

A Case Study of the Cultural Assimilation of Apatani with Assamese on the Border Region between Papum Pare and North Lakhimpur

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Abstract: Cultural Assimilation may occur due to the geographical location such as bordering two societies of different cultural setups. Proximity is the major factor responsible for cultural exchange. The socio-economic life of Apatanis dwelling in Siajuli shows maximum assimilation into the Assamese culture. The Apatanis of Siajuli migrated from Ziro to this area in the early 1950's. Even some Nyishi dwelling in Siajuli have assimilated into Assamese culture in many ways. The Assimilation between the two communities can be seen in the way of food habits, dress, language, housing patterns, agricultural practices, domestication of animals, recreation, and their relation with nature. The present work attempts to study the historical background between the people of hills and plains, the factors responsible for cultural assimilation, and the advantages and disadvantages of cultural assimilation.

Key Words: Border, culture, assimilation, Apatani, Assamese, Nyishi, food habits, dressing patterns, religion, and marriage.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The word culture has a broad meaning. It covers vast areas of human activities to constitute a culture. In the simplest terms, culture denotes the customs, traditions, beliefs, and habits of a group or group of society living in a specific area over a considerable period. It also includes daily food habit, dressing pattern, language or dialect used in communication, and housing pattern which influences the lifestyle of a particular group of people. The arts and crafts, recreation, social institutions, and political organizations also form an integral part of culture. Daily socio-economic activities like animal husbandry, farming, agriculture, horticulture, and social forestry also constitute culture. Culture is acquired by the accumulation of traditions by a group of people which becomes their habit and is inherited and passed on to the next generations. According to the Cambridge English dictionary, culture is "the way of life, especially the general customs, and beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular time".

"Culture may be defined as a collection of the mental and physical responses and actions that characterize the collective and individual behavior of the people forming a social group with their natural surroundings, to other groups, to members of the group itself, and to each individual." It also contains the outcomes of these activities and their significance in the lives of the groups." (Boas, 1911). Culture is composed of very diverse characteristics and cannot remain stable. People acquire a particular culture that has been inherited from their parents but in due course of time, their culture may vary due to migration to other places and adopting the culture of that society. Immigration is also another cause for cultural change in an individual or group of people when one group is the majority and the other one is the minority. The minority group tends to adopt and adapt to the culture of the majority group. Culture adoption may be voluntary or involuntary. Exchanging of cultures across borders is a frequent phenomenon.

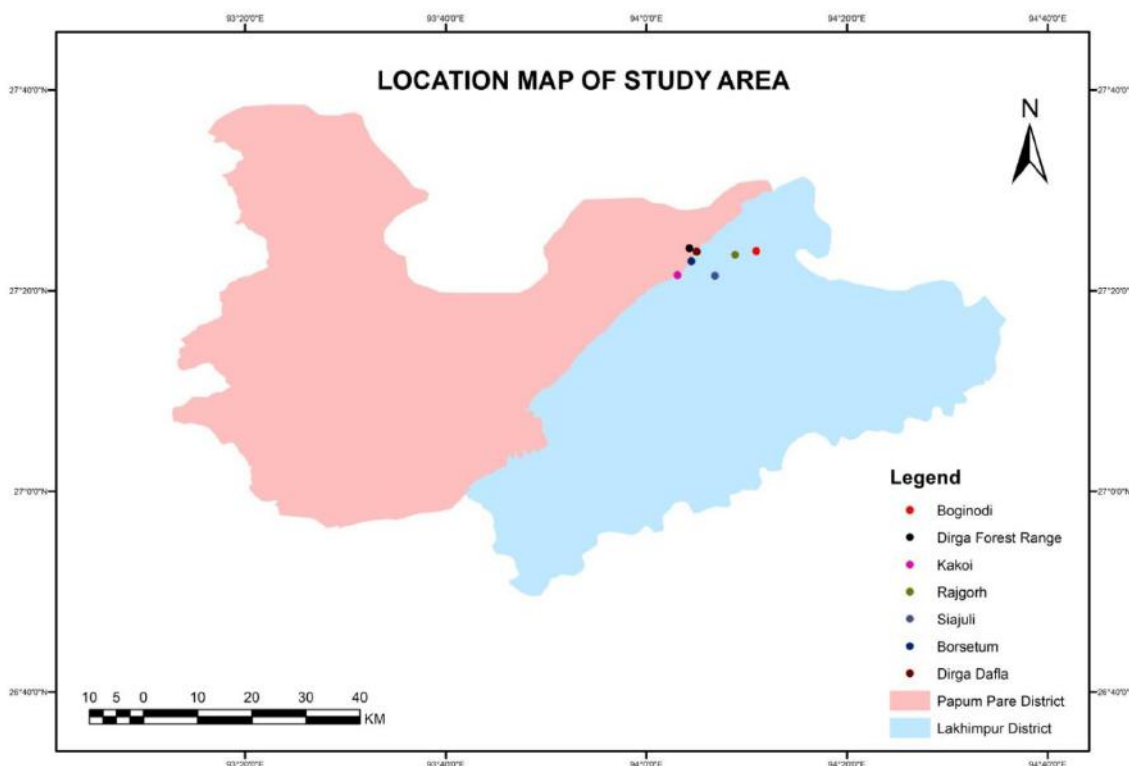
Thus, we can say that culture keeps on changing, it is not rigid, and it keeps on growing and is inherited from one generation to another. "They are embodied in the material and social world, and are dynamic rather than static" (McEwan Cheryl, 2003).

Cultural assimilation means the exchange of culture partially or wholly between two or more distinct groups of people living closely in a particular geographical area over a prolonged period. People from different origins or tribes may settle together in certain areas for a considerable long time. They intermingle in their daily life resulting in the exchange of various cultural traits leading to its ultimate adoption by both cultural groups. Assimilation may also take place because of cultural diffusion, adaptation, or adoption methods. "Assimilation, in Anthropology and Sociology, is the process whereby individuals or groups of different ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture of a society. The process of assimilation involves taking on the traits of the dominant culture to such a degree that the assimilating group becomes socially indistinguishable from the other members of the society". (Pauls, 2015). Intermarriage plays an important role in the process of assimilation. McEwan, states that "Gender plays an important role in this". Yuval-Davis (1997) states that "women are frequently regarded as cultural border guardians." Women not only bear children for the group but also culturally produce them. Women often serve as intergenerational carriers of cultural traditions, rituals, music, food, and the mother tongue, owing to their position as mothers. This is especially evident in minority contexts when the school and public arena provide cultural paradigms that diverge from those of the family."

2. THE STUDY AREA:

2.1 Location: Cultural Assimilation is mostly seen in the adjacent areas between the Hill people and Plain people of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The study area Seajuli under Boginadi circle lies approximately between 27°21'0" N to 94°6'0" E. The villages that Apatanis inhabit are Borsetum, Dirgha Dafla, and Kokoi Rajghar. The local inhabitants of Seajuli are Apatani, Adivasi, Nepali, Mising, and Sonowal (Assamese S.T). Seajuli is located on the border between Papum Pare District of Arunachal Pradesh and North Lakhimpur District of Assam.

Fig 1: The Study Area of Seajuli boundary between Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.



Sources: ArcGIS 10.3

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY AREA

- To study the characteristic feature of cultural assimilation between hills and plains.
- To study the factors responsible for cultural assimilation taking place in the study areas.
- To study the advantages and disadvantages of cultural assimilation.
- To suggest for harmonious co-existence of communities in the study areas.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY :

This paper will help in understanding the present status of cultural assimilation. The work will enable us to understand the factors responsible for cultural assimilation. It will also give a vivid picture of the advantages and disadvantages of cultural assimilation. The investigation will help us to suggest sound cultural coexistence.

5. DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY:

The work is based on empirical studies conducted in the areas. The primary data was collected from the field by using effective tools like questionnaires, interviews, and discussions with individuals and groups from both sides. The secondary data were collected from sources such as books, official records, journals, etc. A hundred percent of the samples were collected from the selected study area. The literature review was done to get more knowledge and to get ideas for work done on the same nature of research. Photography was also used during the collection of data.

6. FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR CULTURAL ASSIMILATION:

- a. Location (closeness) of two social groups.
- b. Different cultural groups.
- c. Economic dependencies.
- d. Peaceful coexistence.

7. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION: Socio-Cultural Assimilation :

7.1 The Inhabitants:

The assimilation between people is possible from the harmonious co-existence of peoples of different origins in the study areas. The study area is inhabited by Apatani, Nyishi, Assamese, Nepali, Bengali and Adivasi. The physical features of typical Apatani, outlooks, dressing patterns, food habits, and lifestyle are seen changing from the original form, and is difficult to recognize many of them from dress and language unless one introduces himself as Apatani. So is the same case with other people who are residing in the study areas. In the study area, there are Apatani from Arunachal Pradesh and Assamese, Nepali, Adivasi, and Mising of Assam dwelling together peacefully for a long time. The Apatani is the denizen of Ziro, the administrative headquarters of the Lower Subansiri District of the state of Arunachal Pradesh. On the other hand, Assamese are the original inhabitants of Assam. There is glaring evidence of cultural assimilation between the Apatani of Arunachal Pradesh and the plain people of Assam in the zone of study. The result of cultural assimilation is more positive and less negative. Therefore, assimilation without losing original traits is advocated. There should be harmonious and peaceful assimilation for the greater interest of all.

7.2 Social Life:

The social life of people in the study areas is marked by observation of various festivals, music and dances, recreation, and other allied activities distinguished from others. The famous traditional festivals like Myoko, Murung, and Dree of Apatani have been forgotten long past. Also, rituals and rites like Tamu, Metw, Mepin, and Kharung performed involving local priests called 'Nyibu' by Apatani have also vanished forever. The popular traditional dances like Daminda, Pakhu-Itu, and Hwrw Khanw performed during traditional festivals and rituals have altogether vanished from their lives. Some of the recreational activities like "Gwbu Lasu Nw" (Wrestling), "Esan Yohnw" (High Jump), 'Berdo Bernii" (Long Jump), "Twkw Achu Nw" (Hide and Seek) etc. are not even mentioned in remembrance. Feasts like "Aping Ganw" (Rice ball distributed during the festival) and "Oho Babi Nw" (serving of local rice beer) to village elders during the festival month, etc. are not even known to this generation. The predominant festival celebrated by one and all is Christmas. All communities gather around in the common platform and merry-go-round with a feast after Christmas service in the month of December. Therefore, Apatani and Assamese have assimilated into a celebration of Christmas leaving their old practices of observing festivals, rituals, rites, etc.

7.3 Family:

The family is the unit of society. The size of the family is seen as almost the same. The size ranges from six to ten members. The Apatani characteristic of an independent and individualistic way of settling a family life has been given up. There is a joint family system among the Apatanis in the study areas. The family composition consists of a father and mother, sons, daughters, and grandchildren. Daughters-in-law may be from Nepali, Nyishi, Assamese and Adivasi. The same is the case, of Apatani girls who are also married to plain people.

7.4 Marriage :

Marriage is considered sacred. Endogamy, polygamy, and child marriage are not practiced today. There is intermarriage between different tribes. They choose their life partner of their own. All the marriage-related traditional

rituals and rites performed by Apatanis during marriage solemnization like “Mabo Enchi Nw” (Social Declaration of Bridegroom), “Eli Banw” (Ceremonial Procession of bidding farewell to the bride from bride’s parent and their clan members), “Mida Mwnw” (Ceremonial Blessing Pronouncement), “Panyi Panw”(Ceremonial Blessing of Child Birth), etc. are completely lost. The marriage is solemnized in the Church. Or else, there is a social marriage where the bride and bridegroom are acquainted by organizing a gathering of both the parents and neighbors on a certain platform. The new couples are recognized by arranging a feast in social recognition of their marriage.

7.5 Language:

There is a distortion of the Apatani dialect in this area due to more contact with the people of plains rather than hills. The present generation hardly speaks Apatani rather prefers to speak in Assamese and Hindi languages. If this continues, after a few decades Apatani dialect will be completely replaced by Assamese or Hindi. Only the father or the mother who migrated from Ziro still speaks the Apatani dialect. Thus Apatani in the study areas have almost lost the Apatani dialect. The present generation has adopted a mixed language of Assamese and Adivasi as language. Their siblings are not completely acquainted with the original dialect. As Vijoy S Sahay said “Language is the most effective means and carrier of transmission of cultural elements and behavior. It also serves as one of the most effective tools of cultural diffusion. When cultural contact between two distinct cultures takes place, borrowing of cultural traits is an inevitable result. Through language, such borrowing of culture traits between two cultures becomes more expedited, more reciprocal and spontaneous”.

7.6 Food Habits :

Compared to other cultural traits, the traditional food habit has substantially remained continued especially among the elders. But young people prefer to eat food cooked with oil and spices. Due to the non-availability of traditional food items, the inhabitants have adopted food from the plains. Thus, after a few decades, after the death of the present parents, the traditional food habit will disappear. Chewing of beetle nuts is very common to all. But these people have discontinued brewing local millet and rice beer.

7.7 Dressing Pattern:

Unlike before, today people (plains and hills) cannot be identified by their dress. Apatanis especially youths rarely wear traditional Apatani dress. Hills have adopted plain dress such as lungi. Assamese gamucha is commonly seen in every house. But few old females continue to wear traditional GALEH ‘loin’.

7.8 House Pattern :

Traditional houses with thatch roofs having a common porch, courtyard, and hall with two to three fire hearth laid in linear pattern without partition is no longer seen. All the houses were constructed with wooden pillars or cemented concrete, which used to be bamboo in traditional Apatani houses. Today all the houses are designed unlike erstwhile with rectangle shape hall type and has provision of numbers of separate rooms.

7.9 Occupation:

Few Apatani families in this study area have adopted tea cultivation as their main occupation besides food crop cultivation and horticulture development. Fishing is also one of the occupations mainly done by females using jakoi. Traditional millet cultivation was important for the preparation of beer is no longer practiced. Cattle rearing which was basically for ritual sacrifice is no more practiced. Cattle are reared for milk, meat, and for plowing the paddy field and not for ritual sacrifice as used to be.

7.10 Animal husbandry:

Traditionally Apatanis are ponds of rearing mithun besides cattle in the nearby forest. However, there have been drastic changes in its process. But today, in the study area the rearing of Mithun has become a thing of the past. Today’s children have not seen mithuns. Thus, in animal rearing Apatanis have merged with plain people by making cow shade close to their house. Animals such as cows, goats, pigs, ducks, and hens are reared for domestic use and commercial purposes.

7.11 Religion:

There is considerable change in the religious outlook of Apatani in the study area. Socio-religious rituals like Dree, Chandw, Tamu, Meping, and Danyi Tunii which was regularly observed involving priest with animal sacrifices have completely vanished. In the beginning, the Apatanis of the study area jointly celebrated the Dree festival with the then Apatani dwellers of Kimin and Kakoi circles of Papumpare District. The people are converted to Christianity and

offer prayer, and fasting in the Church without any kind of animal sacrifices today are common. It has been observed that the Hindu religion is not affected due to migration.

7.12 General outlook:

The traditional system of tattooing 'T' on the lower chin of males, and 'T' beginning from the tip of the forehead to nose, and five five-liner line shape tattoos below the lower chin of females are gone forever. Tying of hair knots above the forehead by males, and hair knots surmounting the head above by women is not in practice anymore. The men and women today in this area of study have a common hairstyle like plain people. Riding of bicycle is a common phenomenon. Generally Apatani by tradition is known as the rough, taught, brave, and warrior type. The waging of war with the British Indian Army in 1947 (Khure Chambyo) is a glaring example. But, today Apatani in Seajuli are soft, morally high, and ethically principled. The color of the skin of Apatani is brownish. But, today Apatani in the study area are darker and their physical appearance has also changed. The language is more of Assamese. They speak broken Apatani dialects in conversation.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS:

Culture cannot be preserved. Culture develops through modification, adding refinement to old through adopting and adapting to better systems of others. But it should not be at the cost of discarding of own traditions and culture. Apatani language and traditional attires have their richness. The good traditional healing practices, traditional food, traditional handicrafts, handlooms, etc. are to be continued along with the adopted culture.

Today's younger generations find more comfort in adopting an easier and adjustable part of culture from others than their own culture.

9. CONCLUSION:

From the study, it can be concluded that if the present rate of cultural assimilation continues, after a few decades there will be only one culture which is Assamese culture. Plain people have adopted a few cultures from Apatanis but Apatanis have almost lost their traditions and culture after migrating to the study area. They have lost their language, food habits, religion, and dress. The offspring of parents through inter-community marriage have changed the physical appearance of the Apatanis; they look more like plain people rather than Apatanis.

From such traits, today's young Apatanis in the study area cannot be recognized as Apatanis because they do not speak Apatani, don't put on Apatani dress, no longer celebrate traditional festivals, they have adopted a different religion and finally they do not look like Apatanis by physical appearance. Finally, Apatanis have lost their culture and identity.

In nut nutshell, the cultural assimilation between Apatani and Assamese is because of the migration of Apatani from the present Ziro, Lower Subansiri District Arunachal Pradesh in search of better livelihood and a place for cultivable land. The major factor responsible for assimilation is their constant interaction for various purposes. The main areas of assimilation are seen in house patterns, food habits, dressing patterns, languages, religion, behavior, outlooks, and practices of agriculture, horticulture, and animal husbandry. The most distinctive changes seen in the process of assimilation are that the Apatanis have transformed their physical appearance, language, religion, and profession. It is apt to put into precession that the results of assimilation are one of peaceful co-existence, better life, and promotion of harmonious relations between Apatani and Assamese in the study areas. Therefore, fundamental features of this cultural assimilation between Apatani and Assamese must be documented properly and passed down for posterity.

The eviction of Apatani settled by the forest department has brought a sense of insecurity among the people and the tendency of migrating back to the hill is perceived. Thus, one day Apatani may revive some of their lost cultures.

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