



SOME ASPECT OF KHASI CULTURE

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Abstract: This essay entitled “Some Aspect of Khasi Culture” is a brief reflection of the Khasi understanding of culture, The khasis are among the tribal groups of Meghalaya. Since their ancient times they have their own culture and lived within the frame work of their cultural thought, practices and worldview. Their culture refer to their societal way of living. Normally, culture has a variety of cultural characteristics and it is dynamic and not static.

Keyword-Culture has a vital role because it deal with the cultural identity of the people.

I. INTRODUCTION

SOME ASPECTS OF KHASI CULTURE

1 Introduction

This essay is a brief reflection on the culture of the Khasi people of Meghalaya. Perhaps, it may be appropriate to give a little background which is relevant for this essay. It may be mentioned that ‘Meghalaya’ is one among the States of India. Etymologically speaking, the word “Meghalaya” is made up of the two Sanskrit words “Megh” and “Alaya” which literally means “The abode of clouds”¹. It became a full-fledged State on January 21, 1972. It is a land of diversity. It is a home of many ethnic groups. The major tribes are the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos. Each of these tribes have their own culture, language, literature, custom and tradition. Each tribe has contributed immensely towards the national unity and nation building. Their leaders had shown their spirit of bravery in their resistance against the British Rule during the pre-independent periods. This is dealing with the concept of culture. The chosen topic is a cultural reflection with a view to re-examining the Khasi culture.

We should in mind that a study on the culture of people is of great importance, because we are dealing also with personality and social behaviour of individuals. Normally, human beings are being deeply influenced by their culture and society. Culture generally provides a map of meaning with which the individual naturally navigates the world. Culture to some extent tries to offer some answers to the questions of one’s place in the scheme of things. It encodes explanations to the origin, evolution, the goal and the end of one’s community. Naturally these explanations are woven into the exteriority of performances. For instance, participation in the ritualized performances can afford an internal etching

of these explanations. These etching in turn guide the individual in his or her actions. Culture as the domain of the known interfaces the domain of the unknown. Culture provides the means to negotiate the interface between the known and the unknown. It provides ground on which creative explanation of the unknown, this important domain of human experiences, takes place.

Normally, a philosophy of culture would take culture as its content. It is the result of the personal struggle of many individuals to unravel the mysteries of human existence and to know the secrets of nature. It is for this reason a philosophy of culture often has been referred to as a way of living and a way of thinking. Its spirit of enquiry is being regarded as one of the central elements in the intellectual history of many civilizations of the world. It gives us some reflections and creates a sense of search for reality and this has an impact in the life of the people. Generally, a philosophy of culture provides us a focus by which we can examine our own functions, behaviours, and aspirations.

2. Meaning of 'Culture':

The word 'culture' is derived from the Latin words 'Cultura' which originally means to cultivate³. Philosophically man is universally known as a rational being. Since man belongs to the animal kingdom anthropologically but socially he is known as a social animal. Perhaps, it noteworthy to mention that man is not like other animals. For he has the power of rationality. It is for this reason may be called a thinking and reflecting being for he has the capacity to think and reflect on the things around him. As a social being man developed to have his own customs, social norms and also has his own rules and regulations of social life. All these things make man to be rightly to be regarded also as a cultural being. It may be mentioned that man's social life has been made possible because of culture. In fact any study of human society or any human aspect of it becomes incomplete without proper understanding of culture. It is so because man is living in the society. He is bound to follow and fulfill his societal rules for purposeful and successful life. Whenever we make a reference to culture we should at least understand this concept culture in a larger perspective. Academically, we should use this term 'Culture' at least in two senses, that is, a general and a specific sense. This expression 'general sense' normally implies the sum total of those characteristics, which are unique to mankind and which have no parallel, in the animal kingdom. When we use the term 'culture' in a specific sense, it usually referring to the totality of the life-ways and' behaviour-patterns of a community or a group. According to Ralph Linton, "The culture of a society is the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation"⁶ Qualitatively speaking, culture as such consists at least three essential qualities; firstly, it is learned, secondly it is shared and thirdly it is transmitted.

Perhaps to explain the meaning of culture in a simpler way we should begin with the fact that man is a social being. Sociologists would like to call man as a social animal. Like animals man is living in a group. We should try to analyze the concept of man. Surely we will find that man learns to live together in a group either in big group or in a small group. In this sense we can sensibly say that every individual man is living in a particular group. In this manner man can be shaped and influenced by his social environment. Consequently, he is interacting regularly with his fellow human beings. Such interactions from a set pattern gradually leading man to have some significant consequences. In this way culture

enables a person to refine himself physically, intellectually and morally and other aspects of his personality by involving deeply into the accumulated best experiences of the human race. Humayun Kabir has rightly emphasized the importance of culture when he says that, “the continuity of cultural traditions is an essential condition for the survival of a nation”⁷.

Indrani Basu Roy said “The term culture stands for the sum total of human behavior, verbal and non-verbal and its product material and non-material. The word ‘culture’ connotes different meanings in different situations. For instance, we commonly use this in humanistic sense to designate manner, taste and intellectual development. It is said that a man is quite cultural or some people have more culture than others, or some human products are more cultural, such as, visual art, music, literature, etc. Poetic expression of culture denotes sweetness and light. To a historian, culture simply signifies social development in artistic and intellectual fields. Modern biological usage of ‘culture’ is restricted to the medium of growth where a mould or a bacterium may be grown artificially. In Sanskrit language the synonym of culture is ‘Sanskriti’ which has been derived from the Sanskrit term ‘Sanskara’ the meaning of which is “the refinement of soul” by various acts, through a series of births and rebirths. The term ‘culture’, thus has been used in different context for a long time, but its exact meaning is still vague”⁸.

As already pointed out earlier, etymologically speaking, the word ‘Culture’ is derivative. It is derived from the Latin “Culture” which literally means to grow. It is for reason we say that culture is related with multi-dimensional growth and development of human life. Some aspects of culture may be internal because it is related with the soul, spirituality and thoughtfulness. But some aspects of culture may be considered to be external in the sense that some aspects of culture can be seen externally in the form of customs, habits and developing certain ways of living and doing things.

Therefore, 'culture' is an inclusive term that covers almost all affairs of man's life and experiences. It seems that mankind started living within their own societal framework since the ancient times. In this way it may be said that the concept of culture grows in the form ideas, beliefs, practices customs and tradition and so on and so forth.

3. Definitions of ‘Culture’

Our observation has revealed that culture today has become a universal phenomenon in the sense that people of different countries, ethnic groups at different ages have their own culture or cultures. It is for this reason that culture can be studied in different inter-disciplines. Sociologist Graham Wallas defines that “A Culture is an accumulation of thoughts, values and objects; it is the Social heritage which is passed automatically through genes”⁹

Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor defines “Culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, moral laws, customs and other capabilities, habits acquired by man as a member of a society”¹⁰.

Malinowski defines culture as the “handiwork of man as the medium through which he achieves his ends”⁷.

Taking into consideration all these definitions we could say that culture is the pattern of human activity; it is the symbol that gives significance to all the activities of a community. It has a vast scope which practically includes all the activities of a community like religious, socio political, economical,

technological and all other characteristics. Perhaps, in its broader sense culture is like a mirror which reflects the picture of a particular community.

4. Society and Culture:

The term 'society' is the most fundamental one in sociology. The term 'society' is derived from the Latin word 'Socius' which means companionship or friendship.¹¹ It indicates that man always lives in company of other people. Hence, society consists of groups of people relating to some forms of behaviour. Culture is the way of life of the people living in a society of a certain geographical area. It includes their social structure, marriage, custom, and family life, their patterns of work, religious ceremonies, dances, socio-political life, language and literature etc. As a group of the society, every group has a culture of its own. Culture is the identity of any racial group.

In a similar way, the Khasi society has its own cultural identity. Generally the people have their own religion, custom, tradition, social structure, language and literature, political thought and economy. As a community of the society, the Khasis are always conscious of their traditional culture. Without exaggeration, the Khasis have their own customs related to marriage system, birth-death, agriculture, worship of God and nature, food and dresses which are preserved through their oral tradition. Modernization has changed the culture of every ethnic community. With the coming of modernism, the culture of the Khasis also has been modernized from time to time to cope with the changes of time. The religion of the Khasis also has been changed and modified due to the influences of modernization and globalization. A new form of religious thought system has emerged in the early part of the 21st century and this new trend of thought system has been attempting to reform the negative aspects of the original religious thought system. For instance, animal sacrifice in the name of worship has started diminishing from time to time. Now, the Khasi Religion has been weakened because Khasis have been converted into different religions. Due to modernity, the culture of the Khasis society is changing from time to time. Hence, the culture of the Khasi society has been changed to a certain extent.

It is an undeniable fact that man is a social animal. He lives in a social group in a society. Hence, human culture and society go together. Man cannot live as a man without society. Society has become an essential condition for human life to arise and to continue. Different communities belonging to different societies have different cultures. Culture has to do with human habits, human customs and human way of life. There is a big difference between culture and nature. Nature is God-given while culture is man-made. Therefore, the culture of a society is the behavioural expression of the members of a particular community of the society. Hence, society is culture-bound. Our observation reveals that there is no society without culture. Practically speaking, there is no society without culture.

Culture is a way of life in which human beings are living in any given society. It is for this reason the word is either directly or indirectly links with other words like 'cultivate', 'cultivation' and 'agriculture'. For instance, human customs, habits, certain life-style, dance, dress, and artistic works do not come miraculously. Practically, certainly ways of life have been thought as a cultural identity, socially accepted, taught and passing on from generation to generation and considering to be unique and different from other groups of people.

5. Historical Background of the Khasis

While trying to trace back the origin of the Khasi people Hamlet Bareh said “ The Khasi people belong to one of the earliest groups of races migrating to North-East India. They were not an isolated people, but have had close connection with other peoples inhabiting Assam and made substantial contribution to the evolution of culture in this land. Even in their present home, in the period before the British annexation, they had links with other neighbouring kingdoms (through their migrations) and had political and commercial contacts and still continue to contribute to the cultural life of their neighbours. Emphasis in this work has been laid on the evolution of Khasi society i.e. matrilineal form of organization, its megalithic and religious aspects reviewed in the light of their chronological history and the nature of their civil institutions”¹²

Regarding the local Khasis of Meghalaya Hamlet Bareh said “The Khasis in the past had no literature of their own. The modern Khasi script with Roman characters was introduced as late as 1841 A.D. A particular tradition says that one original Khasi script was lost in the ancient period at Madur Maskut and Nongkseh whereas , in other accounts, it is stated in was lost in the flood...the use of these scripts was abandoned after 1941 A.D. when they were replaced by the Roman alphabet”¹³

6. Some Characteristics of Culture

The Khasis have their own culture since the olden times. Some of the characteristics of Culture may be pointed here as follows:-

(i) Culture is acquired or learnt: Like other thinkers the Khasis believe that culture is not innate in us because it is not an in born quality. In other words, culture is not biologically acquired. But it is a learnt quality or an acquired quality. Culture is socially acquired. It is a social trait which may be acquired by means of socialization in the form of habits customs and other social thoughts.

(ii) Culture is the quality of transmission and accumulation: Since the ancient times the Khasis have the understanding that culture is the quality which may be transmitted and accumulated. It may be transmitted from person to person and from one generation to another generation.

(iii) Culture is the quality of social heritage: Interestingly, the Khasis have the conception that culture is the quality of heritage in the sense that culture is a social heritage of man but it is not an individual heritage of any man. Culture cannot be created or generated as a finished product. But culture is learning while existing. Culture is part of our cultural life. It part and parcel of our life-experiences and part of our cultural learning processes.

(4) Culture is an idealistic quality: Since the preliterate times the Khasis have a belief that culture is an idealistic quality in the sense that it stands for an ideal norm or norms of human behaviour. Culture may add some beauty as to grace man’s life.

(5) Culture and its needs: The Khasis have the understanding that culture is one among the artistic activities of man. It expresses that man has social and ethical needs which should be met for his qualitative life. It is for this reason man has some habits, customs and some particular life-style which man socially needs and ethically helps man to live a life of certain quality.

(6) Culture has the quality of adaptation: Throughout their history the Khasis understand that culture has the quality of adaptation because each culture tries to adopt some qualities which is out of its own environment. This can happen when there is a contact between two or more cultures. The interactions of these cultures may bring in as an interaction result which may be called as an adaptation culture.

(7) Culture and the quality of manifestation: According to the Khasi people culture is the manifestation of man's mind in various moods of nature and environment.

(8) Culture is dynamic: Like other civilized people the Khasis have the perception that culture is not static but it is dynamic because it is always in the state of constant flux. Any nation is open to changes and progress. It is for this reason a culture of a particular ethnic group after get itself culturally modified. This can take place with a view to cope with the demands of modern way of life.

(9) Integrative quality of culture: While referring to the concept of culture the Khasis have the perception that culture has the integrative quality in the sense that it tends to become integrated. In other words, those various parts of culture become integrated with each other and even a newly introduced element of culture may get itself integrated.



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