

BOOK REVIEWS

Ecology, Culture and Change: Tribals of Sikkim Himalayas

By Veena Bhasin

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Daryll Forde, in his Presidential Address of 1948 to the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, identified ecology as that paradigmatic outlook which integrated different branches of anthropology, specializing in the study of pre-historic remains, contemporary cultures, and biological adaptation and ensuing evolutionary processes. Though imbued with novelty in perspective, Forde's advice remained largely unattended to by the then prevailing intellectualism in anthropology, except that it had found its exemplification *par excellence* in his oft-quoted and read book, *Habitat, Economy and Society* (1934).

In the span of five decades, from the time ecology was described as the undisputed integrative perspective, the scenario in which anthropological works are produced has changed drastically, almost ruefully. With the operation of the Malthusian principle in as rigorous a form as was envisaged theoretically, the entire world has been a mute witness to the depletion of precious resources, non-renewable or renewable with the snail's speed. Mining and manufacturing industries have 'ploughed the mother earth's breasts' (in the language of the Baigas) to produce commodities primarily for consumption in urban and developed societies. Forest resources have been over-exploited, the results of which are horren-

dous: trees are felled in Nepal, there are unabated floods in Bangladesh.

Who has been the victim of these vituperative changes in human environment? Who has been the tight-lipped sufferer of excessive human habitation? Who is treading through multitudinous problems of fuel, fodder, water and food as consequence of consumerism, the genesis of which lies in developed societies? The sufferer is the common man; the sufferer is the small community which for millennia has been having homeostasis with its environment; and the sufferer is the developing world. Why these small communities had been the vanguards of their habitat was because they never thought of it as a 'resource'; they never had a consumeristic outlook. If they burnt the dry twigs to make their food, they also nurtured the trees, may be by identifying them with 'supernatural spirits'.

In this canvas of micro-and macro-climatic changes and environmental degradation, having its relentless devastating consequences on the life of small communities of food gatherers, pastoralists and peasants, the need to undertake ecological studies becomes urgent. Daryll Forde's contention of an integrated science of man possible with ecological perspective is now welcomed as a laudable attempt. Before issuing policy statements having implications for planning, it is imperative that these communities threatened with all sorts of ecological problems, are studied with 'ecological perspective'.

I said 'ecological perspective'; here, it needs to be made clear that 'ecological perspective' is neither 'environmental determinism' nor 'geographical fatalism'. One may ally with 'possibilistic' approach in which environment is one of the several factors conditioning, influencing and governing the course of social and cultural life.

In a nutshell, the 'ecological perspective' is concerned with two issues: the adaptation-biological and cultural—of human beings to the cycle of environmental changes and the balance which thus obtains; and the management of environmental resources through a feed-back between technology and material culture. At the super-structural level, the effects of environment, technology and strategies of deriving basic existence, on ideology, the realm of religion and rituals, the politico-legal relations between people and cultural patterns may be studied. Here the issue is not that environment determines the ideology or religion of people; but it is the relation between environment, economy and technology that has implications for regulating the ritual cycle or the dominant ideas in a society. A student of human ecology knows fully well that he deals with complexity of relations, in which cybernetic aspects of cultural information and energy input produce feed-backs, which not only require an interdisciplinary approach to their study, but also the ability to separate out units and their relations from the complex interactions for analytical purposes, for quantifying, if possible, their exactitudes.

Read in the background of these issues, Veena Bhasin's *Ecology, Culture and Change: Tribals of Sikkim Himalayas* (1989) is a commendable effort. Its merit lies on the following counts. Firstly, there is no anthropological study of Sikkim after it was integrated with the Union of India (p. 17). Let me, here, go a step further. The earlier studies on Sikkim, some of which may be called anthropological, as I understand after going through an excellent bibliography, running into thirty-four pages, in this book, were of piecemeal type reporting the oddments of the Sikkimese, or geared more to a political understanding of this strategic zone, not only for India, but also for her neighbours. None of them was in fact a community study as this work is (p. 18), which is based on a field work extending for slightly more than two years (p. 19). A turbulent situation in Sikkim has been the singular reason, keeping the anthropologists away

from embarking on the study of a region that could help re-casting some of their analytical models. In this backdrop of political turmoil, kudos to Bhasin for undertaking this venture, staying in harsh and unpalatable field situations, and enriching the repertoire of analytical ethnographies.

Secondly, though ecology has acquired the reputation of a catchphrase, there is a paucity of studies that precisely delineate what an 'ecological perspective' is, and how an ecological study is to be actually accomplished. Either there are studies which cram anything and everything, visible or deduced, of a culture under the rubric of 'ecology', or there are others which commit the unpardonable error of stating that they 'investigate ecology of a region'. Ecology is itself a study; it is not studied; it is the study of an ecosystem and the synergistic relations between its components. What is studied is the man-environment relation as it unfolds itself with an intensification of human habitation and the concomitant environmental changes. Further, not all areas of a culture are equally affected by its ecosystem—there are gradations of relations, some are more conditioned by the environment than the others.

Bhasin's work, as compared to these put-all-in-one kind of studies or the erroneous ones where the 'field of proposed study' is confounded with the 'area of investigation', examines 'how' and 'where' ecology and socio-cultural factors are interconnected (p. 5, 343). Both these words—'how' and 'where'—are extremely important: the first describes the processual aspects of a relationship, and the second talks about those elements of culture which are closely related to the eco-system. In this, selectivity is the main principle. The approach Bhasin has taken up for examining the social and cultural facts of the Lepchas and the Bhutias of north Sikkim is Julian Steward's cultural ecology; it may be recapitulated that this approach has withstood the test of time both for micro-and macro-studies, from the study of Hopi Indians to that of the Indonesian agricultural history. Bhasin finds Steward's

approach very useful because in it the question of 'where does the interaction of habitat and socio-cultural characteristics obtain' is debated in great details.

For Steward, 'cultural ecology' is not a province of enquiry. It is an approach, a methodological apparatus, where subsistence patterns and economic arrangements are seen as intimately connected to the environmental pressures and cycle; the economic system accruing thus, forms the 'core' of a culture. Hence the nuances of economic life and ecological adaptations (p.62) need to be studied thoroughly. And Bhasin makes a detailed comparative account of the economic systems of both the north Sikkimese tribes, and then ascends to the ideology and ritual life of these people.

From the anthropological angle, both the Lepchas and the Bhutias have been treated as 'communities'. Manageability of research is one reason. The other reason is the crystallization of collective sentiments around the group because of living together, sharing the same habitat, and combating the threats collectively. But this does not imply the isolation of a community (p.27); it is not a 'windowless monad', to borrow the words of Srinivas (1957). Relations with neighbours and the historic facts of various migrations compel a community to change. Changes are further initiated when developmental schemes are installed in the midst of small communities.

In the dialectics of tradition and modernity, Bhasin analyses the changes that are gradually emerging in the North Sikkimese tribes. A more efficacious technology is accepted by the both. Similarly, formal education has started making impact on its beneficiaries. But the networks between the people, precipitating because of trade, contiguity of communities, migrations in search of better and fertile habitats, etc., have been instrumental in initiating changes. By implication, if the networks are restricted, the domain of change will be similarly affected. Thus, the Bhutias have remained primarily in contact with the Tibetans only. The extent of economic change in them is limited. On the other hand, the Lep-

chas have been in touch with several other communities, thus they are successful in incorporating various types of changes (p.353-355). The gradual economic transformation has contributed to changes in domestic units and religious life.

The Lepcha case is interesting, and can be linked to the issues of tribal problem in general. Despite the controversy regarding their autochthonous status (p.82-83), they are considered as the first arrivals to the present Sikkim. From the eighteenth century onwards, particularly with the opening up of the country and the ramification of communication system, they were outnumbered by the migrants from Bhutan, Nepal and Tibet, who in the course of time became firmly entrenched. Competition between the 'locals' and the 'migrants' accentuated, and as it has happened in other parts of India, the rights and land of the original settlers were usurped.

How could the interests and traditional rights of the Lepchas be protected in this state of influx of the outsiders? In the history of tribal India, the most controversial suggestion to save the tribals from being swept away by the incoming exploitative and oppressive elements has been to 'isolate' them in 'reserves' or 'parks'. Verrier Elwin's name would remain eternally linked to the policy of isolationism, he confidently espoused for the Baigas of Mandla district in Madhya Pradesh, and by extension to all the tribals, living under the ominous fear of external interventions culminating in their proletarianization (1939).

In an intellectual climate when reformist ideas championing equality of all human beings were settling down, in a political ambit charged with freedom struggle thus drawing people from all social milieus, and in an ideological realm where the thesis of assimilating the diversity of tribals into the 'mainstream', it was virtually impossible for Elwin to defend the idea of 'isolationism' or a 'tribal reserve park'. Fearing that it amounted to keeping them in human zoo, to be periodically visited by the anthropologists for the sake of their data-bank, Elwin (1953) and other

sympathisers to the idea of isolation lost no time in withdrawing their names from this policy.

None of them, however, realized that geographical isolation of a people because of difficult hilly terrains, if administratively supported (and enforced) by legal machinery, completely prohibiting the outsiders either to acquire tribal land or to usurp their local business, could yield very encouraging results. von Furer-Haimendorf's study of the Apa Tanis of Subansiri district in Arunachal Pradesh substantiates this idea: to quote from one of his recent publications:

Opponents of any special privileges for tribals, particularly of the exclusion of non-tribal settlers from tribal areas, often put forward the argument that tribals will advance only if they freely mix with other sections of the population. The experience in Arunachal Pradesh demonstrates this argument is fallacious (1982: 297).

Bhasin's study of the Lepchas makes significant contribution in this regard. Living at lower altitude, as compared to the Bhutias, the Lepchas led a trans-humant existence, of hunters and food-gatherers. To safeguard their interests, territory and rights, especially because of unmitigated migrations from the hills and beyond, the Maharaja of Sikkim "converted one of his private estates Dzongu into a Lepcha reserve" (p.84). Once their resources were protected, and they had not to compete with the migrants, they were able to develop agriculture, with shifting cultivation giving way to more "productive techniques of terracing, ploughing and irrigating the lands" (p.85).

The fact of their inhabiting the 'reserve' did not prevent them from visiting neighbouring markets, where they sold their produce to local merchants, and acquired commodities they needed the most and also did not manufacture. Market became a change-initiating institution—modern innovations were introduced in their culture. But the Lepchas exercised a great deal of selectivity; the cultural traits congruent

with their local social structural demands could find easy acceptance (p.347). Some other innovations were 'self sponsored' (p.346) like, they formed their own work-groups which built *balwaris* and schools. Collective enterprises co-existed with emphasis on individual initiative and achievement (pp. 240-264, 344). Certain institutions, like *Panchayat*, were easily accepted by them (pp.283-291, 352). In other words, they were able to lead themselves on the path of development and modernization, keeping alive with it their cultural identity and group solidarity. The idea of Lepcha 'reserve' had positive consequences—it saved them from exploitative elements, it kept their resources intact, and at the same time, it handed over to them avenues to take advantages of the developed institutions.

Ecological factors—habitational, particularly—condition the range of extracting resources from the environment, and this range affects the economic level of a society. The case studies of the Lepchas and the Bhutias brings this out clearly. Bhasin's attempt is exemplary in another way. It gives a good idea to the readers, especially to the neophytes in the discipline of cultural ecology, how a plethora of data can be suitably classified.

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