

A CULTURE TRAIT IN TRAVEL: SANTHIGIRI ASHRAM

Dr Madhuri Saikia

Associate Professor, Department of History, Dakshin Kamrup College, Mirza, Assam, India.

Abstract:

Culture is considered to be a way of life of every region and every nation. Culture moulds us as human beings and binds us together. Culture is our identity. It helps people from other regions to identify us. However this culture which is specific to every region and nation is not static, but it adopts, adapts, diffuse and bring in elements of other cultures in the long run. Culture changes the behaviours, ideas, beliefs, attitudes, values and habits. There are various ways by which culture changes and people adapts to the cultural practices of a superior culture. Studies have revealed that diffusion and acculturation are the social reasons that play an important role in culture change. Cultural diffusion happens when the cultural beliefs and social activities from one group of people transfers to or is adopted by another culture. It also means spreading out and merging of pieces from different cultures. Cultural traits are things that allow one part of a culture to be transmitted to another. Cultural trait combines with each other and gets transmitted. The paper focusses on how a particular cultural trait of the South Indian state of Kerala has been adopted by the Assamese community- a group of people from the North East Indian state of Assam. The study looks at the Santhigiri Ayurveda Care of Kerala as a case study.

Keywords: Culture, Diffusion, Lived Experience, Ayurveda

Introduction

Culture in the ordinary sense is understood to be a way of life, of every community, society, group, nation of which art, music, theatre, drama, clothes, food, language, festivals, rituals, religious practices, values, attitudes, are all entwined into the norms of particular societies and ethnic groups across the globe. In 1961 in “The Long Revolution” Raymond Williams outlined that culture is a particular way of life of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general. Culture which is considered to be a way of life is however not static. It grows, it changes and modifies, culture adjusts, adapts, and keeps accepting new elements as the society and civilisation changes from time to time, and from generation to generation. As people from one culture group go to different places and assimilates with their culture, chances are that the previous group will be affected by the new culture and vice versa. Coming back these groups of people brings in new traits with them which in the long run are adopted by the people. On the reverse other cultural groups which comes from outside and settles in a new country brings with them traits of their own culture. Through a process of assimilation both cultures get mixed and results in having produced characteristics of both cultural groups and practices. This happens with every generation. These cultural characteristics develop through proper communication. Language is an important feature through which communication is possible. Different features of communication are verbal, visual, musical and body languages. A society grows through experience, contact and discovery. The growing society is made and remade in every individual’s mind.

Many of the cultural changes in the world from 1500 AD to the present have been caused directly or indirectly by the dominance and expansion of Western societies. Thus much of the culture change in the modern world has been externally induced if not forced. However cultures are not only changing because of external pressures. Most of the external pressures have come from Western societies but not all.

Cultures interact with each other and change each other through contact. Trade networks, international development projects, telecommunications, education, migration, and tourism are just a

few of the factors that affect cultural change through contact. The process of cultural transmission is influenced and constrained by humans' evolved psychology; people tend to acquire some cultural variants rather than others. On the other hand the cultural environment provides cultural variants that are transmitted to or adopted by individuals via process of social learning.

Two basic processes drive all cultural change. The first is internal: the discovery of something new. The second is external: incorporation of something new from the outside. Discoveries and inventions which may originate inside or outside a society, are ultimately the sources of all culture change, But they do not necessarily lead to change. If an invention or discovery is ignored, no change in culture results. It is only when society accepts an invention or discovery and uses it regularly then we can begin to speak of culture change.

Culture Diffusion

The source of new cultural elements in a society may also be another society. The process by which cultural elements are borrowed from another society and incorporated into the culture of the recipient group is called diffusion. It is the spreading out and amalgamation of many cultural pieces from different cultures. Diffusion is the spread of culture through contact. The mixing of different cultures through different ethnicities, religions, and nationalities has today increased with communication, transportation and technology. Diffusion can occur in several ways. First in mutual borrowing, two societies that are roughly equal in power and level of development exchange aspects of their culture. Second diffusion may occur between unequal societies, involving a transfer from a dominant culture to a less powerful culture. This may occur through force or more subtly through education or marketing processes that promote adoption of new practices and beliefs. Third a more powerful culture may appropriate aspects of a less powerful culture. Now a day's people are using social media like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram with people living across continents. As a result the minds of the people are becoming open and they receive many elements from people and society living in every corner of the earth (yourdictionary.com). For example trade has been an important means of cultural diffusion for centuries. It is not unusual to adopt various components of that lifestyle back home from another culture. Besides people learn about new products from different places. Cultural diffusion can bring changes towards one's own life. In cultural anthropology diffusion or the spreading of culture trait was the prime fore of human development and all cultural development could be traced to a few inventive centres (Britannica.com).

The most important factor influencing cultural diffusion are the groups of people helping the process. According to some authors the first adopters should be prestigious people so the rest of the community will feel the urge to follow them (Henrich, 2001, Kaufman and Patterson, 2005). Diffusion influences local culture from the point of view of dressing style, food and traditions. However, diffusion through education and marketing processes that promote adoption of new practices and beliefs is the most common method effective in the contemporary society which brings in culture change.

The study focusses on how cultural variants spread and persist within a population via processes of cultural learning. Cultural transmission is biased; people tend to acquire some cultural variants than others. The process of cultural transmission is influenced and constrained by humans' evolved psychology that shape what we learn, how we think, and whom we imitate. During human evolution, man adapted for culture in ways other primates did not. Biologically evolved novel forms of social cognition and cultural learning formed the micro foundation for cultural evolution and exclusively human ways of behaviour. The key adaptation has been the one that enabled humans to understand other individuals as intentional agents like the self-a capability necessary for reproducing someone else's behavioural strategies.

Richerson and Boyd in (2005) have conceptualised cultural transmission as the product of a series of analytically separable cognitive learning mechanisms or transmission biases that allow humans to

effectively and efficiently acquire cultural variants in a complex cultural environment. As a result human thinking is biased toward certain cultural variants without exhaustively examining the immense amount of available social and environmental information. Thus human culture is an example of an emergent macro phenomenon for it is based on social learning taking place on a micro level.

Culture is a lived experience

Culture is a lived experience; it is invented, and created, learnt and borrowed, accumulated and transmitted from one generation to another through learning processes. There are examples of societies who are interested and are influenced by the production, distribution and services which establish norms and values and also create health benefit for all. People are drawn towards them for survival and comfort. Influenced by ideas and philosophies on holistic treatment of mind and body these days all over the world people are seen practicing lifestyles propagated by Indian Gurus like Swami Ramdev, by organisations like the Art of Living, and other Ayurvedic schools teaching about Meditation, Yoga, vegetarian diet etc. These are the newly emerging cultural phenomena. Anthropological studies devoted to understanding the evolution of complex human cognitive adaptations and their links to population level dynamics of cultural variation are done to understand diffusion dynamics. In Assam, a state in the North East region of India centres run by these institutions propagating holistic treatment of mind and body through meditation and yoga are many. People are enthusiastically participating in the various practices like meditation and yoga. Vegetarianism is a foreign concept for the region. None of the religious schools of thought as practiced in Assam including Vaishnavism could strictly impose it. The Indo-Mongoloid population of the area has mostly adopted Christianity which proposes its own method for the holistic treatment of the mind and body. Also the non-Christian Indo-Mongoloid population is still practicing their animistic faiths though they are counted as Hindus in the Government Census reports. These faiths too propose their own methods for holistic treatment. In this complex cultural landscape this newly emerging global cultural phenomena has brought in micro-level changes which might in the long run also bring in macro-level changes.

Santhigiri Ashram

Santhigiri Ashram, an organisation from Kerala, dealing with Ayurvedic treatment have established their centres in Assam, where they offer treatment for holistic development of an individual besides therapies for particular diseases. In this way there are number of other organisations. Santhigiri itself receives more than one lakh patients per year and their number is growing day by day. In Guwahati city (the capital of Assam) there are three Santhigiri Ayurveda centres. Santhigiri Ashram centres have greatly influenced the society at large through their customs and traditions of Ayurveda practice of ancient India. The forests and hill stations of Nilgiri, Munnar, Wayanad, Kodaikanal, Ooty etc are the abode of spices and medicinal trees and plants which has been in service for human kind since time immemorial. These places in South India are therefore considered to be the primary centres of Ayurveda in India. Santhigiri practices Kerala Ayurveda and it has its centres all over India. The Headquarter of the Santhigiri Ashram is at Pothenkode. The Santhigiri Ayurvedic Treatment relies on Kerala's age old medicines. Only medicine and therapy is a form of treatment at Santhigiri hospital.

Panchakarma Therapy Packages

Ayurvedic treatment gives due importance to Panchakarma which includes Nasiyam, Wamanam, Viraechanam, Vasti, Rakthamoksham. These are highly effective for chronic diseases and rejuvenation.

Types of Diseases Cured

Santhigiri hospitals treat various kinds of diseases. But to be totally cured a patient needs to have patience. The Santhigiri Ashram at Kerala manufactures 500 varieties of medicines.

Rejuvenation Therapy

The main idea of the people who come to Santhigiri Ayurvedic Hospital is for ultimate healing for a happy and healthy life. The treatment begins by counseling about the disease and life in general. For this the patient has to visit the centre regularly for a few days. Then once they start believing in the system, treatment begins. Treatment includes the therapies like rakthamoksham, vamanam, viraechanam etc. The medicines are manufactured by the ashram in their headquarters in Kerala. During the treatment patients are advised to eat vegetarian diet for purification of the body. During the time of treatment Yoga and Pranayama are discontinued. After every treatment varying from 15 days to a month a gap period of 15 days is maintained after which oral medicines are advised to be continued along with Yoga and Pranayama. The patients are also advised regulated hours of sleep and work. Individuals are more likely to adopt some cultural variants based on their content. The people visiting Santhigiri Ashram have confidence on the style of their treatment. But as it is a treatment which involves adopting to marked change in their way of life it is also a question of adaptability. From the interviews that were conducted of the patients who have already finished their treatment it is seen that most often they continue with meditation, yoga and the vegetarian diet. Even if some do not practice yoga and meditation regularly they also do not give it up totally.

Many social scientists work on how individuals make decisions and how behaviour is acquired, while many of them ignore those decisions and mechanisms of learning aggregate at the population level. In the interviews with the patients they revealed very confused thoughts about why they chose this organisation for their treatment. Micro determinants of individual behaviour and the recursive relationship between these levels have been analysed.

It shows that the choice was made because this group is the most visible in the electronic and print media. The diffusion of innovations of all kinds indicate that biased cultural transmission is the predominant force in behavioural change and socio-cultural evolution in general, and not individual level rational choice trial and error learning or cost benefit analysis like it is assumed in many theoretical approaches in the social sciences. Unless payoff information related to the different traits is very clear people rely on biased cultural transmission.

Kerala as a state is known for its beauty, ayurveda, traditional martial arts, dance forms etc. So, style of treatment coming from there is considered as the best choice. This can be identified as a bias cultural transmission because similar resources available in Assam itself, or Meghalaya or other parts of India have not reached the patients. Individual level rational choice trial and error learning or cost benefit analysis are factors which can affect the acceptance of a cultural variant but in this case biased cultural transmission seems to be the dominating factor

Conclusion

As mentioned above marketing and advertisement of the Ayurvedic products through media has played a major role that has led to the acceptance of Santhigiri Ayurvedic treatment. Assam has her own Government run Ayurvedic hospital which caters to lots of patients. But the attractive photography and videos of Santhigiri Ayurveda of extracting plants and preparing medicines and also treating patients in the interior of forests and 5 Star Hotels appears to be very exotic and hence people are drawn towards their charm. The integration of world markets and technological advances in recent decades allowed for greater cultural exchange through the processes of globalisation and diffusion. With increased communication including air and rail travel, use of the social media, and the internet, the doors for international and national business have opened facilitating the flow of goods and services and also proper information as well as movement of people and organisations. Santhigiri Ashram has set its centres and brought its materials, products, infrastructure, health

workers and Doctors to different destinations. Relation with the facilities provided by Santhigiri Ayurveda has in the long run led to diffusion or the spread of material and non-material culture from one culture to another. Along with availing the treatment of Santhigiri Ayurveda people are returning back with a new appreciation of the Kerala Ayurveda system and adapting it to their own cultural practice. Tourism is another exotic way by which culture change happens. Kerala Ayurveda combined with tourism is a very interesting package that is offered to the tourists. Probably attraction for the Ayurveda spas offered by the tourist organisations has a lot of impact in the minds of the tourists. When these Ayurveda treatments are made available for the people of the recipient state there is a natural tendency for the people to accept the facilities. When this practice of consciously adapting to the culture trait of another culture continues for a long time culture change happens gradually. Access to the internet has brought this Ayurveda practice to most Assamese homes. They have integrated the Kerala norm not only through the practice of Ayurveda but also through the Kerala style of clothes (women have started wearing traditional Kerala sarees). Lifestyles as portrayed in the Kerala homes through the Ayurveda treatment is gradually leading to diffusion of culture amongst a section of the population

References/Bibliography

1. Bates, D.G. and Fratkin, E.M. (2003). Cultural Anthropology. Allyn and Bacon.
2. Clifford, J and Marcus, G. (2010). Writing Culture, The Poetics and Politics Of Ethnography. University of California Press.
3. Ember,C. and Ember, M. (2014). Cultural Anthropology. Pearson Education. New York.
4. Kaufman, J and Patterson, O. (2005). Cross- National Cultural Diffusion: The Global Spread of Cricket. American Sociological Review. 70 (1).
5. Miller, B. D, and Wood. B.A. (2006). Anthropology. Allyn and Bacon.
6. Richerson, P and Boyd, R. (2005). Not by Gene Alone-How Culture Transformed Human Evolution. Chicago The University of Chicago Press
7. Handbook on Santhigiri Ashram