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Trans-Migratory State and Environmental Subject Signifiers in the Non-Synchronous Ethno-Environmental Context of North Bengal

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Environment rears and promotes the present and future of man. Environment is a cultural and ethnic determinant of a group of people or the entire race whose daily culture is greatly influenced and intervened by the environment in the historical process of the growth of humanity. Humans are the products of territorial space and historical time. They need to negotiate the technologies of environmental determinacy and encounter the contingency of cultural transformation through antagonism and ambivalence. Physical environment thus take part in historicizing the world taking human to the outer limits of social and ethno-racial transformation and change. In this disciplines the cultural unconscious is spoken in the slenderness of narrative and in some strange overlapping of such multiple determinants.

In the dialectic of modernity environment is the most important factor in appropriating or preparing the human race down the ages. It creates a perspective of progress or a social dynamics which turns out significant in a chain of discourse shaping the human history. The forest, foothills and the rivers of North Bengal provides a terra-incognita rather than a purely ready-to-use state-of –the-art surrounding which can provide knowledge and initiate the progress.

Environment, in discursive sense a colonial text, a foundation, a condition, a presence, strangely collusive with its dispersal, equivocal and uncannily self,constituting an intervening the human affair. It constitutes the marginal as well as principle perspective of cultural difference that emerges out of cross –factor interaction between man-environment and cultural history. The present paper is aimed at the issues of environmental determinism and critical/strategic negotiation of man to locate themselves in a non-synchronous time and tradition.

The varied migratory movements attempt to give some indication of the ideologies, choices, reasons and compulsions which may have governed the act of immigration. While migration defines a location, a physical movement and a frontward attitude, 'exile' indicates an unavoidable isolation and a nostalgic anchoring in the past. The word exile evokes multiple

meanings covering a variety of relationships with the mother-country such as alienation, forced exile, self- imposed exile, political exile and so on. In the Indian context the migratory movements are governed by the movement of indentured labour and of the trading communities; the same is also governed by the pursuit of higher standard of living, opportunities for work, education and corporate service assignments among others. In the trans-cultural global context a migrant is an important postcolonial subject. Rushdie remarks:

[M]igrant is perhaps, the central or defining figure of the twentieth century [….] A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption: he loses his place, he enters in an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behavior and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to, his own. And this is what makes migrants such important figures: because roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a human being. The migrant, denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human.[1]

In a trans-migratory condition, cultures go across boundaries, transgress lines and take root after multiple dislocations, and the transplanted subjects feel nostalgia, or experience amnesia amid contestation and ethnic disavowal under specific conditions. Such migration has resulted in most cases politically and socially mobilizing category of nationalism in a transgressive space. The ethno-cultural history of North Bengal is based on such challenges and negotiations. The current study aims at to define the problems of entire region from critical theoretical angle and point at the issue of environmental determinism in shaping the socio cultural tapestry of the Himalayan foothills where migration, rupture and slippages play vital role in developing its anthropological history.

The whole process of trans-migration results in multiple homes and diasporic spaces and a migrant, in the process of new ways of being human, suffers dislocations and acquire a non-exclusionary hybridized identity. Yet, this multiplicity of 'homes' does not bridge the gap between 'home' – the culture of origin; and the 'world' – the culture of adoption. In such precincts of history, the boundaries have an uncanny pattern of persisting in thousand different ways, and are very often conflictual.

Man finds himself in a built environment and succession of cultures leaves their mark in a shared space or territory. For human environment in a social world, there is a distinct cultural ecology of interactive human differences. Such condition and perspective have far reaching

effect in the constitution of human beings as environmentally determined cultural complex. Historically and in practice such complexes share traits and often merge creating hybridity and evolution of different ethnicities. The identity of such ethnic group in the process of human evolution and changing dialectics is not transparent or unproblematic. All human evolution and identity formation is hinged on dialectic of relationship between man and man and between man and environment.

In the last paragraph of *Culture and Imperialism* Said says: 'There seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness as if that all human life was about the connection between things.'[3] Separation and distinctiveness, interaction and negotiations with environmental subject signifiers are such historical and phenomenal determinants. Said ends up at a kind of *heteroglossal dialogue* of different identities in which they connect with each other and becomes a hybrid. He rejects the meta-identity of the centre as well as small national identity compartmentalized.

Bhabha projects culture as hybrid and is a product of disjunctive temporality which is analogous to Salman Rushdie's notion of 'broken mirror'[5] about the migrants all over the world. Rushdie even generalizes the excitement of the homeless when he says: "But human beings do not perceive things whole. We are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable of fracture perceptions."[6] The migrants cracked and fractured self have been indicated by Bhabha using Lacan's notion as the 'The twilight existence of the Aesthetic images.'[7]

In the context of the geo-anthropological environment of North Bengal, its cultural exclusivity and difference as well as racial harmony and oneness it is interesting to locate the cultural environment in the intersections of different heteroglossal elements reflected in a broken mirror. Said's heteroglossal dialogue is to theorize hybridity in diasporic condition, which is a context of the cultural sub-text of the Sub-Himalayan West Bengal, most truly a mélange of cross-cultural, trans-border and intra-state population.

In the unique cultural environment of North Bengal identity is not an already accomplished historical fact, it is *environmentally and politically determined and culturally defined.* The different ethnicities of North Bengal thus reared and nurtured, moves in the terrain of hybridity, race relations, multiculturalism and the politics of difference. North Bengal is a sub-

Himalayan pocket comprised of the indigenous racial and ethnic communities as well as the cross-border and inter-state migrants.

Rajbanshis are indigenous community of northern districts of West Bengal state of India and the same time has a caste identity. According to census 2001, Rajbanshis have a population of 18% in North Bengal. Koch Bihar state and Coochbehar town were built up after the collapse of kamtapur kingdom once centering on Gossanimari fort; its ruins still exist in Sitai- Dinhata region of Cooch Bihar districts and on the banks of different distributaries of Torsha River. Koch Bihar and Kamtapur were represented by the female deities namely Baro Devi and Kamteswari. Kamtapur state was ruled by the Khens who have now some concentration in Neighboring Assam. Khens are more focused on Tibeto-Himalayas, whereas Koch – Rajbanshis were more prone to Indo-Bengal political structure.[8]

According to Das Gupta, 'Rajbanshi people are not together any single community, but a huge social fold containing different ethnic communities with so many tribal affiliations. They could even possess different modes of production depending on local ecosystem a bit different in Mahananda plains and Teesta-Torsha areas. That would even generate different lines of polity, economy and even religious values however intensively overlapped.'[9]

Apart from the Rajbansis there are diverse group of people belonging to different racial and ethnic roots such as Nepali ethnic groups who are primarily Hindu, Buddhist and Animist. Adivasi communities like Santal and Oraon and the indigenous people such Mech, Bodo, Rabha, Toto, Koch,Garo, Tamang and Lepcha. Totos and Dukpas tried a lot to keep them distinct. In Totopara and Buxaduar of this Bhutan foothills, Toto and Dukpas have been successful to keep their cultural identity intact, however in other politico-economic and social issues they are highly influenced by Nepali and Bengali people. Dhimals of Siliguri Terai are similarly included within Rajbansi fold as they were the probable wooden plough suppliers to the Rajbanshi agriculturalist.[10]

The multilingual ethnic communities have different social and cultural practice with a desire to protect their exclusivity besides their political strategy to be in one single stream of national identity. Over the years there have been several moves to assert their identity in shaping their ideologies preserving the roots to which they belong. This assertion has been a practice from the pre-Independence British colonial era. Ironically it is the British colonial strategy which resulted inter-racial and inter-cultural shifting causing dislocations and slippages.

British established tea gardens and forest departments in Siliguri foothills (Terai), Darjeeling hills and Bhutan foothills (Dooars). There was huge influx of people from different parts South-Asia, Indo-Nepal and British Bengal to this Frontier Bengal. Adivasi people mostly from Chhotonagpur plateau of Jharkhand-Odisha region and central Indian territories were brought into the Sub- Himalayan tea gardens to work as tea garden laborers. Hill people from Himalayan country of Nepal were also introduced to tea-estates mostly situated at Darjeeling hills and other sub-Himalayan pockets. Many Nepalese hill people from Nepal and Nepali folks of Darjeeling Hills and other Diasporas joined into Gorkha regiments of both British Indian Army and British Royal Army.

In 1911 AD, when Bihar and Odisha as well as North East India were excluded from jurisdiction of Bengal Presidency, the Gorkhas also demanded for a *Pranta Parishad* or a marginal state. Many Bengali castes including post-partition exilic lot and agrarian Rajbanshis also came to this area due to job and business opportunities. They were also attracted to the fertile land on Mechi-Mahananda, Teesta-Torsha and kaljani, Raidak-Sankosh river basin.

In the prevailing political and cultural context ethnicity is emerging as a focal consideration in the politics of identity in North Bengal, and it is emerging as a cartographic domain that posits the question of internal colonialism and hegemony. The ethno-political environment of North Bengal represents a combination of home, homecoming, exile, confinement and transgression, centrality and marginal. In a non contiguous ethno-linguistic mosaic that North Bengal is the problem of location and slippages also becomes relevant to consider a harmonious relocation of ethnic subjectivity without insularity and excluvist upsurge. The social and cultural topography of North Bengal is thus multi-dimensional and multi-layered and hinged on several signifying factors.

Being reared, nurtured in a fixed environment mainly dominated by forest-villages, tea-gardens, villages and hill habitats, this region has very little of city facilities such as health, education and communication. There is no alternative way to belong to the environment except agriculture and garden based employment opportunities. The sub-Himalayan West Bengal is not aided by irrigation facilities, and as such there is larger prevalence of mono-cropping all over. People here have to depend upon rainfall to practice their agricultural activities. All ethnic communities living in the exclusive cultural topography are forced to negotiate with the typical

environment which demands extraction of human labour with little to offer them to survive at ease.

The environment in North Bengal has a significant role in the continuous mutative change in human settlement-in race, ethnicity, culture, religion, ideology, ethics and politics. Here environment is a natural constant influencing the socio-economical as well as political health of the region. The ethnic determinants such as politics, religion, ideology, ethics and environment are actually sub-texts of the over-all ethno-cultural ecology of North Bengal. They are different and complex in nature contributing to the cultural chemistry of the region. Man need to negotiate and encounter such complexes including the environment which alone is not a variable determinant. Thus man's existential text encounters the sub-texts determining his identity. If there is a thesis and anti thesis in the text and sub-text ratio, there is a scope of synchronization and symphony of culture, through heteroglossal dialogue and political negotiation with all centers of physical and metaphysical power.

This is to strike at the vapidity of irrational ethics which can make catch phrase such as 'unity', 'integrity' etc but cannot quite re-set and reinforce the under-developed and deprived ethnicities threatened to be obliterated and endangered. The ethnic groups born in an environment first develops as a biological text, and then becomes a social text, then a political and finally an ideological text. This textual metaphor is common to all human beings, including the sub-Himalayan human texts. Man as text, determinants of identities as sub-texts and environment as the context, create a distinct cultural ecology of interactive differences which make the ethnicities as environmentally determined cultural composite.

Historically and in practice such composites mutually interact. Such dialogic of difference often produce hybridized exclusivity depending on environment, physical social and political. Separation and distinctiveness, interaction and negotiations allow man to be historically located in diverse environment. From hybridity to heteroglossal dialogue through reinscription and negotiations the culturally threatened lot demands relocation and reinscription of their identity in defiance to hegemonic politics and environment.

In the context of the geo-anthropological environment North Bengal the question of cultural exclusivity and difference, heteroglossal dialogue and reinscription of identity are very important. As mentioned earlier, North Bengal is Sub-Himalayan pocket comprised of the indigenous racial and ethnic communities as well as cross-border and inter-state migrants, during

the pre and post-colonial period, which includes post-partition and post-war refugees. The different ethnicities of North Bengal move in the territory of hybridity, race relations, migrations, multiculturalism and the politics of difference. Thus, in the unique cultural environment of North Bengal identity is not an already accomplished historical fact, it is environmentally and politically determined and culturally defined.

There is no denying, ethnicity is emerging as a focal consideration in the politics of identity in North Bengal, it is emerging as an ethnographic domain that posits the question of internal colonialism and hegemony. The ethno-political environment of North Bengal represents a combination of home, homecoming, exile, confinement and transgression, centrality and marginal. In a peculiar multi-lingual mosaic in North Bengal the problem of rupture and dislocation also become relevant to affect a linear relocation of ethnic subjectivity without insularity and excluvist upsurge.

The cultural sub-texts in North Bengal are centric to different ethnicities. In current trends of globalisation, migration, multiculturalism and ethnic assimilation, the neat division of the binaries is hardly feasible. The narratives of dislocation have given rise to new aesthetics and new rationalities, not merely in terms of post-colonial aesthetics but also by using fluidity and ethnic acculturation as a new concept. It recognizes translational alternative version as equally relevant, and a new narrative of cultural fragility is born out of this conflict. After heteroglossal dialogue and inter-textual interactions the different ethnicities now have a general centripetal effort to merge with the greater cultural text without losing cultural exclusivity.

Linguistic oppression, unequal development, and marginalization are contributing into the new environment with socio-historical and political specifications of transformation through ethno-political encounters. The dislocation and disjuncture are largely due to uncertainties in a challenged space where contestation and negotiations are the most important tools for survival. A heteroglossal dialogue and decentering of politically signifying factors may offer an ideal condition to create an ambiance of racial and ethno-environmental sameness. Man is ultimately a neurotic structure propelled by the surrounding and responded by the peculiar psychic consciousness of the conflictual clusters of ethno-racial lot. To quote Fanon:

> The neurotic structure of an individual is simply the elaboration, the formation, the eruption within the ego, of conflictual clusters arising out of the environment

and in part out of the purely personal way in which that individual reacts to these influences.[12]

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