

Interethnic Relations In The Saiton Village Of Manipur: A Continuum Of Centrifugal And Centripetal Dynamics

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Abstract: The concept of ethnicity (Gaines Jr S. O., 1997) is pictured as an individual's shared biological and cultural heritage within a given society. Inter-ethnic relations refer to the side-by-side existence of people with varying ethnic backgrounds. In multi-ethnic villages, the relation between interpersonal or "intra-ethnic" and inter-group or "inter-ethnic" relationships is a significant indicator of evaluating the degree of permeability of intra-ethnic territories and acceptance of the ethnic by the state. The study of the inter-ethnic relationship has been increasing, and the inter-ethnic relationship has many different meanings. It goes together with the integration of the state. This article will be an updated view of the field, current issues, and findings, and introduce a framework to facilitate the study of inter-ethnic relationships. The majority of this article will reflect the literature and focus on inter-ethnic relationships, while also drawing attention to findings from the field study. The study takes a balanced view of the ethnic competition approach (Coser, 1956; Coenders, 2001) and the structural approach. In the present, it is more focused on the variance in inter-ethnic relationships in sociocultural, economic and political-religious spheres and in which conclusively to know their levels and intensity of interaction with the 'ethnic other.'

Index Terms: Interethnic Relations, multi ethnic, Manipur, North East India.

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of ethnicity (Gaines Jr S. O., 1997) is pictured as an individual's shared biological and cultural heritage within a given society. Inter-ethnic relations refer to the side-by-side existence of people with varying ethnic backgrounds. It provides an extension of ethnic ties amongst the ethnic groups in every sphere of life. It is also interesting to note the lifestyle of how different ethnic cultures lived and worked in the manner of social interaction, distribution of economic as well as political resources. Therefore, it can be drawn that such form of ethnic interrelation integrates emotional development and mutual bonding. In multi-ethnic villages, the relation between interpersonal or "intra-ethnic" and inter-group or "inter-ethnic" relationships is a significant indicator of evaluating the degree of permeability of intra-ethnic territories and acceptance of the ethnic by the state. It is time to bring the concept of ethnicity, and more broadly the issue of culture, to the forefront of inter-ethnic relations in the present scenario. In discussing inter-ethnic relationships, some clarifications are in order. The study of the inter-ethnic relationship has been increasing, and the inter-ethnic relationship has many different meanings. It goes together with the integration of the state. The inter-ethnic relationship also encompasses all domains of life such as social, cultural, economic, religious, political and educational. Social aspects of inter-ethnic ties include shared norms about inter-ethnic marriage, kinship, and commensally relations, interaction in religious and ceremonial spheres. Economic elements cover inter-ethnic cooperation and competition in the livelihood system, business, and trade.

Political factors include aspects of traditional Panchayat which solves their different problems and ethnic conflict like issues of the people regarding village disputes and problem concerning family matters. Ethnic conflict remains as one of the essential issues, impeding relationship and social harmony. As is often the case, years of research can imbue terms with lives of their own, and "intercultural" has been primarily used in the context of communication research (Gudykunst, 2005). Conversely, "inter-ethnic," is perhaps the most commonly used term in the context of intercultural romantic relationships and the close-relationship literature. This article will be an updated view of the field, current issues, and findings, and introduce a framework to facilitate the study of inter-ethnic relationships. The majority of this article will reflect the literature and focus on inter-ethnic relationships, while also drawing attention to findings from the field study. The research on inter-ethnic relationships draws simultaneously upon the fields of intergroup relations (concerned with phenomena such as nature and regulations of inter-ethnic relations). In the present, it is more focused on the variance in inter-ethnic relationships in sociocultural, economic and political-religious spheres and in which conclusively to know their levels and intensity of interaction with the 'ethnic other.'

2. INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS IN A RURAL SETUP: AN OVERVIEW OF THE THEORY

In a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society, the concept of social integration and cohesion is of foremost importance. It is based on the commitment of people toward the main society (Reitz, 2009). Reitz refers integration as to the society's ability in adjusting the common goals as well as the preparation of the requirements for fulfilling them whereas social cohesion as dealing with the people's participation in fundamental organisations of society and how they experience the concept of satisfaction. Here the terms "sense of belonging" and "participation" are the elements of the multi-dimensional concept of integration. The study takes a balanced view of the ethnic competition approach (Coser, 1956; Coenders, 2001) and the structural approach. Ethnic group competition is the aggregation of individual competition experiences and maybe over economic resources (Blalock, 1967), power (Blalock,

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1967), cultural resources or collective identity (Tajfel, 1982). According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1982), individuals use similarities and differences as a basis for categorising themselves and others into in- and outgroups and, to maintain a positive self-regard, evaluate ingroup members more positively than outgroup members. It tries to comprehend the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations with an approach that combines both the ethnic competition and structural perspective by looking at how socio-cultural, political and economic processes influence the historical processes of interaction in the study area. This indicates an integral approach.

2.1. Inter-ethnic Relations Studies and Anthropology

The study of inter-ethnic relations deals with problems in the social-anthropology, i.e., the formation, stabilisation, and change in social relations. This form of relationship enhances the knowledge of the dynamics of culture, cross-cultural connections and the preparations for cross-cultural adaptation. Hence, the mutual bonding amongst the various ethnic groups enables to evaluate and solve any way of a hindrance in attaining their goal. Horowitz (1985) outlines the origins and manifestations of 'raw' ethnic sentiment. He also discusses how institutions can affect the expression of this sentiment. He calls these the "two imperatives" of explaining the ethnic conflict. Three main approaches have been applied to ethnic conflict: Modernization theory, economic interests, and cultural pluralism. The earlier studies, carried out by Anthropologists and many social scientists among various communities, have pointed continuously out the distinct issue of ethnic conflict and offered suggestions of bringing better results. The most common forms of studies on inter-ethnic relationships focus on one member of the relationship but often gather exclusively on 'Economic Factors' as regulators of relations between tribal and non-tribal groups. (F G Bailey, 1957 and Vidyarthi and B K Binay, 1977). Many studies of inter-ethnic relationships have been seen. Researchers have begun to accumulate a critical mass of reviews on inter-ethnic relationships. Weber and Geertz concentrate more on the unchanging aspect of 'ethnicity,' wherein 'the cultural givens,' like religion, customs etc., and have a primordial quality. Whether as Francis (1947), Barth (1987) and Brass (1991), on the other hand, propose that multi-ethnic societies are always in flux. It is imperative to study in different aspects of relations through micro-level study to gain a better understanding of various issues and concerns to individual perspectives. The role of economics in the multi-ethnic society is different, and its relation among the group needs to be looked on it. So many theorists advocate a 'constructivist' paradigm to study human relationships, the best way to approach the study of Inter-ethnic Relations is a Qualitative Method.

3. METHODS

With the Qualitative approach, the idea of human and social interaction and meaning are explored and shared by systematic interpretation. The current study was undertaken through a qualitative research framework and data was gathered through fieldwork and other qualitative tools and techniques. A multi-ethnic village is not that hard to find in Manipur, but it is rare to see any village consisting of more than four communities. Saiton is such a multi-ethnic village in the corner of the Northeast region of Manipur, India. Ethnicity

in Saiton is mainly determined customarily, which in contrast, can be regarded as crucial to its integration and interconnection between ethnic groups inhabiting the place. Saiton, the village under study, is a multi-ethnic village which consists of Meetei, Meetei Pangal (Muslim), Kuki, Kom and Bengali with multiple belief systems. The field area is broad, consisting of eight Panchayat wards with vast fields, river, and hill range; it is not possible to cover them all deep within the limited period. Further, this research method is also based on intensive and extensive field investigation. Data were collected through key anthropological methods. The study was done in an exploratory mode using tools and techniques which are as follows: non-participant observation, interviews, key informants, case studies and focus group discussion. Observation was the primary method employed because it provided insights to understand the situation better. Non-Participant Observation method was used to study from a distance. Observation in anthropology is not just viewing but trying to understand every aspect and noting it down. Interviews, mostly informal ones were used to collect information about inter-ethnic relations and their conscious attitudes towards other ethnic groups. Non-structured Interviews were centred around issues such as: interaction among different people about how they organised themselves and evolved cooperation among the groups, and what were their social dimensions. Focus group discussion was also carried out among the leaders and the members of the community to go into the dynamics of inter-ethnic relation. The key informant is the person, whom most of the information are gathered for the study. Case Study method was specially used to gather data about some members of organisations who were working at an individual level. It was to analyse and interpret their functions.

4. KEY OBSERVATION OF INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS

Inter-societal collisions, giving way to chaos and later complying with peace, have always been a common phenomenon since the inception of humankind. This is how all societies have migrated, acculturated, and diffused into other cultures and alien climatic conditions. Saiton of Manipur, as sample exemplifies this pattern. Though minor clashes do surface, the villagers live in interdependency. The communal and societal relationship depends on three factors- religious, political and economic, which were closely looked at during each village case study. These factors operate, and they modify the structure of every social phenomenon. Inter-ethnic relations can be understood through two relationship formulations, i.e., inter-ethnic marriage relationship and neighbourhood relationship. In an inter-ethnic marriage, the couple are not related to each other in terms of natural or cultural habits. In the same way, neighbourhood relationships also, often, find it challenging to breathe into those circumstances. With religion and politics coming into play relationships seem to get rather complicated, and conflicts spring up among the diverse cultural/ ethnic groups, a pattern seen since ages. Despite much diversity, the people of Saiton maintain inter-social relationships well. It is challenging to find vulnerability as an outsider. Even in a multi-ethnic setting, every group follows their customs and rituals without imposing them on others. They share love and affection and protect each other. Nevertheless, just as some interracial relationships may succeed or fail by basic relationship processes (e.g.,

attachment, interdependence, social exchange). It should be noted that most studies do include that inter-ethnic marriage seem to be a real challenge, yet many families live in harmony amidst the troubles. Societal acceptance appears to be more important than family acceptance. It is a taboo to do a religious activity with a partner's family members who are from another community or religion. However, the number of such cases are negligible as people are mostly getting married within their community. Hence, the social connectivity quotient of couples who have done inter-ethnic marriages remains constrained as they are few.

4.1. Sociocultural perspective:

From a cultural perspective, food culture dependency of all the communities remains the same. In most of the places, people often feel insecure due to the food cultures of the land. Providing food to other community members of the village is not banned. But as they value their culture much, often it prohibits them from eating the cooked food of another community. Meeteis and Bengalis prefer to eat fish in their feasts, and sometimes even the vegetarians depending on the occasion. If the event is related to marriage, and housewarming then fish forms part of the main menu. Muslims of the Saiton prefer beef and mutton in their house, but in many feasts, they offer fish to other community members. Drinking liquor is not prohibited for the Kuki and Kom; they consume alcohol in every event like feasts, mourning, marriages, and other rituals. Commensality may be defined as the phenomenon of eating together especially in a commonplace. However, in this village commensal relations have gradually evolved. Bengalis, Meeteis, Kuki, Kom and Muslims eat together. Sometimes owing to differences in and rituals, Muslims will not attend Hindus' feast, and the other communities also do the same. During the major festivals of the Meeteis and the Hindu sections, Meetei Brahmins are preferred as head chefs. Kuki, Kom and Muslims keep themselves away from such occasions. On a similar note, Brahmins abstain themselves from the feasts of other communities. Generally, every community accepts raw food but not cooked food from the other communities. But during rare occasions, they do welcome cooked food. On a peripheral glance, almost all the people remain open towards accepting food offered by people of other communities. There is no such rigid rule or barrier for food sharing among the villagers. Every morning and evening, people come together in the market, and without any hesitation, they accept whatever is available in the tea shop, as a common place. Interaction is something which evolves out of personal comfort zones. There are no specific places for interactions in this village. Generally, people gather beside the roads and other open spaces to talk about various matters of daily life. The market is the place where all the communities come and exchanges their goods. This space offers a platform of togetherness. Women remain as carriers of information regarding domestic incidents across the place as they chit chat within the vicinities of the market. A market is also a place for solving the problems of the villagers and where collective decisions are taken regarding the festival dates and other ritual aspects. Daily interactions with the outsiders keep them informed about things around. Generally, in the evening women in the village sit together and talk about the various issues about their lives. There is a unity among the villagers since all the members in the town address each other using

kin terms like:

che (elder sister),
 echan (younger sister),
 mama/ khura (uncle),
 tachao (elder brother),
 tamo (elder brother),
 ene(aunty),
 tada (brother),
 enao(younger) etc.

Religious relationships among the villagers have been characterized by tensions. Taboo /namuŋbæ/ in Manipuri is a forbidden activity, something that is not permitted, something which stands against social approval and is disallowed by norms of behaviour. There are complete restrictions or prohibition in saying /haihæidæbæ/ or doing /tæwhæidæbæ/ something that is restricted or considered as taboo. It is related to the social and cultural aspects of life. Manipuri society is rich in taboos. For instance, Kuki, an outside clan cannot enter during the time of village rituals; they can come freely and participate in the festival once the ritual is done. According to them, food offered to God is restricted for their members. Other than the food they offer to God, they do serve a different menu for the visitors. Hindus prefer Brahmins to perform their rituals. During the rituals, known people from other groups are invited. Meeteis is a primarily animistic community. They worship many deities, which are considered superior, for obtaining their blessings for a peaceful and comfortable life. Every activity begins only after the worship and celebrating a festival of the concerned deity. Especially Kukis and Koms perform seasonal festivals offering newly harvested grains, fruits, etc., to god before eating them. However, under the influence of Bengalis and other Hindus, they started participating in some of the Hindu festivals. Apart from this, people were also influenced by certain other religions. Christmas is the biggest festival of Kukis and Koms as a result of the Christian influence. For them, Christianity has brought much change. Hence the Church remains the head of their group. People from different communities can enter into the church and can participate in the prayers and feasts arranged by the Church. However, they will not participate in Hindu festivals other than seasonal celebrations. People who have converted to Christianity change their names after initiation. Even though the people in this village are changing their names after getting baptized, they do not want to lose their ethnic identity, and as a result, they are adding suffixes to their names like William Kipgen, John Haokip; Kipgen, Haokip, that helps them identify with their ethnic groups.

4.2 Economic perspective:

A firm economic base stands pertinent to satisfy the human needs of society. The commercial interactions among these people have helped me to understand the economic structure of the village under study. This village's economy is based on the exchange of products, selling, and farming. Agriculture is the primary activity of people. While using the natural resources around them for day to day needs, they are also equipped with modern agricultural means such as a tractor to plough and other agricultural equipment. In the village, the oldest and most essential household occupations include handloom, bamboo crafts, wooden crafts, piggery, and poultry. By compulsion or choice, this constitutes their

livelihood. Development seems scarce in this region, and the people are stricken by unemployment, forcing them to turn to self-employment. The villagers try to cope up with the socio-economic and cultural changes by adapting their businesses to the changing situations brought by external or internal forces. Interaction with people outside their social circles has benefited the villagers a great deal. Kukis and Koms have been known to engage in agricultural activities and raising livestock (pig and poultry). They are known for their practice of shifting cultivation which is locally known as 'pamlou'. These people practice both shifting and settled cultivation simultaneously depending upon the land and other resources. Every community has its ways to meet their basic needs for existence. People with the same natural surroundings adhere to different economic processes to meet their needs. All the villagers are agriculturalists doing shifting cultivation. Muslims are an artesian community and are known for their trade. In addition to traditional occupation, they work seasonally in different places. People are often changing their occupation to meet other challenges. Some of them are employed in the construction sector and as daily wagers. Most of them travel to neighbouring towns to work in various areas as a salesman in the general stores. The Muslim community members are traditionally weavers who are specialised in weaving clothes. Muslims grow vegetables like mustard or cabbage; other communities grow different plants like peas, turmeric, ginger, sweet potato, while Meeteis are usually paddy. The Bengali sect covers the riverside planting all kinds of seasonal plants like onion, corn, cucumber, bottle gourd, bitter gourd, and pumpkin. All these seasonal vegetables are exported to nearby markets by tribal women. It is interesting to know how this village has adapted to the social and economic changes in the past decade. People help each other irrespective of their ethnic backdrops. The idea of cooperation can be seen clearly in Saiton among the villagers even though they are a heterogeneous group. The village consists of eight wards; each ward member holds a different occupation. The men and women of ward number one and three mainly depend on riverside occupation. Their primary income is the daily wage labour and collection of the stone and sand. They contact contractors, and they sell the sand for rupees three to four thousand per lorry. The youngsters of ward one are more focused on the army and some private jobs. Daily wage labour remains the livelihood for most of the villagers. They join in general stores, utensil stores, and clothing stores. Few own and run automobiles and a few do poultry. Women are more into cultivation and weaving. They have a traditional way of making puffed rice with a simple wooden tool. All over the village, five families continue this as their occupation. These families depend entirely on making puffed rice. They sell it to the local market, but they also contact a few traders for sending the products to other places. On a comparative note, the Bengali community remains economically backward. As per records from the Panchayat office, 75% of the families live below the property line. Lots of Bengali youth migrate to other places in search of work, and most of them join some utensil shops or big grocery shops in the central town of Imphal. Whoever stays back in the village mostly take care of the agricultural fields of other communities as these people do not own much land. They are more dependent on government schemes like housing scheme, old age pension, education, and MGNREGS etc.

4.3 Political perspective:

In a society, politics play a prime role in maintaining social order. Politics has become an important factor and a force because it has an evident impact on the life of individuals. It also influences and changes how an individual defines himself, society and social relationships. In a country like India, where democracy is the 'core', the political life of the tribes reflects a paradoxical situation. Democracy upholds collective decisions and the will of the majority, an idea adhered to even at the village level. Hence everyone will have a share in deciding the political ties in a village, which span over generations. Unlike the rest of the population of Manipur, the people of Saiton are strong in communities' organisation of politics, which are deeply rooted in their respective culture, traditions, and customs. As a result, attempts to impose formal institutions have created an uneven situation. There is a need to understand the political arrangement of the community. As the area under study harbours diverse ethnic groups, negotiations remain a common phenomenon at the time of elections. Once the leader decides, the people follow it expecting social prosperity. Hindu Meeteis remain as the most dominant community. There is evidence that the Meeteis frequently interfered in the village administration and sorted out the disputes. Elders of all the communities settled the village conflict. Among the tribes, the Khullakpa (chief) holds the power to make key decisions. For Muslims, Maulabi (Muslim leader) holds power though they never impose authority on others. However, in this 21ST century, everyone is interested and involved in politics. The study illustrates the interest of the people of Saiton towards this end. Each ethnic group prefers the elected representatives to be from their kin sect. There is a case where a kin circle remained prominent in politics. Village politics also affects the villagers as it has a large stake in compromise talks and village administration. The huge vote bank Saiton offers attracts every political party. In this village, politics affects every individual. Inter-village Panchayat controls all the village political relations. Among all these different ethnic groups, Panchayat members perform a vital role in bringing out the togetherness. Within the village, if there are conflicts between the people, the Panchayat members take care of the issues. Meira Paibi, a local body for women empowerment, settles minor disputes involving fights in the neighbourhood and so on. Even though they are not politically engaged, they have much power to control things at the village level. These women stand against the local vendors and drunkards. If they find that the men and youngsters of the village are using alcohol, they directly go and catch them red-handed, advising and warning them about the dangers. Their contribution to village administrative affairs stands prominent. Panchayat member manages disputes that erupt within the village. To control unwanted conflicts among different communities, the Panchayat members have a committee which includes village elders from different ethnic groups. The Panchayat member invites the committee members for meetings, sometimes at short notice, to settle major problems or to discuss programs to be organised at the village level. Issues brought before the Panchayat mostly involve small ethnic conflicts like fights between the tribe and Meetei regarding their social involvement during the time of Holi and Durga Puja. The decision taken would be a collective one and would be final. There was a case, brought before the Panchayat, an inter-family dispute of five youngsters arguing over an issue involving a girl. The elders posed some

questions to every person involved in the conflict, and then they finalised and gave judgment by discussing among themselves. They tried to compromise the issue by talking with the youngsters and their family members. The issue was briskly settled, and the youngsters along with their family members went back peacefully to their respective places.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Conflicts among the communities are rarely seen in Saiton. One major reason for this would be the fact that people have been living together in harmony for generations. They had created the feeling of oneness among themselves. The presence of 'Ethnic Other,' lead to stronger Intra-ethnic Bonding and which was expressed more effectively when the respondents observed, "...we are here from birth, all of us are like extended families". Village set-up though gives a feeling of segregation from members of different ethnic groups, also fosters a stronger 'we-feeling' among the in-group members. Humanity remains the major force at the heart of Saiton's people. If one community is attacked or involved in an issue with an outside community, the entire village stands to back them up. Despite its heterogeneity, the people of Saiton stand united to face their common evils and fight through the times of despair. Saiton villagers enter into inter-ethnic interactions with each other due to 'circumstances' (in the economic sphere), but they sustain the conflict-free ambience by 'choice' (Especially in the religious and political sphere). This indicates that the central axis around which all the communities revolve is the village, 'Saiton.' There are both centrifugal and centripetal forces at play here that somehow facilitates a social, cultural and political equilibrium. In this theme of contextual influences on inter-ethnic relationship processes with which we began the present thought of circumstances made to interact. Results of this study that have been conducted concerning village suggest that it would be mature for generalisation from consequences on inter-ethnic constructed strong relationships to begin exploring ethnicity as a multidimensional, multifaceted influence on the link in other contribution to a knowledge base.

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