SOCIO-CULTURAL NETWORK AND COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MISHING AND ADI COMMUNITIES IN BORDER AREAS OF ASSAM AND ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

Borders play a fundamental role in defining state territories, shaping geopolitical dynamics, and influencing interactions between borderland communities. Anthropologists view border regions as crucial sites for exploring sociocultural processes emerging from state territorialization, local social organization, and individual agency. These areas reveal how people encounter, reinforce, and subvert political boundaries in everyday practices. Border existence fosters activities like small-scale trade, tourism, and cultural exchanges, facilitating daily interactions and symbolic identity constructions. Despite different traditions and practices separated by borders, these interactions shape ways of living and thinking. Numerous studies on India's social and cultural networks focus on single linguistic zones, neglecting cross-border socio-cultural communication. Assam and Arunachal Pradesh share an 804.10 sq. km border, presenting a unique context where the border is a site of social contact, composite cultures, and co-existence. This study examines inter-ethnic communication and cultural exchange between the Mishing and Adi communities along the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border. It investigates cross-border interactions, providing insights into socio-cultural networks that operate differently within single areas. This research aims to illuminate how these borderland communities navigate and negotiate cultural identities and social relations amidst complex border dynamics.

Keywords: Socio-Cultural Networks, Border Areas Communications, Adi-Mishing Tribes

1. INTRODUCTION

Border play a key role in defining state territories, shaping geo-political dynamics, and influencing the interaction between communities inhabiting borderland spaces (Brunet-Jailly, 2005; Newman, 2006; Paasi, 1996). Anthropologists have long recognized border regions as critical sites for investigating the socio-cultural processes that emerge from the interplay of state territorialization, local social organization, and individual agency (Alvarez, 1995; Donnan & Wilson, 1999). Borderlands provide fertile ground for exploring peoples' lived experiences of encountering, reinforcing, and subverting imposed political boundaries in their everyday practices (Sahlins, 1989). In border areas, inter-ethnic communication is a part of people's everyday lives (Fedorova, 2008). The very fact of the existence of borders inevitably provokes various types of activity like small-

scale trade, tourist services, and cultural exchange among the various communities inhabiting there (Donnan & Wilson, 1999). These activities make people communicate with each other, literally in their daily interactions and symbolically in constructing images and perception. Separated by state borders, they usually have different traditions and practices, and the collision of these differences influences in various respects, especially in habitual ways of living and thinking. Mutual attitudes on the border are shaped by many factors, although state policy typically plays a major role (Wilson & Donnan, 1998).

In the last few decades, a good number of scholars namely, Singer (1955), Lewis (1955), Bose (1956,1967), Redfield (1956), Opler (1956), Cohn and Marriott (1958), Mazumder (1958), Jay (1970), Bhowmick (1976) and others in their study have highlighted different facts of social and cultural networks of interaction in India. But none of these studies has given an idea of the nature and extent of socio-cultural communication that takes place in border areas between two neighbouring states. Almost all of these studies are limited within one linguistic zone and as such they do not reflect the nature and extent of the network of socio-cultural communication that exists among communities.

Assam and Arunachal Pradesh share about 804.10 sq. km of the border. These border areas are not just a demarcation but a set of practices and discourses rooted in the life experiences of the people. The border that exists there is not always a place of the conflict zone but rather a space of social contact, composite cultures, and co-existence (Esse, 2017).

Hence, this study focuses on examining the inter-ethnic communication practices between Mishing and Adi ethnic groups inhabiting the adjacent cross-border areas of the Arunachal Pradesh-Assam interstate border in Northeast India. In the study, the nature and extent of the network of socio-cultural communication will be seen, which operates at a different level in the given area.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Border study is relatively a new domain of interest within the realm of anthropology. It represents a field of academic concerns specific to the economic, social, and political circumstances of people living around the border, including explorations of border culture (Flynn, 1997). This discipline emerges from the tradition of social anthropology which focuses on local constructions of social and symbolic boundaries. The prime motivation behind developing this discipline was to examine how constructions of identity among people about themselves and the people on the other side effect border communities (Wilson & Donnan, 1998).

The study of border is predominantly grounded in the works of Fredrik Barth. However, the considerations for anthropology of borders as a new disciplinary specialization come up to a large extent only in the early 1990's (Wilson & Donnan, 1998; Donnan & Wilson, 1999). Following the groundbreaking research of Cole and Wolf (1974), researchers started to explore borders as a means of widening perspectives which encompasses the formal and informal ties between local communities of which they are a part of the larger politics (Wilson & Donnan, 1998). Some anthropologists have been primarily interested in cultural borders which separate and connect the different worlds of meaning and identity, others in the borders which mark out geopolitical space, and yet others in the borders which order social relations and indicate membership of community (Donnan & Wilson, 1999). The social and political boundaries that are formed by people are found to be artificial. Such demarcation is never a barrier to the relationships exist among

similar ethnic groups. Such cross-border communication reshapes the meaning and role of borders, as it decreases the significance of borders as a line of demarcation and separation. The cross-border communication helps in the development of socio-cultural cooperation amongst the people of neighbouring border areas. Therefore, in some border areas, the border culture reflects a homogenous character based on commonly shared historical and socio-cultural identity. Such phenomena in one or other forms do exist in many parts of the world including India and its north-eastern region.

Borders are zones of constant cultural negotiation. The study of the everyday lives of border communities is concurrently the study of the daily life of the state (Donnan & Wilson, 1998). Thus, understanding borders and its process helps in recognizing the state, people, and their corresponding socio-political behavioral patterns, including how people arrange and locate themselves in these extended communities (Kearney, 2004).

The Assam and Arunachal Pradesh border is an administrative interstate border dividing the two states of a single nation. It is a boundary set up by the colonial rulers that divides hills and plains. The people of Arunachal Pradesh shared a kind of bond with the Assamese society in the early days. The Assamese societies are to an extent considered to be born out of two brothers from the hills (Varrier, 1958). The people of present-day Arunachal Pradesh have always maintained relationships across borders. The border areas of these two neighbouring states are not just demarcations but a set of practices and discourses rooted in the life experiences of the people. This region is a space of social contact, composite cultures, and co-existence, thus a new site of solidarity between the people of both states (Esse, 2017).

Similarly, Lila Gogoi (1958) also stated that there is unbreakable friendship existed with the tribes that surround the boundaries of Assam along with matrimonial relations which brought about a happy and natural synthesis. According to Tayeng (2017), boundaries matter little to people inhabiting along the Assam-Arunachal border areas. It is the place where people share memories, and these memories can be identified in the form of a festival like Bihu, Ali-Aye Ligang, where cultural exchange takes place by participating in the festivals. The people who have been living along the boundary engage in individual occasions, influence cultures, and exchange amongst people.

2.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1) To know about the patterns of socio-cultural exchange between the Mishing and Adi communities in border areas of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.
2) To know about the perception of people towards Inter ethnic relationship between Mishing and Adi Communities.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes long-term, multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork as the most culturally situated, context-responsive methodology enabling the exploration of border dynamics, inter-ethnic relations, and cultural aspects from an emic standpoint. Accordingly, 12 months of fieldwork was undertaken spanning 2022-2023 across three border villages on each side of the Arunachal Pradesh-Assam boundary involving participant observation of routine activities and ritual events as

well as 40 in-depth interviews with border residents. The techniques allowed for gaining a rich, nuanced understanding of ground realities around inter-ethnic communications mechanisms, cross-border interactions during festivals, and phenomena like instances of two-way cultural borrowing in the specific social context of these borderland areas.

The qualitative interviewing employed unstructured, open-ended questions to gain borderlanders' emic views on diverse facets of the research problem; assessing impacts of the interstate divide, gauging current cross-border ties and communication channels, and probing the contemporary situation and efficacies around cultural borrowing and mutual participation in rituals. Interview transcripts were analyzed using inductive coding procedures to discern key patterns, consistencies, and variations around investigation axes. As standard anthropological ethical procedures were stringently followed, informant identities have been anonymized for confidentiality.

4. STUDY AREA

The villages selected for the study are Oiram ghat, Kemi, and Leku of Assam under Dhemaji district and the villages explored in Arunachal Pradesh are Sika Tode, Sika Bamin, and Oyan villages of East Siang District. These sites were selected purposefully due to high degrees of physical proximity and cross-border mobility linkages as well as active trade relations between their inhabitants observed over the years.

5. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This paper draws upon theoretical approaches emphasizing borders as continuously produced through performance involving multifaceted relationships between state policy regimes and everyday social practices of ordinary actors across scales (Paasi, 1996; Newman, 2006; Perera, 2019). Practices create effects of boundaries even in their breach and transgression (Sahlins, 1989). Border performativity perspectives enable appreciating the Arunachal Pradesh-Assam border not as a fixed divide but one that emerges at the intersection of legal-bureaucratic exercise of territorial powers; strategic assertions of collective identity and political claims; quotidian movements and exchanges between borderlanders; and shared histories interweaving communities across imposed statist lines.

The study also employs interpretive approaches like symbolic interactionism and performance theories to examine inter-ethnic communication dynamics and cultural exchanges along the border villages (Blumer, 1986; Bell, 1997). These view cultures, communities, and their boundaries as interactionally and symbolically produced through communicative processes of mutual role-taking, interpretation, and definitions of reality. Collectivities like ethnic groups are formed and boundary markers are continually instated and challenged through embodied, repetitive performance involving cultural displays, ritual interactions, and collective identity assertions in public arenas (Berezin, 1997; Cohen, 1985).

Such perspectives help appreciate how inter-state borders come alive and transform from cartographic markers to meaningful socio-cultural boundaries between ethnic communities through routinized communicative processes and symbolically charged performances around the border. Everyday cross-border mobility pursuits and exchanges also refashion meanings of group belonging in this liminal space. At the same time ritual interactions and collective fantasies of cultural

sharing enable the recreation of a trans-frontier social universe binding borderlanders across the imposed interstate divide.

6. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The political and administrative boundaries which separate Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have not been barriers to the communication between people living in the border areas. According to Lila Gogoi (1958), the tribes that surround the boundaries of Assam had unbreakable friendships including marital relationships which brought a happy and natural synthesis.

Adi and Mishing communities perpetuate through three broad dimensions, namely, economic, socio-cultural, and political interactions.

6.1. ECONOMIC NETWORK

Since the early days, Arunachal Pradesh had economic relations within and across the borders. There are obvious reasons for the people to make contact and trade relations. It is one of the most uncongenial places for farming due to the rugged mountains. Almost all the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh had trade relations with people of neighbouring areas within and across the border.

Economic networks have been maintained through various types of labour relationships, mutual interaction and financial help, and assistance through service of occupation, markets, and other forms of trade or business links. Moreover, the border area has a distinct border market of its own. People come across the border and visit such markets. There are weekly as well as daily markets in which people regularly visit. Some prominent border markets are Jonai Bazar and Ruksin. These marketing centers have widened the network of communications between Mishing and Adi Communities. Infact, people of both communities survive equally on these border markets.

6.2. SOCIO-CULTURAL NETWORK

Ritual exchanges and cultural borrowings constitute important windows for peering into ethnic equations, senses of similarity and difference as well as changing inter-group accommodation along border zones (Cohen, 1985).

6.3. MARRIAGES

Marriages and kingship are found to be vital dimensions in maintaining intercultural relationships between Mishing and Adi Communities. It is exciting to note that the network of marriage ties in the region are extensive and spread across other parts of the area. These practices were found not only in northeastern India but also in the northern part of India (Smith, 1995; Lewis, 1955, Cohn & Marriot, 1958; Marriot, 1959). Moreover, diverse ceremonial friendships is also being able to locate among people which are occasionally solemnized. These ceremonial friendships play a key role in social life and have made inter-community cooperation and relations easier and more lasting.

6.4. FESTIVALS

Further, the network of communication is also found to be guided by the celebration of different types of feasts and festivals. The people of both communities

visit villages lying across the border to witness or participate in the festivals and also to join in the associated fairs. The role of people in this respect are found as a spectator and participants who enjoy these festivals.

6.5. RELIGION

It is also witnessed that certain religious practices play a significant role in the establishment of such ceremonial friendship. Inter-community relationships are also maintained through observances of common types of religious and ritual practices. Collective celebrations of Donyi Polo Day popularly known as Indigenous Faith Day were seen in the border areas by both Adi and Mishing communities. Ghurye (1953) observed that there are constant movement of professional religious entertainers, preceptors, holymen, and beggars in the countryside. Such religious networks have always been key channels of cultural communication (Deming, 1953).

7. POLITICAL NETWORK

Research on political networks primarily of ties of clan and kingship among the rulers and dominant landlord groups were conducted by several authors (Opler & Singh, 1962; Marriot, 1959; Lewis, 1955). But political networks are also found to exist and operationalized through community organization of various communities which are extensive in nature.

8. INTER-COMMUNITY MEETINGS

Political networks of communication were maintained through community-based associations like Adi Baane Kebang, Mishing Baane Kebang, and Adi Mishing Baane Kebang etc. Through these organizations, the people of both communities maintain some form of political interaction. Organizations like Adi-Mishing Bane Kebang organized meetings regularly to discuss diverse issues of Adi and Mishing communities. In recent years, efforts have also been taken to revive their brother relations which are reflected in their interest in lineage-based organization (Opin Kebang) meetings which are often held regularly.

9. COMMUNICATION DURING CRISIS

Crisis also provides a unique context through which people of both Adi and Mishing communities find an occasion to strengthen their relationships. Crisis like natural and man-made disasters provide opportunities, in which the people of both communities exchange the requisite help. In any emergency situation, a new form of channel of communication emerges among the people of Adi and Mishing communities in the form of mutual support and cooperation.

9.1. FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS

1) Participants from both the Adi and Mishing tribes shared numerous instances of intermarriages, joint festival celebrations, and linguistic exchanges. These practices highlight a dynamic cultural exchange and adaptation process, fostering mutual understanding and cultural enrichment between the two communities, reflecting the profound familial bonds and shared cultural identity and respect.

2) There has been a significant exchange of linguistic elements between the two communities. Both Adi and Mishing languages have incorporated words and phrases from each other, reflecting the deep-rooted cultural connections and mutual accommodation. This linguistic borrowing serves as a testament to the friendly relations and cultural integration efforts between the communities.

3) Despite maintaining distinct identities, there is a strong sense of brotherhood and unity between the Adi and Mishing communities. Statements emphasizing the need for cooperation and forming an association to manage inter-community affairs highlight the pragmatic steps being undertaken to strengthen this unity.

4) Participants also acknowledge their shared ancestry, which is evident in their common food habits, lifestyles, languages, and kinship systems. There were beliefs among the people that the historical migration of the Mishing had not diminished the sense of their common origin and shared cultural traits with the Adi tribe.

5) The Adi and Mishing tribes have adopted an integration strategy that allow them to maintain their distinct cultural identities while simultaneously embracing elements of each other's cultures. This balanced approach of cultural integration promotes mutual respect and coexistence, enabling both tribes to enrich their cultural heritage while preserving their distinctiveness.

Thus, opinions from the public illustrate a harmonious and dynamic relationship between the Adi and Mishing tribes, characterized by cultural exchange, mutual respect, and cooperative efforts. These elements contribute to a strong sense of unity and shared identity, despite the tribes' distinct cultural backgrounds.

10. CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the economic, socio-cultural, and political networks that sustain and enhance the relationship between the Mishing and Adi communities along the Arunachal Pradesh-Assam border. Despite the region's political boundaries, these communities have maintained robust interactions through various forms of exchange and cooperation. The persistent economic interdependence is evident in the regular border markets that facilitate trade and communication. Socio-cultural ties are reinforced through intermarriages, shared festivals, linguistic exchanges, and mutual respect of culture, thus, fostering a sense of unity and brotherhood. Politically, community-based institutions and lineage-based organizations play an important role in maintaining social norms and political interactions between both communities.

The findings highlight the dynamic process of cultural communication and adaptation that characterizes the relationship between the Mishing and Adi communities. This ongoing interaction highlights the resilience of traditional networks and the abilities of both communities to navigate relationships transcending state-imposed boundaries. The study also illustrates how borders serve as a site of cultural hybridity and collective memory.

11. POLICY IMPLICATIONS
11.1. PROMOTION OF CROSS-BORDER ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

Policymakers should support and facilitate the operation of border markets such as Jonai, Ruksin, and Jhelom. Enhancing infrastructure in these areas can boost economic activities and improve livelihoods for border communities.

11.2. ENCOURAGING SOCIO-CULTURAL EXCHANGES

The state should promote festivals, rituals, and other cultural exchanges that strengthen the bonds between the Mishing and Adi communities. Cultural programs and joint celebrations can be supported through grants and logistical assistance.

11.3. STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Community institutions like Adi Baane Kebang and Mishing Baane Kebang should be recognized and supported. These organizations can act as mediators in resolving conflicts and maintaining social harmony. Formal recognition and financial support can enhance their capacity to manage cross-border issues effectively.

11.4. FACILITATING COMMUNICATION AND MOBILITY

Policies aimed at easing restrictions on movement and communication across the border should be considered. Simplifying travel permits and ensuring safe passage can encourage greater interaction and cooperation between the communities.

11.5. EDUCATIONAL AND LINGUISTIC INTEGRATION

Educational initiatives that incorporate elements from both cultures can promote linguistic and cultural integration. Schools and community centers can serve as platforms for teaching and learning each other's languages and traditions.

12. RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION

Continuous research and documentation of the evolving relationships and interactions between these communities can provide valuable insights for policy formulation. Academic institutions and research organizations should be encouraged to conduct interdisciplinary studies in this region.

By implementing these policies, the state can not only preserve the rich cultural heritage of the Mishing and Adi communities but also promote regional stability and cooperation. Ensuring that borders become points of connection rather than division can lead to more inclusive and harmonious development in the region.

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