CHAPTER - 5

Transformation of Society, Religion, Polity
Transformation of Society, Religion, Polity:

Impact of Modernisation on the Barmans:

The concept of modernisation as a theoretical study was first conceived in U.K in the second half of the 18th century.

In India, the wind of modernisation reached through the contacts with the west, especially Britain and not as a result of the replacement of a traditional agrarian economy by an industrial one. It was the few English educated people who first fell under the spell of the wind of modernisation which later spread roughly throughout the length and breadth of what was known as the British India.

The advent of the British rule in Cachar in 1832, after the end of the Kachari dynastic rule in 1830 was marked by the start of a process of modernisation in the region.

The process of modernisation of the Barmans gained acceleration during the forties of the last century. A number of more or less educated Barmans made their appearances in the region. There has been a great deal of increase in the Schedule Tribe literacy rate in the valley. According to 1991 census papers, the percentage was 59.19 percent for Cachar, 53.07 percent for Hailakandi and 59.71 percent for Karimganj District in general, where as it was 30.5 percent for the whole Barak Valley in 1971. (See the Page No 45, Chart no - 1.13).

The Barmans are now naturally eager for the formal education of their children largely because it is far easier for a Barman matriculate or a graduate to get government jobs than it is for other because 10 percent of the jobs in the
government and semi government establishments and seats in the professional and vocational institutions are reserved for scheduled tribes population. This is because they are better educated compared to the other scheduled tribe populations such as Boro-Kachari, Lalung, Miri, Deori, Sonawal-Kachari and Rabha etc.

It should be noted that, most of the Barman men and women slept on the floor till Independence. During the field visits in the villages mentioned before, it is found that the villagers now sleep on the cots. That indicates that there is a slight improvement in their economic condition. When the field visits\(^1\) were conducted in the villages i.e. Bagarkona, Dholai, Sodagram, Siberbond, Thaligram, Dormikhal, Kumacherra and Jaipur, it was found that at least 40 percent of the inmates of sample houses under my study did not use any modern durable consumer goods where as in urban areas, the Barmans use modern durable consumer goods which they can afford. One can find them in their village home also.

The impact of modernisation, which naturally made inroad among the Barmans, had its impact on their political behaviour. According to Robert Edward, political modernisation helps in the formation of a new political culture. Political modernisation is linked with economic planning, industrialisation, social system, capital formation and it is measured in terms of working population, literacy,

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1 : The list of names and data about villages selected for sample field work is placed in the appendix 1.
percapita income, political stability and technological growth.

The country as a whole had undergone these all processes. But these developments have always been on an uneven keel resulting in regional imbalances. In the case of the Barak Valley, the imbalance has been considerably adverse for the people as a whole of which the Barmans form a microscopic minority. In this respect, the Barmans are also victims of adverse and uneven development or, more precisely, under-development.

Political modernisation involves the processes like identification of the individual with the political system, involvement and participation of the people in the political process, emergence of people as holder of political powers and of new political institutions including political parties and pressure groups\(^2\).

The Barmans of the Barak Valley, in their present state, fulfil these criteria. So far as the first two points are concerned, as they tend to look upon themselves as a people separate from others inhabiting the valley, they can hardly feel themselves effectively involved in the prevailing political system in which they can emerge as holders of political power in a political situation where political parties themselves fight for en-masse votes of particular communities, castes, tribes whom they strive to transform into their vote banks.

Thus, it is not that, there is dearth of politically conscious people among the Barmans. But their political consciousness is not effective in terms of votes. This explain the reasons for the tendency of all Barmans of a village deciding collectively to cast votes in favour of or against a particular political party.

During the freedom movement, a number of leading members of the community took part in the fight for Independence. Late Manindra Barman, of Vijoypur, a communist leader made his appearance on the political scene and his party's activity were declared unlawful. There are still, in and around Borkhola, Barman supporters of the Communist Party of India {C.P.I(M)} and they have also their own Nikhil Cachar Hairamba Barman Samiti, a non-political cultural body.

The fear that the various concessions provided for them in respect of appointments and admissions to professional institutions etc will be lost with the loss of their separate identity, also works against their political modernisation. This inspires them to try to stick to their rural roots and continue with their own separate institutions because they are in microscopic minority.

The effects of modernisation came to the doorstep of the Barmans as they could not resist the influences of the mainstream political system but it was accepted haltingly lest, they should be denied of privileges granted to them as tribals.

The need for general awakening of the community began to be felt by some leading Barmans long before the end of the British rule. It was also felt that advancement in the field
of education is a pre-condition for the progress in the field of politics. Nandalal Barman, a leading member of the community of Borkhola was among the few personalities at whose initiative, an M.E school was established at Barkhola. The School is now a Higher Secondary School. Ram Chandra Barman donated Rs. 1500/-, a considerable sum during that period, towards the establishment at Jaypur Raja Bazar M.E School, which is also, a High School now. With the spread of education among the Barmans, there came about political awareness, which led to the appearance of some political activists in the pre-Independence days. They were mostly supporters of the Indian National Congress. The leaders included Brajendra Barman of Thaligram, who now heads the Sub-Divisional Development Boards for scheduled castes, plain tribes and backward classes of Silchar Sub-division. Late Anil Chandra Barman, an advocate, of Debipur, near Dholai, was also a prominent congressman from the pre-Independence period. Kalisaday Barman is also an old congressman. Nareshwar Barman, whose family donated land for the first M.E School, at Bam Dholai, which is now a Higher Secondary School and Nityananda Barman who donated money for the school building, both took the part in the freedom movement.

Besides congress, the only other party, which made some inroad among the Barmans before Independence, is the Communist Party of India. Among the Barman communist activists, the most prominent was Late Manindra Barman of Bijoypur, who because of his considerable organising ability, was able to spread the party's influence among the Non-Barmans also. After Independence, when the party was declared
illegal, he went and remained underground until the ban on the party was withdrawn. Another communist leader, Rukmini Barman, of Dolu Basti, later became a C.P.I (ML) activist.

From the time of Independence, the Barmans have supported only the Congress for a long time, excepting of course in the areas where the communists have some pockets of influence. In the late eighties, some student leaders of anti-foreigner movement formed the Assam Gana Parisad. Since then, the Assam Gana Parisad (A.G.P) twice formed the State Government in Assam. The A.G.P tried hard to win some support in Cachar. But, since late eighties, the B.J.P has been second largest party in the valley.

It is now necessary to discuss the Dimaraji movement at some length because it is the first violent political movement of a number of the Dimasa youngmen. Though, the demand for the creation of a state called Dimaraji was first raised by a newly formed body called the Dimaraji Revival Demand Committee, the violent activities in support of the demand are committed by a number of youngmen belonging to 'Dima Halam Daoga'.

**Dimaraji Movement:**

Militant separatism is a well-known feature of the North-East India. The Naga National Council formed on February 2, 1946, demanded separation of the Naga Hills from the rest of India in June 1947. Towards the end of 1949, Dr.A.Z.Phizo was unanimously elected president of the organisation. In the early fifties, the Naga Separatism
turned into a violent insurgent movement. "A.Z. Phizo made his dramatic escape to the East Pakistan on his way to London through the Jungles of this (North Cachar Hills) district in December 1956" 3. The North Cachar Hills area is used as the corridor for both Naga and Meithiee rebels 4.

But the Dimasa insurgency is something new in the region. The insurgency took its start following the formation of the Dimasa National Security Force (D.N.S.F) in the early nineties. After the D.N.S.F was disbanded and its most members surrendered, some of those who did not surrender were organised into an insurgent group called the Dima Halam Daoga (D.H.D) under the leadership of Bijoy (Binay) Nuidung. In this, Subrata Langthasa, Ex-president of All Dimasa Student Union, helped him.

There are two factions of the D.H.D now. One is led by Dilip Nunisa and the other by Jewel Gorlosa. The D.H.D runs its insurgent activities in close co-operation with the National Socialist Council of Nagalim. The Naga insurgent outfit, whose chairman is Mr. Isak Chishiswu and General Secretary, is Mr. Thuingaleng Muivah. The D.H.D depends on the N.S.C.N (I-M) for training and arms. For, quite some years, the D.H.D has been committing extortions, abductions, loot and murders.

The outfit claims to have been fighting for a separate Dimasa state called 'Dimaraji'. In the early nineties, a political body called the 'Dimaraji Revival Demand Committee'

4: Ibid.
was formed. It submitted two memoranda to Mr. P. V. Narasingha Rao, the then Prime Minister of India. The proposed Dimaraji, the D.R.D.C claimed, should include besides some other areas, parts of Cachar, and Karbi-Anglong and the whole of the North Cachar Hills District.

Very naturally, the violent activities and propaganda of the D.H.D spilled over into the Barak plains especially Cachar. There were bandhs and calls for boycott of Independence Day celebrations both in the hills and the plains. A 72-hour bandh, for instance was called in support of the Dimaraji Demand in Nov 2000. There have been considerable numbers of cases of loots and extortions and murders.

There are also the Dimasas and the Barmans who call in question the wisdom of the Dimaraji demand and the D.H.D activities. In 1997, the chairman of the Scheduled Tribe Development Board, Amal Kanti Barman, said “The demand for the creation of Dimaraji will spell disaster for the Dimasas”. In 2000, the Autonomous State Demand Committee and the Dimasa Student Union published a white paper and declared that they are opposed to the movement for Dimaraji. Brajendra Kumar Barman, an old congress leader, said, “Dimaraji, even if it is necessary, the time is not yet ripe for its creation”. Since in a democratic system, where the requisite number only counts, there is no room for Dimaraji

5 : The Jugashankha, 8.8.2000
7 : The Sonar Cachar, 27.4.2000
because the Dimasas are not numerically large enough, he added.

Till very recently all the sane advice had fallen into deaf ears. But the recent N.S.C.N (I-M) demand for the extension of on going truce between the armed forces and the Naga insurgent outfit into all Naga-inhabited areas in 2001 began to unnerve the D.H.D and the D.R.D.C because of the fear that the demanded extension ultimate might lead to the creation of Nagalim or greater Nagaland, whose map as prepared by the N.S.C.N (I-M) includes, besides other areas, the North Cachar and Karbi Anglong. The D.H.D faction consisting of about 60 members led by its chairman Dilip Nunisa, whose followers dominate the eastern side of the district, has been considerably weakened following several army operations. The strong hold of Jewel Gorlosa faction is Umrangsu area. But Jewel faction is also in a tight spot over the extension of the truce into the area of its domination. It has come to light that both the D.H.D factions have sent messages to the Assam Government, expressing their wish to enter into peace talks with the State Government. What is more important is the fact that they are not yet known to have approached the union government with any peace proposals. Thus, there are reasons to suspect that the Dimasa

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8 : The Jugasankha, 30-01-2001
9 : The Telegraph, 14.7.2001

{Foot Note :- The Dimasa Student Union and the All Dimasa Student Union are different organisation. The former does not support the Dimaraji demand while the latter does.}
insurgency was engineered clandestinely, by a mainstream political party, to harass the political opponents and now it finds that it had better be kept inactive. The white paper published in 2000 by the A.S.D.C and the D.S.U also lends support to the view. Therefore, the so-called Dimaraji movement is now expected to lose much of its steam. But the way of making easy money once adopted, cannot be given up by all, who have made extortions, loots and robbery, their methods of quick self-enrichment.

Barmans have got all remnants of their original animistic faith and practices. They all practise Hinduism in the same way as Bengalee do. There are now among them the followers of saints like Anukul Chandra and Swami Swarupananda.

While discussing social mobility, it is necessary to consider the extent of the process of Sanskritisation undergone by the Barman community. Sanskritisation is a process of social mobility characteristic of the caste wise segmented Hindu society. The term was coined by M.N.Srinivas, who uses it to mean the process of upward mobility of the lower castes by imitating the life styles of the upper castes, particularly of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas.

The impact of modernisation enabled the Barmans’ to shed many of their old superstitions. For example in the older days, a person instead of going to the doctors, spent money and materials to propitiate gods through rituals. Now, they

10 : See reference number - 7.
are more rational and discriminatory. They visit hospital on their own. These are marked changes in the life pattern of the Barmans, but the old practices and habits die hard. An educated young man, a government employee was asked whether he would take recourse to the propitiation of a god through the Hajoi as the remedy of illness of a member of his family. His reply was that, if it was found that all medical treatment failed, he would conclude that the anger or dissatisfaction of a supernatural being lay at the root of illness which could be got rid of only through the propitiation of that supernatural being. Out of 25, 15 educated young men and young women expressed almost the same opinion.

It is worth mentioning here that undergoing the process of modernisation at least in this country, the people do not altogether conquer the fear of supernatural and malevolent spirits, which they cannot easily explain away. It clearly runs counter to modernisation in the real sense of the term. Increasing beliefs in astrology, offering made to the planet-gods, pompous observances of ceremonies like marriage and casting votes in the elections on the basis of the candidate’s, religion, language, caste, or tribes are only a few examples of this mantel aberration.

Thus one can hold that like their neighbours, the Barmans are also undergoing the process of a kind of changes, which having effects mainly on their external material life, brings about much less changes in the modes of thinking and outlook.
An effort can be made to estimate the impact of modernisation on the Barman community as a whole has come about.

Before going in to the question of the extent of the process of modernisation, which the Barmans have undergone, it is necessary to look at the factors that make modernisation possible. Myron Weimar makes five main factors, which bring about modernisation. These are Education, Mass Communication, Ideology, based on nationalism, Charismatic-leadership and Coercive governmental authority.

**Education:**

According to a sample survey undertaken in 1984-85, literate Barmans formed 43.7 percent of their community. 51.8 percent of the males and 34.57 percent of the females were literate. During this period, 37.86 of males and 23.73 percent of the female had an educational level ranging from the primary to the postgraduate standard. But so far as higher education is concerned, they are much behind the caste Hindus.

**Mass Communication:**

Modernisation depends on mass communication to a very great extent. The media like radio, television, news papers, periodicals, movies contribute a great deal to modernisation for they spread modern ideas much faster. Educated Barmans read the newspapers and periodicals while the uneducated and even illiterates listen to the radio and watch television,
which are found even in remote villages in the houses of the very few who can afford them, but the use of durable consumer goods are at a very poor level till to date.

**Ideology based on Nationalism:**

Though not always co-existing, nationalism and democracy when permeating a community inspire it to modernise. A people whose leading members find it more worthwhile to emphasis its distinct identity and to stick to its ethnic tribal roots tends to resist or at least does not welcome a nationalistic ideology. The very few, if there be only, who can rise above narrow tribalism are unable to make their people to imbibe the sprit of nationalism and democracy for they can only do way with the benefits of reservations enjoyed by them.

**Charismatic-leadership:**

There has not been rise of any charismatic-leader whose influence can lead his people to adopt modern beliefs, values, ideas etc.

**Coercive Governmental Authority:**

Like Kamal Pasha and his present followers of Turkey, in India, there has not been only coercive governmental authority to impose modernisation from above. The Indian state is not imposing its "dictum" on small tribal groups. Constitutionally, various provisions protect tribalism but the impact of modernity comes to small tribal groups not through the provisions of laws but through the process of
urbanisation, higher education and through exposure to the outside world.

**The extent of the impact of modernisation on the Barman:**

Rustow and word have mentioned some measures, which can be used as criteria of modernisation.

**a)** Industrialisation of economy, adoption of scientific technology in industry, agriculture dairy forming etc making them highly productive comes first. The Barak valley is an industrially backward area where the Barmans are a small community constituting a tiny percentage of total population.

**b)** The next of the criteria is secularisation of ideas. The term secularism means the principle of having no connection with religious or spiritual affairs. In India, it is often used to mean equally distant from and or proximate to all religions. The Barmans are generally a religious minded people though their religious beliefs, has little to do with their occupation and general political life.

**c)** Modernisation is also marked by a “remarkable increase in geographic and social mobility, which include occupational mobility”. The Barmans in general are a rural people and hardly leave their villages for good, though sometimes, their jobs make them live away from their villages, their district and even outside their state. There is not much scope for their occupational mobility. The occupational mobility is minimal among the people, there is not much besides agriculture and a few government services. Lately, there is a little awareness among the Barmans. Some
of them, for various reasons are moving to the hills to seek employment. During a field visit, it was found that there were in some villages in the hills certain Barman houses that were recent migrants. The migrants now use the name of patricians as their surnames. As for instance Girish Barman has become Girish Kemprai.

d) An increase in material standard of living is another criterion for modernity. There has certainly been an improvement in the material standard of living. The Barmans did not use many articles of furniture and all families used to sleep on the floor. But, now about 50 percent of them sleep on cots according to the field visit of sample houses and one can find tables and chairs in about 50 percent of Barman houses. Those who are serving in government establishments or are comparatively big landholders, use all kinds of costly durable consumer goods. These phenomena reveal the increasing economic inequality, instead of a general increase in the material standard of living because one’s enrichment ensures here impoverishment of another where the economic cake does not grow larger as a whole.

e) High proportion of working force employed in secondary and tertiary rather than primary production. i.e., manufacturing and services as opposed to agriculture and fishing’s, also accepted as the measure of modernisation.

According to field visits, the data collected from the sample villages, of the total number of Barman workers, more than 81 percent comprise those engaged in cultivation, agricultural work and household industries. 5.1 percent of
them are engaged in non-household manufacturing work. Therefore, the proportion of working force employed in secondary and tertiary production is too low to meet the criterion of modernisation.

**f) An increment of mobility in the society understood in terms of urbanisation, the spread of literacy and media participations are also important features of modernisation. According to field visit, as the Barmans who live in urban areas form less than 0.09 percent of the community and the spread of literacy among them has not crossed the 50 percent mark**, the participation in the print media is limited to a very small number of educated people. In other media, there is participation where they are available.

**g) High Expectancy of life at Birth:**
Life expectancy has increased because of the availability of medical cure for many diseases, which used to be the cause of many deaths in the early times.

**h) Relatively greater measure of public participation in the polity:**
The Barmans participate in the general and local election and cast their votes in favour of their chosen candidates. But they do not participate in the mainstream politics in a big way. There is a great deal of change-resistant outlook among the Barmans, so far as, their social life is concerned. Their keen desire to preserve distinct ethnic identity keep them

**(Foot Note :- See page 120 for the literacy rate. The figures pertaining to the Barmans living regularly in urban areas were compiled from the data collected during the field visits.)**

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continuing with as many of traditional features as possible. This is why, they still stick to their rural roots and the remnants of their traditional village organisations and continue to have their Kunang’s and other office bearer like him. They retain that sacred 'change resistance outlook' in respect of social life of the community. In the post Independence era, the seat of political power, in shape and idea, shifted to the hills. In the plains, the Barmans had enjoyed advantages in social exposures like education and integration with non-tribals. In the hill politics, many Barmans are found to have given up the surname 'Barman' and adopted patrilineal names. In the hills the conventional form of Hinduism is found to be practised only in towns.

For instance, Sri Phanindra Garlosa was the chairman of the District Council. Previously, he was a Barman inhabitant from the plains. Girija Barman in Haflong is prominent as a Dimasa gentleman. While the conditions in the plains induced them to adopt a posture of 'change-resistance' attitude, as they cannot so easily play a role in the mainstream politics. A silent migration of the Barmans to the hills is noticed. The District Council and educational institutions offer greater opportunities for employment to them. Recently, a Barman boy hit the headlines by being instrumental in organising the Dimasa insurgent outfit Dima Halam Daoga. He belongs to a Barman family from the Barak Valley, which migrated to the North Cachar Hills. He is now known as Jewel Gorlosa.