

Culture Change In A Disturbed Physical Environment: A Microlevel Case Study

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ABSTRACT A tribal village in the fringe of old Guwahati at one time had self-sufficient economy. The villagers were agriculturists and raised paddy in the fields. They collected from the forest and hillocks in the neighbourhood necessary articles like fire-wood, edible forest products, leaves for silk-worm, medicinal herbs and materials for constructing houses. The pools of various sizes supplied them fish. Silk-worm was another source of protein diet. Besides, occasional hunting of small games and birds added to their protein intake. They prepared molasses from sugarcane that they grew and also mustard oil. The situation changed with the destruction of forest, filling up the lowlying areas with earth carried from the hillocks for various purposes, converting the paddy fields to residential areas, etc. The change in physical environment disturbed their economic balance and brought several changes in their socio-cultural life.

From the beginning of the human history, human populations, small or large, have learnt to adjust themselves to the natural surroundings for their survival. Through experience they acquired the knowledge of exploiting the nature for their own benefit. During this process some sort of balance was maintained between man and nature. Time to time minor hits from the side of man temporarily disturbed the balance, which however, was regained in due course. Interactions between man and nature gave rise to several cultural activities including economic pursuits, centre round the surrounding natural resources. Therefore, major disturbances in the physical environment may change the culture of the concerned human population.

In the present study a village community has been investigated in order to look at what happened to their culture when their physical environment was badly disturbed, and hence it is a microlevel one.

The village is situated at a distance of about

four kilometres from the outer margin of the old Guwahati town. Now it is within the limit of Guwahati city. The village is small, inhabited by about fifty families, almost all of which belong to a particular plains tribe of Assam. The elderly persons of the village were personally interviewed and made attempt to reconstruct the situation prevailed in forties and early fifties of the present century. Further, necessary data were collected from the informants to learn about the present situation. A comparison between these two sets of data reveals the culture changes. A host of factors are responsible to bring the changes. Here, however, the changes caused by the change in physical environment have been highlighted.

In the village the houses were distributed on one side of a road. The backside was bounded by small hillock covered by different kinds of trees and also by forest. On the other side of the road lied the paddy fields intersected by lowlying areas unsuitable for cultivation or small pools

of water. The villagers freely used the natural products for their maintenance.

The village community was agriculturist. The people raised paddy in the paddy fields. The yield was not only sufficient to provide rice, their staple food, for the whole year, but also to sell the surplus to get cash money to purchase necessary articles like salt, kerosene oil and other sundries. They grew pulses and a few vegetables for household consumption. Sugarcane was grown for making molasses and also mustard seeds, which they pressed themselves to get mustard oil. They practised some sort of sericulture by rearing and keeping silk-worms, which were fed by the leaves of a particular tree collected from the forest. Silk-worm was a source of their protein diet also. The pools and low-lying areas of various sizes were full of fishes of different kinds, which they caught seasonally on community basis for immediate consumption, besides preserving them in dried condition for future use. From the forest seasonally they collected edible articles, that too to eat fresh or for preservation. Occasional hunting of small games and birds created excitement among them, besides adding to their protein intake. The forest supplied them fire wood and materials for construction of houses. Bamboo was abundant. Medical herbs were also gathered from the forest. The women were expert weaver. They used handloom, which again was made by themselves using available local materials gathered by them from the natural surroundings, except, however, a few items and also cotton yarn, which they purchased from market. Thus, in one sense they had self-sufficient economy, though most of them did not own the entire paddy field in their possession.

The changes started from the early sixties and it became rapid and abrupt from the beginning of the seventies, when several processes began. The low-lying areas were filled up with earth collected from the hillocks making the hillocks barren. Earth was carried to other places as well. The paddy fields were converted to highland for construction of residential houses, offices buildings, warehouses, factories, etc. The pools and

forest suddenly disappeared affecting their economy and thereby bringing changes in their way of life.

Most of the paddy land of the village was owned by landlords of Guwahati. They evicted the cultivators and took possession of the land giving compensation to use the fields for other purposes. The paddy fields owned by the villagers themselves were not economically viable for cultivation, because, firstly, these were small patches distributed over a large area and secondly, water logging became a problem as the plots were bounded by newly created highlands. Therefore, they too sold their land. The new situation compelled the villagers to give up their age-old occupation. However, a few families, which were reluctant to accept the new way of life, with the money so collected purchased paddy land in distant areas and moved out of the village. Others constructed small thatched huts in their compounds to let out. Again, some others took petty jobs in factory, office, etc.

Sugarcane fields need to be fenced by bamboo or timber. To prepare molasses huge quantities of firewood are necessary. Bamboo which were abundant at one time became scarce, because it fetched good cash and hence it was sold out for getting easy money. The forest disappeared, the hillocks became barren, and as such these were no longer sources of free firewood. Therefore, preparation of molasses became unprofitable. The villagers had to give up that practice, instead started purchasing sugar from the market.

With the disappearance of forest several other changes occurred in the life of the village community. Except a few families, others gave up rearing silkworms, as there was no supply of leaves of a particular tree, the food of the worms. Most of them have forgotten the use of medicinal plant. The younger generation has no chance to be acquainted with the medical herbs, which are now non-existent in the surrounding. They were deprived of getting edibles from the forest. There was a big change in their food habit. For construction of huts they could no longer get materials from the forest, but they are to depend

on market. House types started changing.

The pools were earth-filled leaving no place for fishes to breed. Regular fish-eater villagers either had to give up that habit or to purchase fish from market which they could not do for financial reason. Mustard oil is no longer prepared by themselves.

The people were not in the habit of growing vegetable in their kitchen gardens in large quantities. Instead they preferred to collect the same from their natural surroundings. But along with the deforestation these articles of food became scarce. Now they cannot depend on the natural surroundings for their required quantity of vegetable items of food.

Their smoking habit has also changed. They used to smoke tobacco wrapped in a kind of tree leaves grown wild in the village forest. Now such trees are not there. Hence they have switched over to *bidi* or cigarettes.

The whole economy of the village community has completely been shattered. It is needless to mention that many rites, rituals, festivals etc., are directly linked up with the economic activities of the people. Society has also certain responsibilities which are connected with economic life. Hence, the changes in economic pursuits have seriously affected the socio-cultural life of the village community. A new generation with new outlook, value, idea etc., is gradually emerging.