Globalization and Tribes of Northeast India


If the end of nineteenth century underlines the distressing effects of industrial revolution and colonialism, the end of twentieth century witnesses the emergence of two paradoxical processes: (i) globalization: a process that cuts across the boundaries of nations, cultures and societies privileging a move towards larger integration of the world and facilitating interdependence moving towards a global culture; and (ii) resistances to globalization: in the form of a vehement articulation of the local for preservation of indigenous cultures and identities. Although the meetings of WTO, NAFTA and other world bodies are often disrupted by huge demonstrations these have little or no effect on the process of globalization. In economic terms, if globalization facilitates the flow of free-market capitalism along side free trade under the WTO regime, in political terms, it underscores the changing nature of the nation-state constraining the political sovernity of subaltern nations. “Commodification and consumption that either universalises desires or particularises traditions” in cultural terms, makes the regime hegemonic, leaving an individual to fend for him/herself through inevitable mediation of multiple agencies and issues (Li 2001). However, there are aggressive advocates in both camps for and against globalization. The common charge against globalization is that it is an extension of Western capitalism; empowered by free market economy it perpetuates neo-colonialism. Under its sway, the powerful force it unleashes, it is argued, preservation of cultures and identities in their pristine/undiluted state becomes impossible resulting, on the one hand, in alienation of identities and, on the other, in cultural chaos.

The present world has had undergone massive transformations from the time sea routes are discovered to America, Asia and Africa, followed by the hegemonic march of colonialism and the painful process of decolonization. Similarly our thinking and thoughts have passed through the Western project of modernity and enlightenment, postmodern and postcolonial discourses. Arguing against the adherents of globalization, Fredric Jameson (cited in Li 2001) discounts the merit of such a process by saying that people have been trading with each other from neolithic times and commodities have been moving from one part of the world to the other from time immemorial; there is nothing new in the process but what is damning is that it perpetuates Western hegemony in disguise as a logical prop for late capitalism. Noam Chomsky (Ibid) drives this point home with great polemical verve: it seems fairly clear that one reason for the sharp divide between today’s first and third worlds is that much of the latter is subjected to “experiments” that rammed free market down their throats, whereas today’s developed countries are able to resist such measures. Expressing his concerns R. Radhakrishnan (2004) maintains: Globality and globalization are the Darwinian manifesto of the survival of the fittest, the strong nations will survive “naturally”, for it is in their destiny to survive, whereas weak nations will inevitably be weeded out because of their unsatisfactory performance as nation-states.

Beyond the economic and political debates, it is presumed that globalization is a challenge to cultures, in particular, to marginalized communities and their identities. Interestingly, when we look around us today we find what is specific and local acquires the object of global desire while the so-called global circulates freely, unhindered in the local market. In such a scenario where the local and the global seem to overlap, the discursive articulation of the difference of identities and social and cultural practices become more crucial (Baral and Kar 2004). In the context of the tribes of Northeast, it is feared that globalization may bring in large-scale commodification of their cultures and would erase their unique identities that are so far consolidated mostly on the premise of ethnic difference.

trace the historical development of the concept of identity. According to them, because of the instability and internal heterogeneity of identity categories, critics have delegitimated the concept by “revealing its ontological, epistemological, and political limitations” and underlined the fact that “as a basis for political action, [the concept of identity] is theoretically incoherent and politically pernicious.” Although the editors follow the postpositivist realist framework in their attempt to reclaim identity in which “experience” is the most important vector, my position is not to reclaim any identity perse but to look at identity politics in the Northeast India in the wake of globalization that contributes to the changes in its formation, reformation and deformation.

Although globalization dehistroisizes identities, it cannot certainly erase an identity totally except creating hybrid identities. Today, identities are under a period of rapid evolution in matters of rights, articulations and solidarity movements and so on in our country. Is it then feasible to preserve a pure, uncontaminated identity with a romantic notion of its uniqueness? As “Northeast” and “tribe”(s) are inescapable givens (these categories can be contested) any discussion on/about identity and culture in the context of the tribes of Northeast, in the wake of globalization, has to be negotiated through the trope of in-betweenness. The in-betweeness as a frame of reference has to take into account general assumptions often invoked around constructs such as “Northeast” and “tribe”(s) and specific examples of particularity in the context of a particular identity and culture.

Identities in Northeast are mostly constructed around ethno-nationalisms. The politics of identity therefore centralizes difference as the most important marker thereby recognizing cultural difference of which an identity is a producer as well as a product. The politics of difference holds good so far as there are no boundary crossings, but it becomes problematic and looks skewed when the boundary of exclusivity is blurred under let us say intense democratization of a society with increasing acceptance of the other or under globalization blurring all boundaries. It thus gestures toward an internal contradiction that while excluding the other it seeks to be recognized by it. Therefore, difference is not self-generative but always an other-contributed marker.

The contemporary critical-theoretical debate surrounding identity politics has been productive in that it is flexible and extensible, as new tropes continue to influence new political claims in drawing a difference say between the expression “tribe” and “indigenous people” in India, and between “Canadian-Indians” and “first nations” in Canada while asking questions regarding the relationship between identity and environment, identity and development etc. All these are different prongs of having new claims to territory, political control and other demands in consolidating the community’s bargaining power. Politically these new claims seem to be fine as long as they work towards community solidarity and empower the community. For example, there have been talks on/about intellectual property right vis-a-vis folk knowledge/wealth, particularly, in the context of tribal societies in terms of textile designs, herbal medicines, and other indigenous products that will bring immense economic benefit to the people. But such moves either for economic integration or cultural exchanges are vitiated by ethnonationalism in most cases resulting in solidarity/autonomy movements that underline the old notion of unique identity and exclusion and undermine integration and development.

Notwithstanding the claims and counterclaims, it is true that the concept of identity is in a period of rapid evolution. Changing technologies also have contributed to the problematic. Attempts to decode human genetics and possibly shape the genetic makeup of future persons (Wald 2000), to clone human beings, or to xeno-transplant animal organs, and so on, raise deep philosophical/ethical questions about the kind of thing a person is. We are now capable of changing our bodies through sex change or cosmetic surgeries with immediate consequences to ways of our understanding that dramatically change our identities. As more and more people are using disembodied communication technologies, the kinds of identities that matter seem to be shifting (Turkle 1995). Our identities are increasingly pathologized these days (Elliott 2003). In addition identities are increasingly getting hybridised. In such a scenario how does one understand identity formation and its articulation. In the context of Northeast in spite of claims of uniqueness of an identity, the identities have undergone tremendous evolution and have been hybridised with or without ethno-politics of exclusivity. However, it is necessary to understand their evolution as examined in the articles by T.Ao, Raju Barthakur, and Margaret Zama. These articles underline the transition and transformations that have shaped the Ao Naga, the Mizo and Arunachalee identities. If the transformations have occurred (allegedly under a coercive process) by the state power imposing alien institutions and practices and by the intrusion of cultural and religious forces from outside, semiotically, such forces have also contributed to the strengthening of an identity culturally. Within the generic representation of the Naga, the Mizo and Arunachalee identities it is important to note the internal heterogeneity within the generic as problematic as the conflict between ethnonationalism and the nation state. Therefore, identities in the Northeast can best be understood to have been placed between conflicts of self/other binary, in an in-betweenness that is simultaneously historicized and dehistoricized.

Moving from identity politics to culture, we need to ask how does one formulate—and is formulated—who, culturally, one is? Because culture enriches itself through mutations and is also an important identity marker. In Northeast it provides both a context and text for the politics of difference. The anthropological understanding
of culture is an ensemble of beliefs and practices that are subjected to a “pervasive technology of control” (Greenblatt 1995). In an interesting analysis connecting identity with culture under the contemporary free market economic regime, Radhakrishnan (2004) offers a perspective that “at the very heart of a despatializing postmodernity” all claims of free trade that is implicated in the disjunction of home/not-home, inside/outside is no alternative but a return to nationalism. He goes on to add, we are all aware that in the age of late capitalism, culture itself is nothing but a commodity infiltrated irrevocably by exchange value. For him, “Culture becomes the embattled rhetoric of home, authenticity, and “one’s ownness” deployed strategically to resist the economic impulse toward “sameness.” We want to be part of the borderless economic continuum, but at the same time, let us be who we are; our cultural identities are not for sale or commercial influence. I agree with Radhakrishnan to the extent that identities and cultural products are valuable for preservation but such a position also seeks an answer to the question how does an identity negotiate with cultural change and changes in one’s social environment? If we are not given a choice to opt for what is good for us and renounce what is not how can an identity gain in authenticity. Hence our resistance should be strategic not political.

Beyond and besides identity, we need to examine what happens to cultural products such as indigenous music, textile designs, handicrafts, herbal medicines, dance forms and so on under globalization? Can indigenous cultural products remain what they are or will they respond to the market forces and bring in economic prosperity to the people under globalization? These are some of the issues we need to ponder over when we think about globalization and its impact on tribes of Northeast and their cultures. The two articles by Desmond Kharmawphlang et al and Anil Boro provide us with two different perspectives. Comparing and contrasting the two markets in Shillong “Bara Bazar and Police Bazar” Desmond and his colleagues have argued how globalization has been instrumental in job losses and traditional skills in exemplifying what happened to the tailors of Bara Bazar. Their concerns are pertinent how a consumerist economy with the support of media has affected the lower income groups in a society and how the marginalized is further marginalized. If in the loss of the tailor’s song of Bara Bazar, Desmond and his colleagues see the death of traditional trade, Anil Boro sees huge opportunities for traditional products in a period of globalization. The indigenous cultural products can be marketed and would bring in huge benefits for the tribes of Northeast India, he argues. However, he pleads for a government controlled monitoring body that would facilitate the trade and to refrain outsiders to get into the area for private benefit and personal greed. By arguing that both the folk and globalization function within the logic of reproducing the same again and again, Prasenjit Biswas does not see any contradiction and underlines a generic possibility of mutuality. Looking at globalization vis-à-vis indigenous religion from the perspective of philosophical anthropology, Basil Pohlong locates a spirit of accommodation and mutuality between the two formations. He underlines the need for ethics in both spheres.

Outside the domain of academic discourse, it is my experience and understanding that the simplicity of common life in the Northeast is often mired by the complexity of the politics of Northeast. Although many problems regarding Northeast simply frustrate us for their monotonous repetition, reiteration and having no possible-solution-at-hand there are areas that are stimulating and productive from academic point of view. There are many changes that have embraced the common life in Northeast within a very short period of time. Therefore, there is a kind of cultural inertia that dominates the psychology of the people. A tribal from Northeast India struggles to find his/her moorings being caught in the conflicts between multiple structures of power and authority. If the Indian state with its avowed policy of democratization of the tribal polity and promotion of protective discrimination and economic empowerment through development makes efforts at integration of the people with the mainstream, the militants resist strongly such moves propagating separateness promising the people the possibility of a romanticised, sovereign tribal homeland and the Church, outside these two structures, brings in the messianic hope of salvation through concepts such as sin and expiation and organised from religious practice. The question that looms large and begs to be explored: can globalization with its promises of economic salvation override the political, cultural and religious salvation that this part of the country is questing for last fifty years or so?

References


