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The wonder that is India

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Abstract

In a multi-cultural nation like India each contributing culture maintains its distinctiveness. Growth of composite culture is necessary for the formation of national identity and national integrity. Composite culture forms a pillar of nationhood. Cultural diversity then nurtures national unity.

Keywords: Cultural diversity, nationhood, national unity, multi-cultural nation

Introduction

In India we celebrate unity by acknowledging of diversity. The present write up is some selected cultural practices which we call as little traditions of least known in nature, which are practiced in various eco-cultural zones of the country by distinct ethnic groups and maintains a harmonic relations among the neighbouring groups.

India is not only a country of cultural diversity but it's geographical and ecological contour is also diverse in nature, viz, desert area, hilly, forest, moist climate, arid, temperate, rain forest, deciduous forest, island surrounded with brackish water and so on, accordingly ethnic groups of those area are adapted their lifestyle. There are number of eco-cultural zones of India considering its diversity.

In the following lines some typical cultural attributes of our country are illustrated for the general readers to understand the diversity of our heritage and many among such are unnoticed and ignorant of those cultural behavior.

Matriliny, generalized exchange and prescriptive alliance, adelphic polyandry, Sub-tribal clusters, phratry system etc. are some of the salient features of north-eastern tribal societies.

This is a land where people also follow matriline and biline. Meghalaya is the only State in the country where matriline is followed in the matter of descent and inheritance of property; here uxorilocal residence is followed among the Khasi and the Garo. Moreover, among the Dimasa Cachari of Assam, bilineal descent and bilocal residence are practiced. This system is very pristine. Every person has two sets of clan—a primary clan and a secondary clan. For a boy patrilin (Sengfong) becomes the primary clan and matri clan (*Jaddi*) becomes the secondary clan. While, for a girl mother's clan (*Jaddi*) becomes the primary clan and patrilin (Sengfong) becomes the secondary clan. A girl, on marriage, sheds her patrilin i.e. secondary clan and adopts her husband's Sengfong as her Sengfong. In the matter of residence, in the first year, the couple will follow uxorilocal residence following which the couple will pursue virilocal residence. Among the Dimasa, a person is known by his / her primary clan. Thus a boy is asked 'what is your Sengfong'? While a girl is asked 'what is your Jaddi?'. Manipur, Mizoram and Arunachal also exhibit women dominated societies where women take a leading role in the production, distribution and management of agricultural and non-agricultural (such as textile) products. In Manipur, in the capital city of Imphal, the main market i.e. the Ima market focuses upon the role of women in the sale of products and in market management.

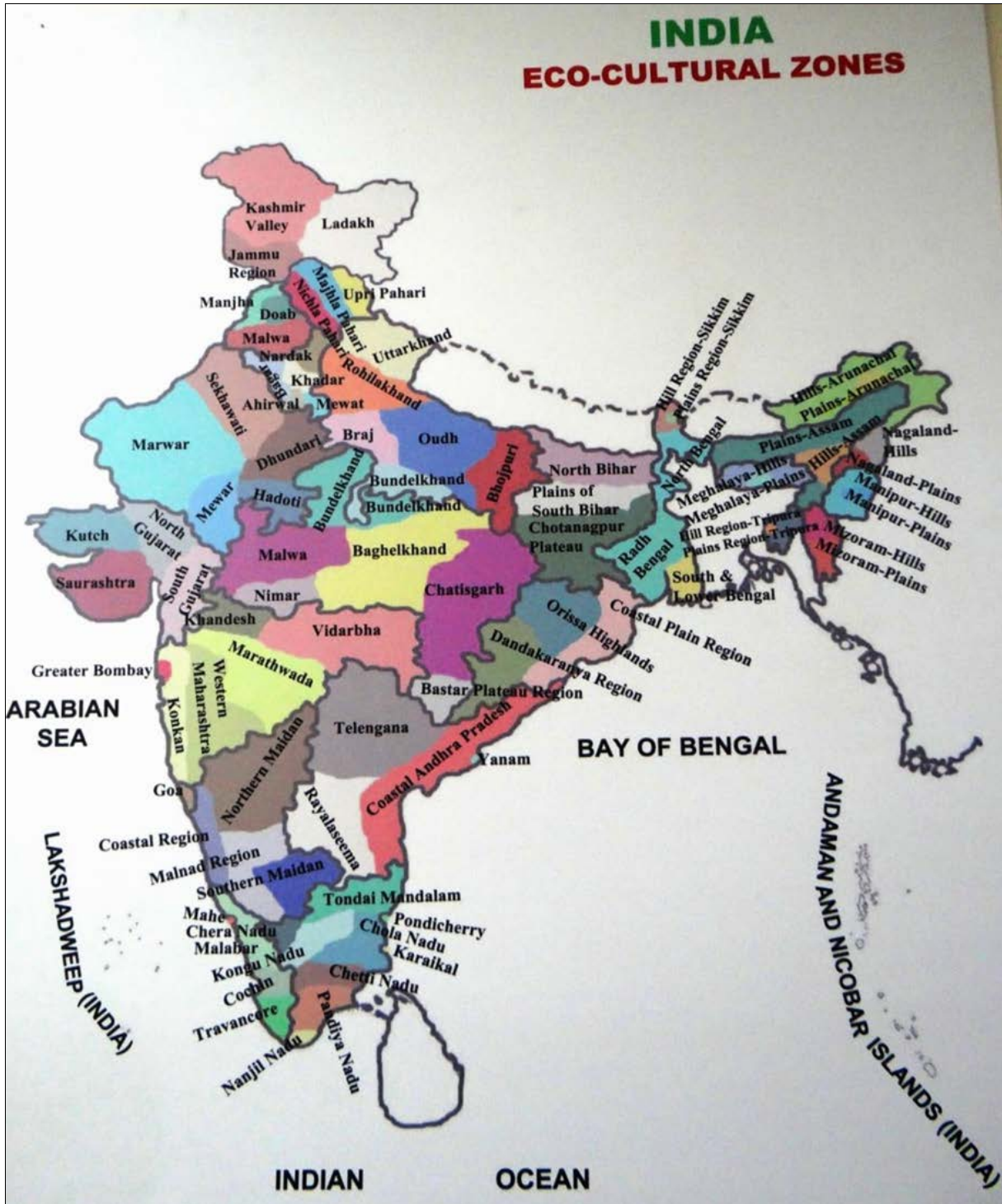
The Purum Kuki of south-east Manipur presents an interesting case of preferential marriage with a generalized exchange system that the Purum society is divided into (i) One's own descent group (ii) Wife giving group and (iii) Wife taking group. In Purum society, a girl cannot be brought from a clan where a family gives a girl. Direct exchange of girls is forbidden though in some of the Purum villages, a few case of direct exchange (of girls in marriage) are found. In such cases, they are conscious that by practicing 'direct exchange' they are violating symbolism

When we see the Kuki cluster, Naga cluster or Khasi cluster where similar traits such as descent, marriage system, residence pattern (such as uxorilocal, virilocal or duolocal) and similar textile design or style are found. We shall have to take geo-cultural factor seriously.

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In explaining the Garo type or the Khasi type of matriliney (in Meghalaya) or in describing the generalized exchange and asymmetrical alliance of the Purum Kuki vis-à-vis the other Kuki groups we must take resort to in-depth cross-cultural studies in different groups. The existence of similar types of consanguineous marriages present among different groups also needs similar kind of study. In the case matrilineal system, the Lalung and the Khasi express a system of unity (of brother and sister due to birth through a common mother). But in the Garo this form of consanguine unity is not expressed. But a form of structural unity through marriage between siblings of brothers and sisters is obtained. This form of unity binds two exogamous 'maharis' necessitating exchange of cross-cousins.

In North-east India both the Khasi and the Garo practice matriliney, the institution of 'nokrom' holds an important place, whereas that is not true in the case of Khasi. On the other hand, the type of bilocal residence found among the Pnar Khasi is unique and typical. This feature of uniqueness can be examined through an in-depth study of migration, analysis of the geographical milieu and exposure to other regional groups from whom similar traits might have been borrowed. Phylogeny may be helpful to find out the cause of persistence of cultural traits such as polyandry, generalized exchange and asymmetrical alliance, matriliney along with uxorilocal residence and different forms of consanguineous marriages that are found in North-east India.



Source: Courtesy, Zonal Anthropological Museum, Anthropological Survey of India, Udaipur

Binary System

Among the Purum girl giving sib is *achung* in contrast to girl receiving sib which becomes *athoi*. Marrying mother's brother's daughter is a better form of marriage i.e. *achumpihak* in contrast to *pihak* i.e. other form of marriage; the space (in a house) meant for the male inmates is called *pipaka* whereas the space for the female inmates is called *ningolka*. Similarly, the village council *hupal* has two wings-*hloukal* i.e. the elder's body and the *loumi* i.e. the youngster's body.

Whenever any social matter or village level dispute arises both the *hloukal* and the *loumi* may take the decision jointly. In case they fail to take any decision, opinion of a *tarpu* (an elderly person acquainted with the traditions and norms) is sought. There was a time when in some parts of Arunachal Pradesh (especially Siang), *Kebangand Bangokebang* played a significant role in resolving social disputes in welcoming guests and in maintaining cohesion within the village.

Typical Marriage Alliance

The system of union or marriage among human beings is practiced either regularly by all members or occasionally by some members. The former one is termed as regular form while, the other one as typical or rare forms. The normal form of marriage is practiced by the large number of human societies, as custom. But the typical one is present in only a few societies, and it is practiced side by side with normal forms.

It has developed out of a primeval habit. It was, I believe, even in primitive times, the habit for a man and a woman (or several women) to live together, to have sexual relations with one another, and to rear their offspring in common, the man being the protector and supporter of the family and the woman being his helpmate and nurse the children. The habit was sanctioned by custom, and afterwards by law and was thus transformed into a social institution.

Polyandry, as said, cannot be treated as typical and rare form of marriage. There are over eighty communities of the world who either practiced polyandry in the past or are still practicing it. Polyandry is neither 'unusual' nor 'unnatural'. Polyandry is neither 'exotic' nor 'erotic' nor 'promiscuous' nor 'problematic'. It is a normal form of marriage as polygyny is. If marriage of a man with more than one woman is normal form of marriage then why should a woman marrying more than one man be 'abnormal', 'unusual', 'unnatural' or 'promiscuous' etc. or even 'notorious'?

Polyandry was once practiced as form of marriage in all the five continents. At present it is found in all the continents except Europe. In India polyandry is found in the north-western region of Himalaya including Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir, Lahaul and Spiti, Kinnaur and Sirmur in Himachal Pradesh, and Dehra Dun and Uttar Kashi in Uttaranchal. All these areas are included

In the Western and Central Himalayas. It is also found in Punjab and Haryana. Polyandry is also practiced in Kerala, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim.

Ladakh

In the Leh district (of Ladakh) polyandry was reported. A stray case of polyandry was also found among the Gara, Mon, Beda and the Dogpa communities. Among the Bodh

or Bhot the eldest brother usually married and the younger brothers also shared the wife of their eldest brother as co-husbands. Among these people –“there is social sanction for sexual indulgence with the common wife. As recognition of their being the husbands of a common wife”, the younger brothers like the eldest one, also offered *khatak* at the time of marriage.

Apart from the above fraternal polyandry the Bodh also had non-fraternal form. “In the past an outsider, other than real brothers, could also join the wed-lock. Such a man used to be known as *phorsak* who was inducted in the family by the common wife”. But before the man was inducted, consent of the eldest brother was an essential condition. “The man, so inducted was more favourite as he was brought by the choice of the woman herself”.

Lahaul and Spiti District

Polyandry was also present among the people of Lahaul and Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh. Ghosh (1987:54) after studying the Lahaulas, reports that polyandry among these people was fraternal one. “The eldest brother took the wife and simultaneously she became a wife to all the brothers, as well, in common”. Sharma has also found that “polyandry is an honorable sacrosanct and socially approved custom of marriage among the Lahulas” (Sharma, 1987:391). They were practicing it since time immemorial, and it was widely practiced among them in the past. Among these people polyandry was fraternal one. After the eldest brother married a woman ceremoniously, she became “a de-facto joint wife of all the brothers having a common parentage” (ibid). But in Garh valley of Lahaul the younger brother was not allowed to bring a separate wife or to bring a second wife in the family. He should remain satisfied with the wife of his eldest brother, if the younger brother was a small kid, he had no option but to marry his elder brother's wife when he reached adulthood (ibid: 391-392).

Kinnaur

The people of Kinnaur also practicing polyandry, the adelphic type, for centuries. The brothers of the same parents, same father but different mothers and same mother but different fathers usually marry the same girl. The eldest brother only went to marry the girl in the girl's home.

There he married the girl after performing some rituals. After marriage when he returned his own parental house, he performed some rituals again in which his brothers also joined. All the brothers sat in one place in a row and in front of them sat the newlywed girl. The maternal uncle of the brothers tied a piece of cloth round the head of all the brothers, and thus all brothers became the husbands of the girl. Then onward each of the brothers earned the sexual right over the girl. This ritual was known as turban tying ceremony or paglikshimu.

Sirmur

Polyandry was found in the district of Sirmur, Himachal Pradesh, and the same was found there since long. Here it was fraternal one, and the brothers or cousins usually shared a common wife together. “It is common for three or four brothers to have only one wife but even seven brothers are known to have only one wife” (Parmar, 1975:89). It was as Parmar thinks, that it might be “a measure of expediency”. To him, “the fraternal idea or the principle of fraternal equivalence seems to be at the root of the polyandry

Here” (ibid). Among the people here, if they were alive, they arranged marriage for their sons. Only one brother got married, and he was normally the eldest brother. But no matter which of the brothers married the woman, she became the wife of all the brothers. “But if partition took place, which was not very common, she would be allotted to the husband in whose name she was originally married” (ibid: 90). In this district of Himachal Pradesh polyandry was widely practiced and “every family knows it’s working and those concerned accept it as a matter of course” (ibid).

Mal Paharia

Mal Paharia of Damin-i-koh region of Santal Pargana, Jharkhand believe in Obscure Cult or Malevolent Spirits. It is worthy to mention that beside these benevolent deities, the Mal Paharia have a large number of malevolent spirits called as Jonkh who have the mischievous power to do harm. Those roam in their vicinity always with a tendency to do harm for these people. They always have suspicious mind and are scared of those. In case all types of disease and death, they blame evil spirits. Even if wind blows heavily or if there is non-stop rain for a long, they blame the evil spirits. They lead their life with several restrictions, taken as protection from the evil act of those malevolent spirits. Some of the jonkhs are Rangadhari, Bisachandi, Kolkaowar, Kal Chaora, Kal Singh, Banashakti, Jalhari, Fulhari, Am Deo, Cham Deo, Gorla Kali, Khunti Deo, Pat Bihar, Jonkh, Jokh Danu, Bhui Deo, Chordanu, Maha Danu, Singh Bahani, Patal Kali, Kiching, Smasan Kali, Maha Kali, Aghoriya Kali, Baghwas, Jora Jonkh, Karodanu, Mahul Baniya, Mal Jonkh, Kichling, Bel Kupia, Saonar, Bhowar, Pahar Thakur, Ichra Kudra Jonkh, Banashakti, Dalhar Jonkh, Swarga puriyatri Jonkh, Kalkumari Jonkh etc.

Dharmaraj of Birbhumi

The ritual of Dharmaraj is chiefly performed by Dom, Dhibar, Jeley, Bauri, Bagdi, Mal, Metha, and Hari. Presently he is worshipped also by nabasak sect (i.e., clean caste). It is also reported that the oldest priest of this ritual was from the above-mentioned caste groups

Dharmaraj has no definite form, only he is represented by a piece of round oblong, conical or even irregular piece of a small stone often it is found in the shape of a tortoise and often identified as Kormas raj or Kurma avatar - one of the avatars (incarnations) of Vishnu. Generally Dharmaraj finds his seat at the foot of a tree or in the midst of an open field. But as per ability of devotees mind built or brick built shrines are also erected.

Some scholars are of opinion that it is a Buddhist deity while others relate it with Siva; a few are of opinion that Dharmraj is the form of Surya Baruna and Yama of the Hindu pantheon

Islanders of Lakshadweep, Union Territories

In the Lakshadweep islands people speak a language that contains words of Tamil, Kannada, Arabic, Malayalam, English, and Hindi etc. except in Minicoy where they speak Mahl. Some people of the old generation called it “jesri” or “Dweep Basha”. Malayalam is the language spoken in all the islands except Minicoy. In Minicoy people speak Mahl which is written in Devehi script. Literacy is increasingly acknowledged as a key mechanism for development as well as a reliable indicator of it.

Marriages with cross-cousins is preferred. Marriages with Mother’s brother’s daughter and father’s sister’s daughter are common in the island.

Under the Marumak kahthayam matrilineal system of inheritance, descent and succession to property are traced through females. Descent and kinship revolve around the mother and the children bear her family or house name. Wives and children belong to a different family from their husband or fathers and do not have any rights in the property left by them.

The status of women in a family and society is determined by their economic stability. In Lakshadweep society, no separate property rights and lives under one roof and under one head. Partition can be made only through common consent. Otherwise, all divisions of property are only family arrangements by which the male’s right is limited to the usufructuary right over the property. On his death, the property reverts to the original thawed and does not pass to his wife and children. In the case of a woman, her property goes to her children.

Another custom linked with this concept of common property is that neither men nor women leave their own family homes on marriage. The husband visits his wife’s home every night and return to his own home in the morning. The children live with the wife in her thawed (matrilineal exogamous descent group) under the guidance of her Karanavan (the manager of the property). The role of the father is limited.

Wancho of Nagaland

Locket with Human Head(s) motif--During pre-colonial, colonial and even early part of post-colonial days intra-tribe or inter-tribe feuds or raids were integral component of community history in the region where Wancho, Nocte and other tribes of present Nagaland reside. Wooden or metal heads or even other body parts were perceived as the trophy for the successful headhunters or takers and such original trophies are still possessed by some families, which members received from Village Chiefs as a token of honor. However, with the emergence of state and subsequent administrative penetration of state such context of severe ethnic feuds no more exists. But such wooden or metal lockets became ornaments for men and even became a product of Wancho art, which received tourist attraction. Naturally, these are now manufactured in various government emporiums or by individual entrepreneurs by using metal workers or woodcarvers and transported to various places beyond Arunachal as per the basic principle of supply and demand

Merriah of Kandhamal

This is chiefly a festival to appease earth deity –darni, performed prior to agricultural season in the month of Irpi danju (March). Though this is one of the chief festivals among the Kandha, it has equal importance also among the Kui Domanga or Pano. In earlier days (prior to 1845) the merriah was supposed to mean human sacrifice which was banned by the British and was replaced by buffalo (koru) sacrifice. This ritual among both the ethnic groups (i.e. Kuinga or Kandha and Kui Domanga or Pano) played a vital role in expressing the in-group feeling and solidarity of clans and lineages where relation from distant villages are invited and the main role played in this ritual by the Kuinga or Kandha and Kui Domanga or Pano as laka gatanju or

priest. It is told by the villagers that darni penu or earth goddess is, very important to them as she is linked with cultivation, their food producing economy and to appease her blood sacrifice is essential Bura or buda penu – the creator of the earth, is the benevolent spirit. The entire belief system is deeply embedded among both the Kui Domanga or Pano and Kuinga or Kandh in the studied villages.

Conclusion

In a multi-cultural nation like India each contributing culture maintains its distinctiveness and also continues its own development though informed by fellow cultures ; the contributing fellow cultures are respected and their identity are also kept intact. In a multicultural society, growth of composite culture is necessary for the formation and growth of national identity and national integrity. Once the multi-culturally constituted composite culture is widely accepted, it forms a pillar of nationhood. Cultural diversity then nurtures national unity.

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