, coupled with rapid deterioration of the living standards of the masses have triggered of various problems including internal conflicts.

2. Identity crisis: Leading to ethnic extremism

It is pertinent to understand the concept of ethnicity. Ethnicity is often identified with the ideas of primordialism based on descent, race, kinship, territory, language, history, etc. Ethnicity can be classified into two groups - instrumental ethnicity which emanates from material deprivation – and

symbolic ethnicity based on one's anxiety to preserve one's cultural identity (Noyoo, 2000: 57). In certain cases, ethnic identity is intrinsically connected with language. Language is very often becomes a maker of cultural differences.

The politics of northeast India is marked by ethnicity and extremism for a long time. The assertion of various ethnic identities and the attitude of the state in containing ethnic extremism make the region distinct from the rest of India. The root cause of ethnic assertion can be found in the identity crisis of various tribal communities who extend over the territorial boundaries drawn by the Indian nation state. Most of the ethnic assertions are due to ethnic groups' desperate attempts to protect their identity, culture and language. For instance, it is argued that "claims to ethno-nationalism of the Bodos can be interpreted as closely intertwined with issues of institutional and social exclusion based on language politics" (Saikia, 2011: 60). In other words, the basis of ethnic assertion can be seen in two contexts. Firstly, the tribal communities' subjective consciousness of being excluded oppressed and marginalized. Secondly, the process of development failed to address the legitimate concerns of the people. Though after independence the Indian state tried to integrate and assimilate various ethnic communities in the mainstream national identity, the development process generated a feeling of alienation among them ^[3]. Moreover, development led to the unequal distribution of resources across the communities and regions. Thus, both non-economic (subjective consciousness) and economic (material) factors created a sense of exclusion among the some ethnic communities.

3. Globalization effecting traditional skills and entrepreneurship

The North Eastern tribes such as the Aka, the Garo, the Adivasi, the Angami, the Dimasa follow the customary laws in which women were the backbone of the economy. Some of it remains today, at times under a new garb but even in matrilineal societies, most recent changes tend to strengthen patriarchy rather than introduce gender equity. It is true that the role of the customary law is more pronounced in tribal societies than in others. Social control depends on it but its observance does not depend entirely on the codified laws. Most of them live at least partly according to their own tradition. As a result, in all the tribes studied customary laws continue to play an important role. However, they are in a process of change because of social and economic factors as well as the new political situation created mostly by local needs and pressures through the help of globalization. Economic development of a country or a geographic region depends on for major sectors: land, labor, capital and entrepreneurship. And this last one is perhaps the weakest among all the tribal population of women in north east India. Though some ethnic women in this region live in the matrilineal society and possess huge productive potentialities, yet their entrepreneurial capacities have been ignored since ages. Yet ethnic women of this region have been able to initiate some business such as shoe making, furniture, bakery, book sellers, catering, production of food items like soya bean edibles., bamboo shots, dry meat, various type of pickles etc,

² Walter Fernandes, Challenges To Tribal Culture In The Context Of Globalization

³ V. BIJUKUMAR, Social Exclusion and Ethnicity in Northeast India

cloth merchant (traditional dress), dress making and embroidery, traditional ornament, transport operation, flora culture, hair and skin care, traditional medicine and drug making, retailing business^[4]. Several ethnic communities of north east India have invented the traditional technology of converting protein rich soya bean into flavored fermented food with easy digestivity and bio nutrient. It's a famous and full blooming business occupation in the region. This is exclusively carried out by the ethnic women in Sikkim, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh^[5]. In the state of Meghalaya only, there are more than 20 categories of business that the Khasi women are entreprenuring. 80% of the enterprises were started on women's own initiative with minimum family support. Their current businesses were also rated as very good or good, and the progress over the past five years was maintained. These entrepreneurs require somewhere between rupee fifty thousand to rupees two lakhs to start their enterprise. It generally takes 2 to 4 years to settle down. In spite of all these difficulties, the innovativeness is the hallmark of most of the women entrepreneurs.

In a research carried out in 2008 by Nongdri on the working lights of ethnic women in northeast engaged in trade, industries and contractual activities, it was stated that, "given the opportunity ethnic women do not lack in communication or the ability to carry out their entrepreneurial task". The study was based on Khasi women in Meghalaya and the fear that matriliney and other cultural forces prevalent in the region can dampen the role of women entrepreneurship has not been borne out in this research.

These tribe's men mostly produced handicrafts like bamboo and cane furniture, carpets, winnowing plates, bows and arrows, baskets and decorative pieces. Women in such tribes were mostly engaged into handicrafts such as producing bamboo items like mats, baskets and decorative pieces, weaving shawls and another does embroidery work. All the Aka women weave shawls for both men and women and mekheles for women. These are their traditional or ethnic clothes worn during festivals and special occasions. Teenaged Dimasa women learn to weave as women weaving shawls is integral to their customary law and knowing to weave higher their status. Many tribes have lost the tradition of handicrafts because of the modernisation that they experienced through land alienation, snapping the link with their past, migration to Assam and their isolation in the tea gardens^[6]. Thus, women are again starting to produce handicrafts as a mode of reviving their tribal identity. However globalization, through cheap price, machined made goods are creating minimum demand for handmade items. Thus the entrepreneurship and communicational role of women in the region shows that despite average education and humble family background, the ethnic women have been equal to man in being quite enterprising and successful through hard work, patience,

perseverance and good public relation. And among all the northeastern tribe, the Khasi woman of Meghalaya has been the most successful ethnic women in developing the entrepreneurial vibes among themselves since centuries.

Many factors contribute to generate disadvantageous situation for ethnic skills

1. The loss of land, waters and forest experienced by ethnic women is specially deepening the poverty of them, while increasing their domestic load and subsistence responsibilities.
2. The introduction of cash economy has eroded their independence as self-reliant food producers, healers, artisans and spiritualist and thus declining their entrepreneurial qualities or opportunities.
3. The homogenizing trend brought about by globalization is increasingly affecting the richness of cultural diversity which is valuable asset for the ethnic women. This homogenizing trend is harming their productive capacities.
4. The ethnic women of northeast are repositories of rich, varied and locally rooted knowledge of ecosystem management and technologies, locally adopted seed varieties, medicinal plants, art and music that makes them wonderful business women, strategist – decider of economic growth of nation. These areas are also reduced to minimum importance of western techniques and machineries/capitalist expansions.
5. The society plays a prominent role in entrepreneurial venture and success. Besides, family related hurdles, women too faced other problems like mobility constraints, dual responsibility, low managing ability, risk bearing ability etc.
6. Women in Manipur face marketing challenges in the form of competition from cheaper and substitute product, thus they sell their product through the middle man. This middle man exploits them.
7. Lack of financial skills lead to women's disempowerment. Women entrepreneurs in Manipur lacks financial skills as they did not understand hidden costs and anticipate appropriate cash requirement. Normally banks are blamed for not financing women. Banks don't have doubt on women capability as they do not consider gender while financing but they place high premium on security of principal and interest amount that is why they take mortgage on bank finance^[7].

One of the biggest factors responsible for the failure of entrepreneurial initiative among ethnic women is globalization. Neo liberalism, capitalism, ultra consumerism, industrialization are the products of globalization which exploits indigenous and traditional culture. Capitalism as the patriarch of present time exploit women by dissembling them to use machine and technology. Thus it is due to capitalism that the talent of the ethnic women in the northeast is undervalued and ill paid. Globalization extracts more profit

⁴ Sairabellkurbah, role of women entrepreneurial in the economic development of Meghalaya: a north eastern state, India, international journal of engineering, business and enterprise application (IJEBA), 2013

⁵ Jyoti Prakash Tamang, Rajen Chetri and Rudromani Sharma: Indegineous knowledge of north east women on production of ethnic fermented soyabean food, Indian Journal of traditional knowledge, November 2008

⁶ <http://ncw.nic.in/pdfreports/Customary%20Law.pdf>

⁷ International Journal of Engineering, Business and Enterprise Applications (IJEBA) www.iasir.net, Page 175 ISSN (Print): 2279-0020 ISSN (Online): 2279-0039, Role Of Women Entrepreneurs In Theeconomic Development Of Meghalaya: A North Eastern State, India

from the traditional product made by these women and give much less return to them

Conveying relevant alternatives to the preservation of identity

We have witnessed from the above discussion that tribal culture has changed. This is not surprising for the reason that, if a culture does not change, it declines. Nevertheless, recent processes have resulted in the deterioration of the tribal lifestyles and cultural changes have become instruments of legitimisation. Just as “civilising education” was the legitimizing principle in the colonial phase of globalization, productivity and profit have become the main criteria of development today. The human being is forgotten and the poor completely ignored. The tools of cultural propagation like the mass media have become means of spreading this message. Consumerism is the basis of this culture. The tribal communities in general and the women among them have become its worst victims as the foreign markets are producing the same handicrafts at minimum prices leading to the loss of popularity in traditional skills, ultimately harming the markets of the indigenous tribals. In today’s situation, the tribal communities are attracted to accept the false set of values brought about by globalization. This is where one needs to look at culture as a political tool. It has to be turned into an instrument of preventing the impoverishment of tribal communities by globalization. To achieve this, tribal communities need to go back beyond the externals of their songs and dances, though these can help in their search for an alternative. They must return to the core value system of their cultures and choose a new set of values based on it, in order to find relevant alternatives to consumerism and the self-centeredness which globalization generates. In other words, they have to start with the willingness of sharing, the sustainable utilization of their livelihood and the women’s traditional skills, and take their whole community towards equality.

Conclusion

It is however said that “there is no alternative” to globalization. For the globalists, we are moving into a “borderless world” or the “end of geography”. Though positive points in globalization cannot be denied, however, the gains are not without a heavy cost. With the ‘market’ controlling the economic policies of the state, there has been growing inequality. Global competition, neo-liberalism and structural adjustment programmes are constantly eroding peoples bargaining power. Neo-liberal path of development has promoted new identities, and new interests within local, political processes. Regional, communal, ethnic and linguistic or gender identities are getting precedence over class perspectives. The excess of production process has created an environment of individuality where men miss to sort out his friends and enemies. This fundamentalism, even while promoting its own agenda, is, very definitely, engaged also in promoting the agenda of neo-liberal globalization. These irrational ideologies grip the minds of the people thereby resulting in taking an exclusivist and sectarian view that exclude “the other”. It is with such a distorted view that fanatical acts of terror are committed. Facts of history are

being distorted to meet their sectarian interests. The assault on reason is carried on. K.N. Pannikar has, once, remarked “Like fascism, it is a political project, which promised to build a nation based on revivalism, self-glorification and racial superiority”. Such a negative development has further aggravated the already high tension and enlarged the scope of the internal conflicts in the region. To end this tragedy, a theoretical understanding of the current conjuncture is needed. Neither neo-liberal ideology of any sort nor identity based ethnic extremism of any description can provide a way out of the current conjuncture.

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