Globalization and Local Cultures: The Tribes of North East India

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Where do the less developed [and scheduled as ‘tribals’] local communities of Northeast India stand in the Globalized world? What is their status and position in it? Is the tribal world of this remote corner of the Indian sub-continent aware of the fast changing global economic and technological scene and consequent socio cultural tensions and crises today? Are the people themselves aware of the processes and impacts of globalization? If they are, are they willing to take part in the process? These and myriad other questions come to our mind when we ponder over the issue of globalization in the context of Northeast India.

By globalization we simply mean that the world has become more and more easily accessible and open to any one of us. This process has made the modern nations and communities increasingly more interdependent, susceptible to the market forces and flexible to the changing currents. Almost every one of us is aware that there is no escape however strong our resistance might be, from the all too powerful clutch of globalization. For some people it has become a craze; for others it is just fashion. But, for the unaware multitude of Indian masses it is just a distant dream or rather just a magic word. For another group it is a new world of avenue opening up through the IT boom and for some others it is an alternative route for progress and development through liberalized trade and corporate finance. Any way, it enhances the levels and volumes of global interaction [Lewis:2002:334].

The phenomenon of Globalization is looked upon by many as a new form of encroachment on the local or regional territories. It is never free from its own perils and fissures. That is why the critics of Globalization outright castigate it as an evil and the enemy of human progress and democracy. We need to look at globalization from the point of view of its impact on local indigenous cultures. According to Lehman, Globalization has two-fold ways of interaction with local culture: i) Homogenization and ii) Cosmopolitanism. Globalization either eliminates local elements or incorporates them without acknowledging it. Secondly, it may incorporate and celebrate local elements. Here a situation arises where the global and the local overlap and the discursive articulation of difference between the self and the other becomes problematic. As we come to the tribes of Northeast, globalization has already made an inroad into the life and culture of its people. The globalized market economy as well as the entertainment industry has already encroached upon the traditional culture and the life style of the people of the region. Hence some people have expressed the fear that large scale comodification of their cultures would erase their unique identities. Authors like Appadurai [1990] and Featherstone [1996] however contend that globalization cannot be simply measured from the set binaries of globalism and localism. It has deepened the problematic of the linguistic terms like global and local, indigenous and heterogeneous, universal and particular. There are two views that glean from the whole debate on Globalization: that it is a force that will erase unique identities and traditions and that it is an opportunity for unhindered trade and commerce, and economic empowerment. I would like to look at both aspects in the context of a few communities of Assam.

The question of identity and its uniqueness in the present context are tricky. Those who vouch for unique identity and cultural purity forget that identity like any other practice in a society is an evolving concept except that in a symbolic form it connotes the ethnic, linguistic and cultural markers and differences. Although mutations are facts of life, all that is called essential and unique in defining an identity is because of exclusion from/of the other, not as something such self-evidential. Under a globalized cultural space, the larger question is, can unique identities remain pure and uncontaminated? To speak the truth, that is not possible because each community keeps on learning from other communities and thus the process of acculturation continues. Keeping in mind the utilitarian value, a community adopts new ideas and practices. While a culture makes some readjustment in adopting the new, similarly the new is reshaped to be appropriated by a host culture. It is also true identities already, always hybridized. Once any community opens its door to the forces of globalization, its cultural assets and products are bound to be pushed for large-scale commodification and loss of their unique
identities. We should take up the challenge and see to it that instead of clamouring for unique identities, which are not out there turning the advantages of globalization to our benefit.

Keeping in view the opportunities globalization offer, we have to examine in perspective what happens to some of the cultural products of the tribes of Northeast. To be an effective player in the global market under an industrial and technological regime the smaller communities need to put their acts together and should have adequate resources and safeguards. The ethnic textiles do have an opportunity to be globally marketed along with other products such as food items, indigenous herbal products, beverages, dance and music. The Bodo and Mishing weavers with their expertise in the textile products can link up with the world market but they can not do that simply because they lack the resources. It is interesting and ironical that big players have already arrived on the scene as ethnic textile products and designs become widely popular. The fashion designers with some knack for ethnic designs and forms have taken some interest in the ethnic textiles of these local communities. This intervention from outside has put the preservation of tradition under tremendous stress, for such an intervention from the world of fashion technology will definitely transform the traditional designs, colours and forms and also their use. However, there is another side of the story. The weavers for decades without any support from the Government and without a viable market for their products have suddenly wakened up to a new opportunity. It is true that the colourful traditional textile of the ethnic communities need further exposure whereby the weavers and the entrepreneurs will benefit economically. But the inroads of modernization and sense of aesthetics and utilitarianism in fashion as applied to the ethnic dresses of the local ethnic groups in the absence of adequate protection, it is feared, will be hijacked from the community itself.

The ethnic textile products, for example, Bodo dokhona made of the finest pat silk and muga silk and the best Mishing mekhela and ribi gacheng and galok have become a craze in the market. The Assamese variety of the muga and pat silk clothes has also become a commercial success story. In case these products are not patented the producers of the material at the local level will loose their commercial potentiality. So only recently there is an alarming talk of patenting the textile items those are locally produced in the name of geographical indicators. This kind of question arises only where the local products feel threatened in the competitive market and there is no institutional control and monitoring. When a team of our University teachers and Researchers visited the interior tribal villages and talked to the community leaders and the practitioners of the traditional arts and crafts, they found them to be ignorant of such dangers of their products being hijacked. When they came to know about the necessity to protect the rights over their traditional products, they agreed that such an initiative must be taken.

Another area where the local ethnic communities can thrive in the market oriented global space is their ethnic food, recipe and beverages. If the Government of India opens its door to the East, that is for the countries of Far East and South East Asia [as it is on the anvil now], the local ethnic communities of Assam and Northeast can profit a lot in trading their handicrafts, industrial and agricultural products as they have not benefited much, as people say, from Tea and Oil. There are local products and folklore items in which the specific ethnic groups or localities specialize and the people of Far Eastern countries use these items for having a strong cultural affinity with these people. It is not a question of products alone but products finding the right type of markets.

Like the textiles, food products and beverages, the ethnic groups’ produce can be patented and launched for the Far Eastern and global market. This is an area where the Autonomous Councils and District Councils and NGOs can work in tandem for the benefit of the community and employ thousands of local educated youths. The exotic folk culture with ethnic diversity of the region can draw the buyers from all over the world. Eco-tourism and package tours to ethnic places can immensely help this. But the lack of infrastructure for the tourism industry is still a major draw back. The Autonomous Councils of the Bodo [BTC] and the Mishing or any other local autonomous body for that matter can play the pioneering role in this. If the colourful folk dances and performing traditions need to be showcased in the global context the autonomous bodies and the departments of the Government must take the initiative. Preservation of cultural heritage of the smaller communities is an important aspect which we must not lose sight of. The ethnic communities and their cultural heritage have a distinct uniqueness and they should be empowered to negotiate for their rights over the folk products in any transaction.

If for example the folk music and dance forms of a tribal community of the Northeast go global, will they be able to preserve their cultural character? Popular music, says Lewis, “has a chameleon core which prevents it from being fixed and standardized. Rap music which began as the specific articulations of poor black youths in the West Indies and New York South Bronx, became authenticated as an international black music — not bordered by what might constitute official American cultural export, but as a transnational art form which crosses and recrosses what has been called the Black Atlantic” (Lewis:2002:353). In the Indian context, Bhangra based Punjabi pop songs have assumed almost an international character. Like the Punjabi pop, modern Bihu songs have emerged as a very popular art form throughout Northeast India and in the rest of the country. The modern day Bihu songs and dances, apart from the colorful ethnic dances of the region like Bagrumba, and Bardwisikla of the Bodos, Gumrag or Mishing Bihu of the Mishings, have become very popular these days. Thanks to the revolution in entertainment industry, the Bihu VCDs and cassettes make a good business today.
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The idea of the global is often conceived in terms of an appearance of the “simulacral” that presents the interior of a culture as “decontextualized” or “deterritorialized.” Instead of arguing that there is an ongoing dialectic or bind between the local and the global, I prefer to take a semeiotic stance; that is, how the material symbols and codes of stories and narratives get represented in the discourses emerging from within the life-world of the community. Such representations within the domain of folk literature, I would emphasize, could be looked at how genres are co-constituted and how they are designated a place within the site of an ongoing repertoire of construction of meanings. In order to accomplish this task, the paper is divided into four sections: section one delves into the nature of Global in the Folk; section two deals with the Representational artifacts; section three provides an analytical scaffolding of the genres in folk and delves into the simulacral content of Folk and section four concludes by way of prognosticating the interrelationship between identity and folk genres in a moment of the Global.

The notion of simulacra as explicated by Baudrillard and Jameson is of much relevance here. According to Jean Baudrillard, a simulacrum means a substitution, a precession of the signs of the real for the real. Such signs are meant to encounter the real through its representational and relational connection between the Subject and the object (1998:166-184). Fredric Jameson has added a further twist to this by defining simulacra as a copy of the copy for which no original has ever existed. In other word, it is a temporalization of the material and the spatial, which he calls “conversion of space into time” in order to strike only a resemblance with the real (1994). This also means a symbolic constitution of the human Subject, which no longer exists in space, but exists only in a temporal space that is configured by a temporally constituted subjectivity. In the case of folk genres that are supposed to be transmitted within a system of beliefs and practices not only bind a society together but also act as the identifying marker of that society. The representational and temporal dimension of folk can go as signs of...