Interaction between great and little tradition:
The dimension of Indian culture and civilization

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Abstract: Society can be looked upon as a process, a series of interaction between human being. The whole human society and each group in the society can be viewed as the manifestation of the social processes between the interacting members. These interactions ultimately form the social structure and the norms, values and customs related with these social relationships determines the cultural aspects of human being. In Indian context, the term culture has been derived from the Sanskrit word Sanskriti. The term civilization is regarded as a changed or developed stage of culture. This was marked by the organisation of complexities, heterogeneities and certainties. In the context of Indian civilization there are two distinctive but inter related cultural traditions namely great tradition and little tradition. The great traditional parts primarily include the Sanskrit Vedic Hindu literature and the little tradition is prevailed in the life of village communities including the tribal societies. This paper is an attempt to highlight the interaction between the great and little tradition in the context of Indian civilization and to find out the rhythm of national cultural heritage of this country.

I. Introduction

Society can be looked upon as a process, a series of interaction between human being where each person responds to the stimuli of other person. No social life is possible except such interaction and this communication is the basic to all social life. The whole human society and each group in the society can be viewed as the manifestation of the social processes between the interacting members. These interactions ultimately form the social structure and the norms, values and customs related with these social relationships determines the cultural aspects of human being. In Indian context the term culture has been derived from the Sanskrit word Sanskriti. Both the terms have been composed from the term sanskar, means satisfaction of total rituals, which may be applied to the ways of life for living common at any one time to all mankind. The term civilization is regarded as a changed or developed stage of culture. This was marked by the organisation of complexities, heterogeneities and certainties.

India is a multiethnic country. Along with its ethnic diversity the geographical landscape and the cultural practices of the concerned population is distinguished from one another. The evolution of culture, mainly in Indian context is the interplay of two factors- the physical environment and the metaphysical ideas. The atmosphere gives the people a common outlook and temperament though they may differ in their religious and philosophical ideas and it forms a common national culture. Among the other sources the new religious and philosophical movements, culture of people who have come from outside and settled here or of those with whom the country has come into contact through trade and commerce. The complex formed from these elements is called as National culture. With the diversified landscape the production of crops varied from each other and thus the India’s economic life developed on an agricultural pattern and this had a marked influence on the shaping of her culture as a whole (Husain, 1978: 11-19). Thus the foundation of Indian civilization is totally based on agriculture. The extensive plains of the Indus and Ganges have been the principal seats of early Indian civilization, while the mountain fastness lying to the south and
the numerous valleys and deltas in the southern peninsula have harboured local, regional civilizations which have added new strains and thus enriched the totality which became known in latter time as Indian civilization. The evidence of early Indian civilization goes back to the days of ancient period where there was the feature of Indus valley civilization and Dravidian cultural heritage.

The Indus valley civilization is believed to have reached its zenith about 3000 BC. But it had come into being at least 250 years earlier and has continued about 2000 BC. The Dravidians in the South India, who were in close contact with the Sind valley civilization, had by 2000 B.C. reached a high stage of cultural life and kept the notion of civilization during the centuries preceding the advent of the Aryans when North India was plunged in darkness. So, we can rightly say that India has maintained a more or less advanced cultural life since its emergence of 5000 years ago. No other country except China affords an example of a civilization continuing without a break for such a long time. About 2000 BC when the Indus valley civilization was being destroyed in North –West India by the ravages of wild invaders, the Dravidian culture in South India reached a very high level of development. Excavations in the Indus valley have yielded plenty of shells and pearls which must have come from South India. Even in the Bothi language of Baluchistan, nearly fifty percent of the Dravidians’ words are found which proves that there was a close cultural contact between the Indus valley and South India. About 1500 BC while the Dravidian culture was flourishing in the south, the dark period following the destruction of the Indus valley civilization was coming to an end in the north-west and immigrants Aryans were laying the foundations of a new culture infused with vigour and vitality. The hub of this culture was the land between the Sutlej and Yamuna in east Punjab and it was gradually spreading eastwards over the Doab or the region, between the Yamuna and Ganga. The Aryans had not yet completely subdued the aboriginal tribes whom they called the Dasyus and they were engaged in continuous warfare. In India they began to live the settled life of peasants and the various tribes established their little rural democracies.

According to Census 2001 the tribal population in India is 8.20 percent of the total population. They mostly live in the forest hills and naturally isolated regions known as a rule by different names meaning either the people of forest and hill or the original inhabitants and so on. Nearly all the tribal people of India have been in almost continuous contact with their neighbours and this contact goes back at least to the days of Ramayana and Mahabharata, where they were referred as jana. Even in Vedic literature, there are references to people who were different in physical appearance, and who worshipped strange gods; in other words the contact between the tribals and other farming and cattle rearing people has been a continuous one over the centuries (Vidyarthi, 1977: 25). Considering to the tribal history it can be found that they are the integral part of the Indian civilization. Various elements in the ancient civilization of India were contributed by the tribals. It is believed that they were the earliest among the present inhabitants of the country. So far as we know four main races and culture welded together into one people, the Hindu people, these are- (i) The Austro-Asiatics, in their primitive form are represented by the Kols or the Mundas, the Khasis and the Nicobereese. (ii) The Mongoloid people speaking dialects of Sino-Tibetan family and represented by the Nagas, the Bodos, the Kukis. (iii) The Dravidians – including the Malers, the Oraons, the Gonds and the Khonds and (iv) The Aryans who are supposed to come at last in India (Vidyarthi, 1977: 26).

In the early historical period of India which coincides with the Hindu period, the tribals either compromised with the Hindu neighbours or went further in the deep forest. All through the long centuries of the Hindu rule and Hindu neighbours, the tribals find themselves assimilated to an extent with the Hindu culture. Ghurye (1963), has observed that the tribals have shown a common tendency to look upon themselves as Hindus or as people closely connected with the Hindus. For the section of tribals who have remained in the isolated mountain fastnesses he states that only very small sections in the recesses of hills and the depths of forests, have not been more than touched by Hinduism and they have retained much more tribal creeds and organization than many of the castes of the Hindu society, yet they are in reality the backward Hindus. The tribals in the early historical period appeared to have lived in a state of internal movement cutting across the country and their movements were generally guided by the river valleys and destinations were the hills and forest regions of the country.

During the Medieval period, by the end of the 16th century the tribals were harassed by the Mohammedan rulers and gradually lost their status of free movements. Along with the Mohammedan rulers a number of regional rulers also harshly treated the tribal people in different sectors of the country. The mostly sufferer were the Gonds, the Banjaras, the Bhils, the Khasas inhabiting in different regions of the country. The modern period starts with the advent of the British rulers and it was the tribal people who gave the first major opposition to them. Subsequently
Folk songs verse and music go together and the musical aspect is much of discipline to own importance. The songs had adversely affected on the right of tribal ownership and their transactions, where it is performed by the boys and girls in the village akhra. The tribes associated with beliefs and mystical ideas; the r. These provide moral to ridicule laziness, rebelliousness snobbishness. The second, used in the services of religious festivals and offering to the deities. These cultural practices are not only for their recreation, it shows their devotion and obedience to the nature. Their folk cultural elements are nothing but the reflection of interaction between the concerned people and surrounding environment. In Indian context, the tribal artistic life and their cultural heritage primarily includes the following forms-

- **Folklore**: It includes the oral literature like myths, tales, legends, riddle, proverbs, songs etc.
- **Folk Music and Dance**: These include folk song, folk dance etc.
- **Folk art Handicraft and Acrobatics**: These include folk art, drawing, painting, carving, wood craft, metal craft, garment making with decoration, wooden or cotton produce etc.

These aspects of tribal cultural heritage are discussed here in brief.

**Folklore**: Folklore is the oral literature of the simpler societies which is perpetuated by oral traditions. There is usually no formal teaching technique; the concerned people primarily learnt through ear and it is transmitted in this fashion from generation after generation. Among many of the tribes, there is an institution of youth dormitory, a place where all the unmarried youth of the village assemble at night. Here they tell heroic stories of their fore fathers solve puzzles and give dramatic performances along with the song and dance. This group performance is helpful in many ways for the origin, development and transmission of tribal folklore in an institutionalized form. There are diversified functions of folklore; the first function is to provide education to the people and a note of discipline to the very young children. These provide moral to ridicule laziness, rebelliousness snobbishness. The second function is that it serves to validate culture, justify its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them. The third function is, there are in every cultural word the social norms and customs have been highlighted altogether. The fourth function is, it keeps the social solidarity and social interaction in the entire community.

**Folk music and Dance**: Folk songs, music and dance of the tribes are a composite whole which is one of the dominant characteristic of their culture. In folk songs verse and music go together and the musical aspect is much more reflected in practice. The songs are of several kinds. There are life cycle songs sung at different occasions like birth, marriage and death moral songs, teaching morals, teaching the philosophy of life, songs dealing with the seasonal variations are some prior one among the uncountable many. There are a number of songs dealing with their religious festivals and offering to the deities. These songs and dances are performed in a number of ways, like the group song, where it is performed by the boys and girls in the village akhra; the couple song, sung by a couple of singer and the single song, sung by an individual who is common in the tribal population like the pradhan.

**Folk Art, Handicraft and Acrobatics**: Primarily the tribal art and crafts corresponds to three types, viz. ritualistic, used in the services of rites associated with beliefs and mystical ideas; utilitarian, dealing with the modes of manufacture and material qualities like basketry, pottery etc.; individualistic, dealing with the feeling and emotion of the crafts man like weaving a cloth, preparing a mat.
Folklore in tribal communities has much significance. It continues to be a vital part of the life. There is hardly any occasion of the tribals which is devoid of the folk song. In their day to day dealings the proverbs are employed. Riddles are a source of knowledge and entertainment. Altogether the folklore materials explain the life of the tribal and rural people at the axis of self as well as at the axis of community. Cultural history and customs of day to day life are depicted in the folklore (Vidyarthi, 1977:308-337).

From the above all contexts it is quite clear that the Indian civilization has the dimension of great and little tradition as well as tribal, rural and urban culture. Both of these traditions have a close interaction with each other and according to Redfield unlike the others the Indian civilization has emerged as a complex whole of great and little, written and oral, literate and illiterate, formal and informal tradition. In the context of Indian civilization, the interaction between the cultural heritage of tribal and non tribal societies have been described by a number of scholars in various ways. Mackim Marriot by examining the religious content has contributed two concept to study the Indian civilization namely universalisation and parochialisation. In the former the cultural traits of little tradition are absorbed into great tradition and a local phenomenon become universalised; while in the latter some written, literate, shastriya and sanskritic elements of great tradition are learnt about, reformed and modified by the folk people to become apart of their cult. Oscar Lewis in his concept of rural cosmopolitan defined that the village members have a close affinity among themselves. But this affinity is not only confined among the people rather it has extended upto individual and nature like with land, house, cattle, bird, plants and other natural objects. All these interactions reflect the response of human mind related with its surrounding environment and determines the cultural heritage of its own. Milton Singer has given the concept of culture complex in the form of cultural geography, cultural performances, cultural specialists and cultural media. These are practiced by the representatives of great traditions and due to continuous interactions with the rural communities these have merged into the daily life of the rural people and they practise it in their own way generation after generation. L.P. Vidyarthi in his concept of sacred complex described that the great traditional elements are being practised in the holy and sacred cities, along with some sacred performance by the sacred specialists in a scared geographical area. In these places the entire cultural performance are leaded by the head priest or mahanta. Often the mahantas’ and their disciples move from village to village to collect subscription and the villagers also often pay their visit to the holy sacred places. Thus there is a continuous interaction between these two traditions and the members of the village community practise the great traditional cultural elements in their own way during their daily livelihood purpose.

III. Interaction between Great and Little Traditions: Some Field Observation

In the context of cultural interaction between tribal and non tribal societies, North Bengal deserves special importance. This region is broadly divided into three categories, hills, sub Himalayan foot hills and barind plains. With the variation of geographical characteristics the cultural heritage of the concerned people varies too. A few studies were done among the tribes of North Bengal, showing its own cultural heritage and interaction with other non tribal communities. The data was collected from the field on the basis of observation, case studies, interview and key informants interview which are discussed below.

The Meches: The Meches of Toto Para Ballalguri Gram Panchayat, besides their traditional animism, some of the families were converted into Christian religion and Brahma Hindu religion. The followers of the Brahma Hindu religion performed ‘yajna’ with holy enchanting and offer ‘ahuti’ according to the Hindu social customs. Among them a concept prevailed that on set of first monsoon makes the soil fertile as it is compared with the case of menarche of woman. In this context most probably the Meches tried to find the co-relation between nature with woman, as both of them are fertile and they have the power and capacity of production. Thus here the concept and worship of Devi Basumati according to the Vedic Hindu mythology may be inter-related with their cultural belief. The younger generation was engaged in official jobs, business and so on and for it they had to go to out side as well as to the urban centers. The Meches were well familiar to their dialect but simultaneously except the little children everybody among them converse in the Nepali and the Bengali languages with the people of the said communities. In this way there occurred a continuous interaction between the cultural heritages of the Meches along with the culture of adjacent rural and urban communities and it had provided them the opportunity to get modern accesses of livelihood (Field Study, 2011).
**The Drukpas:** The Drukpas of Buxa dooars region are a Tibeto-Mongoloid tribe and except some converted Christians most of them were Buddhist in religion. It is to be mentioned here that among the Drukpas and other tribes and people of Tibeto-Mongoloid group inhabiting in Darjeeling Himalayan region and Sikkim mostly have a strong belief on Goddesses of ‘Mahakal’ which is represented in the form of a dragon with protruding tongue and representing the figure of a thunder. This cult is an idol similar with Devi Kali of Hindu religion. Thus it may reveal the cultural interaction between these two traditions due to their prolonged co-habitation (Field Study, 2013).

**The Totos:** The Totos are a primitive tribe and live on a small hill area at the foothills of the Himalayas just to the south of the border line between Bhutan and West Bengal, named as “Toto Para” village under Madarihat police station of Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal. They are living in this area since the middle of the 18th century. Earlier they were the only inhabitants of this area but later on many other communities came and started to settle here permanently. According to the official estimate in 2003, there were 73.92 percent people belonging to the Non Totos, where there were 700 Nepali families, 25 Bihari families, 4 families of Bengali and Muslims, 2 families of Garo and Meches. Simultaneously the cultural aspects of the new comers were quite distinct from the traditional Totos. Interaction with outer world had changed the various material as well as social and cultural aspects of the traditional Totos. The patterns of livelihood of the outer world societies had attracted the youths a lot and they were imitating them. The pattern of dress, house hold implements, ornaments, and houses had changed a lot. News paper, telecommunication and electronic media like television, cable, and video were attracting the Toto people towards a new way of livelihood. The traditional occupations of the Totos were very much related with their surrounding environment. But as the new comers gradually started to reside in Toto Para, there took place a continuous deforestation which seriously affected their forest based traditional occupational means. The Totos regularly came in contact with modern education and it helped them a lot to acquire knowledge. Both knowledge and education provided them the opportunity to seek for official jobs in Government, non Government sectors and businesses and some of them were working in various governmental sectors. The Totos were getting more involved with official jobs and it was providing them a broad opportunity to deal with a number of people who were residing to the nearest urban centers. Their interaction with others had widened their view and their needs were no more confined in local products. Their material requirements were reflecting their attraction on the urban based products. Gradually the Totos were coming in close contact with television, video radio and other electronic media which were helping them a lot to know about the outer world. As the changes were taking place in their material aspects of livelihood their social structure and concerned organisations based on the material aspects were changing from their traditional circumference (Field Study, 2011-2012).

**The Rabhas:** The Rabhas dwelling in a few villages of Cooch Behar district was co habiting with a number of Bengali caste population like the Rajbansis. They were engaged in settled agriculture and white collar jobs. Basically the traditional Rabhas are animistic in nature. Every Rabha family worshipped their traditional household deities Runtuk and Basak for household peace. They had their own traditional priest named as Deusi Bura. But as some of them had started to live in the plain land from a prolonged period as a result they came under the influence of the Hindu religion and it influenced a lot on their traditional socio-cultural life. As the plain land Rabhas were living with the people of caste Hindus from a prolonged period, naturally a lot of cultural traits of the latter can be observed among the former. By accepting the religious and daily livelihood practices of the caste people the Rabhas were trying to develop their social status as well as they were trying to get the position in Hindu social stratum. First in 1935, a Brahmin priest who came from Nalbari Assam gave them the initiation of Vaishnavism. Later on many other Rabha people followed the pioneers. Each Rabhas had their own familial Hindu Kulguru. During 1970’s they were Kshatryaised by wearing six threaded paita (sacred thread) from Rajbansi Vaishnav Gosai or Adhikari (priest). Again in 1998 ten Rabha families were initiated by the holy Satsangha of Thakur Anukul Chandra. With this gradual acceptance of Hindu belief naturally a lot of Hindu rituals are more prevalent among the present Rabha society. At present various social and religious festivals are performed by them with the help of Hindu Brahmin priest. Still now they worship their traditional house deities Runtuk and Bashek for household peace and prosperity but these are their ultimate confinement of traditional gesture. After the acceptance of Vaishnavism they started to worship Lord Balarama and a number of other Hindu Gods and Goddesses namely Lord Shiva, Devi Kali, Devi Durga, Devi Bisahari etc. Simultaneously they performed the Hindu religious occasions like Rasyatra, Dolyatra, Bijoyu Dashami and so on. They organised fairs during these occasions and as a result there occurred cultural admixture of a number of people irrespective of religion, caste and locality. These factors were automatically mobilizing them to get more hinduized. As per Kshatryaised Rajbansi Hindu ritual they followed the funeral ceremony on 13 days with the help of Brahmin priest irrespective of their traditional duration of funeral ceremony.
Now a day the marriage and first rice giving ceremony are also performed through the Hindu rituals with the help of Brahmin priest. The younger generation totally communicated in Bengali among themselves and their traditional mother tongue 'Cochakrow' was confined only among the aged population. Thus among the plain land there is a continuous admixture of tribal cultural traits with the non tribal cultural traits (Field Study, 2012-2013).

IV. Observation and Concluding Remarks

Human being is the superior most living being in the world. An organised social life and the norms and customs related with daily livelihood make their life systematized and disciplined one. Culture is the reflection of human mind and civilization is the material creativity of the culture. Indian civilization is one of the oldest civilizations of the world. Before the invasion of the Aryans, there occurred the development of Indian civilization, created by the non Aryans tribal population of the contemporary period. The civilization of Mohenjo Daro, Harappa was primarily built upon trade and commerce but the base was agricultural product of the rural community. Due to trade and commerce, the communication and interaction with the outsiders got rapidly increased and along with those there occurred the diffusion of cultural traits from one geographical zone to the other. But after the invasion of the Aryans, the tribal people were isolated in the less communicable, hilly regions of the country and started to lead their life in their own way. But due to rapid invasion of the outsiders and at last due to the colonisation of the British rulers those less communicable areas were also came under the domain of administration and the tribals were also got counted as an administrative entity. These factors helped them to come in close interaction with the people of other communities. The main theme of tribal folk culture is the worship of nature and natural elements. Their feelings are closely related with the nature and it is reflected through their art and culture. On the other hand the conventional Vedic Hindu literature worships various Gods and Goddesses with rituals, yajna, hymns. Due to prolonged cohabitation of these two cultural practices the exchange of traits and elements occurred among them, and it ultimately enriched the national cultural heritage as a whole. Considering the Indian civilization there is diversity in the aspects of language, rituals, culture and so on. But the prime religious feature of this country is based upon Hinduism and in the pilgrimages there happening a continuous cultural interaction between the people of different region, culture and customs. Naturally the great traditional elements of the pilgrimage are coming into the daily lives of the village dwellers and it is creating a cultural interaction between these two traditions as a whole. Along with these the community festivals like village fairs have become a common place for the people of different regions and they are able to exchange their material cultural aspects and other cultural traits in these occasions. Running through various diversities is the thread of basic unity which makes Indian society a big society and a big nation. In this regard the unity of India is essentially a religious one. People may worship various deities but the religious scriptures knit the heterogeneous groups together into one religious society. People of different language backgrounds, customs and regions are found in one place of pilgrimage and one shrine with one common object of achieving moksha. This unity can also be observed at several levels, especially in the periods of western encounters. An important source of unity can be noticed in the process of cultural and technological communication and interaction. In addition to these agencies the social structure and economy forged linkages of reciprocity and interaction between regions, groups and cultural traditions. The organisation of Indian cultural tradition at the levels of the folk and elite have had a large measure of mutual give and take through localization of the cosmopolitan or elite traditions and cosmopolatization of the local traditions. Unity through this diversity of cultural and social forms in traditional India was articulated in commonalities of social and cultural institutions, occupation and technology, trade, market and transport etc. This brought a measure of functional interdependence among the diverse cultural group identities. India fought for political freedom as one unified entity. After independence our economic, social, political philosophers are broadly based on equality, justice, liberty, rationality and secularism. Also people may communicate in different languages in different regions but they have common languages of English and Hindi to communicate with each other. Thus the common customs and consensus in social values have preserved our traditional culture. Thus Indian civilization is not only an urban based entity, rather the role of rural people and the importance of their cultural heritage cannot be ignored. The Great traditional elements are continuously getting mixed with little traditional elements, because the interaction among the countrymen is nationwide and the specification of regional and territorial biasness is ruled out in this socialized democracy. From the beginning of Indus valley civilization till the date of modernization, the cultural zones and the cultural heritages of the concerned dwellers may be variable, but the rhythm of national cultural heritage is the prime essential factor here and as a whole India is represented as the cultural geography and the example of a civilization bearing the ideology of “Unity in Diversity”.
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