



CASTE TRIBE INTERACTION AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN

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ABSTRACT:

Caste Tribe interaction in North East India is not a recent phenomenon yet it is an important area to study. Northeast India is very much unique in terms of its population structure, geographical location, language etc. This place is full of diversity and there are so many areas for research which are yet to touch. The interaction between Caste and Tribe in foothill area of Assam Arunachal Pradesh takes place since the pre-colonial period. Balipara plays an important role in this interaction process, it is one of the connecting roads between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. This place has witnessed of various significant incidents. As the administrative system has changed the scenario had also been changed. During the Ahom era the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh came to the plains of Assam and interacted with the local people through various way. the interaction was mainly an economic interaction. As British occupied the place they had introduced some new policies and rules such as inner line regulation etc. In the process of interaction process the women plays a very significant role. They were act like as mediator between the groups. Women are always recognised as bearer of culture. In this scenario they act also as bearer of culture, carrier of culture, as cope up tool and also as changers of culture. It is the women who continued the economic interaction between caste and tribe in this area. Apart from the economic interaction there was secret marriage alliance also, which signifies the role of women in the interaction process. As this kind of marriages were not accepted by the local people at that time, they had to develop their own separate village also it is the women who were considered as impure or they have to go through a purification process. These kinds of practices still practice of parts of this area.

Keyword: Women, Caste, Tribe, Interaction, women, culture, foothills, culture.

Introduction:

Women are integral part of the society or it can be said that the most important section of the society. They are bearer or carriers of culture. By virtue of their roles as wives, mothers, homemakers, women have been tasked with rearing and socialising the next generations and inculcating in them the values and traditions of the native culture. Women has great influence in all aspects of the society but understanding historical experiences of them is a difficult task as women's narratives are always excluded from the mainstream society.

The colonialism has created two new categories of caste and tribe a confusing way in North East India. The colonial construction of caste tribe relationship has come to permeate the socio-political discourse of the post-colonial state too. Though interaction between caste and tribe still practice the protective discrimination or the reservation system has influenced it. Today's interaction does not take place in aspiration of the tribes to achieve vertically upward social mobility within the traditional framework of hierarchy. The aspiration of many tribal groups in earlier times acquire the status od a caste does not appear to be the case now. There is an interaction between the tribal and non-tribal group from many years. The process of Sanskritization also took place in North – East too. (Sharma, 2009)

Caste – Tribe interaction process is not a recent phenomena and in this process women played a very important role.

Objective of the Study:

- To understand the process of caste tribe interaction.
- To investigate how does women act as an agency of caste tribe interaction.

Methodology:

To understand the role of women in the process of caste-tribe interaction, data has been collected through both primary and secondary sources. The primary data is collected through oral history, observation and interview method. Secondary data has been collected through books, journals, souvenir, historical documents etc. Primary data is collected from the villages of *Sonitpur* district. To collect primary data *Garogaon* and *Dalangbasti* has been selected as these two villages are tribal village and also nearby Assam Arunachal Pradesh border. From each village 6 households have been selected and total 20 samples have been selected through purposive sampling method.

Discussion:

The process of migration, immigration and formation of a diaspora is a dynamic and ongoing process and there is a continuum. The first-generation migrants continue to identify themselves with the home country because of emotional attachment, cultural as well as religious identification. The north Eastern population has been resettled because of various reasons, sometimes due to their internal conflicts or sometimes by the Britishers. Apart from that we all know that India is a place of migration. A number of groups has been migrated to India and now they become integral part of the population structure as well as culture too. In North- East India the Britishers had resettled the population for administrative purpose.

The concept of tribe in North-East is not similar with the other parts of the Indian society. In North-East the tribal groups adopted Hinduism and become part of the larger Hindu group. According to G.S Ghurye the tribes are nothing but backward Hindus.

But at the same time, it is believed that the tribes are isolated and generally they lived outside from the mainstream society. They are also culturally isolated. But in order to achieve certain social position in the society, involve in upward social mobility. As a result, the tribes adopted various dominate rituals, practices followed by the caste group. From the era of Ahom, there was a close interaction between Tribe and Caste. The *Dafals* (Nyshi) came down from hill to plain in order to *loot* first. In order to control this the Ahom administration, introduce the system of *Posa* and *Duar*, which was continued by British too. Later on, there was exchange of economy, marital between tribe and caste group.

The above discussion clearly shows that there is an interaction between caste tribe since decades. The tribal group has been shifted to plain area mainly due to survival and also because of marital relations. The female population migrated with the men was initially confined to the domestic sphere but later on joined the labour force too. The women started taking participation in the festivals, ceremonies organised by the neighbouring community. They also started adopting the food pattern of each other's and that's how there is exchange of culture.

Balipara is situated in Sonitpur district of Assam. This place has significance as this is the connecting road between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and plays a role as transit point. This place was under Ahom rule then goes under colonial rule. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh especially Nyshi came down to valley to loot the villages which were under Ahom control. As a permanent solution to this, they had introduced the system of *posa* and *duar*, which was carried on by the British too.

The tribe produces ginger, ghost chilly, woollen cloth, spices (*jabrang*) and in return of these products they want rice, salt and silk cloth etc. So, there was barter system. The *jabrang* is one of the rare spices found in Arunachal, the tribes bring this to valley and this become part of their food habits.

The Ahom arranged for weekly *hats* (market), near by the *duar*. There was a weekly market which was held only on Wednesday, where hill people came to valley and they exchange their products, sometimes they sell and the valley people also take part in this market. This weekly market was a source of entertainment and also can be considered as a public sphere. In this market, the tribal women mainly take part. They also came to valley for wage related works. In this way, the women take part in marital relations. But, this kind of marriages were not accepted at that time by the caste groups of plain, and as a result those who involved in these kinds of marriages they were being isolated from the mainstream society and settled nearby the forest area and some of them goes back to hill. Those who lived in forest area, slowly they had developed their own village. At present this villages comes under Nameri reservation area and these are not revenue village till date.

Some of the tribal groups came down to valley and they settled in that area. Some of them were settled by the Britishers too. Those tribal groups had adopted the dominant culture and also Hinduism. During that era, neo-Vaishnavism was expanded, so many tribal groups took *sarana* (religious shelter). Once they take religious shelter or adopt Hinduism, they become part of the mainstream society and they are considered as pure. Here we can refer to James Scott, in his writing he has mentioned that the hill people are always considered as "uncivilized", whereas valley people consider themselves as civilized or superior. But once they adopted Buddhism the people of hill become superior too. Here also a similar picture been captured.

The tribe who settled in this area, they had adopted the food habits, language, dress pattern, rituals of the caste group. They had involved in marital relations with the caste groups. The tribal groups celebrate *bihu*, wear *sador-mekhela*, speaks Assamese language. At the same time, they celebrate their festival, practice rituals and speaks their own language too. They follow their animism and also follow Hinduism. They worship *Shiva*, and draw a connection between tribe and lord *Shiva* through his life-style.

In this way, there is interaction between caste and tribe and the tribe draws a connection between them and Hinduism. The tribes follow the process of acculturation, where they have adopted the so called local or Assamese rituals, ceremonies but at the same time they are conscious about their own cultural identity. The respondents identify themselves as Assamese and they had published writings in their souvenir titled as "*Brihotor oxomiya jati gothonot obodan*" (contributions of tribal group in the formation of Assamese Community). With the influence of Hinduism and as a cope up mechanism they had adopted the Assamese culture but with time these cultural practices become integral part of their culture too.

From the above discussion it is come to know that the tribes were come to plain for various purpose, such as economic, social, marital and so on. As a result of it there is a continuous interaction between the tribe and caste groups of plain. In this interaction process the women played a very important role or it can be said that women are agency of the interaction process.

In past the tribes come to valley for robbery and also for exchange of goods, which is still continued. In the weekly market, which is take place every Wednesday at *Chariduar* it is the women who come from Arunachal Pradesh with their local products such as King Chilli, *Jabrang* (kind of spice) etc. They also bring their traditional dress and there is a great demand of their traditional dress especially among the women of plain. The dress is called as *gale* which can be wear as wrapper and it covers the lower body part mainly. The tribal women supply this product at the local shop of this area. Apart from it the women also carry it in the local markets. The women from plain wear it in various festivals. It shows the cultural exchange between the two groups through women.

Apart from it there was marriage alliances took place in this area too. There is exchange of women between the caste and tribe group. As a result of this marital exchange there is exchange of other elements too, such as food, rituals, language etc. Both the groups have adopted and influenced by each other's practices, ceremonies. For example, the Nyshi tribe of this area celebrate *Bihu*, they also organise *Bihu* function but at the same time they celebrate their *Nykum* puja too.

The tribes were migrated to this area due to various reasons and as a cope up tool they had adopted the so-called local culture. Here migration become a factor for cultural exchange.

Conclusion:

Women are always act as bearer of culture. They are known to carry forward the culture from one generation to another. here, in this study the women played an important role in the process of caste tribe interaction. Many oral traditions of the Ahoms relate to contact with *Dafalas* and as well as other tribes which have been proved to be a reliable source in identifying ancient sites and remains. This is a ongoing process. Tribe and Caste cannot be segregate totally, there is a continuum between tribe and caste. However, the study cannot be generalised or cannot identify the actual position of the caste tribe interaction process. There is scope of further research or study.

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