



ISSUES OF IDENTITY AND MARGINALITY IN NORTHEAST INDIA: CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL INCLUSION

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ABSTRACT:

KEYWORDS:

WHO AM I? The question always strikes everybody's mind. Searching for one's identity, all of us get carried away to portray oneself with time, to fashion, to religion, to caste, to community, but at the end we still cannot satisfy ourselves with any definition of our identity. Here lies the debate, throughout our culture, there seems to be an identity crisis. All may be correct to define one's Identity agree that everyone is correct in his/her own opinion. But still the confusion is there regarding "Who am I?" What is behind the struggle for Identity? Specially if focus on socio-political and cultural issues. You could say it takes a wild imagination to picture a truly open society; one where freedom of expression and democracy are paramount, and where no one holds a monopoly in the truth, then these terms like marginalization and alienation will not be applicable. But in practical it will never be possible especially in the North Eastern region of India, where cultural landscape is characterized by several ethnic groups, where social responses, with varying degree of differences emanate from ethnic value-system.

The study looks upon on issues of identity and marginality in Northeast India and its challenges. As we all know that the ethnic communities in the hills as well as in the plains of Northeast India have been disturbed in a great variety of ways since decades. It is a fact that the people of Northeast India do sustain identity crises, be it because of the physical appearance, geographical location, different dialects, socio-cultural life styles etc. But it is not that there is silence in the atmosphere. I would like to quote few lines from Spivak " Can the Subaltern Speak?

"For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject's itinerary has not been traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual. In the slightly dated language of the Indian group, the question becomes, How can we touch the consciousness of the people,

even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?"

When the opponent is strong, the anger and repression get expression through songs, visual art, proverbs and plays. It helps to release the inner tension caused by injustice, and inspires people to unify and fight relentlessly against the injustice and exploitation. The question now rises does marginal visual culture goes parallel with some of the definitions of the term subaltern? To answer this question we can acknowledge the contributions of Northeast Indian authors such as Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*, Dhruba Hazarika-*Son of Brahma*, Anup Kumar Dutta's *The Kaziranga Trail*, Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*, Uddipana Goswami's *We Called the River Red*, *The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam*. Janice Pariet in her stories knits together local folklore and tradition with unfolding social political events. Eastern Kire's *A naga Village*, Nameirakpam Bobo Meitei form Manipur in *A cursed Land*, and a must to mention about the contribution of Sanjoy Hazarika books *Reflection on the North East*, *Tales of War and Peace from India's North East*. All these English Indian writers from Northeast India cantered around a common issue i.e. the socio-political scenario of Northeast India. The writings do suggest the crisis of Identity, insurgency, insider outsider syndromes etc.

A remarkable contribution was made by Srimanta Sankardava a saint-scholar, poet, play writer, social-religious reformer and a figure of importance in the cultural and religious history of Assam and because of whom today the xatriya dance is accepted as a classical dance of India, it is no longer pushed as a marginalized form of dance. He is widely credited with building on past cultural relics and devising new forms of music (Borgeet), theatrical performance (Ankia Naat, Bhaona), dance (Sattriya), literary language (Brajavali). Besides, he has left an extensive literary opus of trans-created scriptures (Bhagavat of Sankardev), poetry and theological works written in Sanskrit, Assamese and Brajavali. The

establishment of xatras and namghar was the endeavor of Srimanta Sankardava. But it is a fact that even today the other parts of India do not have much of information about Srimanta Sankardava? Can this be pushed by saying that it is because of the socio political factors that he is not so much known to the other parts of India? For this the scholars and researchers who are working on the different aspects of Sankardava's Contributions should come forward and make an effort to get the writings published in different languages, and more multimedia documentaries should be produced which can be portrayed in national as well as international levels, rather than being rigid and not given an access to the places where the authentic documents are preserved.

One scholarly article titled *Revolutionary Artist Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Voicing the Silence of the Subaltern* by Gitali Saikia where she mentions how Dr. Hazarika the incomparable musician depicts the subaltern, their suffering and pains, their mentality and as a subaltern historiographer how Bhupen Hazarika tries to record the history of the subordinate groups. At the time of Indian Independence when the society was going through a lot of socio-cultural changes was influenced by the European culture. Dr. Hazarika made immense effort to challenge and bring awareness among the people by writing lyrics on the marginalized communities. Dr. Hazarika with his lyrics did bind a bridge between the ethnic communities of Northeast India.

Apart from the performing arts, Northeast India is rich in the handloom and textile sector. All the eight states of Northeast have a unique identify of their own through the woven textile. Northeast India has the potential to produce the country's finest muga, eri and silk products, the same of which can be exported outside the country, elevating the economic standard and status of the Northeastern states besides putting Northeast in the cultural map of the world. The Northeast region is taking a place on the national map for handlooms sector and it could find a niche market if proper planning and policies are framed. Women weavers though largely dominated the handlooms sector in this region, with changing market structure and competition, they face conflict and compromise. They are still using manual looms with low technology base which affects production. If appropriate action is not taken, then there is a fear of replacing the handloom products by imported materials. The responsibility is also with designers to focus on the handloom products instead of western garments to bring back a proud tradition. It is seen that *Gamusa*, and even *makhala chador*, are being exported from different parts of India and are sold in Assam which is a major threat for the traditional weavers and also the uniqueness of the motifs woven in the textiles are getting extinct. But in contrast, the uniqueness of the textiles from Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram are still intact. Same in the case of the terracotta and the bell metal industries. Some of the NGO'S and Government institutes are indeed trying to preserve these forms of art. The Design department of IIT Guwahati is taking up projects for the development of

preservation of this form of art.

Raghurajpur which is a heritage crafts village in Puri district, India well known for its master Pattachitra painters, an art form which dates back to 5 BC. Apart from that, the village is also home to crafts like Tussar paintings, palm leaf engravings, stone and wood carvings, wooden, cow dung and paper Mache toys, and masks. Similarly, Assam's Goalpara district is popularly known for its terracotta idols. The Kamrup district is recognized for its blooming terracotta industry. Besides this, the Asharikandi village of Dhubri district of Assam is also popular in this ethnic art. Almost 80 percent of the families residing in this village are engaged in terracotta work so that the state and central government has announced this place as a 'model village.'

In fact the heritage site and architecture of North East India is facing identity crisis specially the lost heritages of Sibsagar. Yes, it is indeed a matter to be concerned. We are living in a region that suffers conflicts and political discourse all over its parts. And it is a fact that when identity is threatened, existence is what becomes at stake. Our building environment is the most evident record of our existence and it plays an important role in identifying who we are and what we do. Thus, the Ahom Monuments Kareng Garh, Talatal Garh and Rang Garh which have a great historical importance. But somewhere down the lane these monuments are now suffering from being noted by the outside world. The debate is how this should we bring an awareness. Firstly, a state of polarization has dominated the region. Then, a stereotype readymade production has taken up and the monuments are no longer being taken care off. Of course the Government organizations are taking necessary steps to preserve the monuments but rather than that very less research have been done to study the architectural aspects of monuments.

There are several questions which rise in one's mind while writing on the contemporary art and artists of Northeast India. Most of the artworks reflect the socio-political situation of that place. At this juncture lies the question to what extent the artist involve themselves to the situation which they portray. Is it a documentation of the incident in a vague manner or a self appraisal of the skill they showcasing? Here I would like to mention the fact that some artists of North East India are portraying and painting the Father of the Nation. Now the question is whether the artist is really working upon Gandhian philosophy or the artist is just vaguely portraying the great soul to be an icon rather than an ideal or are they doing so just for the namesake? The question is who will critically analyze those pieces of art work? There is also to mention about some artist who are from the mainstream areas who have performed and also showcased video documentation on the atrocities of the Indian army on the people of Manipur as a part of peace process. Acknowledgement must be made for such contribution and awareness to the viewers on television and print media about that place, but again the question repeats itself to the extent of the

sensibility of the artist towards the ‘happening’ and in what way the critic can analyze that piece of art. Speaking about Northeast India art scenario one can say that the artist isolates himself or herself as an individual who ends up with miscommunication in absence of criticism and analysis. There is always a conflict between the mainstream tradition and the urge to create an independent idiom in art with that of Northeast India. There are many factors for it, and till date the visual art society of Northeast is thriving to get recognition in the mainstream. There is a conflict between unity and diversity because of the clubbing of all the eight states under one umbrella as “Northeast” which is not appropriate, as all the eight states inhabitants vary in language, race, tribe, cast, religion, and regional heritage. Different brands of nationalism have indeed brought a drastic change in the political, social and economic ideology and movement in the Eight States.

There is also a sense of alienation due to the overbearing presence of Army in almost all the North-eastern region of India. Due to which one vital tragedy is the economic failure. We all know the scenic beauty of Northeast India, but people from different parts of the world do fear to visit the beautiful places due to the fear of insurgency. This is one of the factors where the process of development failed.

To conclude we can look upon the issues of identity crisis and marginalization with models like Conversion, assimilation, absorption, inclusion and accommodation. For example some states such as Tripura and Assam a dominated culture accommodates the marginalized culture with its features and differences. In fact some of the dominant cultures assimilate the marginalized culture and therefore the people of that marginalized culture suffers from identity crisis. Sometimes due to assimilation some of the communities have rapidly merged with other culture and have lost their identity. Thus, Issues of identity and marginality in Northeast India is indeed a challenge.

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