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কালচার, অ্যানথ্রোপলজি অ্যান্ড লিঙ্গুইস্টিক্স

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(সাহিত্য-সংস্কৃতি-নৃত্য)

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## Reflections of Tribal Life and Culture in Indian Literature

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### ABSTRACT

Since the inception of Indian civilization, tribes in various forms had their presence felt in Indian ethos of life. India has accepted all tribes in its cultural mosaic and the process of synthesis and acculturation had made the tribes integral part of Indian community.

### Keywords:

Tribe

Invasion

Acculturation

Unity in diversity

Boro community

### 1.0 Introduction

Etymologically meaning cultivation, the word *culture*, having its roots embedded in the Latin word *Cultura* has gone through several transformations of meaning viz. the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties especially in education, the training and refinement of mind, tastes and manners; the intellectual side of civilization etc. If we accept সংস্কৃতি or কৃষ্টি as synonym of culture, both these terms stand for “সভ্যতাজনিত উৎকর্ষ, সমাজনীতি, বুদ্ধি, আচার-ব্যবহার ও শিল্প সাহিত্যের মধ্যে কোন জাতির যে পরিচয় থাকে”. To understand tribal culture, a fair idea about the actual connotation of





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the word *culture* is imperative. While John Dewey, the American educationist accepts culture in a narrow sense -- “Culture means at least something cultivated, something ripened, it is opposed to the raw and crude”-- the term has a broader perspective in sociological parlance, as aptly pointed by E.B. Tylor --“Culture 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”. As such culture signifies ‘the total life way of people’ and man is the architect of this culture building. But a more comprehensive definition of culture has been offered by Raymond Williams in his book *Culture and Society* (1780-1950) when he gave an elaborate definition coalescing several prominent aspects -- “First, a general state of habit of the mind, having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean the general state of intellectual development in society as a whole. Third, it came to mean the general body of arts. Fourth, later in the century it came to mean ‘a whole way of life’, material, intellectual and spiritual”.

From the cluster of these definitions it is evident that culture is a way of life (encompassing the entire society inclusive of all social strata and irrespective of their class, caste and creed), signifying thereby “culture is what we are”-- none is excluded from the purview of culture. In tune with this notion of culture, Indian civilization and culture since its inception had accepted within its fold all social strata irrespective of their social and economic status. Despite their choice to remain outside the main stream of early Indian society, the tribes also had their credence recognized by ancient Indian texts. In view of countless invasions faced by India from hoary past, several groups of people came to the soil of India and subsequently settled, while eliminating or subjugating the original inhabitants in various phases of history. In course of time these intruders found themselves amalgamated in the main stream of Indian life while a few settlers and occasionally the indigenous people preferred to remain in isolation from the main stream. India thus became a melting pot of various ethnic elements of human race and presented a picture of unity in diversity because of the tolerance, accommodative attitude of Indians in general, occasional hostilities notwithstanding. This accommodative attitude of Indian civilization has been aptly pointed out by Rabindranath Tagore in his essay *The Messages of India's History* -- “She (India) has never driven any one out as an alien, she has never turned out a non-Aryan, she has never ridiculed any custom as incongruous. She has recognized and accepted all”.





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This acceptance of several groups of people, even if involved in bloody battle had led recognition to tribes, some indigenous people and a few outsiders.

Now what, is precisely meant by the term ‘Tribe’? The term ‘Tribe’, derived from the Latin word *Tribus* (from tri and bu) denotes an inhabited place. Despite a plethora of definitions offered by social scientists, no precise or specific definition of ‘tribe’ is available. However Risley has defined an Indian tribe in the following way – “a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which, as a rule does not denote any specific occupation; generally claiming common descent from a mythical or historical character and occasionally from an animal, but to some parts of the country held together rather by obligations of blood feud than the tradition of kinship, usually speaking the same language occupying or claiming to occupy a definite tract of country”.

It is a matter on record that tribes in India constitute 8.14% of the total population of the country, numbering 84.51 million (2001 Census). There are 697 tribes notified by the central Government under Article 342 of the Indian Constitution with certain tribes being notified in more than one state. Article 342 lays down that the President may “by public notification specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purpose of the Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes”. They were duly specified by order 1950. SRO 510.

In India, these tribes or *Adivasis*, the original inhabitants as per the derivative meaning of the form *Adivasis*, were ravaged first by Dravidian onslaught and subsequently by the so called Aryans, culminating in their absorption in the main stream of Indian life and culture. The commentator Sāyanāchārya explains *Pañcamānavāḥ* in *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* as four Varnas (caste), the 5<sup>th</sup> being the *Niṣāda*. The *Niṣāda* certainly represents a tribe and its inclusion in the group of higher caste indicates the presence of the tribe along with the so called higher caste side by side. With this picture of amalgamation and synthesis between the conqueror and the conquered, there lived several groups who did not register themselves within the main stream society presumably apprehending loss of their identity and preserving their own culture by all possible means. In the *brāyastoma* of the *Atharva Veda* we come across such segregated people. Occasionally we come across deliberate attempt by the elitist class to demean them -- *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* -- *sayugvā raikka* (carrier of





bullock -- 4/2/3), despite his erudition and scholarship is marked by his indecent demeanor ... (pāmānām kaṣamāṇm). Can we construe this as a deliberate attempt to defame the tribes? But the culture of the tribes can be best understood from a passage in the *Mahabharata* which deals with a conversation between Indra and Mandhātā. In a reply to Mandhātā's query as to how the various tribes *Yavanas*, *Kirātas*, *Gāndhāras* could be controlled, Indra categorically stated that the ethical norms like respect to parents, preceptors and recluses as well as allegiance to the king should be followed by these tribals. So there is a discreet attempt to bring the so called tribals under the main umbrella of cultural life (*Śātiparva*, *Indramāndhātṛsaṃvāda* 65/13-22)--

bhūmipānāñca śuśruṣā kartavya sarvadasyubhiḥ/  
vedadharmmakriyāśaiva teṣāṃ dharmmo bidhiyate//  
(*Śātiparva*, *Indramāndhātṛsaṃvāda* 65/18).

So the tribes are expected to follow the duties pertaining to all members of the society. Medhatithi's commentary on Manu (11.23) more explicitly states that the conquered *mleccha* people renamed as *canḍālas* come within the purview of social hierarchy with practical extinction of their *mleccha* culture. Marriages with tribals also led to several mixed castes as referred to by Manu. However inequalities persist in the treatment towards tribal people despite the mention of numerous groups of tribals, strewn in the *Dharmaśāstras*, epics and *Puranas* viz. *Haihayas*, *Kekayas*, *Angas*, *Bangas*, *Kalingas*, *Paundras*, *Ābhīras*, *Bāhlīkas*, *Udīcyas* etc. In *Manusmṛiti*, we come across a group of people who were socially ostracized and leveled as trouble makers or devils (*dasyava*). Presumably tribes who preferred to stay in the outskirts of cities or in deserted places had thus been categorized as impediment to civilized society.

puṇḍrakādravaḍāḥ kāmbojā yavanāḥ śakāḥ/  
pāradā pahlavāścācīnaḥ kirātāḥ daradāḥ yaśāḥ//  
...mlecchāścāryavācaśca sarve te dasyavaḥ smṛtāḥ//

Manu 10/45

These marginalized people staying in isolation in deserted places were segregated, debarred from socializing with general milieu.

caityadrumaśmaśāneṣu śaileṣūpavaneṣu ca/  
vaseyurete vijñātā vartayantaḥ svakarmabhiḥ//

Manu 10/50

bhinnabhāṇḍeṣu bhojanam/



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vyavahāro mithasteṣāṃ vivāhaḥ sadṛśaiḥ saha//

Manu 10/51

The condition of the dark complexioned tribal girl was abominable as she is meant for gratifying kernel desire of so called higher castes. *Vaśiṣṭha Dharmaśāstra* points out to this precarious condition of tribal women --

kr̥ṣṇavarṇā yā rāmā ramaṇāyaiva na dharmaya dharmāyeti//

(1/6/18)

In classical Sanskrit literature, we come across tribals as warriors. In Bhāṛavī's *Kirātārjunīyam* we find God Shiva fighting with Arjuna in the disguise of a Kirāta. In *Daśakumāracarita* of Daṇḍin, we come across the story of two princes Upaharvarma and Apaharavarma being stolen by Śavaras (the offenders). In course of the narrative there are mention of several tribes. We come across mention of several tribal clans of south India in the sixth act of Śūdraka's drama *Mṛcchakaṭikam* where Chandanaka describes himself as conversant with languages of many tribe communities --

Candanakaḥ -- vyaṃ dākṣiṇātyā avyaktabhāṣiṇaḥ/ Khaśa-khatti-khaḍa-khaḍaṭṭha-viḍa-kaṇāṭa-  
karṇa-prāvaraṇa-drāviḍa-cōla-cīna-barvara-khera-khāna-mukha-madhughātaprabhṛtinām  
mlecchajātinām onekadeśabhāṣābhijñā yatheṣṭaṃ mantrayāmahe dr̥ṣṭa dr̥ṣṭāvā ārya āryāvā//

--According to MR Kale, mleccha means non-aryan, a barbarian.

In Bāṇbhāṭṭa's *Kādambarī*, we come across a beautiful tribal girl belonging to Cāṇḍāla community approaching king Śūdraka in his court with a present.

But gone are those old days. Let us now find out the position of one tribe in contemporary perspective. Coming to the modern era, we find that despite the great antiquity of the Hindu race in Assam, about the 8<sup>th</sup> century of our era, the Hindu dynasty was overthrown by Kachari or Boro tribe, who subsequently full easy prey to the Aryanisation, their sincere attempt to retain their identity notwithstanding. Hence a fusion of culture intertwined with an urge for modernization has endowed this Boro culture with distinguishing feature of its own.

Boro refers to a speech community that speaks Boro, a Sino-Tibetan language. It is spoken mostly in Assam. It was in 2003 that Boro was included in the Schedule. The Boros, also called Kacharies in ancient times were termed as *ud̐cyas* which is a generic name for all the individual







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tribes inhabiting different regions in north-east. Despite their attempts to maintain their identity, the Boros have acclimatized themselves to the modern ways of life. At the same time the impact of present materialistic civilization over the simple lifestyle of Boros had baffled them and induced them to gauge the benefit of this cultural onslaught. However a tone of acculturation of cultures is evident in Boro literature, as is evinced in short stories by Boro writers.

In *Abari* by Ishan Chandra Muchahari, considered as the first modern Boro Short story, we come across an episode marked with empowerment of women in a village community. Abari, despite her physical disability was skilled in all short of household work. But when she refused to marry a physically crippled person, she was ostracized in her community. A depressed but finally determined Abari takes recourse to *Kharsonmai* which is a process of marriage where the girl herself goes to the boys home to tie the knot. Abari's empowerment to select her own husband has been described in quite unambiguous term -- "She is now a girl who can stand on her own feet. Shyness had left her long ago". The story published in 1980 contains a few terms related to Boro life exclusively but is quite modern in spirit.

Desertion of old parents -- another evil associated with today's mundane culture has also infiltrated in the simple lifestyle of Boros. Adaram Basumatari, the author of the story *Fanjari*, described in vivid details the aversion of Fanjari towards her old in-laws, ignoring thereby her husband's latent pain and remorse. The same Fanjari feels herself helpless when her husband suddenly becomes sick. Towards the end of the story we get a jolt when an invitation card was suddenly unearthed. The author narrates -- "It is not an invitation card for wedding, but for the Shraddha of an old women". Needless to say, this old woman is Fanjari's mother in-law and she is invited to attend it. Lack of respect and concern for elders, which reflects loss of values, triggered by western influence has become a feature of our life and culture. Boros are no exception to this. Another significant aspect is the use of the word *Śrāddha* (Shraddho), last rites of a dead person and this Hindu custom to show respect to the dead elders has been shared by Boros. The fusion of culture has thus become a feature of Boro life.

It is a historically accepted fact that the original settlers in India, in whichever name we call them tribe, *ādivāsī*, *janajāti* constituted a significant part of Indian populace throughout the annals





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of Indian history. Obviously their culture despite several onslaught thrust upon them by the more powerful contenders underwent several modifications. This tribal culture was partially subsumed by elitist culture but tribals always tried hard to maintain their own identity. They contributed in their own way in the mosaic of Indian culture. In the words of Tagore --

“She (India) has rejected and thrown out nothing, but has made all her own. India stands before the civilized world as an embodiment of the ideal of unity through diversity”.

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