

Tribal Cultures in Bangladesh: A Sociological Study

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to highlight on three major aspects of tribal cultures in Bangladesh: (a) challenges of tribal modernism (b) contemporary research on tribal cultures in Bangladesh and (c) probable future area of research on Bangladeshi tribal cultures. The paper is based on secondary materials i.e., available published research papers, monographs, dissertations, -reports and articles on the tribal way of life of Bangladesh. Moreover, experience, observations and research background of the author got priority in the paper.

Introduction: Tribal cultures in Bangladesh deserve special attention of the anthropologists, historians, planners and policy makers for a variety of reasons. Each tribal community is famous for its cultural uniqueness and identity – what we call, the way of life, which they have nourished and inculcated from time immemorial. Despite the influence of several modern technologies of cultural change, such as movie, television, internet, dish antenna, tribal people of Bangladesh have been still able to retain their cultural identity and uniqueness although modernism has touched few tribal communities at least to some extent. There are about thirty tribal communities, who are closely associated with the larger communities of Bangladesh although only fifteen tribes i.e. *Bonjogi, Chakma, Garo, Khasi, Khyang, Khumi, Kuki, Lushai, Marma, Murung, Pankhu, Riang, Santal, Tanchangya* and *Tippera* were mentioned in the census reports of Bangladesh on linguistic ground. According to 1981 census report, there are 623216 tribal people, the distribution of which run as follows: Chittagong Hills 403728, Mymensingh 115992, Rajshahi 30 824, Sylhet 18178, Chittagong 17370, Bogra 16529, Dinajpur 11999, Rangpur 6301, Patuakhali 4885 and other districts 410. According to Professor Clarence Maloney several tribal groups of Bangladesh have lost their language and now speak in Bengali (Maloney: 1977).

Researches on tribal cultures in Bangladesh are very few compared to the researches conducted in India. For example, Troise (1976) has enlisted about 200 researches on the *Santals* in his annotated bibliography of *Santals*. However, there are as many as 30 published works on various tribes of Bangladesh, which are reviewed in this article. Besides, there are few dissertations on the tribal cultures in Bangladesh, which are not yet published. This paper is, however, devoted to identify some important area of research, which is still unrevealed or untouched by the scholars of Bangladesh.

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Challenges of Modernism in Tribal Communities

Due to modern concept of globalization, impact of cosmopolitan culture followed by new tools and technologies, ways of life of Asian people including Bangladesh are rapidly changing. And tribal communities are not immune from it. Tribal cultures are in fact subject to face several changes and of modernism and as such gradually losing their cultural identity although each tribal communities are trying to sustain their own cultures. As it has been observed by Maloney (1984) some tribal groups have already lost their own language and took up Bangla as their language. Tobarak and Sadeque (1982) also observed that the *Santals* of Rajshahi have assumed others culture over the years and under went several cultural changes. Siddiquee (1980) also mentioned that the *Oraons* are a bit modernized due to the influence of western culture.

Nature and Dimension of Contemporary Researches in Bangladesh

Other than Bangladeshi academicians and researchers some foreign scholars have attempted to spotlight on tribal cultures in Bangladesh. Claude Levi-Strauss and Clarence T. Maloney are indeed two authorities on tribal aspects of Bangladesh who worked long period of time. Levi-Strauss, who encouraged our belated interest in tribal studies. In the early fifties he did some researches on tribal cultures in Bangladesh. His work *Race and Histgory* (1952) is a theoretical classical contribution on the tribal issues. Clarence Maloney, who taught in Rajshahi University as a Visiting Professor in the seventies, is an outstanding scholar on tribal cultures in Bangladesh.

Peoples of South Asia (Malony 1960) is a monumental anthropological work, which has dealt upon some aspects of tribal cultures in Bangladesh although that is not exclusively written on the tribes of Bangladesh.

Professor Peter J. Bertocci is another foreign scholar who was particularly interested in Bangladesh village studies. But, he also spotlighted on tribal population of Bangladesh (1984: 86-87). Processor David E. Sopher is an eminent geographer whose writings on tribal cultures are noteworthy, which have been referred to by many scholars. Besides these authorities on tribal cultures in Bangladesh Professor Pierre Bessainet, Lucien Bernot, Lorenz Loeffler anal Raymond Lee Owens have contributed their thinking on the tribal aspects of Bangladesh. Owens was a Visiting Professor in Rajshahi University, who supervised some dissertations of Bangladeshi scholars on the tribes of Bangladesh.

As we have mentioned, Maloney is an outstanding contributor on South Asia; his work captioned **Tribes of Bangladesh and synthesis of Bengali culture** (1984) deserves special attention, since it is a classical writing on tribal cultures covering the aspects like number and distribution of tribal population, linguistic groups and synthesis of Bangalee culture. Maloney has traced out the origin and evolution of various tribes and their linguistic difference and criterion. He has

lumped major tribes based on linguistic characteristics and difference and classified other tribes basing upon that criterion. Under the Kuki-Chin tribes he puts *Chakma, Marma, Monipuri, Murung, Lushai, Kumi, Tanchangya, Kuki, Bam, Kheyen, Sak, Pankho, Banjogi, Shendu, and Kheyang*. In this way under Bodo Tribe, he has classified *Garo, Tipra Morung, Rieng, Hajong, Kacari, Mikir, Hadi, Pator, Dalu, Kots, Rajbanshi and Paliya*. He has at length dealt upon Munda language and peoples, Dravidian language and peoples, Indo-Arian speaking tribals and the formation of Bengali Language. He has carefully discovered the influence of Ku-Chin-languages, Bodo languages, Dravidian languages, Munda languages and Khasi language on Bangla language. He has also discovered the cultural features of the tribals which have been derived from South East Asia.

Notes on our tribal Population by A.G. Samad (1984) is a thought provoking research work. Although Samad is a Plant Scientist, but his contribution in anthropology is noteworthy. Bangla Academy has published his book captioned *Nritatta* in the early 80's. His another research work *Bangalir Nritattik Parichaya* (1977) is a classical contribution in the field of anthropology. Present work under review is a descriptive analysis of tribal population of Bangladesh. But he has precisely spot-lighted the process of acculturation of tribal peoples in this research paper.

Some Glimpses in the life of the Aboriginal People in the Early Medieval Bengal by Shahanara Hussain is a research article on the tribal people from historical perspective. She has, in her article, discovered the way of life of the aboriginal people with some pictorial figures and illustrations.

Notes on Chakma Phonology by Maniruzzaman (1984) is a notable work. Maniruzzaman is a teacher in the Department of Bengali of Chittagong University. His contribution as linguist and writer on cultural topics is praiseworthy. The article under review is based on Chakma phonology, which covered the inventory of Chakma phonemes, different vowels, voicing, stops aspirates, glottal sounds, resonant, nasals of Chakma language etc.

The Qualifying Words of Santali by Animesh Kante Pal (1984) is an outstanding contribution in the field of linguistics of *Santals*. Eminent linguist Pal is an authority on *Santal* language, who worked on this aspect for more than two decades. He is an eloquent speaker of *Santali* language. Present work under reference analyzed scientifically the qualifying words of *Santali* language, which focused on its various aspects such as (a) gender and the question of living and non-living, qualifying words, the ariable qualifiers, the possessive terminal units etc. Mention may be made in this connection that although *Santali* is spoken by two and a half million people in India and quartet of a million in Bangladesh but it could not receive much attention from the linguists of south Asia; only three grammars so far have been published by Philip, Skrifsrud and Boding.

Notes on Santali Elements in Bangla by Abi Abdullah is a classical writing on *Santal*, which has traced out santali elements in our Bangla language and literature. Although Abdullah was a bureaucrat and nevertheless he was interested in tribal studies and present work under review is the outcome of that interest. This work is scientific, analytical and above all very interesting.

Oraons Among the Bangladesh Aborigines by Budla Orao is an interesting and descriptive work on the *Oraons* of Bangladesh.

Socio-economic problems of the Santal Students studying in Rajshahi Town (1980) by M.A. Rahman is a research work, which is based on applied anthropology. Rahman conducted research in a *Santal* hostel, situated in Rajshahi town to realize two main objectives: (i) how to uplift the *Santals* of Bangladesh so as to bring them at par with the non-tribal people of Bangladesh; (ii) what type of education should be adopted for them which will help the *Santals* to solve their problems. Rahman in his study identified *Santal* students problems and recommended some measures to solve them. Moreover, he has identified some recommendations which was given by the *Santal* students. Rahman's few recommendations have been implemented by the government of Bangladesh.

Garo society in Transition by Ali Nawaz is a descriptive work. Ali Nawaz observed the *Garo* society very closely and his observations are reflected in this Writing.

The Khasias of Bangladesh: Aspects of a Peripheral Tribal Culture by Syed Mortuza Hasan is the outcome of his long field observation for his M.Phil dissertation. He has discussed several aspects of *Khasi* culture, such as language, religion, economy, law of inheritance of property, kinship structure and nomenclature, political structure etc. The paper ends with some recommendations.

Certain Observations on Chakma and Mug life in Teknaf Area by Shafiqul Islam and others, is a descriptive work on the life pattern of *Chakma* and *Mug* by six observers. This article covered various aspects such as dress, ornaments, housing pattern, food habits, occupation, marriage, divorce, sexual habits, customs related to pregnancy, inheritance of property, recreational life and disposal of dead body etc. of the two tribes under reference. This article has clearly depicted the way of life of *Chakma* and *Mug*.

Governments Participation in the Development Activities of the Tribal People in Bangladesh by Ataul Huq Pramanik is an account of the governmental work directed towards the development of the tribal people in chronological order. Huq tried to give a description of the government activities in connection with tribal development beginning from the British rule. He has evaluated the role of different governments and suggested some measures for tribal development.

Problems of Preservation of 'Tribal Culture in Bangladesh by Quamrul Ahsan Chowdhury is a thought provoking and illuminating research article based on his extensive tour in many of the tribes of Bangladesh. Chowdhury has deeply felt the necessity of preservation of tribal cultures and opined that tribes are facing the challenges of modernization' and of the so-called cultural integration.

I have reviewed important and major contemporary research works on tribal cultures in Bangladesh so far conducted by the scholars of home and abroad. There are of course some other scholarly works on tribal cultures i.e. (1) **The Cultures of Bangladesh in 'Tribal Background: As viewed from Kushtia** by Anwarul Karim (2) **The Buddhists of Patuakhali: Problems of Identity and Existence in a Marginal Culture** by Abdul Mabud Khan (3) **Santals of Rajshahi : A Study in Social and Cultural Change** by Kazi Tabarak Hossain (4) **Ethnicity and intelligence : A Cross-Cultural Study in Bangladesh** by Abdur Rahman Siddiquee (5) **Garos Multilateral Cross-Cousin Marriage : Continuity and Discontinuity in the face of Social Change** by Kibiriul Khaleque and (6) **The System of Marriage and Divorce among the Khasi tribesmen of Sylhet** by Showkat H. Khan deserve mention.

Under the Sylvian Shadows, **Aronno Jonopodey** and **Adibashi Sanaskriti** by Abdus Sattar, these three books are pregnant with thought and contained various aspects of tribal cultures in Bangladesh.

Concluding Remarks:

Researches on tribal cultures are very few in Bangladesh. Most of the researches have been done on five major tribes such as *Santals*, *Chakmas*, *Garoes*, *Oraons* and *Khasias*. But research on other tribes like *Mug*, *Monipuri* are too scanty to mention. Rest of the tribes i.e. *Tonchonga*, *Kuki*, *Lushai*, *Tipra*, *Senduz*, *Pankho*, *Bonojogi*, *Khumi*, *Hajong*, *Murong*, *Pangon* and *Rajbongshi* are untouched by the researchers of Bangladesh.

- It is therefore, suggested that researches on these minor tribes should be done by the academicians and planners, who are entrusted with the tasks of tribal development
- Tribal cultures in Bangladesh are rich and diversified in many respects. It can enrich our national culture by contributing in many ways. Similarly, tribal cultures may also be enriched by accepting the aspects of Bangalee culture. Therefore reciprocity can enrich both the cultures and thus create harmonious and sustainable relationship between the two communities.
- Extensive researches on various aspects of tribal cultures visa-versa its reciprocity with Bangalee culture may create new dimension of cultural diffusion. It is therefore a task of the anthropologists to discover the means of cultural integrity but not by affecting the identity of tribal cultures with a view to creating harmonious relationship between the tribal and non-tribal communities of Bangladesh.

- Researches on most of the tribal languages are almost nil in Bangladesh. Few researches have been done in India. Not only tribal cultures but also tribal languages are also unique. Preservation of tribal cultures and creation of alphabets of various tribal languages are of paramount importance. Grammar of each tribal language should also be written.
- It is therefore desirable that scholars should come forward to complete these tasks by their valuable research to preserve cultural identity of the tribal communities in Bangladesh. It should be noted that preservation of tribal culture is of paramount necessity but this does not mean that they will have to remain in antiquity.

Note: Articles reviewed in this paper were published in Tribal Cultures in Bangladesh, Institute of Bangladesh Studies, Rajshahi University, Bangladesh in 1984.