

Ethnicity vs Development: The Dalus in the West Garo Hills District of Meghalaya

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The study of 'ethnicity' and 'development' is fundamental in the study of social change but unfortunately both these concepts are usually so loosely defined that they overlap with a number of other related concepts. Ethnicity is essentially an ascriptive phenomenon, founded on certain primordial characteristics like language, religion, culture, geographical territory, and so on but its boundaries being flexible and subject to change in time as well as space its subjective connotation—sense of a belonging to a group—is often found to be the only valid ground on which it stands.

Ethnicity has been found to be closely related to state and development (Thompson and Ronen 1986). The process of development, on closer scrutiny, is found to be more growth-oriented than distributive, and more state-centred than emerging from the people's needs. Consequently, it has been one of the determining factors for the ethnic upsurges everywhere. Most such upsurges, in final analysis, crave for a better control over local resources or better redistributive justice. Incidentally, the ethnic phenomenon itself is often made a scapegoat for lack of development or blocking it and therefore consider it as anti-development. Efforts to reconcile these two apparently conflicting

concepts are found in the coinage of concepts like 'ethnonationalism' (Connor 1973) and 'ethnodevelopment' (Stavenhagen 1987) but ethnicity is more acceptedly seen as a consequence of the failure of developmental efforts (Esman 1977).

Development is not yet a discarded goal. It is not only an irreversible process but also an on-going phenomenon. But development as it is understood today—as directed change—is not an uncontested value either: it is very often contested by ethnicity itself. In other words, the ethnic and development priorities sometimes compete with each other throwing the community concerned in a state of multiple ideological conflicts. One such example is found among the Dalus. Hence I intend to develop this theme here in this study with the case study of this community living in a village called Killapara situated in the Indo-Bangladesh border of the West Garo Hills District of Meghalaya. But since this community is rarely known even within Meghalaya a brief introduction may be desirable here.

The Dalus

The Dalus are a small and very backward community. Though their exact population is not known, a conventional estimate puts the figure at 9000, including those living in the districts of Assam like Darrang and Goalpara. They have only two graduates till now and majority of them are illiterates or semi-literates earning their bread mainly by selling their manual labour.

Published literature on this community are scant. The first ever book published on them was written in Bengali and entitled as *Dalu Jatir Bibaran*. This book was written by Pandit Mokhyada Charan Samadhyaya but it is not known when it was published. That it was published earlier than *Dalu Jatir Itihas* (1993) in Bengali by Prafulla Chandra Sarkar, the present headman of Killapara village, is clear because he makes a reference to the above-mentioned book in the preface to his book though he regrets not having been able to acquire a copy of the same. (I came across a hand-written excerpt of the second edition of this book but could not establish its date of publication.) The other important publication on this community is a short write-up entitled "Dalu" by Shibani Roy published in *People of India: Meghalaya* (1994: 148-

156). It may be worthwhile to point out here that *History and Culture of the Garos* by Milton S. Sangma (1981) disposes of them after mentioning them as "original inhabitants" and "non-Garo population" (p. 2). An article by D.N. Majumdar (1984) also devotes a paragraph to this community.

From the few literature mentioned above, it is however clear that the Dalus consider themselves to be migrants from Imphal valley and descendants of an ancestor called Vijay Singh Dhalji who, according to Sarkar (1993) was a king and, according to Roy (1994), a warrior. According to Samadhyaya also he is the son of Commander Vishub Singh Dhalji. He is believed to be the descendant of Arjuna's son Babrubahana. Once Bhagadatta, the King of Assam, attacked Manipur and forced Dhalji to flee his country with some of his followers, which is estimated to have occurred in the early seventeenth century. He took refuge in the Garo Hills and established a village there, which is still known as Dalu Gaon though not a single Dalu lives there today. According to Sarkar (1993) the Dalus of this village sold their lands to the Koch and the Hajong tribes and left it due to problems of water and the ravages caused to their crops by the wild elephants. But the present headman of that village, a Koch, agrees only with the second reason and considers the inability of the Dalus to pay the revenue as more important reason compelling them to leave that village and shift to Killapara, about four kilometres away from Dalu Gaon. According to some villagers, however, the first place where they settled was called Roga in the West Garo Hills. But this is perhaps wrong though the Dalus of Dalu Gaon are known to have visited that place for collecting articles like bamboo and firewood, which they sold in Killapara hat. This hat took place on every Monday. The very next day they left for Roga to collect those articles which they brought down along Bhugai river on Sunday. This perhaps explains the fact that Dalu language has many similarities with the Roga dialect.

Coming back to their history, there is some confusion about certain aspects. For instance, Samadhyaya (n.d.) and Roy (1994) mention about the return of Dhalji to Manipur after some years of hiding in the Garo Hills and that he was not accepted back by his own community. But Sarkar does not agree with this view. Further,

between the first two authors too there is some disagreement: the first says that being discarded he returned to the Garo Hills and settled there but the latter says that being unaccepted by his own community he was so disgusted that he discarded many cultural symbols of their society such as vegetarianism, sacred thread, and the 'Singha' title and adopted non-vegetarianism and the 'Dalu' title. Here again Sarkar (1993) has a different view. According to him, the adoption of new cultural symbols was compelled by the need to camouflage himself and his fellow members for the fear of being attacked and killed by the army of King Bhagadatta was imminent.

Here it may be worthwhile to refer to a passing but significant note by Majumdar. According to him, the Dalus of the West Garo Hills District are none but those Manipuri soldiers who were brought there by the British (1984:161). It also appeared from the present investigation that their migration to the Garo Hills must not have crossed two hundred years, which meant during the British period only. However, a careful historical research is called for before a tentative history of their migration is drafted.

It is, however, fairly agreed that the Dalus now living in the bordering areas of Bangladesh, parts of the Garo Hills, and some districts of Assam are gradually dispersed from their original habitat in the Garo Hills. About hundred years back, many of them shifted to the present Killapara village surrounded by the Bhugai river on the east, Bangladesh on the south, Choipani on the north, and Gangbhanga village on the west. Others went to either Mymensingh District of Bangladesh on the south or the adjoining areas of Assam on the north.

The Dalus are believed to be Kshatriyas and professing Vaishnavism. They are considered to be vegetarians and wore the sacred thread until they migrated to the Garo Hills. Though they have abandoned most of these cultural symbols they still continue with a host of other cultural traits of Hinduism. Here, a discordant note is offered by Bipin Das, an ex-employee of Border Security Force and married to a Dalu woman. According to him, they were originally known as 'Loo', which indicates that they probably belonged to the Loi community of Manipur, which is considered to be 'untouchable'. This is not accepted by the present Dalus

though this contention also establishes that they are of the Manipuri origin. Their traditional language is considered to be Manipuri but the influence of Assamese and Bengali languages on their language at present is quite clear from a list of 77 Dalu words prepared by Sarkar. Their immediate neighbours are the Bengali and the Garo but due to their cultural and religious proximity with the Bengali their interaction is more intense with them than with the Garo.

But they have a feature of their social organisation which seems to be closely shared by the Garo. This is their *dapha* or clan system. The whole society is subdivided into twelve clans, namely, Nengma, Doroong, Kara, Maibara, Chicang, Peera, Koon, Gnadhi, Mashi, Nikinin, Luru, and Sisang. Roy also mentions of Bapar as one of their clans and spells most of these clan names a little differently but Bapar was not known to the villagers of Killapara and some of these are believed to be of the Garo origin. They also have what is called the *gotra* system found among most caste-based societies. The *gotra* names found among them are mainly Shandilya, Alamban, Grihtakosi, Bharadwaj, and Kashayap. Their marriage and funeral rites also have a clear proof of their being Hindus. Their surnames are Sarkar, Singh, Adhikari and Dalu, of which the first and the third are also found among the Bengali. They mostly follow the patrilineal system of descent and inheritance.

Today, they are essentially a labour-class people in Killapara, where about 600 of them live amidst a better-off class of the Bengali. Their lands have been mostly sold away to the Bengali, Garos, and the Catholic Mission which is running a school called Sacred Heart School at Gangbhanga village. Only about 8 to 10 families own small plots of land which they cultivate on the basis of family labour and grow crops like wet paddy, cereals, and some cash crops which they sell at Choipani or Barengapara markets. The Bhugai river is the principal source of their drinking water excepting a few households which have their own dug well or hand pumps. Most of their houses are thatched and can be easily distinguished from the Bengali or Garo houses which have roofs made of corrugated and galvanised iron sheets. Electricity is also not available in most of their houses.

The important political events like the partition of India, the creation of Bangladesh, and the creation of Meghalaya as a separate state seem to have affected them most. The first incident divided them into two countries, the second made their area a battlefield, and the third incident completely peripheralised them geographically as well as economically. Now, as rightly pointed out by Roy (1994:156), their very survival as a community is at stake. Their survival has been endangered even physically as floods have become more recurring after the GREF (Ground Reserve Engineering Force) Road has been constructed on the southern border of the village, which virtually acts as a dam creating havoc for the villagers, particularly those who live in huts.

Ethnicity vs Development

Dalu ethnicity has not only been crippled by the conflict of cultural ideologies within themselves but also constrained by their overall backwardness. This is the most crucial point for them to resolve today and the answers are not clearly visible on their sweat-smeared horizon. The present essay shall attempt to bring out some such issues rather than provide an answer: the Dalu themselves have to search their way out. The major issues of their ideological conflict are discussed below:

(a) *Vaishnavite vs Non-Vaishnavite*

The Dalu are clearly divided into Vaishnavite and non-Vaishnavite groups though the former constitutes a small group of 8 to 10 families only. By Vaishnavites, they refer only to those who have taken *diksha* or initiation from the teacher or *guru*. In this sense, even a family may have, and there actually are, members who are Vaishnavites and others who are not. For instance, the parents may have taken *diksha* whereas the children may not have. However, a borderline does exist at the family level too and the people do make a distinction between Vaishnavite and non-Vaishnavite families. To become a true Vaishnavite is not easy: he/she has to lead a disciplined life and act according to the teachings of his/her *guru*. He/she must avoid non-vegetarian foods, alcohol, and perform various rituals devoted to the *guru* everyday. All this

cannot be expected to be adhered to by all and sundry. Hence it is confined mostly to a few relatively better-off Dalu families and the large majority of them are for all practical purposes, non-Vaishnavites.

The difference between these two groups is not merely that of religious beliefs and practices but is also marked by, apart from economic differentiation, marital restrictions outside the group. Normally, no negotiated marriage takes place between these two groups. The former also consider themselves to be ritually purer and thus superior to those who belong to the second group. However, they are not given any special respect by the non-Vaishnavite Dalus. They often challenge that there is no pure Vaishnavite Dalu in the village. This was in fact proved by no other person than Prafulla Sarkar himself, who is the most prominent Vaishnavite in the village with all signs and symbols of Vaishnavism. He was seen taking non-vegetarian food in a number of occasions even during our short fieldwork. This, however, does not mean that the ideological conflict between these two groups is resolved.

(b) *Gotra vs Dapha*

As stated earlier, both *gotra* and *dapha* systems are currently followed but the community is actively engaged in either underplaying *gotra* or *dapha*. One section of the community, with Vaishnavite leanings, is apparently highlighting the former and underplaying the latter whereas the other section is engaged in exactly the opposite. This ideological conflict was apparently dormant prior to our visit to this village but when our students began to ask questions on these subjects this conflict seems to have got sharpened. That this conflict was not resolved was clear from the contradictory answers which our students were collecting and it was not immediately clear why it was happening so. It was only after about a week or so that things began to fall in shape and our mind was clear.

The ideological conflict revolves round the question whether they are originally clan based or *gotra* based. One section of them argues that they were originally clan based and adopted the *gotra* system only when they were Hinduised during the reign of King

Pamheiba of Manipur. On the other hand, there are some of them who vehemently oppose this idea. According to them, *dapha* system was adopted from the Garo after they settled in the Garo Hills. Their vagueness about the names of their *daphas* and the inability of many of them to state even the names of their *daphas* sometimes made us doubt if it was really central to them. But our experience elsewhere shows that erosion of clan consciousness has been a concurrent feature of most Hinduised communities. Due to their closer interaction with the Bengali the clan organisation must have received a less sharp focus in order to make themselves feel at par with the Bengali.

On further investigation, this conflict seems to have been aggravated by the conflict of orientation among the Dalu of the village. They have two reference groups before them: the Garo and the Bengali with apparently different cultural traits. Orienting themselves towards the Garo seems to carry a hope of getting the Scheduled Tribe status more easily whereas orienting themselves towards the Bengali seems more in keeping with their traditions. This cord with their traditions not only makes them feel culturally superior to the Garos but also makes them feel at par with the Bengali. Politically, they are dominated by the Garos as it is they who represent them in the District Council, the Legislative Assembly, and the Parliament. But educationally and otherwise, they are under close supervision of the Bengali as it is they who teach them in their schools and provide various kinds of guidance to them. Thus, it is difficult for them to ignore either of these two communities though it is the Dalu who are at the receiving end always.

The conflict between *gotra* and *dapha* also includes the question of whether they will have to remain Hindu or become Christian. The Garo being Christian, they apprehend that orienting themselves totally towards them might later mean abandoning Hinduism, which they do not want. Eating or not eating beef is also associated with this dilemma. Though there is no reason why religion or food habits should also be homogenised with the Garo the players in this ideological conflict seem to have become successful in generating a lot of apprehensions in the minds of the (mostly) illiterate adult members of their society.

(c) *Caste vs Tribe*

Closely associated with the above two points in their conflict over caste or tribe identity, as though these are mutually exclusive in all respects. This conflict has taken special significance after the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council Acts, Rules and Regulations as amended upto 31st December, 1968 gave recognition to the Dalus (and the Koches) as a tribe. In Chapter 1, page 2, it says: "Tribals" means the tribes specified in the Constitution (Scheduled Tribe) Order of 1950 and includes the Koche and the Daloo (sic) of the Garo Hills District. Incidentally, this recognition is not extended to the state or national level. The state has clearly, so to speak, passed the buck to the Centre. For instance, the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly in its Budget Session of 1984 discussed the issue of recognising the Banai and the Dalu as the Scheduled Tribes. While the Meghalaya Peoples' Front proposed that they should be recognised, the Meghalaya Union of Peoples' Party opposed it. The then Chief Minister, Captain Williamson Sangma, stated at that time:

... the Committee on the Welfare of Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes of the House itself had studied the issue at length and recommended recognition of these communities as Scheduled Tribes of Meghalaya and that if further investigation in this respect was at all called for, it was for the Government of India to do so (Meghalaya Legislative Assembly 1984). The matter was then passed unanimously by the House.

This is where the matter stands even after a little more than a decade now. There is no serious and concerted effort on the part of the community, except at individual levels, to get the Dalu recognised as a Scheduled Tribe. Their insignificant size of voters, lack of leadership, and political awareness among the members, apathy of the dominant communities in the district, etc., are identified as potential factors responsible for what they have not been able to achieve so far. With such a small size of population and with only two graduates so far, the sympathy of the dominant communities is essential if they are to be developed. The majority of them being menial workers in the informal sector, they cannot

be expected to participate in any effort towards this even if they had their own leaders. This problem is further accentuated by a host of apprehensions shared by the members of their community about becoming a tribe such as having to become Christian and eat beef, among others. The fear of losing the Kshatriya status, which has given them a sense of pride, if nothing else in material terms, is another bottleneck in the minds of the people. Archibald Sangma, the representative in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly from that area, recalls that the Dalu were actually offered the status of a Scheduled Tribe earlier but they refused on the plea that their caste status would fall and they would have to eat beef.

All this is understandable from how basically an illiterate, minority, and peripheralised community perceives things in the surrounding. For them, the Garo represent the tribal world and to become tribe means essentially to become Garo-like. The vast differences within tribes in terms of dress, food-habits, etiquettes, etc., are not known to most of them. Of course, the Garo, as any other dominant community, would perhaps like to homogenise the Dalu culturally but that is a different question altogether. The Dalu have also seen the Bengalis prosper despite being Hindus and retaining all traits of Hinduism. The Bengali case has shown that they need not become 'tribe' in order to develop themselves: rather they should abandon 'tribal' habits like alcoholism and gambling. In other words, the Garo and Bengali communities stand as reference groups for them with apparently unbridgeable attributes.

Regarding the ambivalence of caste or tribal identity it may also be pointed out that the very question of descent is being hotly debated within themselves. The 'pro-clan Dalu', if I may use this expression, are apparently keen to emphasise on what may be described as parallel descent, in which the sons trace their descent through their father and daughters through their mother. Accordingly many returned the clan names of sons and daughters according to the clan names of their parents. Some of them, of course, informed that the daughters take their mother's *dapha* only when they inherit mother's property. This is what Roy perhaps refers to as 'vestiges of matriarchy' (1994: 48-56). But most villagers, with or without Vaishnavite leanings, deny this outright and say

that they are patrilineal. They even alleged that the claim of the other group is unfounded and motivated. In any case, this clearly shows an ideological conflict within them and they have not been able to sort it out by themselves.

The Dalu Path

For many they have to tread either the Garo or the Bengali Path. The third path, which I may call the Dalu Path, is not easily visible even to the most educated of them. But, perhaps instinctively, some of them consider that they should not lose the Dalu identity and become either Garo or Bengali in the process. They are ready to become a tribe, and even dream of becoming so, but not at the cost of their identity or without having to lose their Dalu identity.

The Dalu identity is being gradually revived, mainly in the initiative of the non-Vaishnavites. Their emphases are on their language, dress, festivals, rituals, etc., but all these are, as stated above, in a state of flux. Many of them claim that they can speak in their own language but often speak in the Bengali language and feel more esteemed to be able to do so. Their dress, festivals, and rituals are also largely same as those of the Bengali but they often come out with examples of their culture such as *bastu pooja* or propitiation of the village deity, and *habisanna*, a mourning ritual practised by them. These are often claimed to be exclusively theirs though it is informed that even the Koch and Hajong tribes have the practice of celebrating *bastu pooja* and this practice is also reported from various other tribes though the name of the rituals may vary according to linguistic variation. For a small community without any strong economic and educational foundation it is indeed very difficult to expect its culture to be entirely different unless it is a recent migrant group in a completely different milieu.

Hence Dalu identity may perhaps be better justified in subjective sense than on the basis of any objective criteria though theoretically they can develop certain exclusive cultural symbols or draw new boundaries between themselves and the neighbouring communities. The fact that they call themselves "Dalu" and are conscious of this identity in itself is a great cultural asset. Such a subjectivity may be difficult for them to translate into objective

identity markers but that it is not always necessary either. Their sense in the glorious past is an enough condition to give life to such an identity (Segal 1979 : 7-12).

It is partly due to absence of exclusive cultural markers and partly due to their insignificant demographic size that they are often seen ambivalent about their identity. The ideological support, which is much needed for sustaining such a culture and giving it a clear identity, is often missing due to their poor literacy, economic condition, and other such conditions of dependency besides those mentioned above. The need for development is so compulsive for them that many are ready to redefine their identity in order to make it congenial for development.

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