

TRIBALS IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI

Jalpaiguri is situated at the northern border of North Bengal. The district accommodates about 25% Tribal people who have hailed from the Mongoloids. They have come to India from Tibet via Nepal and Moimansingha of Bangladesh. So the people of tribal community are found living in the district since time immemorial. Among the tribals the noted are – Rava, Mech, Garo, Hazong, Chakma, Megh, Santhal, Oraon, Munda, Malpahari, Bhumij, Kheurua, Doha, Kora etc. But the most primitive tribes in the district are Rava, Mech, Gadura, Toto, Limbu etc. Most of them live in Jalpaiguri district although some of them are still to be found in Darjeeling and Kooch Behar districts. These tribal people do not dwell in any other districts but the above mentioned three districts. However, before going to discuss the life pattern of the tribal people of Jalpaiguri, it is essential to highlight some tribal community in this regard.

Rava : According to anthropology, Rava is a special tribal community among the Mongoloid units. Before the birth of Jesus Christ, the Rava entered into North Bengal from China through Tibet and Burma (Myanmar). These primitive inhabitants are founding in Assam, Garo Hills and Meghalaya. The ancient habitat of the Rava of Jalpaiguri district is Dakshin Kamakshaguri village of the Kumargram Police Station in the district of Jalpaiguri. They also live in large at Maddhya Kamakshaguri, Narar Thali, Radhanagar, Hemaguri, East Shalbari, Mouzar Gram and in the forestry areas of Jhiltong, Rayduck, Indrabasti etc. They are also round at Sara-Kalchini and Mendabari of Alipurduar. Some ancient life habit and style are still clamped with the Rava. They are matriarchal in origin in their

social set up: The issues are introduced in society in accordance with their maternal clan rather than their paternal race.

After marriage the Rava misses, need not have the change of their racial lineage. Their racial symbol is marked with animal, bird, tree, mineral ore, aquatic animal etc. As for example, the clans Mohatak and Gomrei are symbolised by stag and tortoise respectively. In Rava terminology Race is termed as Hosuk. In Rava society, Hosuk occupies an important place which is completely different from that of the other patriarchal tribes.

Rava society strictly prohibits a marriage not only in their own race but also in the lineage of their friends and relatives. Pre-wedding discussion is settled between the bride and groom party through a match-maker (*vut*). To finalise a marriage, a practice – *Koor* is observed in the Rava society. According to the practice (*Koor*) – the apparent groom, his guardian and the match-maker are called upon at brides home. But before setting out for the bride's house certain practices are made at the groom house to forbid whether the consummate bond be an auspicious one or not. In the *Koor* ceremony a white *pugree* is bound up on the groom head by the bride in collaboration with the priest or *Saranga*. This Practice of binding up *pugree* is called *Koor*.

On the marriage of *Saranga* sacrifices hen and *putochakat* and performs the puja of house-deity *Bontuk* on Mychasang. The priest in their tongue, says, "They are in marital bond from today". To apprehend the auspiciousness of the couple, a de throated hen is let free before a cooking pot filled with wine and water. If it found that the right leg of

dead hen lays spread more longer than the left one then the couple is considered to be taken as 'auspicious one'

From religious point of view, the Rava are Pantheist. In their term of deity are Bari and a place of worship of *Boridan*. There is no place of a formed deity in their society. Different elements of nature .like tree, stone, river and stream etc. are invested with the attribute of Deitism/Godliness. Their prime deity is Rishi. His authority Jog and the house deity in Rontak. Symbolising Him (*Rishi*) a hen-egg – *Jochi* is placed on a cooking pot, having filled it with rice and the pot is kept at Mayachasang, a corn container of the Rava's house. The female members perform his puja daily. Their special puja is celebrated in the month of *Baisakh*. The Rava call her *Dhanlakshi* or deity of rice. Of late, the Ravas are being attracted much by Christianity; Christianity has entered the Rava society. The Christian Missionaries are converting the under dogged Ravas into Christianity and upgrading their social, economic and academic status.

Cultivation is the main source of the Rava's livelihood. . Their economy is based on farming. From the very origin they have engaged themselves in farm work. Their ancestors used to plough *jhoom*-cultivation, following the *Tazia* Manner. They dug upon the soil with spade and scattered seed on them. Later they mounted to the states of a permanent farmer from a temporary one. The Ravas of Jalpaiguri are classified into two groups regarding their social and financial plight. The first of them is Rural Rava Society and the other is Jungle Rava Unit, engaged as labour in forest department. The labours get a dwelling house and two acres of land each for cultivation. In exchange they are bound to labour for plantation work of the Forest Department.

After the partition of country in 1947, when the refugees coming from Purba Bangla settled down at Duars, the Ravas would have to displace gradually from their farmland. In recent time of the tribals have got their land back for the initiation of Tribal Land Transfer Prevention Act and Sold Land Extradition Act. Besides this, the Ravas have retained some land for cultivation due to *Barga* Operation. Owing to the farmers' settlement in East Bengal and for Intensive Agricultural Work, a great change has taken place in economy. Now-a-days, the Rava are accustomed to each and every kind of cultivation work. They sell their harvesting crop in market, domesticate cattle's and sell meat to concrete the base of economy. Their children are now much inclined to education. Many of them, having been qualified, have taken job in both govt. and non-govt. sector.

Mech is a very primitive tribe of North Bengal. The Mech or 'Bodo' community occupies a paramount place among the different tribal populace living in the district of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Darjeeling. According to anthropological point of view the people of this community is a branch derived from the Anglo-Mongoloid. The language of the Mech is called 'Bodo' B.H. Hudson has first used the term Bodo to determine an ethnic language word. Later the term has been used to indicate a nation and a language. Historian N. Basu opines that the Mech and the *Keerats* is descendant of *Asur*. Once they were Mlech and later the term has been abbreviated into Mech. They reigned Pragjyotispur for nearly four thousand years and by the eleventh century they began to die down. From a description of Pembarton, it is known that they lived at Volehut of Bhutan

Duars, Moynaguri, Chengamari and Gopalganj which now falls under West Duars of Jalpaiguri.

Dulton in his *Descriptive Anthropology of Bengal* (1872) writes that the existence of the Mech could be found then in and around Bhutan Duars occupied by India. From there, they started living in Jalpaiguri Duars as permanent inhabitant.

In Census of India – 1891 Gait informed that the 'Bodos', being displaced from Patkai Hill, came to Assam by the year 1228. From there, they scattered themselves at different regions like Goalpara, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar naming as Mech or Mess. According to the Census Report of 1901, the Mech have been described as the most ancient tribal by Gait. In spite of their own mother tongue, they use Bengali language at present Charu Chandra Sanyal, a famous critique opines that the Mech belongs to the Mongol. Long before the birth of Jesus Christ, a troop of Mongol, overtaken the mountain of Patkoi via Barma, reached north-east Assam. Gradually dispersed at different places of East and North Bengal. It is apprehended that the team advanced at three different directions into three halves from North-East Assam. One of the teams reached upto Kachud and became introduced as Kachadi. The second troop entered Assam through the Brahmaputra coast and became known as Bodo. Here they were divided into four units – Mech, Koch, Rava and Garo. One unit started living by the Mechi River of Nepal. They are called Mechia or Mech. They are that group who settled themselves in Jalpaiguri, by crossing the Mechi River. The Mech kings had been reigning the area for centuries. But the Mech community has no authentic political history. The people of

the community have been living in the area from ancient time. The antiquity of the other communities living in North Bengal is very short in comparison to the Mech. Yet, the Mech has no script of their own. Many a culture and heritage of them is lost away in the dark of oblivion.

The authentic proofs of the Mech's have been unearthed with the discovery of Kumar Vaskar Barman's Dhubi and Nidhonpur Copper inscription. The genealogy of the forefathers of Vaskar Barman is found in the inscription. Pushya Barman formed the Mech family at about fourth century. Kumar Vaskar Barman was the most successful king of this race. During his tenure, the Chinese ascetic Huen Tsang came to Kamrup on a trip. That Kumar Vaskar Barman was a leading king in seventh century India was left with no doubt. After the demise of Vaskar Barman, Salstamva Mech ascended the throne of Kamrup in 664 A.D. The greatest king of this lineage was Shri Harish or Shri Hotta.

The people of Mech community are primarily the worshiper of nature. Their chief deity in *Bathou* or *Bathhau Siju* tree is the symbol of *Bathou* that is placed at the north-east ward of each and every Mech's house. Their chief goddess is *Mainow* whose position is in the kitchen. Puja of *Bathou* is celebrated with offering sacrifice on the month of *Baisakh* every year. Goddess *Mainow* is the god of *Bishahari* and corn. The god is worshipped on the occasion of marriage *Annaprashan*, *Nabanna*, cultivation etc.

To perform a puja the Mech possesses personal family priest called Rosa. Jou or wine is an essential compound for any puja. Many of them have not accepted Christianity. Those converted to Christianity do not

perform their old religious rituals. Another one branch of the Mech performs the Brahma etiquettes initiated by Kalicharan Mech.

The prime means of subsistence of the Mech community is cultivation. Even today their farming operation are going on with bull plough, ladder etc. But now-a-days, they are as interested in the cultivation of Aman, Aous, and Boro as active in the farming of winter corns. The people of this community are honest, simple and industrious. The Mech women cooperates the male in the field of production. Not only that the Mech women are too much expert in Endi-cultivation and handloom woven. With the advancement of education, they have taken up the calling of government service and many other professions.

The religion of the Mech is based on five principles: *Bathou, Mainow, Saris God-Goddess, Mahesh Thakur, Bishagari, and Kali* etc. are worshipped at home and the village or public deities are worshipped on a public after outside home.

Both their domestic and public pujas are celebrated on first *Baisakh*, the Bengali New Year. Though non-sacrificial pujas were prevalent in the ancient era, sacrificial systems have been started in the *Dapar* Age. Both the two systems of worships are on now-a-days in their society. The social conventions of the Mech were not so hard and fixed earlier and even today, *Keran* puja is the greatest celebration of the Mech. This worshipping is of three types, such as (i) *Eye Keray*, (ii) *Madai Keray*, (iii) *Garja Keray*. The third one is the most important of them because of its unanimous/combined celebration by some villages.

Regarding the matters like land-heritage, marriage etc., the Mech primarily follows the conventions set by their parental society. Like the other tribal societies, their social set up is formed consisting of different *Ari's* or groups. The groups, in their term, are called *Foroihol*. The groups generally found in West Bengal and Ishwarari, Champromari, Hazoari, Bodgoari, Bosumatari and Mochahari. There is no distinction of high and low in Mech society. Different tribal groups have different totems or symbol of group.

Though, caste-marriage was prohibited in the Mech society, with the development of education the system has gradually been loosened. The practice of child-marriage cannot be seen in the society. Dowry was given to a bride in the past but now dowry is given to the groom. Polygamy was out of touch. When the son or daughter grows to wedding-age, bride or groom is looked for. A marriage is settled through *Gadoa* or a match-maker. At first, the match-maker talk to the brides family and fix up a date on which the groom's guardian go to take betel leaf, betel nut, some cash money and perform a puja for the Home Deity placed under a *Sizu* tree. If the bride party disagrees, the things are taken back. And if they agree the same things (betel leaf, betel nut etc.) are sent to the bride's home repeatedly. Final date of a marriage is fixed up, be seated on *Goigawna* with two party's. There is no season bar of marriage over the year. Marriage ceremony is celebrated on *Bathou*.

The lives of the Mech are rich in diverse culture. They observe the New Year's Day *Baishagu* in a festive manner. This is the greatest festival of the Mech's. The important dances of the Mech are *Bugromba*, dance of

spring festival, *Baishagu Gele Nai*, *Nagur Nai*, *Chalthungri Mogha Nai*, *Sotrali Mogha Nai* etc. The ancient *Kerai* dance is now in the way of extinction. Their marriage song *Haba Methai* and marriage dance *Bairati Mogha Nai* are mention worthy.

When someone in Mech society died, he or she is dumped into the ground. After the burial everybody offers a fist of soil in the grave. On the eleventh day *Afchhgar Nai*, the ceremony of purification and obsequial ceremonies are performed. The obsequial ceremony, performed with fish and meat, are called *Machhogarnori* and the one with veg is called *Bangarnai*.

Multilingual and multicoloured tribal communities like Mech, Rava, Garo, Santhal, Mund, Oraon, Lepcha, Toto, Limbu, Khadia have been living in Duars area between the Tista-Torsa catchments at the hill of the Himalaya in Today's Jalpaiguri. Specially the Mech, the Rava, the Garo, the Limbu are most ancient occupant/inhabitant of the area. Their language, literature, culture and behaviour have cast greater influence on the other tribal occupying places. They have advanced much than before in the sphere of education, culture, economy etc. Exercise of Literature among the Mech and the Rava has gained enough fame in the world of literature. Many people of these communities are found professing government service at different offices of North Bengal. This sets an evidence of their advancement in education. But the statistical analysis of Census Reports shows that their numbers, without increasing, are decreasing fast from the last 100 years, a table chart of which is shown below.

Year	Population of Jalpaiguri	Population of Darjeeling	Population of Kooch Behar
1891	21,608	-	3,778
1901	22,350	342	557
1911	19,893	-	-
1921	10,777	-	-
1931	9,510	379	77
1941	6,886	272	-
1951	10,507	224	56
1961	13,178	237	153
1971	10,387	253	68
1981	9,210	190	50
1991	8,101	140	40

Regarding the Census of lowering the population, the following causes can be held responsible:

- (i) In 1950, the British entered the Terrain Region and adopted tea gardening in such an intensive way that the jingle worlds were shattered havoc. As a result, the people dependent on forest became utterly helpless.
- (ii) Frequent changes in Land Management System and increasing of tax by the British.
- (iii) People coming from North East began pouring in East, while the rest started living in British India as the out-comers/foreigners.
- (iv) There had been a severe scarcity of Mech Land, centring round preparing the tea gardens by 1874.

- (v) An ever-growing pressure from the outsiders was always on.
- (vi) During the preparation of tea garden in 1860, a huge amount of land was forcibly acquired from the Mech Rava and the other tribes by virtue of Waste Land Act.
- (vii) The then British introduced Tenancy Rule for which lands could be easily bought and sold, causing a havoc infiltration of Bihari, Marwari and upper caste Bengali Hindu etc. in their native land that resulted extreme oppression, exploitation and deprivation.
- (viii) With the extending of Tea Gardens between 1860 and 1930, the local tribals were beginning to be displaced from their own land. The tribals revolted against the British for this.

According to a Report prepared by Sardar Saheb twenty thousand acres of land were earmarked for tribal people at southly under the P.S. Kalchini. As a result, people of Mech and Rava community went away to some other places. The other observations and field survey reveal that many people of Mech and Rava have been converted to Hinduism or Christianity. They speak Bengali. Though they follow the tribal conventions, many of them are still introduced as *Kudi*-while many other have assumed the title Mondal in Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar Sub-Division. This is why the Mech and the Rava always maintain a greater imbalance with the whole state regarding their population statistics.