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A Historical Analysis on the Social Life of the Dhimals of North Bengal

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Abstract:

Dhimals are the little known tribal groups of West Bengal. This community is also found in Jhapa and Morang District of Nepal. But in India they are only found in Terai or especially in Maniram Gram Panchayat and Hatighisa Gram Panchayat of Naxalbari Police station under Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Dhimals are described as a non-Aryan tribe by the most eminent scholars like Hodgson, Dalton, Risley, Hunter and O'Malley. In primitive age they were mainly animist. They were socially and economically backward. They made their living by shifting, hunting and fishing before the advent of the British in Terai. The Status of women was high in the society and a girl could choose her husband, her decision was given preference. Dhimals had their own rich tradition and culture. But over the years many changes took place in their social life due to the influence of the Hindus especially by the Rajbanshis, a dominant tribal force of the terai.

Keywords: Dhimal, primitive, tribe, community, Terai, backward, culture, custom

North Bengal is a place of various ethno-lingual communities such as Rajbanshis, Bodo, Koch, Mech, Rabha, Dhimal, Limbu, Munda, santal, Paharia, Mal-Paharia, Asur and so on. But among them Dhimals are very little numbered ethnic group. Now in India the Dhimals are mainly concentrated in Maniram Gram Panchayat and Hatighisa Gram Panchayat of Naxalbari Police station under Darjeeling district of West Bengal. They are identified as the aboriginal and a non-Aryan tribe by the most eminent scholars like Hodgson, Dalton, Risley, Hunter and O'Malley. Dhimals belong to Mongoloid group and their language has been classified as the complex pronominalized of the Tibet- Burma branch by the eminent linguist Prof. Chatterjee and Paul-Bane Doicket. Grierson in "linguistic Survey of India" Classified Dhimal language as 'Eastern Pronominalized group' of 'Pronominalized Himalayan Group' under 'Tibeto Himalaya Branch' of 'Tibeto- Burman subfamily' which may be categorized under 'Tibeto- Chinese group'. History was completely silent about the existence of the Dhimals of the Terai before Mr. Hodgson's report. Even Minhaj-Uddin Siraj in his book *Tabaqat-e-Nasiri* wrote about the presence of Mech, Koch and Tharu people at the time of the expedition of Mahammad Iban Baqiyar Khalji in 1205 but remained silent about the presence of Dhimals. It was Brain Hodgson (1847) who had written the first report in the form of monograph on Dhimals Entitled 'Essays the first on the Koch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes'. He mentioned that "the Dhimals whose numbers do not now exceed 15000 souls, are at present confined to that portion of the sal forest laying between the Konki and the Dhorla, mixed with the Bodo, but in separate villages and without inter-marriages".

Dhimals are described as a gentle, polite and non-violent race. Hodgson said about the Dhimals that "These people, though dwelling in the forest, apart from the inhabitants of the open country are never guilty of black mailing or of dakaiti (gang- robbery); which among themselves crimes of deep dye are almost unknown". Harimohan Sanyal in his book also mentioned that Mech and the Dhimal are much polite and peaceful race, no misdeed is visible among them, they never misbehaved with others, they never engaged in the practice of stealing. Physical feature of the Dhimals are same like the other Mongoloid people with small eyes, half-flattened and wide nose, square face, wide thick lips, black straight and rough hair, yellowish skin and medium height.

Before the establishment of the rule of British, Dhimals of this area mainly practiced shifting cultivation, fishing and hunting. Hodgson mentioned that Dhimals never cultivated any land more than two years and they never stayed at one place for more than four to six years. But with the expansion of the Tea garden areas the Dhimals began to lose their traditional pattern of shifting cultivation. Instead of that, business of wood became much profitable in this area so a huge quantity of wood began to export for making railways sleepers and also for other purposes. As a result the forested Terai region gradually becomes bald headed. But the last blow in their traditional pattern of livelihood had come through the forest policy that had been introduced by the British in Darjeeling district in 1864. British forest policy had curtailed all sorts of rights the Dhimals earlier enjoyed on forests. As a result Dhimals were forced to leave their traditional pattern of livelihood such as shifting cultivation, hunting and to adopt settled cultivation

In primitive age, mainly before the occupation of Terai by the British caste system was totally absent among the Dhimals. All were equal in the society. But in colonial rule they were forced to leave their earlier pattern of livelihood and adopt the pattern of settled

cultivation, again Hindus influence a lot in bringing about this change. As a result a kind of class system was developed among them. Risley mentioned Dhimals were now divided into three classes- Angia, Laten and Dugia. These three classes are not completely debarred from inter-marriages but the Agnia Dhimals deemed themselves superior from the other two classes and generally married within their own class. Four exogamous septs namely Chonga, Dauwa, Kauwa and Ranga were found for marriages at that time. Marriage in same clan was prohibited for male for seven generations and in case of female it was three generations. But at present, generally fourteen septs are found among the Dhimals namely- Donge, Ding, Talipa, Haria, Nunia, Rathum, Hardia Nunia, Anlaiti, Kasher, Later, Lambang, Tharu, Yogi and Tegree. But now marriages also occasionally took place with their neighbour Rajbanshi community. Earlier for such marriages Rajbanshis had to enroll themselves in the Dhimal community by abandoning their own caste and an entrance fee had to be given by them by giving a feast to the Panchayat.

Infant marriage is almost unknown among the Dhimals. But this custom was practiced by few well-to-do Dhimal families who earnestly tried to imitate the customs of high caste Hindus. Nearly a century ago the marriageable age of a girl in the main body of Dhimal society was between 12 to 16 and for a boy 16 to 20. Regarding marriage opinion of the girl and boy was given more importance than their parents. But sometimes marriages of well to do families were arranged by the parents. But as a rule of the society first step for marriage was taken by the girl by eloping one day before marriage with the man of her own choice and quietly settling herself in his house. But marriage ceremony would only be performed when the girl was able to prove her housewifery in the house of the boy. The custom of bride price was present among the Dhimal society and it was fixed on the basis of the beauty of bride and the social status of the bride groom. Marriage ceremonies during those days were performed in a simple manner. But as a result of close contact and interaction with the Rajbanshis and other Hindu caste some rituals and rites have entered into the society such as saptak or carrying the bride seven times round the bridegroom, sindurdan or smearing vermilion on girl's head, presence of village barbar, presence of caste guru usually a Rajbanshi and showering of dub grass, sandal powder, water on the heads of the married couple by the assembled guests.

The Dhimal women are accorded due status and respect. Woman occupies an important place in the socio – economic structure of her society. In choosing her husband girls have full freedom. An indistinct shadow of matriarchal society is still found in the Dhimal society. Girls are regarded as source of wealth and they are cherished. Dowry practice is not present in the society. Instead bridegroom has to pay bride price for marriage. Widow Remarriage is allowed in the society and ill-custom such as sati or widow sacrifice was totally absent in the society.

Rice is principal food of the Dhimals. They like to eat meat and fish. They avoided vegetable and they are very fond of non-veg food. But due to settled livelihood now they are cultivating some vegetables. Dry fishes are also preferable to their menu. From the writing of Hougson and Hunter we get some picture of the food habit of the Dhimals. According to them Dhimals eat all animals except oxen, dogs, cats, monkeys, elephants, bears and tigers.

In order to fulfill the demands of clothes dhimals acquired the knowledge of weaving. They used to make their clothes at home like the other tribal group mech. But they did not have any idea about the use of wool. Dhimal women used to wear 3 feet wide and 7 feet long deep red clothes decorated with white and yellow colours and Dhimal men used to wear a cotton sheet over their body and dhoti. Use of shoe was not present among them and they used a kind of wooden made sandal. Traditional dress of a man was "Chaite Dhari" (a knee height towel made with thick clothes) and the traditional dress of a woman was "Dacca-bona" (a cloth similar to the loin their chest). But now by the influence of modern culture many modern dresses have entered into their society. Dhimal men now wear pants, shirt, jeans etc and women wear saari, blouse, salwar, kurta etc. but still the aged ladies of the society wear their traditional dress "Dacca-bona". Different kind of silver made ornaments like Tacca-mala (neklace of coins), Chandra-Har (moon designed necklace), Surya-har (Sun degined necklace), Jhuri-Kharu (A kind of bangle), Theng- kharu (anklet) are used by the Dhimal women. Due to economic reason use of gold is not popular among them.

Three important festivals of the Dhimals were Harijata held in December- January at the time of ripening of cotton crop, Gavipuja held in July- August at the time when the rice comes into ear and the last one Pachima-paka celebrated in October. The first two festivals were related with agriculture mainly held on the bank of river and last one observed inside the house. But with the course of time all these festivals gradually disappeared from the Dhimal society. Now the most important festival is "Gram- puja" a collective festival by the villager for the welfare of the village. Despite this "Asari- Ghasari Puja" at the time of sowing and "Jeth puja" for crops is also celebrated by the Dhimals. All these festivals that are now observed by the Dhimal society have been influenced by the Rajbanshi society.

In the conclusion it can be said that the social condition of the Dhimals is not advanced. Still most of them are very poor. In the census report of 1872 of Darjeeling district Dhimals were described as aboriginal Tribe of this region but surprisingly they were disappeared from the census report of 1931. As a result they deprived from all sorts of facilities which ST and SC communities are enjoying. The Dhimals of this region have been demanding the status of schedule Tribe from a very long time. And in order to enlist their identity in the Government list of schedule Caste and schedule Tribe, an organization namely "Dhimal Astitya Raksha Samity" has been formed by them. Dhimal had their rich culture and tradition. But now various changes have been taken place in their social life. It can be said that if the dhimals are included in the Government list of schedule Caste and schedule Tribe then some sorts of benefits may change their social condition which may help them to preserve their identity as an ethnic group.

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