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RESEARCH ARTICLE

AN INSIGHT INTO ECOLOGICAL CULTURE OF THE A'CHIKS INDIGENOUS TRIBE OF MEGHALAYA: A STUDY

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Abstract

Mankind is often placed in a privileged and glorified position among all the creatures, while the nature is often given the least importance on earth. A sense of Protagoras concept, an ancient Greek philosopher states that "Man is the measure of all things," setting the tone of human chauvinist perception (cited in B.L.Mawlong & M.B.Mitri, 2015). But it is an indisputable fact that one cannot imagine the survival of humankind outside of the natural environment. However, the beauty, integrity and fairness of nature consist in the cultural practices and behavior of a community having more intelligent relationship with the natural world. In discussing the problems and causes of our environmental crisis, modernization and globalization to be the reason and the big threat for all the creatures and sustainability of all species of earth. The traditional indigenous knowledge of ecological practices and behaviors of the community towards natural environment are generally based on beauty, fairness and integrity and optimum balanced utilization of available nature and other natural resources. Majority of the ethnic tribal community inhabits the northeast part of India and the A'chiks is one of them. The inhabitants of the A'chiks could be found in different states of India such as Meghalaya, Assam, Koch Bihar, Nagaland, and Tripura but the major portion of the total A'chiks population inhabits in northeast region of Garo Hills of Meghalaya. The ecological culture of the A'chiks with nature is always symbiotic and intimate. The activities of humans triggered by changing ecological practices and behavior owing to the globalization, the influence of modern culture, intermingling and cultural hegemony, most of the tribal ecological cultures are in the way of extinction. For maintaining stability and integrity of all species of earth, ecological practices and behavior is essential and without ecological culture the sustainability of ecology would be impossible. The A'chiks ecological culture, their eco-friendly attitudes and behavior is significantly valuable for the ecological development in the context of ecological aggravation and more importantly it can be brought to a practical life with the ecological cultural practices and behavior in the world of today.

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Introduction:-

Natural environment is the essential element that determines the existence of humans and which at the same time is shaped by the human characteristics and activities. The means of balance, beauty and integrity of all species of earth is seen only when there is a good relationship between human beings with these creatures. The result of this interaction is the cultural landscape as part of ecological culture. Its two components – nature and culture – work together and lead to unique features. One generation adds new transformations to another generation, producing changes in the balance of natural resources. Hence, ecological culture is the set of knowledge, attitudes, practices, norms and idealism that guide us to interact with the natural environment. Culture can be defined as one of the assets in relation to protection and preservation of the ecological system of nature. On the other hand, ecological culture is a set of cumulative bodies of knowledge, practice, and belief that evolves adaptive processes and is handed down through generation by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings with one another and with their environment. It is a traditional ecological knowledge generally defined as local knowledge held by indigenous tribes unique to a given culture or society. The beauty and perfection of balance of nature is seen through culture. The tribal communities characteristically meet a substantial proportion of their resources requirements from a relatively ecological cultural system of practices and beliefs. Saraswati (1991) states that the tribal community cultures are still in perfect harmony with and spiritually attuned to nature. The cultural practices, behavior, folklores and cosmologies of most of these indigenous societies maintain a conservationist ethos in order to sustain their natural resource base. In fact, the tribal cultural practices, beliefs and behavior are intrinsically nature-centric.

Therefore, the northeastern part of India, a nested home to the tribal communities and other ethnic groups, finds nature within the mode of their very existence. The very rich biodiversity of natural resources of the northeast not only breathes life into the literary troops, but also celebrates the state of interconnectedness between each and every life form in the environment. But in the pace of modern culture, there comes cross culture, cultural suicide, culture mixing, and the ecological culture of the tribes that do not favour familiarity with nature. The tribal ecological culture which established the intimate relationship between man and nature that once existed has disappeared. The ethnic tribes tend to imitate the modern culture without thinking its effects brings with them the consumerist attitude, behavior and restricts them to have ecological cultural practices and beliefs with the natural environment. This understanding and knowledge may be due to the fact that man starts to realize that everything else is made for the purpose of humans to be used and above all is the owner of all the creatures. Such a conception leads to the cross culture, culture suicide where the indigenous traditional ecological culture has been manipulated fully to satisfy human greed, without having any accountability towards nature. Such a sense of conception, such a sense of domination over nature has generated a loss of indigenous ecological culture in which we and everyone need to distinguish right behavior from wrong and also we need to rethink what is worthwhile in life.

Ecological Culture:

In Meghalaya, the Khasis, A'chiks, and Jaintias constitute the major original inhabitants of the state of Meghalaya. The A'chiks are also one of the major tribal communities of Meghalaya. Until the arrival of Christian missionaries, the A'chiks were a tribe strongly rooted in their tradition and culture. The culture of the A'chiks is based on oral tradition handed down their beliefs and practices orally from one generation to the next. The A'chiks like any other ethnic tribe of the Northeast India, possessed eco-consciousness and concern that which express their social and ecological life world. The traditions and culture of the A'chiks has been their myriad of their ecological life world view. In the context of A'chiks ecological culture, beliefs, practices, knowledge of ecology reflect the values of people and their cultural environment; which gives a world view, a means of understanding the world. Most of these cultural practices of the A'chiks emerged with the environment and reflects a sound eco-consciousness. So, the A'chiks tribal orientation to ecological ethos cannot be understood without first understanding their tradition and culture. In this way tradition and culture has an important role to play in determining human ecological action and attitude towards nature and also in determining human-nature relationship. Sujata Miri (2001), referring to the tribal views that according to most tribal tradition and culture, man, animals, nature, the earth, the sun and the moon belong to a continuum and form a natural-if-cosmic-moral community which they must all sustain. Similarly, such kind of insights can be extracted even from the worldview of A'chiks ecological culture.

Ecological concern and consciousness:

The A'chiks indigenous knowledge through culture and tradition is said to be the cultural property which can be describe as characterizing a community's or group of living, thinking, concern and consciousness connected with nature. The ecological cultures of the A'chiks is the ecological consciousness and concern in which they follow in

their day to day live since the immemorial time that helps to grow their ecological culture. The A'chiks indigenous ecological consciousness was that of building techniques and house pattern which are directly connected with nature and climatic condition. These ideas and practices reflected the concern to how the eco-consciousness plays a vital role in the understanding of ecology and its linkage with social welfare. Hence, the study of A'chiks traditional ecological culture would be incomplete without a description of their traditional eco-cultural house, for the entire traditional socio-cultural life of the A'chiks represented by the traditional indigenous house pattern.



Plate-1:- Nokkra or Front House pattern and location of A'chik indigenous tribes.



Plate-2:- Nokgil/dongrama or balcony of A'chik indigenous house.

The A'chiks houses were built using natural materials like timbers, bamboo, cane and thatches etc. Llewellyn R Marak (1995) in the book "Hill Societies" mentioned that the most impressive objects manufactured by the A'chiks are unquestionably their houses. The house where they live together is called main house or nokmong. The house is built in such a way that for building house, they use giant bamboo, bamboo leaves as well as thatching leaves for roofing and the walls are made of the same matting having the provision for all the activities inside the house.

Thatching grass is mostly preferred for roofing in which a small bunch of thatching grass is erected at the end of roofing signifying to protect from the causer of thunder and lightning. It is known that bamboo and thatching is a life supporting gift of nature in the lives of the human beings. On the other hand, the main house is often built according to the direction of the sun, hence, the nokkra or the front of house in the west and the nokkgil/dongrama or back verandah or balcony to the east. It is believed that the building of house never be done at the fallow land as it is believed to be the way of wind to pass through. The A'chiks traditionally holds nature in great reverence that established a cooperative spirit and survival with no interference with other creatures. In fact such is the way of looking at nature which cannot be termed exploitation of nature but more appropriately a way being sustained by nature.

The A'chiks indigenous tribe still possesses valuable ecological wisdom and remains the guardian of their own habitats, offering a refuge for rare and endangered species and an undamaged ecosystem. In the same manner, another indigenous culture of the A'chiks is the Nokpante or the bachelor house, for the young unmarried youth are not allowed to live with their parents in the ancient time. It was built in such a way that the main posts of the larger nokpante are sometimes carved and coloured. The subjects of the ornamentation are human beings, tigers and other animals, and various kinds of fruits and vegetables (Playfair A. 1909). An art of dove is also seen to have carved at the horizon wooden post of the house. These attached ornamented animals are not just an art of ornamentation of animals but a significant symbolic meaning and an ecological concern behind all of this. As the curved dove represents peace, it symbolizes innocence, gentleness, tenderness, and peace. So, the ecological concern needs to advocate the personality of peace, gentleness, or tenderness in life. This ornamentation has the reason to bind human beings morality to have eco-friendly relationships with animals and other beings. As in the case of Nokmong or main house, the life and culture of the A'chiks revolves through the ecological cultural practices and behaviour connected with nature.

In another version of the A'chiks ecological consciousness is the location or site chosen for the village to inhabit and construct the houses. The A'chiks like other hill tribes construct their houses in valleys or in depressions on the hillside, close to running water. They attach great importance to pure water, and it is quite the exception for them to live at any distance from a good distance (Playfair A.1909). The sites chosen for the houses are often found at the steep and at the flat ground the villages are mostly found. It is important to note that the entrances of their villages are to be covered with plantation of groves of jack trees and other fruits plants that form an important article of food, and it is the custom to plant the trees as soon as a village is founded.



Plate-3:- Traditionally wrapping of vegetables and food in banana and other tree leaves.

The indigenous A'chiks tribe is said to have traditional indigenous food habits connected to ecological culture. Generally, the A'chiks staple food is, of course, rice, in addition to which they are also fond of eating millet, maize and other food items. There is nothing remarkable in the manner of their cooking, they simply boiled the food. The A'chiks use ordinary earthen pots for cooking purposes and also pieces of bamboo about a foot or two in length are

cut and filled it with water to boil rice as a cooking pot. The medium of cooking curries is the soda-water or kalchi which is made by them from the burnt ashes of dried plants like bamboo, mustered plants, cotton plants, banyan tree etc. Wrapping and taking of food, vegetables in banana and other tree leaves is one of the most common practices of the A'chiks indigenous tribe is the choices of keeping cooked food and other food items that reflects eco-friendly attitudes and consciousness of the human beings.



Plate-4:- A gourd that is used to give water or store water by the A'chik tribes.

It is useful to come with the life of a culture in the behavior and practices of the A'chiks to witness the traditional use of gourd as water storage. Traditionally a gourd was used to give as well as store water by the A'chik indigenous tribe in the ancient days. This life culture extends ecological consciousnesses of the A'chiks in view of environmental threat to the human beings which access adaptive eco-friendly response of the tribe to the inner life of that culture.

Thus, the A'chiks traditional indigenous knowledge of ecology is not mere tradition but a set of adaptive response that have evolved over time for the ecological survival as well as augmenting biodiversity.

Ecological awareness:

As the A'chiks, the inhabitants of the indigenous hill tribe of the state of Meghalaya, the livelihood of the people is essentially agriculture. Playfair A (1909) mentions in the book "The Garos", that cultivating the soil is with him the beginning and the end of his life's work, and the occupation to which he devotes all the energy he possesses. The study of A'chiks culture is incomplete without a description of jhum-cultivation, for the entire socio-cultural life of the A'chiks is reflected in the jhum-cultivation. In other words, jhuming is one of the most important sources of all walks of life of the indigenous traditional A'chiks tribe. As the life and culture of the A'chiks revolve through jhuming, most of the ecological awareness and consciousness find their outlets in different activities connected with nature. Several A'chiks indigenous traditional agricultural practices reflect an ecological awareness and consciousness.



Plate-5:- Patch of land chosen for Jhuming.

For instance, ‘a’a o’pata’ is the first invocational work culture during the agricultural cycle. According to Lucy Marak (2015) in her book, “Myth and Archetypes of Garo (A’chiks) Folk Narrative”, says that the patch of land chosen for jhuming may be the habitation of a malignant deity, known as Abet Rora Raka Ganda. So, on cutting the first plants for clearing, he do the invocational work which the indigenous A’chiks believe that if the malignant spirit is in favour of jhuming, they sets for work, but if the malignant spirit does not, they abandon the spot and search for another in which the good or bad results comes in the form of dream. Perhaps because of this, it is a custom for the A’chiks to ask for favour of the deity whenever they set for jhum-cultivation in the agricultural cycle. In yet another ecological awareness and consciousness of the A’chiks agricultural practices is the jhum land where cultivation takes place for two consecutive years in which crops are grown like rice, maize and millets and other crops in the second year. Then the land is abandoned and allowed to lie fallow for at least 12-15 years. Hence, it is said that nobody would touch the abandoned land till it attains 12-15 years. So, the land and forest are not easily used and destroyed as they wish, they abide by a strong ecological law of nature which ultimately signifies the ecological awareness as well as consciousness of the A’chiks. Another ecological awareness of the A’chiks is that when different items of food like rice, millet, maize etc, are at the growing stage, it is said that birds, wild animals and other insects may destroy the field. So, in order to save the field from destruction these animals are not mentioned according to their common names but reference to them is made under certain terms. The A’chiks indigenous tribe believed that if the common names were pronounced, these creatures would come to the jhum field and destroy the crops. There is an ecological respect between human beings and wild animals. The wild animals are not mentioned according to their common names, as it is believed that if the common names are pronounced, the humans are vulnerable to these animals or these creatures will come and attack the man. Thus, an elephant which is usually known as mongma is termed as dal’gipa (the great one), Atchu Ambi (grandpa grandma), Ki’me chapangpilgipa (one carrying tail on both sides), wena kon’a (wanderer). Similarly, a tiger which is commonly known as matcha is termed as miksugija (face not washed). It is taboo to mention them with common names. It is prohibited with strict warning that unnatural things may happen to ones who break this ecological respect like mentioning them with their common names. If we examine this closely from the modern point of view, it is perhaps a way to maintain ecological balance and sustenance that species will continue to live. Thus, man desires, above all, to live in harmony and peace with other creatures, for he is along with his cultural settings, be his thought, concern, awareness and language- a part of nature.

Present Scenario:

The indigenous A’chik tribes lived in harmony with their environment as a result of their ecological cultural outlook. However, the impact of western culture and its associated aspects of modernity have greatly changed the face of A’chiks traditional ecological contents. It significantly includes human culture within nature on the unprecedented degradation of the environment under the forces of development strategies that need to look back and examine how

different forms of ecological culture relate to biodiversity. It is significant to note that the indigenous building techniques and house pattern of the A'chik tribes which has a direct contact with nature and environment are now being replaced by modern building pattern and techniques. It is no longer according to the traditional ecological house pattern and techniques in the world of today. This modern way and pattern of building of the houses brought significant changes in the ecological system in Meghalaya region. Wrapping and taking of food and vegetables is one of the most common ecological cultural practices of A'chiks is now drastically changed and replaced by aluminum foil and other non-biodegradable objects which can cause impact and a threat to environment as well as human beings. It is due to the fact that there is migration and cultural contact with modernized and globalized earth that people have lost their ecological cultural practices and concern towards nature. Nature is not looked upon with reverence, but as a mere resource to be manipulated and exploited for personal benefits. Thus it becomes imperative to understand the manner in which we human beings are despoiling our natural environment and the impact that we have brought in this planet. However, awareness for environmental damage and the need of more ecological behavior and consciousness are now established through different ways.



Plate-6:- Showing Nokrek Biosphere-Reserve.



Plate-7:- Showing Balpakram National Park.

Some of the significant environmental movements in Garo Hills are Nokrek Biophere-Reserve and Balpakram National Park of the Garo hills of Meghalaya, which made them to protect and preserve the natural ecosystem of the

environment. These bio-reserves movement were made with a focus of attention to protect and preserve the ecosystem of the nature in this modernization and globalization climate changes and environmental degradation.



Plate-8:- Fish sanctuary at Rombagre village, West Garo Hills, Meghalaya.

In fact, there are communities' reserve forest and also fish sanctuary which vividly portray the concern for natural environment. This forest reserve and the sanctuary is an attempt to extend the ecosystem restoration with the kind of concept to reaffirm and retrace the ecological principle for the sustainability of the natural resources as a whole. This movement has made for protection and rehabilitation of natural ecosystems in accordance with the mindset of taking into account that nature is the only way to survival of humans in the world of today.



Plate-9:- Showing local NGOs participation in protection and preservation of environment.

Similarly, the local voluntary organization or the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) is also seen taking active participation in the protection and preservation of the natural ecosystem. As such, one of the recent organizations has been established by the A'chik local people of Garo Hills state of Meghalaya in 2019, known as "A'chik Association for the Protection of Environment" with the motto of 'save the environment, save the earth'. The intention of the group profoundly is seen to retain the traditional ecological practices for the environmental sustainability and ecological stability and also to reconsider their perception of nature in terms of their interconnectedness of all life forms in the environment.

In view of the fact that commitment to preservation of the ecological diversity demands unequivocal respect for the ecological culture. In other words, in this modern and technology based world as well as in the pace of massive increase in population, nothing seems to be possible so to change and go back to traditional ecological culture. But, seeing the fact that we also have to bear in mind that the environmental crisis that we are facing today in the twenty-first century is very different, it is very much fatal. It is important to rethink and revive our lost moral sense of interconnectedness with the traditional ecological culture in the context of environmental degradation and environmental sustainability. Thus the challenges of environmental issues and problems are to strive for the establishment of a global environmental consciousness and culture in the world of today.

Conclusion:-

The A'chiks indigenous tribe lived in the closest association with the natural environment. The ecological culture of the A'chiks is indeed a part of the flora and fauna which perhaps in a way the modern man has ceased to be. It can also be said that the A'chiks tradition and culture seems to evolve their own ecological culture in the sacred harmony between man and nature. After having briefly discussed the culture of the A'chiks from the ecological point of view, I could notice that concern, consciousness, awareness and respect for the natural environment has always been there with them since the origin of their tradition and culture. The traditional ecological practice not only ensures its sustainable use but also helps in conserving the natural resources for the welfare of all. So, it is necessary to make aware and conscious the modern people of the whole world about the indigenous traditional ecological culture and technologies of the indigenous tribe. If we are really concerned and conscious for the safety and preservation of our environment, then it is necessary and also a duty of all the people to protect and follow the indigenous tribal ecological culture for the sustainability of the environment as well as for the survival of human civilization.

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