

Enlivening Dyeing Tradition and ICH : The initiative of ARHI in North East of India

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Abstract

Non-profit organization ARHI from the North-Eastern part of India has dedicated itself to preserving the undocumented and un-archived ICHs of different small and big communities in this area for many years. These communities are on the verge of losing their identity from the hegemony of either pervading mechanization of urban life or an adjacent bigger community's dominant culture. It is apparent the isolation and the "looked-down-upon" attitude of the majority communities have even created an inner centrifugal force within the communities where the new generations have withdrawn from the existing practices of lore and norms. ARHI has been proactively engaged in different innovative ICH revival and education projects. Of special mention is the ongoing revitalization of ICH associated with the natural dyeing tradition of the Karbi tribe. This project had commenced in early 2019 before the outbreak of COVID-19 and is continuing amidst the pandemic in modified form.

Like other tribes, the Karbi tribe also has a majestic textile tradition rooted in its cultural life. Its traditional costume is indicative of its identity, livelihood patterns, and social and cultural beliefs. They are the aesthetic expressions of rich cultural traditions. The traditional dyeing system is one of indispensable component of the textile tradition. They prepare dye from different natural sources like herbs/plants, or bark, or animal products. In each stage of textile tradition, especially in case of dyeing, there are a set of rituals or songs or performances of ballads which are an indispensable part of the knowledge system. *Phelo Keplang* is one such example. *Phelo Keplang* are the folk ballads sung describing the origin of cotton and usage in their society. '*PheloKeplang*' narrates the origin of cotton and beginning of weaving in Karbi society.

As the traditional dyeing system on the verge of extinction and new generation weavers almost are ignorant of it, ARHI has intervened here in the form of a project named Revitalization of Natural dyeing system and ICHs associated with it. Under the project, a number of activities were undertaken to revitalize traditional dyeing process as well as rituals and performances associated with it. A series of workshops were being held in villages of West Karbi Anglong district of Assam. The workshops are meant for young generation of Karbi tribe where surviving community elders are providing training and demonstration of different processes of dyeing. The process of training is accompanied by relevant performances of ballads/rituals which are taught by community elders.

The project was going in conventional format from village to village in collaboration with the community before the outbreak of COVID-19. As the COVID-19 crisis grapples up the whole country is put under lockdown and other restrictions, the ongoing revitalization project has to undergo major changes in its form for its functioning after the outbreak. The crisis has brought several challenges as well as opportunities. As movement has been restricted, ICHs training are conducted through video conferences, ICH laden video messages are circulated on mobiles. Since the community is been isolated by lockdown restrictions it another way gives imperative to concentrate on their own resources.

Introduction

The interactional dynamics occurring among Cultural Life, Modes of Production and Ecology have been a perpetual in the history of human civilization. The renewed process of modes of production often mould cultural practices of people circumscribed by the ecology of the region. Contextualizing India's North East which is inhabited by diversified indigenous population, it becomes apparent that culture is an elegant lived experience here. The present-day populations of North East India have great diversity in terms of lifestyle, cultural activity, and physiological features which implies the acculturation, assimilation and diffusion of various cultures and groups of people. North East India has the evidence of intermixing of the cultural elements due to the migrations of different peoples with different cultures in different times. The entire cultural life blood of North East India from the plains of Brahmaputra valley across the Karbi, Dima Hasaonaga hills to the Dibang valley is spilled by contours of the myriad cultural expressions.

ICH of the region

The factor of ethnic heterogeneity being the core features of North Eastern society, incessant spectral flow of traditional folk cultures from time immemorial forms the bedrock of the its socio-economic life. This has been an enduring process and still developing, rather than just a memory of the past where folklore and intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is considered to be as an important source for human history.

The region is home to repository of scores of ICHs spread across which are the assets of different tribes which have historical significance in the formation of ethnic textures of the region. The folk tradition of every tribe is very strong and enriching with the presence of spectacular cultural traits and customs. Interestingly their rich repertoire of cultural heritage is largely oral.

Ethos of the communities are reflected in their traditional dresses which are woven by themselves. Traditional community medicine, traditional architecture and rich art and craft are the essential components of their substantive traditional life. Traditional festivals constitute a significant part of their culture.

ICH in decay

But under the hegemony of either pervading mechanization of urban life or religious conversion, the communities are struggling to maintain their cultural heritage as alarmingly number of practitioners of ICH are dwindling day by day. The age-old process of transmission of ICH from one generation to its succeeding generation is severely halted resulted in upbringing of a few generations who are completely ignorant of their communities rich cultural ethos and practices.

Factors of Decay

Staggering poverty and many other economic factors inhibit many other communities to develop and sustain their cultural life as it was in past. Moreover, there is no robust support system to nurture their cultural life. Another crucial factor of decay of ICH can be attributed to the unprecedented loss of indigenous language throughout the region. The condition is so alarming that not only small and marginal communities face danger of extinction of their language, even many of the languages of mainstream communities finds mention in UNESCO's endangered list of languages. Since language is the primary link to cultural ethos of their communities with every loss of language we also bear the loss of treasure of ICH.

Safeguarding ICH

The indigenous practices and heritage evolved through ages definitely form an indispensable part of worlds vanishing ICHs. There is an urgent need to have an integrative approach to safeguard the cultural heritage of the tribes using comprehensive method of documentation and scientific methods.

There should be an effort to bring the communities into one platform to sensitize about the need for safeguarding of ICH and providing young generation with the basic tools of ICH learning. The targeted section should be younger generation creating a sustained dialogue with the older generations.

Intervention by ARHI

The factors mentioned above had necessitated emergence of indigenous cultural organizations which have been engaged in revitalization of ICH practices which are in the danger of extinction. One of such likeminded organization is ARHI (ARHI means example in Assamese language) which is based in state of Assam within North Eastern part of India.

Established in 2008, ARHI is collaboration of individuals belonging to the indigenous tribe, activist working for the cultural-educational rights of native people. It is a wider platform for all indigenous communities to discuss and reflect upon challenges and problems faced by indigenous communities as well as finding the best means to address those concerns. It is a grassroots organization comprising all small & big indigenous communities.

Vision and Mission:

Being an indigenous led organization, the prime objective is to overall development of the indigenous people and their cultures. The crisis of cultural identity, revitalization of indigenous language and literature and other socio-economic problem are the core areas of its operation. ARHI forms a wing called Folk Culture Research Centre of North East India to specifically address safeguarding of ICH of Indigenous people.

FCRC has dedicated its members from the North-Eastern part of India persevering to preserve the undocumented and un-archived cultures of different small and big communities settled in this virgin land. In all the researches done by the Centre, it was very encouraging to witness the un-polluted cultural symbols of life-style, songs, rituals etc.

ARHI has therefore, to be an archival testimony to such diverse culture through video and audio documentation. In addition to it, thoroughly researched publication work has been carried on by the Centre covering their ethnic culture, language and literature. The Centre's aim is to "bring into the mind of people a comparative and integrated cultural consciousness and establish a solid foundation for an actual cosmopolitan society" (part "d" of Preamble, ARHI of North-East of India)

FCRC has audio documented different songs and hymns of the different communities of the tribes of the North Eastern States of India.

Highlights of ARHI's work

Work Profile:

1. Organizing workshops

ARHI successfully holds workshops dwelling on specific themes of Indigenous culture or pertaining to particular locations. After careful research and meticulous fact gathering, artistic and multimedia materials are used to convey the uniqueness of local culture through words and images in the workshops. Notable workshop is held on traditional songs of Tai-phake tribe, Karbi and Tiwa Tribe.

2. Establishing a research and online resource centre

ARHI believes that academic research and field work constitute the basic groundwork, which is as important as the promotion and continuance of indigenous arts and culture.

Therefore, ARHI turns the fruits of research into virtual exhibitions uploaded to its web pages, so that the public, the artists, the cultural workers, as well as the younger generation, may have more opportunity to get in touch with local community culture.

An online resource centre can provide ideal teaching materials for general education courses in understanding community history and culture which in the long run will be a significant tool in preserving the legacy of indigenous culture.

3. Holding seminars and meetings

ARHI invites scholars and researchers periodically to speak on local culture academic topics and guides cultural tours as community events, leading the public back into the roots of the community so that they may discover the essence of their own community culture. They can gain experience, knowledge, understanding and appreciation of their own local culture and can elevate their awareness to recognize that one's own local culture requires to be conserved.

4. Promoting indigenous culture and arts through education

To let the public and our youth develop a deeper understanding of local culture and to place a higher importance on its conservation ARHI strengthens its ties with local educational bodies by providing text and graphics related to community culture, running culture seminars and community workshops, aiding different organizations to plan general education syllabus, producing a series of teaching materials and furthering the union of local arts and culture to youth education so as to allow local culture the room for healthy growth.

5. Publishing of books

ARHI has published numerous collections of its research and documentation works on diverse tribes of North East India. Books on tribes of Tai-phake, Singpho and Tiwa, Karbi, Tangsha, Tai-Khamti, traditional medicines of North Eastern tribes and collection of folk tales in Patkai range are published.

6. Indigenous Language Revitalization Programme

ARHI is running a number of language revitalization programme in order to revitalize extinct indigenous languages which are in the list of UNESCO's endangered list. Recent such programme is on Tiwa language revitalization programme.

Ongoing Project Before Corona

In 2019 before the outbreak of COVID-19, ARHI is primarily engaged in revitalization of Traditional Dyeing system of tribes living in West Karbi Anglong District of Assam. The tribes selected are Karbi and Tiwa. However initially focus is put on dyeing system of Karbi tribe and ICHs associated with the traditional system. The project is named as *In the quest of Lost Colors: Revitalization of natural Dyeing Tradition of Karbi Tribe*

About Karbi Tribe

The Karbis (Karbi:) mentioned as the Mikir in the Constitution Order of the Government of India are one of the major indigenous ethnic tribe in Northeast India and especially in the hill areas of Assam. The great artist-scholar Bishnu Prasad Rabha refer to them as the Columbus of Assam. They prefer to call themselves Karbi and sometimes Arleng (literally "man" in the Karbi language).

The Karbis are the principal indigenous tribal community in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, a district administered as per the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, having an autonomous district of their own since 17 November 1951.

The Karbis linguistically belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. The original home of the various people speaking Tibeto-Burman languages was in western China near the Yang-Tee-Kiang and the Howang-ho rivers and from these places they went down the courses of the Brahmaputra, the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy and entered India and Burma. (Source: Wikipedia)

A LOOK INTO TEXTILE TRADITION OF KARBI

Handloom and textile is another major craft industry of the Karbis. The handloom weaving as a folk-art having age old feature forms an integral part of the culture and tradition of the Karbis. The traditional hand-woven products of them are widely known for their glorious heritage, artistry and time workmanship with its beauty as well as simplicity. These products unfold the skill and creativity of the indigenous weavers.

Every Karbi women has their own traditional fly shuttle wooden looms known as *pe-therang* installed in the enclosed veranda outside the house and they practice the rearing of silk worm from the cocoons and have the art of spinning cotton too. Karbi women still use '*takiri*' a hand spindle to spin yarn.

With this traditional loom the weavers till today make various intricate designs inspired by nature, birds, fishes, flowers, trees. One notable aspect of Karbi traditional attire is that the different designs and colours of the clothes are meant for particular age, sex and social status of the people using them.

Traditional Dyeing System

Traditional dyeing system is one of indispensable component of their vibrant textile tradition. Dyeing is a creative and lucrative art nurtured and patronized through centuries. Use of myriad colours in handloom products is a unique feature of the textile tradition of Karbis. The tribe have very rich tradition of scientific knowledge of natural colour extraction from plants to dye threads which is very much eco-friendly.

The dyeing process is a comprehensive one involving different processes from plant identification to different method of dye preparation. They prepare dye from different natural sources like herbs/plants or bark or animal products. Traditionally the Karbis used three colors, i.e. white, indigo black (dark bluish black), and red. The Karbis most popular dye was indigo obtained from the leave called Sibu (indigo plant leaves).

The yarns were dyed by the Karbi weavers, the women folk with the indigenous dye till the recent past. But at present the art of dyeing is on the verge of disappearance. Due to the availability of factory-made dyed threads in the market an easy tendency has been marked among the present day's weavers to skip the trouble of preparing the dye stuff. It is apprehended that the villages may be the last generation who can identify these substances and know how to prepare the indigenous dye.

Urgent Need for Preservation

One of the fast disappearing knowledge system is natural dyeing system which is an integral part of Karbi Textile Tradition. Unfortunately, due to availability of cheap machine-made cloths and non-existence of support system, only a few elder weavers are left who are expert in dyeing techniques. The new generations of weavers are completely ignorant of the dyeing tradition.

Though the community has repeatedly appeal to Governmental agencies to meet their demands, nothing substantial has been done so far from Government.

ICHs also under Threat

Its traditional costume is indicative of its identity, livelihood patterns and social and cultural beliefs. They are the aesthetic expressions of the rich cultural traditions. The entire dyeing process is intertwined with the observance of a number of myriad cultural expressions such as ritual, hymn or ballads which are in largely oral form. There are numerous ballads associated with the natural dyeing process.

As the whole dyeing process is about to be extinct apparently the ICH associated with it are also dyeing its natural death.

Project Design for Revitalization:

The project will be conducted in four phases: 1. Mobilization & Orientation 2. Documentation 3. Workshops. 4. Assessment

The initial phase of Mobilization & Orientation involves awareness generation among community to preserve the extinct dyeing tradition and briefing them about the ensuing project. In the next phase comprehensive documentation of the dyeing process along with recording of ICH was done. The selection of plants and their dyeing properties, colour extraction process, and coloring of thread, recordings of songs was conducted audio visually. After that all documentation finding is published in a booklet with photographs demonstrating entire process as well as photographs of the plants. A series of workshop was conducted to train young weavers the art of dyeing by the elder weavers who possess the knowledge. Finally at the end of the project community representative will assess the desired impact of the project.

Overview of ICH of Karbi Tribe

The Karbi folksongs are the result of accumulated imagination and aesthetic sense of the community. With its words and images drawn from folk stories tuned with natural environment the folksongs project the Karbi folklife with its regional character. These songs take the listeners to the local world, local names of places, characters, rivers, birds and animals, hills, gods and goddesses, relations and known characters, local material items, local dressing, dish, habits and practices, in fact local physical, socio-cultural, economic, political and aesthetic environment. In spite of regional differences what is common to the folksongs of the community is its involvement with nature, uniformity in man-nature relationship, attitude towards tradition and culture, their psychology and sustenance of their traditional values.

Folk Songs associated with Textile Tradition

Songs of Creation:

The creation tales narrated in the creation songs recount how the world was formed, how the things came to be, for contained within creation stories are relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist. In Karbi folk society the creation songs are known as '*Keplang*' or '*Keplank*'. The Karbi origin narratives are

linked, complementing and supplementing each other and the Karbi worldview is constructed around these origin narratives.

Karbi Keplang

The Karbi *Keplang* narrating the origin of the Karbis trace their origin to the 'Naval of Earth' (Longle a-chete) through the 'white mountains' (long-le kelokabui) and the land of the Burmese (Barmipiakengri/Barmipoakengri) to the present habitat. According to the myth a mythical bird *Plakvutpi* lays thousands of eggs and different communities are born from different eggs and so the Karbis.

Keplang or Creation Songs:

The realm of Karbi creation songs dealing with the origin of right from the creator to the various objects of nature used in their daily life construct the Karbi worldview. The '*Hemphukeplang*' teaches the folk how to live together in peace with certain rules, codes, ideals and try to inculcate in them certain values such as the purification of body, mind and soul, keeping purity in whole life, nobility, humble and amiable nature giving up of ill temper, self-dependence, healthy competitive spirit, obedience, good dealing and self-confidence.

The songs like '*Bong Keplang*', '*Thap Keplang*', '*Sok Keplang*', '*Phelo Keplang*' etc. are integrated with the values like acknowledgement of contribution respect to the ancestors and tradition.

Phelo Keplang or Songs of origin of cotton:

Phelo Keplang are the folk songs sung describing the origin of cotton and usage in their society. *Phelo Keplang* narrates the origin of cotton and beginning of weaving in Karbi folk society. The origin of '*phelo*' or cotton is related to the origin of weaving and production of materials from cotton years.

Phelo Keplang narrates a story of origin of cotton through its three part. According to the story, one orphan boy went for fishing in *Ake Pu* (Traditional Fishing Festival). Though nobody could catch a single fish in the community fishing festival, the boy could able to catch a special fish which was very big in size. Once he cut the stomach of the fish for cooking, he found lot of seeds inside the stomach.

He was wondered by finding so much of seeds since he did not know use of the seeds. Then *Hemphu* (God) appeared in his dream and asked him to plant different seeds explaining their usage. Cotton seeds were one of them. Interestingly cotton was not known to them before that. He sowed cotton seeds according to instructions given by God. In the course of time cotton tree had grown with full bloom of cotton production. Again he asked God what to do with the cotton blossoms. God asked him to use it for extracting threads from cotton. Accordingly, he explained methods to prepare cloths from the threads.

Covid outbreak and its impacts

As India is under the grip of COVID-19, the North Eastern region has also witnessed registering of new cases day by day. Apart from surge in big cities and metros the exponential growth of

COVID-19 cases in small towns and villages of the region proves that virus has transmitted into community level.

The crisis has a much deeper and more widespread impact on Indigenous population of the state who are always at the receiving end of health care system. Indigenous people generally have repository of ICH which practice has been severely affected by the outbreak of the epidemic.

Impacts:

As countrywide lockdown is imposed restricting movement of people and closing down indefinitely all key institutions which facilitates practice and exchange of ICH, it is undeniable fact that ICH in any form is highly impacted by the crisis. The preservation efforts by different agencies whether by private or government is equally impacted by it. The most severe blow was received by ICH practitioners like folk singer, craftsman, weaver, folk musician as their access to livelihoods restricted without having any income for last six months. Most of such ICH practitioners have compelled to do other petty jobs abandoning their practice for the sake of survival which is another crucial threat to ICH.

Challenges vs Opportunities

The outbreak has undoubtedly brought crucial challenges to communities and organizations which are directly or indirectly associated with ICH. It brought immeasurable hardships to ICH practitioners in terms of survival.

The Indigenous communities face hardships in terms of survival especially women folks.

Economic Impacts:

Indigenous communities are badly affected economically since access to livelihood due to lockdown imposed by Government. A number of indigenous populations are daily wage earners whose daily income earning is severely affected due to restriction in movement. Due to economic slowdown of the country, many an indigenous youngster who are engaged in petty jobs in small towns may face loss of jobs. There are already thousands of youngsters who have come back to their native place from metropolitan cities on the fear of getting infected by Covid19. Hence economic impacts of Covid19 have hit hard the indigenous communities.

As mentioned almost all the door for ICH practitioners are getting closed down and public performance of ICH are highly limited, it has brought several challenges as well as opportunities to state of ICHs in state like Assam.

Challenges are abound and manifold however opportunities for ICH are scarce. However, such adverse condition too gives rise to a few opportunities for ICH. Ironically lockdown for COVID-19 has produced such congenial atmosphere for mainstreamed indigenous communities to preserve their ICH isolating them rest of the world. More importantly it is become pertinent for indigenous communities to preserve some of valuable ICH in the context of developing immunity derived from traditional medicine. Indigenous communities have been practicing traditional medicine since time immemorial which provides the communities immunity from many known & unknown diseases and ailments. Interestingly a number of ICHs which are about

to become extinct contain such valuable traditional knowledge of medicine. Strikingly the pandemic has brought to the fore the reimagining of relationship between nature and mankind.

It is in this critical juncture every organization working in the field of safeguarding of ICH are compelled to remodel their project activities to suit the changing realities. Our organization ARHI is no exception. ARHI also has brought about several changes in its approach, work methodology and its focus.

1. Usage of Web tools and Social Media:

Project activities are increasingly shifted to online platforms so that COVID protocols can be observed. Wider usage of social media has begun to reach more people in less time at minimum of expenditure.

ARHI's Facebook page has live streamed ICH performances which attract large number of community members sitting at home. Online ICH training and workshop have become possible with the aid of goggle meet and zoom meetings.

2. Digital Empowerment:

Empowering communities with digital education and expert in usage of digital tools have become need of the hour as online platforms require communities to be technically sound. ARHI has engaged its community representatives to train people on usage of smart phone and other electronic devices.

3. Indigenous Youth as Torch Bearers:

We employ indigenous youth as torch bearers of our new strategy of preserving ICH of their communities. As they are already expert in digital technologies, they are to mobilize and train other member of their communities' digital knowhow.

4. Development of IEC materials

Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials are produced in large number containing messages of ICH education. They are shared among communities in greater numbers through messenger service such WhatsApp/ Facebook Messenger etc.

5. Alternative Livelihood to ICH practitioners

ARHI has integrated ICH practitioners especially women creating alternative livelihood opportunities by providing them work of handmade mask making. The handmade masks are now in high demand since Indian Government has made it compulsory to wear mask in public. The traditional designs and motifs are integrated in handmade masks.

6. Integration of ICH education in online school classes

As schools start holding online classes due to lockdown, ARHI has incorporated ICH training especially singing of *Phelo Keplang* in their external activity classes in some schools.

This has greatly helped providing training to large number of students which was impossible earlier.

Finally, the implications for safeguarding of ICH before and after Corona are very significant. It has brought out many fundamental questions into fore. In the course of our working with *Phelo Keplang* (Folk Song of origin of Cotton), the current situation has compelled to revitalize '*Lo Keplang*' which are in tune with ecological wisdom referring to the understanding of the importance of bio-diversity and interrelations or interdependence among the living beings on earth for survival. In totality the creation songs of the Karbis narrating the origin of various objects of nature are characterized with eco centrism, sound understanding of the human dependency on nature and environmental ethics like human accountability to environment hold high relevance in present day context. The traditional values ingrained in the songs can reorient the younger generation towards a better understanding of their own land and its objects and survival of their indigenous non-human physical environment and healthy human nature.

The COVID-19 situation has posed severe challenges to working of organizations as well as generated immense possibilities. As indigenous led organization ARHI's responsibilities to safeguard ICH become manifold. The new normal has necessitated redesigning of conventional methods and approaches. A host of activities are planned which are very much interactive and effective for the current situation. The role played by ARHI in safeguarding of ICH in such difficult time among indigenous population of the region is crucial. ICH education for the first time has been integrated into school education which is completely in digital format. The digital revolution among communities brought out by ARHI is another milestone for engagement of community in safeguarding of ICH. Of particular mention is the mobilizing indigenous youth as torch bearer for promotion of ICH. The positive changes brought out by ARHI will be stepping stone for the communities in the realm of ICH.

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