CHAPTER-44

Existing Institutions of the Barmans

Deals with:

Extant of the Barmans, Garba Puja,
Office of the Kunang, Dilo,
Hojai and Barua, Hojaiju and Baruaju.
Existing institutions and functions of the Barman

Garba Puja; Office of the Kunang, Dilo, Hojai and Barua, Hojaiju and Baruaju

Garba Puja - 'Garba' or 'Garba Puja' is still observed in some big villages with a large number of populations. But as it is a very expensive occasion in many villages, its place is increasingly taken by 'Kali Puja'. But where it is observed, the Barmans invite their non-Barman neighbours to take part in it. The way it is observed is described in Traditional Religious aspects of the Barmans. P - 90
It is worth mentioning that even in the N. C. Hill, all village administrations do not have all the office-bearers now. Only in the oldest and most conservative of the villages in the North Cachar Hills, 'Semkhor', these office-bearers are found.\(^1\)

Office of the Kunang:

Every Dimasa village has a headman who is called 'Kunang'. Though the office bearer is to be elected, it is seen that a male descendant of the deceased headman is elected. A person who is not a descendant of the deceased headman can be appointed to the post when no capable and efficient person among the last Kunang's male descendant is found.

If the village is very large, the village has an assistant headman who is called 'Dilo' in addition to the headman. With Dilo, the headman runs the business of the village administration. The heads of the families living within the village are consulted about the details of administration when the need arises. In all matters, the headman is the supreme.

These offices and office bearers are still in existence in the Barman inhabited villages. They can still exercise the same degree of authority as before only in the villages where all inhabitants or at least a majority of inhabitants are Barmans. But in the villages, where they form a small

\(^1\) Danda, D., *Among the Dimasas of Assam*, P-39.
minority, these office bearers naturally cannot exercise any significant influence or authority because their jurisdiction includes only the Barmans of the villages.

It is also a traditional duty of village administration headed by the Kunang to arrange and organise the celebrations of traditional ceremonies. But, many of these rituals have long ceased to be observed. But of late, it has become a happy practice of the Barmans to invite and allow non-Barmans to take part in the observance and celebration of the occasion to promote a cordial relation between the Barmans and non-Barmans. Previously, these occasions were originally and exclusively Barman affairs.

There are some practices, among the Barmans, which have also become obsolete with the passage of time because of the changes in beliefs. Thus, the ritual offering to gods and goddesses at the time of epidemic or natural calamities etc, are going out of practice with the spread of education and enlightenment. The practices, which are still current among them, also have undergone changes or modifications.

As it has already been said, the Barmans in the valley by and large follow the same variety of Hinduism as practised by the Hindus of this valley, specially their religious practices are nearer to the Bengalee practices. So, the village administration headed by the Kunang has often to initiate the celebration of Durga Puja, Holi and Dewali.

Thus we find that in consonance with the changes with the passage of time, the traditional institutions of the Barmans had to be modified to suit the demands of time. Whatever changes there might be, still the institution plays
a role in the life of the community. The absence of any superbody like Autonomous District Council as in the North Cachar Hills has also enabled the village institutions to enjoy much more autonomy than the village administrations in North Cachar Hills District enjoy. In North Cachar Hills, the village administration is under the close surveillance of the council.

It is also noteworthy that the offices of the Hojai and Hojaiju are rapidly losing their importance. The Barmans' increasing dependence on modern medical care at the time of illness and pregnancy etc, is responsible for this. There are a number of villages without the Hojai.

A Hojaiju is still there in every Barman village. She has an assistant called Baruaju. She acts as a traditional mid-wife. She is still called to help the pregnant women at the time of childbirth. She is paid for the service, which she renders. Her position and function still remain the same as before. But, the Barmans now seek doctor’s help when a case gets complicated. Therefore, the importance of the role played by the Hojaiju is not diminished in any way.

Again, they can translate into action the decision of the village administration provided they do not come into conflict with the laws made by constitution and legislation. They cannot try any case in which all parties involved are not Barmans. So, the scope of their function has become much narrower today.

But there is another side of the coin to look at. In the Barak Valley, there is no superbody over the village administration unlike the one in existence in the North
Cachar District. The Autonomous District Council in the North Cachar Hills has a very big say in and the right to interfere with the village administration. The Dimasas of a village can elect or select the Kunang but cannot appoint him to the post without the prior approval of the Autonomous District Council. Nor can they remove a man from the post of Kunang when they like to, without referring to the District Council as is necessary in the North Cachar Hills, where it is only the District Council which only possesses the authority to remove him. A village administration cannot apply to the government for a grant or help without channeling the application through the District Council in the North Cachar Hills Districts.

In the Barak Valley, the Barmans in every village are free to appoint their own Kunang and officials without going to any other higher body, as there is no such body in the valley. They can apply to the government for any grant or help for any purpose directly. Thus, one can conclude that at least within its own sphere, the village administration in the valley enjoys much more autonomy than enjoyed by its counter-part in the North Cachar Hills where the autonomy of the village administration has been diminished to a great extent by the overlordship of the Autonomous District Council.