Primitive Style yet a Living Tradition: A Case Study of North-Eastern Region of India

Abstract

The dwellings of such tribal communities have a specific type and model. Simultaneously, there are some reasons to make that type of dwellings. The tribal people of North-Eastern regions having an occupation mainly ‘jhuming’ or shifting cultivation to provide their agricultural fields for protecting wild animals making their dwellings near by their ‘jhuming’ land.

Ajit Mookerjee, describes that “The term ‘Adivasis’ or ‘Dwellers from the beginning’ now officially used in India seems to be more appropriate for these people who are usually known as the tribals or the aboriginals. In the evolution of Indian culture, the Adivasis had never remind an isolated phenomenon and their aloofness today is due to many untoward political and social conditions”

A glimpse of the dwellings and the customary situations of North-Eastern region of India is presented below:

Dwellings: The tribal people of North-Eastern regions are living in a hilly remote area or in a forest where the bamboo, cane and wood are found in a greater quality. The wide growth of bamboo, cane and wood inspire the tribal people to make a ‘tong-ghar’ (improvised thatched house built in the branches of a tree in the midst of a paddy) and these are needed to provide a house for themselves. The ‘tong-ghar’, is also know as chang
several communities of North-East India etc. Every tribal community has an identical dwelling in their periphery so that a tribal person belonging to another community can identify the dwellings of other communities.

The dwellings of such tribal communities have a specific type and model. Simultaneously, there are some reasons to make that type of dwellings. The tribal people of North-Eastern regions having an occupation mainly ‘jhuming’ or shifting cultivation to provide their agricultural fields for protecting wild animals making their dwellings near by their ‘jhuming’ land.

They live in either hilly area or in forest. The tribal people use the bamboo or wood as a post or pillar in their houses and with the help of that pillar they construct their living dwellings.

More or less 60-70% (percent) hill people engage themselves in their main occupation as ‘jhuming’ in entire North-Eastern areas. The ‘jhuming’ or shifting cultivation has a different process to cultivate paddy. The persons who cultivate paddy or rice are called as ‘jhumias’. The ‘jhuming’ cultivation has different names in different places of India. The following table shows the variety of names in several places:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Places</th>
<th>Local names</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Arunachal Pradesh</td>
<td>1. ‘Adi – Arick’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(among the Adi’s)</td>
<td>2. Hooknismono</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Tripura</td>
<td>3. Tekonglu</td>
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<td>3. Nagaland (Ao Naga)</td>
<td>4. Kurwa or Khallu</td>
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<td>4. Santhal Pargana’s</td>
<td>5. Bewara</td>
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<td>5. Rachi</td>
<td>6. Palamau</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>or Marhan, Dippa</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Orissa</td>
<td>8. Kondapady Podu, Rema, Dahi-Kaman, Chas Bringa, Gudia, Dongar etc.</td>
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Even in case of shifting cultivation, the tribal people regularly shift their ‘jhuming’ lands after two to three times. The tribal process has a long term methodology. It is called as ‘jhuming cycle’. Firstly, the tribal peasants select the area on which they propose to cultivate the paddy and for that reason they burn the jungle or weeds. The burning weeds become a form of ash and that is more beneficial when they sow the seeds.

The implementing tools for the ‘jhum’ are almost made of bamboo and wood. Moreover, the tribal people of North-Eastern region use spade, dao, axe, etc. Same time, they use storing and measuring baskets also which are made of bamboo and cane. They create different types of baskets which are hung or kept in their dwellings like ‘baling’ (popularly
known as ‘kula’ i.e., winnowing fan) and a bigger size of storing basket which is placed in the corner of a verandha. The construction of that dwelling is made with a verandha also so that they can store their edible crops for the whole year. The dwellings of tribes have a verandha with extended roof providing space for the tribal women to weave their clothes. These kinds of baskets have no holes because the tribal women paste a layer of cowdung over the backside wall. For that reason, the insects or fungus could not destroy the storing materials or crops. Even the structure of the dwelling is maintained in a height from the ground level so that the tribal people of North-Eastern region feel secured from ferocious animals of the forest or jungle. They get relief from flood etc. also.

It has been observed that the tribal people of North-Eastern regions like Ukhrul district of Manipur, Majuli – in Jorhat district of Assam, Amarpur – a subdivision of Tripura, has a specific site for cooking purposes inside their dwellings. The platform is based on thick bamboo which is designed with some holes. The holes are made on appropriate sizes as because the washing materials could be passed away easily through these holes.

Again, the design of the fire place gets superstructure for seasoning their firewood. The tribal folk collect firewood from the jungle and in the rainy season they are unable to gather the firewood for the cooking purposes. The men folk of tribal family create a structure on the fire place and in the different seasons they collect firewood and these are kept on the structure. This is an indigenous process for seasoning the firewood. As a result, the smoke will soak the piths from the collected firewood.

In Nagaland, it has been cited that a wood carving is a tradition among their different communities. A pillar or a beam is used to show their different beliefs. They curve different designs, motifs, animals, human heads, or any natural forms, etc. ‘Mithun’ is known as ‘metho’ by Chakhesang community in Nagaland. ‘Mithun’ (Bison). After killing the ‘mithun’ they eat its flesh and use its horn for their house decoration or use it as prestigious cup to drink country liquor. Rich and handsome people mostly use this kind of object. Sometimes they use this cup as a musical instrument and also as blowing horn while they sing and dance. The head of these dead animals are used as wall decoration. So the real skull of a mithun head with the horns reflects that the head or owner of the house is a strong man and the number of heads depicts the number of killing mithuns. The heads of mithun are used as symbol in their houses, village gates. No chemical is used to protect the mithun’s head from the attack of insects. The rich people of Nagaland and Manipur also decorate their dwellings by the curving of mithun heads on wooden pillars or walls etc.
In Manipur, Nagaland and a few tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh draw the symbolic motif of Sun on their main gate or the main door of a house. Because ‘Sun’ is the ultimate source of energy and live. The people of the community of those regions want to live long and be glorious as Sun, Moon, and stars.

Again the Chakhesang community considers leopard as its elder brother. Though they kill leopard or tiger but at the same time they have a guilt feeling for killing someone whom they honour as their elder or the owner of their house. Every year they offer prayers to the leopard or tiger for not attacking them but to help them whenever they need its help. A leopard is the strongest animal and the king of the jungle. The leopard lives on the flesh of the animals in the forest. The Naga youths want to be as brave and strongest as leopard so that they have a tradition to curve a leopard on their main door in their dwellings. This concept was established after observing the Andro village of Manipur.

The tribal people of North-Eastern regions have a tradition to attach a linkage between their dwellings and the land. As because there is a communication gap in between the destination so that they fixed a wooden log in between these places. The wooden log having a shape of carvings like staircase helps to get a stepping easily. In some places it is found that the total staircase is made of thick split bamboo and the some tribal areas a few tribal communities get a construction of staircase through the pieces of local wood.

B.C. Allen describes that “The Naga house is almost invariable darkened dirty, but the style of building differs very considerably amongst the different tribes. The Angami house is faced with planks, and has a thatched roof that slopes from the ridge pole to within a few fact of the ground. The side walls are made of reeds, or thatch, or planks, as they have no windows, the interior of the building is extremely dark . . . The floor is made of earth, fowls and cattle live with the family.”

According to B. C. Allen, it was described that the floor of a house is made of earth which could be found among the Angami Naga community in Manipur. The Angami Naga may be settled in the plain area of Manipur. For this reason, they are treated as plain tribe.

References:
2. Sour Source: L.P. Vidyarthi, Art and Culture of North-East India, Chapter – V, Changing Jhum Economy, Page no – 86.

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