Tribal Culture and Folklore of Arunachal Pradesh: A Study in Kurung Kumey District

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TRIBAL CULTURE AND FOLKLORE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH: A STUDY IN KURUNG KUMEY DISTRICT

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Abstract: The folklore is vital in transmitting the values, beliefs and moral teachings of any given society. Since ages, it has been an eternal part of any human culture, more specifically of tribal culture. The folklore, culture, heritage and agriculture define the tribal society. The folk and tribal arts of Arunachal Pradesh are simple, ethnic and colourful. It speaks volumes of state’s rich cultural heritage. Folk life represents the aspect of cultural anthropology which concentrates on the study of one’s own national cultural heritage. There is no known human society exist in this world without having any trait of folklore.

With this backdrop, the current paper has been framed with objectives: (i) to study the culture and folklore of tribal communities of Kurung Kumey district; (ii) to understand the folk life of these tribal groups; and (iii) to investigate the backwardness of tribes inhabiting the district. The study has been conducted using participatory research method to identify the cultural perceptions and priorities of tribal people in the district. The investigator conducted in-depth interviews and observed the daily-life activities of tribal people. The primary data is gathered through a field investigation.

Keywords: Tribal; Culture; Folklore; Belief; Arunachal Pradesh; Kurung Kumey.

INTRODUCTION

Arunachal Pradesh is a land of rich cultural heritage and varied folk-art tradition. The folklore is vital in passing on the values, beliefs and moral teachings of a society. Since ages, it has been an eternal part of tribal culture. The folklore, culture, heritage and agriculture define the tribal society. The folk and tribal arts of Arunachal Pradesh are simple, ethnic and colourful. It speaks volumes of state’s rich cultural heritage.

To Goodenough, “Folklife represents the aspect of cultural anthropology which concentrates on the study of one’s own national cultural heritage. There is no known human society which does not possess folklore”. In the words of Bringéus (1968), “the focus of the study of folk life is to obtain and understand the present way of life itself. In the future we must not simply be content with reminiscences instead testimonies. We must also study what is alive. The ethnologist is looking for the normal situation. Superficially it may mean that ethnology becomes less historical. But its objectives in the study of society must still be to demonstrate the part played by tradition as the motor of our culture. Consequently, a historical perspective is needed in an analysis of the present and in planning the future”.

From the words of Goodenough, it is clear that folklore doesn’t reflect on the remains of primitive cultures alive today, instead it focus on the individual in the midst of social conflict, the present and the future. The folklore studies include oral literature, material culture, social folk custom and folk performing arts. The words and phrases like “manners”, “customs”, “neglected customs”, “fading legends”, “fragmentary ballads”, etc. present an outline of folklore (Dundes, 1965: 4).

The tribes constitute a rich, unique, varied and critical element of Arunachalee tradition. The folk and tribal arts of Arunachal Pradesh are ethnic, simple, colourful and
vibrant enough to speak volumes about the state’s rich cultural heritage. Tribal life is an epitome of absurdity. Even though, they are living in an enriched environment with full of colours and music, their personal life is an untold sufferings arising out of alienation, deprivation and enslavement.

KURUNG KUMEY DISTRICT: AN OVERVIEW

Kurung Kumey district is situated in the northern fringe of central Arunachal Pradesh in the Eastern Himalayas between 27° 45’ to 28° 22’ N latitudes and 92° 00’ to 94° 15’ E longitudes and spread over an area of 6,675 sq. kms. It is bounded by Tibet (China) on the north, Upper Subansiri District in the East, East Kameng District in the West, Lower Subansiri District and a portion of Papum Pare District in the South. It is named after two principal rivers of the district namely, Kurung and Kumey. It has 2 subdivisions, 13 administrative circles with 9 CD Blocks.

The landscape consists of sub-montane and mountainous ranges, sloping downwards are divided into valleys by two major rivers Kurung and Kumey along with their tributaries. The climate varies from sub-tropical in the low-lying areas to temperate in the extreme northern part, with clearly marked four different climatic seasons i.e. summer, winter, spring and autumn. May, June and July are the warmest months and the temperature begins to fall in September, with the onset of winter. Most of the rainfall occurs during the months of June to September. During this period, the southerly moisture laden winds cause heavy rainfall on striking the southern slopes of the mountain ranges.

Physiographically, it can be clubbed under a single unit- the lesser Himalayan ranges, lying across the region. The altitudinal variation seen in this area is from 200-3,000 m AMSL. The valleys in the district are longitudinal and narrow, with steep hills. The main aspect lies between south to north western and south to north eastern alongside Kurung and Kumey rivers respectively.

Administrative Units: The district was created on 16th April, 2001, after it was carved out of the erstwhile Lower Subansiri district and its HQ was first proposed at Laying-Yangte; now established at Koloriang. It consists of two subdivisions namely, Koloriang and Nyapin. The newly elected PRIs in April 2008 have lead to the revival of democratic institutions and presently there are 13 ZPMs (Zilla Parishad Members), 155 ASMs (Anchal Samiti Members) and 555 GPMs (Gram Panchayat Members) in the district.

Demographic Profile: As per the provisional population Census of 2011, the population of a district is pegged at 89,717 with 44,226 males and 45,491 females as compare to 42,518 with 21,117 males and 21,401 females in 2001 Census. The district registered a record decadal growth rate among the districts of Arunachal Pradesh with 111.01 per cent during the decade 2001-2011. The population of this district is predominantly tribal (more than 97 per cent) and Nyishis, Bangrus and Puroiks are the tribal groups inhabiting the region. The district has a low literacy rate of 50.67 per cent (2011 Provisional Census), being 57.28 per cent among the males and a measly 44.31 per cent among the females. The sex ratio stands at 1029 and the population density at 15 persons per sq. km.

People: Kurung Kumey is home to the valiant Nyishis, the diligent Bangrus, and the nomadic Puroiks. The Nyishis are the demographically the dominant tribe inhabiting in all directions/ circles of the district. The Bangrus, a relatively small tribe is confined to the western and northwestern part of the Sarli circle. They are closely related to the Nyishis whom they resemble in dress, festivals, manners and customs, and with whom they often intermarry. The Puroiks are confined to the high hills in the district’s northern, north-western and western part spanning the areas of Sarli, Nyapin and Phassang circles. The Puroik settlements are interspersed with the Nyishi and Bangru villages. Their economy is based on food-gathering and big-game hunting. Few of them are now taking to sedentary form of agriculture and the change in their life style is now perceptible, though at minimal level.
Tribal settlements are known as Nampam (hamlet). Each Nampam contains, on an average of 30-50 sparsely constructed houses. Tribal folks of Kurung Kumey district are the most backward among the tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh. Their economy is traditional in nature, depending mainly on land for agriculture and forest for non-agricultural products. The plight of tribals continues to be steeped in the quagmire of ignorance, illiteracy and poverty.

NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The rate of low literacy among tribal communities across the country is a serious threat to present Indian education. It is, further, more significant to Arunachal Pradesh, the state with second lowest literacy rate in India. The intensity of the problem is reflected by the CBSE conducted AISSE (All India Secondary School Examination) and AISSCE (All India Senior Secondary Certificate Examination) results where the district more often attained the less percentage of students passed the examinations. The increase in the number of failures and drop-outs in the schools of Kurung Kumey district may be argued as major cause for the fall.

According to Israel (1998), recognizing the community as the unit of study is an important principle of any research. The study is carried out to generate an understanding of the community members’ perspectives and needs. In the words of Dorson (1965) “in the objectives to study about a society, a historical perspective is essential in an analysis of past and in planning the future”. The knowledge of past is important to understand the present and predict the future. The study of folklore is one of the means to understand the folklife. The observations and data collected through this study are being discussed as follows.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

i. To study the culture and folklore of tribal communities of Kurung Kumey district;
ii. To understand the folklife of these tribal groups; and
iii. To investigate the backwardness of tribes inhabiting the district.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is conducted using participatory research method to identify the cultural perceptions and priorities of tribal people in the district. The investigator conducted in-depth interviews and observed the daily-life activities of tribal people. The primary data is gathered through a field investigation.

TRIBAL VALUES, CULTURE AND PRACTICES

Culture: Eco-values are integrated as feminine values. Tribal people are the custodians of a culture, rooted in integrated values of a perspective that women and nature are one. The wisdom of tribal people tells that the earth meets the needs of not only humans but also the whole creation. Unlike non-tribals, a distinct characteristic of tribes is that they have an ethic of enough. Nothing is taken from nature, other than what is essential. The bare-foot folk dance is a life celebration of their oneness with nature. The Divine is perceived in the trees, mountains, streams, animals and in all creation. Earth is Mother God and God is not to be bought or sold. They approached the land with great respect. For tribes, joining with nature is a celebration which all of them celebrate together.

They are the originators and contributors of unique system of nature and indigenous medicine. The entire hybrid in food crops, medicinal plants and animals all over the world are those developed from the rich variety of life species preserved from ancient times by tribal people. It is an irony that modern society perceives tribes as uncivilized and uncultured. For centuries, Nyoru or Nyora (forest) and its fertile land were owned by the tribal people. They never privatised them, nor did they destroy them in the name of development. Their life is need-based rather than greed-based. They have not become money-minded.

A Society with Little Gender and Class Discrimination: The traditional tribal system allows equal rights and participation for both men and women. There is no other human group in the world in which women’s freedom
is upheld to this extent, avoiding all discrimination in work. The women are given freedom to find and choose their own life partners. Divorce and re-marriage are accepted by tribal society. There is no dowry system among them. Men and women enjoyed equal rights to property. Female infanticide is unheard in this society.

The whole traditional society is built on the solid foundation of equality among all life forms including the plant kingdom, water and earth. It is based on the symbiotic relationship of all beings with nature. People are given respect and status according to their contribution to society, but only when they are performing the particular item assigned to them. Hence, a Nyub (priests) who performs rituals are treated with respect when they performing the rituals in their respective roles. After the event, they are treated as equal to anyone else in the Nampam (village). The attitude comes from the core of culture, eco-friendly life and social environment.

Socio-Cultural Structure: Tribal people lack written language of their own, but it has not prevented them from passing of their rich culture and customs from generation to generation. They speak their own dialects. Children are given names usually in accordance with family tradition. Tribes bury the dead in areas nearby their houses. Aram-kiinam (ritual for dead) by priest accompanies the funeral ceremonies.

Tribal Songs and Dances: The tribal people play a vital role in transmitting the history, cultural traditions, and the way of life to new generations. Tribal songs and dances are the media through which traditional knowledge are transmitted. One of the tribal songs has the following as its theme. It is sung by a woman while sending-off her daughter to another village after her marriage. She sings:

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\text{Ngakege nyeme nga, sulu bu aluso},
\text{Ngakege nyeme nga, siryum bu aryumso},
\text{Anege gamgung ngam gyote bu rinela},
\text{Abuge gamha ngam bingte bu rinela},
\text{Nyubuge ge nyoku lo, chuchu taka nu,}
\text{Tae ge nyoku lo, ruru taka nu}
\]

O! My dear daughter, today I’ll tell you something precious. The precious is the words of wisdom from your parent. Please! Be a good girl/woman at in-laws home. Don’t carry away by any mischief and mis conducts.

Another song gives vivid details of cultivation. It articulates of how to prepare the ground, how to prepare the seedlings, how to transplant them, how to watch their growth, how to harvest and how to prepare the food out of the harvest.

Regarding jhum cultivation, various seeds should be mixed and sown; birds that come must be chased away. You have to look after the cultivation by watching from a small hut built on the top of the tree. Take the trips to drive the birds away and say, kehe...ehe...kehe...ehe... and lobbing stones at them.

Their customs and traditions are handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth where the elders play a vital role in the process. They hand down to successors their songs and stories.

CONCLUSION

In an ethnographic research to study about a community, it is vital to analyse their problems looking at from various perspectives. The study of the cultural priorities of tribal people has enabled the researchers to look at the problems, beyond the extent to which, an outsider can perceive. Being the possessors of a wealthy culture, tribals would have diffidence to adapt and tune to the prospects of a foreign language. Indeed, initiatives have to be taken to evolve culturally specific syllabus and curriculum for the tribals. A learning environment has to be created in the classroom that nurtures the curiosity and path to knowing. The skills of language are important for the balanced participation in tribal community as well as, larger world community. Practice and preparation in the cultural traditions interwoven with language experiences reflecting all education domains help the learners to understand and participate in rightful place in the universe. Tribal culture has several elements that mainstream people have to emulate. The noble values and
attitudes can be contributed to the present-day world at large.

REFERENCES


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