Tribal Culture of Dooars: An insight and Deteriorating Trends

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ABSTRACT

Tracing the root of any culture is a painful task, but what pains even more is the deterioration of the culture so long nourished. Dooars, a part of the Himalayan foothills of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts of North Bengal, presents a fascinating study of culture of various tribes residing in the region. The Bodos and Ravas in the agricultural belt and forest areas, the Adivasis and Gorkha tribes in the Tea belt area people the major portion of Dooars. The amalgamation of various cultures gives rise to the mixed-culture prevalent in the region. This diversified culture is attracting the attention of the people across the world. Whether one culture is nourished or wiped out by the other is an area needs to be focused on. The lost trends, transgressions and to some extent, transformation, whatever the reasons may be, bring forth the deterioration of a particular culture. The crux of the present study centres round the various tribal cultures of the Dooars region and the deteriorating trends which are quite prominent in recent times.

―Time past and time present are both perhaps present in time future‖.

— T.S.Eliot (Tradition & Individual Talent)

Indeed, the past and the present construct a considerable part of the future. But the word ‘perhaps’ is equally a fact to be considered with serious consideration. In the context of the cultural deterioration in the Dooars region of the Northern part of Bengal the past perhaps is present in present time and the present will perhaps be present in future time. This ‘perhaps’ is the reason which poses a great question mark in the cultural scenario of the said region. The tribes – the art and culture of the tribes to put it in specific terms – add a special dimension to the socio-cultural framework of Dooars. Putting the culture of various races, that too of tribal sects with age-old customs and tradition, under scrutiny is a mammoth task. It needs a detailed understanding of not only the ‘pastness of the past’ but also the ‘presentness of the past’. Delving deep into the tribal culture may lead one to a somewhat painful realization of the transition and to some extent the transformation of the deep-rooted culture. This paper aims at holding up cultural deterioration of the tribes in the Dooars region.

But before taking up the task of finding out cultural deterioration, one must have a clear idea of what ‘culture’ actually is and a knowledge of the geographical location of Dooars and the tribes who people the place.

The word ‘culture’ derives from a French term, which in turn derives from the Latin ‘colere’, which means to tend to the earth and grow, or cultivation and nurture. In the words of the anthropologist E.B.Tyra, it is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Tylarian idea can be discerned in a modern definition of culture, given by M.J. Herskovit: “Culture is the man-made part of environment”. In the words of JhonBeattie, “Culture is the way of life which is transmitted from generation to generation.” To put it in simple words, culture denotes the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society.

‘Dooars’, a region in the Himalayan foothills of North Bengal, provides a fascinating study in the culture of various races living in the area. The name ‘Dooars’ is said to have been derived from the word ‘Door’ in English or ‘Dwar’ in local languages. The origin of the word elicits considerable debate among the people. Keeping the concern aside, attention should be fixed upon the geographical area of Dooars. The region mainly comprises of the whole of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts. The area stretches from River Teesta on the west to Sankosh river on the east. Dooars does not have a political boundary, the natural area of Dooars can be considered to include Goalpara and Kokrajhar districts of Assam. The region with the rich cultural heritage is providing a multi-coloured canvas to the people across the country. The co-existence of forest, tea garden and agricultural belt adds to the complex thread of the culture. The area is full of ethnic people – people from Mech, Rava, Toto, Lepcha, Tamang, Limbu, Adivasi communities.

The different races residing in the region give rise to a diversified culture. The culture of the tea belt area differs from that of the agricultural belt and the culture of the agricultural belt differs from the culture of the forest area of the region. This huge difference in culture and more importantly the co-existence of these diverse cultures provide much area to think upon with immense interest.

Having a firm grip over the culture of the Dooars region is next to impossible. Rather, an attempt can be made to categorize the culture of various sects as per their nature. There are primarily tribal people of three categories inhabiting Dooars, hence there are different sort of culture – firstly, the culture of the people depending upon agriculture; secondly,
The major portion of tribal people in Dooars are the tea garden workers –mainly people from Oraon, Munda, Santhal, Kharia, Mahali, Ho, Kora community who have come from Chota Nagpur, Orissa, Keonjhar (Jharkhand) and Madras province. They had their own culture; they had their own dialect. When they came to the Dooars region, the first problem they faced was with the language they would use because all were unfamiliar to the language of the other. As a means, there emerged a ‘Lingua Franca’—the Sadri language. The Adivasi Tribe in the tea belt area primarily use Sadri language to communicate with other sects of their society.

The Adivasis of the tea garden area –mainly the people of Dravidian origin and Austric origin –regard Karam as their presiding deity and Karam puja is their greatest festival. Karam is primarily the worshipping of Nature on the 11th moon of the Hindu month ‘Bhadra’. The Adivasis perform the rituals from cutting the Karam branch to ‘visarjana’ with much devotion. The cultural folk dance form as well as the songs specially meant for karamutsav is really a treasure for the concerned community and a rich cultural heritage of the said region. ‘Saharai’ is one of the major festivals of the Adivasi community in which the tribe sings a special type of song known as ‘Jagarani’. The Adivasis have their own way of worshipping God and their own unique food habit. ‘Hariya’ or the rice-beer is an integral part of their cultural festivals. ‘Khadain’—the traditional form of body-tattoo —is something that makes the people different from all other tribes. The Adivasis—the various groups of the Adivasis –Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Mahali etc. are really rich in culture—a culture evading time and place—a culture originating from earth and speaking of the earth.

The Nepalis of the Dooars belong to the Mongoloid origin. The Nepali tribes residing in the Dooars region mainly consists of Lepcha, Tamang, and Limbu. All these tribal sects have their own culture. They have different customs and tradition. Lepcha people, mainly the inhabitants of Sikkim, are found in the Dooars also. They are mainly the followers of nature. They worship rocks with the belief that rock will never change and holds a great respect for ‘Himalaya’ which they consider as being their gurdian deity. The Lepchas have their own language which belongs to the Bodish-Himalayish group of Tibeto-Burman language. The marriage custom of the Lepchas are also very unique in its kind. Lepchas have their own dance forms known as ‘Zo-mal-lok’, ‘Chu-faat’, ‘Tungrong-Hlo Rum Faat’, ‘Kinchun-chu-Bomsa’ etc. Lepcha language was the official language of the Darjeeling hills till 1911 and served as the ‘Lingua-Franca’ in the Darjeeling district.

Tamang is another Gorkha tribe to be found in the Dooars region. The Tamangs are the original people of Yambu (Kathmandu valley). They have their own cultural heritage. Their unique dance forms –‘Tamangselo’, ‘Bakpa’, ‘Zungba’, ‘Cho’ –with grotesque make up and traditional instruments add charm to the socio-cultural scenario of the area. Tamangs are mainly Buddhist by religion and celebrate ‘Lhosar’. Limbu is another tribe of the Nepali speaking origin. Limbus have their own language known as ‘Limbukara’. ‘Nahenkham’a and ‘Mangona’—are two major festivals of the Limbus. They have their own dance forms --‘Ke-lang’, ‘Damka Lama’, ‘Ylangma’, ‘Nahangma’, ‘Tongsinglam’ etc. Limbus have their unique marriage customs and death-rituals like the other sects of Nepali tribe. Sanssari puja, Kul puja, Kukurthar, Kaktihar are also prevalent among the tribes of Nepali community in the Dooars region.

Other than the culture mentioned above, the Nepalis have a dance-cum-song tradition of ‘Deushi’, performed by troop after the Diwali in the month of October/November. ‘Bhoiloni’ is another culture of singing, specially by girls during the night of Diwali and the following night. In both the cases the groups visit house to house and perform their song and dance.

Mech or Bodo people are another tribe residing in the Dooars. They are, like the other tribes of the region, worshiper of nature. ‘Bathou’ is their presiding deity. They depend upon farming for their livelihood. They have folk dances of their own –known as ‘Mousanai’. They dance in group in accompaniment of traditional instruments like Khambang, Chiling, Serja, Zafkhring, Zobtha, Khaoa-sang, Bila-Zangdamogra etc. The famous dance form of Bodo tribe is ‘Dang –Fang –Badari’, ‘EndiLunai’, ‘Nagurnai’, ‘Maigainai’, ‘Bagrumba’ etc. Like the Bodos, the Ravas also occupy an important place in the structural pattern of the tribal society in Dooars. The Ravas who are of Mongoloid origin entered into North Bengal from China through Tibet and Burma (Myanmar). They don’t have their own written script, but do have a unique spoken dialect known as ‘Kochakrou’. ‘RountakTangi’ is an important religious ceremony among the Ravas. ‘Rountak’ is the alternative form of goddess Kali for the Ravas. This is the oldest puja of the tribe and is performed with compliance to strict customs and rituals. Rountak puja occupies an important place in day to day life as all the ceremonies, including marriage in the Rava community. Ravas are predominantly a matriarchal tribe. Ravas have their own dance form known as ‘Basaoni’. ‘Nakchenrouni’,a dance form while catching prawns, ‘Bousrapid’,a dance form to welcome the new year, ‘Larai Lungi’, a form of war-dance, ‘Hern –Tangi-Basaoni’, a dance to worship culture are some of the traditional dance forms. They use mask in some of their dance forms like ‘Chargoloibhiy’, ‘MakparBasaoni’ etc. Ravas have their own culture of marriage.

Toto, the smallest group of tribe in West Bengal, is another tribe residing at Totopara, a place under Madaribhat police station, Alipurduar district, in the Dooars region. Anthropologically, they belong to the Tibet-Mongoloid origin. They don’t have any written script. Their oral language is called Toto. They are mainly worshiper of nature. The presiding deity of the Totos is ‘Ishpa’ who is worshiped in two forms – ‘Sainjha’—the male form and ‘Sainjhani’—the female form. ‘Sainjha’ is worshiped in ‘Angchu’ puja towards the end of July or the beginning of August. ‘Sainjhani’ is worshiped in ‘Mayu’ puja after twenty two days of ‘Anchu’ puja. Besides these ‘Pidna’ puja, ‘Geram’ puja, ‘Manka’ puja are also prevalent among the Totos. They have their own culture of marriage. ‘Sardey’ and ‘Arsing’ are two important festivals of the Totos.
The mixing of so many cultures in one particular region is very rare in any other part of the country. The influence of one culture upon another is immense. Now whether this influence helped the cultures to flourish or added to the wiping out of one culture by another is debatable. Such a rich cultural heritage needs proper preservation, the lack of which started causing deterioration in tribal culture of the region.

What pains a lot is an observation that the rich cultural heritage of the region is deteriorating day by day. Among the Adivasis of the tea garden areas, Karam puja which once was celebrated with strict rituals accompanied by traditional songs and dance is now-a-days partially changed or, better to say, lost its past cultural heritage. People of the Adivasi community started forgetting the Karam songs, resulting in the replacement of traditional songs with the commercial filmy songs in which the group of the tribal people dance for the whole night. ‘Khodain’ is literally extinct from the Adivasi culture. ‘Shama’ utsav is also on the verge of extinction.

Among the Nepali tribes, the marriage culture of the Lepchas has changed a lot not only in the urban but also rural areas. ‘Sansari’ puja, ‘Kul’ puja which once were performed among the tribes are no longer seen among the Gorkhas. ‘Deushi’ has lost its rich culture now-a-days. The traditional song and dance by the group of people has changed a lot. ‘Bhoiloni’ also has undergone a drastic change. Filmy songs accompanied with music have replaced both the traditional songs in ‘Deushi’ and ‘Bhoiloni’. ‘Jhakri’ is another case which is almost extinct among the tribes.

The Mech or the Bodos also have lost much from their indigenous culture. The Mech tribe started forgetting their own culture of welcoming their New Year by celebrating ‘BaishaguRangjana’; rather they celebrate English New Year. ‘Sijou’ tree was an essential part in ‘Bugrumba’ dance in past. But now-a-days, the converted people perform ‘Bugrumba’ without sijou. Conversion to Christianity has paved the way for wiping out many indigenous cultures. Most of the Ravas have converted to Christianity or Hinduism, resulting in the loss of their unique cultural traits. The ‘Mayu’ puja among the Totos is reduced to five days compared to earlier nine days. Tribal culture is really in an endangered state where the effect of globalization is hitting hard on the knots of the mixed culture of the tribes.

The tribal culture is deteriorating day by day –this sentence is quite common in culture study. But why is culture deteriorating? This needs a deep insight into the prevalent culture as well as the culture of the past. The change in lifestyle among the tribes is one of the major concerns behind the deterioration of culture. Most of the tribes came from different regions and shared different languages. ‘Linguistic Imperialism’ is certainly causing the loss of existence of many languages of the area. The indifferent attitude of the tribal people, specially the younger generation towards their own respective culture is another reason of deterioration. Socio-economic reasons are also there behind the deterioration of culture. Above all, the conversion to Christianity plays an important role in the deterioration of the culture of the area. Technological development which facilitated the other means of entertainment affected the flow of culture to a considerable extent.

The pattern of the cultural deterioration among the tribes that strikes me quite strikingly in the course of my study needs a critical insight too. The Bodos and the Ravas, the tribes peopling the agricultural belt and the forest areas, themselves have settled down there and found means to livelihood on their own. They carry on their culture according to their own convenience. Affected by the outer world, they remoulded, reshaped their culture on their own. On the other hand, the Adivasis of the tea-belt area were brought into and engaged as labourers. ‘Cultural dislocation’, no doubt, had affected them badly. Besides that, being under the garden authorities, they never got the opportunity to continue their culture the way they wanted. The prevailing culture of the region prevailed over them. They had been forced to adjust and remould their tradition, their culture the way the region demanded of. This patterned difference of deterioration of culture is unique to this region due to the existence of various tribes –tribes settling own their own or brought into to work in the region.

‘Upholding’ and ‘uplifting’ –these two terms also need to be considered in this context as the educated society, in present times, try to uphold and uplift the culture of the tribal sects. Between this two, whereas ‘upholding’ tries to sustain the root and various facets of the culture, ‘uplifting’ poses potential threats to the existing culture. What guided my thoughts towards the direction is that when one tries to uplift the culture, the process aiming at betterment sometimes makes one adopting the new, modified, refined culture ignoring the old which attracts no interest whatsoever. This possible threat is sometimes associated with the process of upliftment. Adopting new lifestyle, indifference to the root culture paves the way to deterioration.

But, does ‘Culture’ really deteriorate? Are not the changes whatsoever signs of evolution? These questions really add a new angel to the topic under discussion. That culture evolves with time is a fact not to be denied. Now, this evolution may lead the culture to either a higher or comparatively lower plane than before. It is then when culture, through evolution, faces downward trends, we, in simple terms, use the word ‘deterioration’. American anthropologist, Charles Horton Cooley, rightly pointed out that “to cease to admire is a proof of deterioration.” Admiration, no doubt, really places one in a tough test to decide whether the culture is admired or just adhered. Culture, only adhered is always exposed to deterioration; but defies the deterioration when admired, resulting in the sustenance of the culture. Evolution, as mentioned earlier, is a phenomenon that is not out of consideration and it is this evolution of culture –of course, the downward trends –brings about deterioration.

In view of the contending issues and challenges, the following steps may be taken for effective cultural preservation of the Dooars region. Establishing committees or holding seminars and workshops will not bear any fruit if the tribal culture is not nourished and preserved from the grass-root level. Arrangements should be made from the administrative level to facilitate the tribal people to practice their culture on a regular basis. For example, making them practice their
traditional dance/songs and give them exposure to a higher level. Another most important thing is that the tribal folk literature should also be encouraged at all levels. A boy reciting a poem by Raghunath Murmu or Sushil Kumar Rava should equally be encouraged as that of a boy reciting Tagore. This is possible only if the educated society starts thinking that the tribes also have a rich culture and their literature is also very rich in nature. Research should be carried out to find the root of these tribal cultures. But this searching process should not be done by the educated society with a view as if they are doing this out of sympathy. What should guide the process is that by doing this they themselves are getting enriched with a rich indigenous culture. This mentality of the educated people and positive steps on the part of the government can save these tribes from losing their culture.

Summing up a topic related to something which aims at the culture of the tribes not to sum up is rather a challenging task. But the challenge of challenging the deterioration will be won only if, at the first place, the tribal people feel the urge to preserve their own culture. Continuous and sincere effort should be made to revive the past culture and to make the tribal culture flow continuously from ‘time present’ to ‘time future’.

References

[7]. Interviews with people from different tribes residing in Dooars.