Chapter 6
POWER STRUCTURE

The tribal life is generally regulated by customs and traditions in social, economic and political areas. There has been a definite system of administration which regulates internal and external affairs of a tribal community. All tribal communities possess some sort of government as an essential part of their customary law. But the primitive form of government sharply differs from the modern form of government as the former is embodied by customs and traditions of the community. The chapter analyses the Barmans’ formal and informal power structure and their participation in other power structures in the urban system.

Traditional situation

The Barman tribe of Cachar district a strong socio-political executive body through which the network of social relations is established in the form of institutions, customs and traditions in all rural and urban areas of the district. But it is not possible for a single
person to look after the whole Barman community of Cachar district. Therefore, the people are divided into geographical areas. Every Barman village has a headman called Khunang selected by the villagers themselves. Along with headman some other executive members are also selected to assist him to administer the village (Source: Mr. Rosomoy Barman, an ex-headman of Silchar Dimasa Samaj, committee).

Traditionally, the king is the supreme authority of the Barman community in Cachar district designated as Rihpasgaw (Commander-in-Chief). From each of the 40 Sengphongs, there was a representative who formed the king's assembly so that all the people could speak out through their respective representative. Moreover, all the Barman villages were represented through individual headman, i.e., Khunang and all the Khunangs were supposed to work under the leadership of Aigya-Khunang (the head of all Khunang). Aigya-Khunang was the representation of the king who looked after all the matters of people and administrative structure. Under the Khunang some other official members were working; viz., Delik, Daolatho, Habaiskhao, Farai and Hangchaobukhu and all these members formed an executive body which worked for all the welfare activities and administrative activities of a village (Paul 2001:249). The structure of the traditional Kachari administrative system is shown below.

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   King
   ↓
  Aigya Khunang
  ↓
Khunangs of 40 Sengphong
↓
Khunang  Khunang  Khunang  Khunang
↓
Delik    Daolatho  Habaiskao  Farai  Hangchaobukhu
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Village System

Previously, the oldest person of a village became its headman (Khunang). No other qualification would be taken into account and thus his selection was unanimous. The Khunang was assisted by a Delik (assistant headman) who was also selected by virtue of seniority in age. The third position, i.e., Daolatho was also selected on seniority basis who assisted the Deliks. The post of Habaiskao is multiple in number who were in charge of their respective areas and have the responsibility to communicate the pronouncements of the executive body. The rest two councillors Farai and Hangchaobukhu were selected from young members of their traditional dormitory (Nodrang) of the village on the basis of merit, efficiency and wisdom. They are the juniors and in the lowest position in the traditional political structure who assist all the senior executive members by all means (Paul 2001: 255 - 56).

The most important responsibilities of the village government was to protect the village and its inhabitants from the outsiders attack and from the wild animals. The village administrative body also had to look after the peace and order in the village and at the same time look after all the social, cultural, political and economic activities. At the time of settlement of any marriage the presence of Khunang is compulsory. He had to see the young males and females did not violate the rule of clan exogamy and tribe endogamy. The village administration also heard and decided the marital disputes. When such cases were brought before them, they would first try to reconcile husbands and wives but when they failed to reconcile them they allowed them to divorce. The administrative body also had to work some welfare activities for the interest of the villagers. They built roads, dug tanks, wells and canals from nearby rivers
for irrigation when necessity arise. In all the social, cultural and religious activities the presence of *Khunang* was necessary and he had to initiate and supervise all the activities. When any disease broke out in the form of an epidemic the *Khunang* had to worship the deity, supposed to be responsible for that disease. Besides, the administrative body had to see that its members should not violate their customary rules and regulations and whenever anybody violated these he or she would be ex-communicate (Dutta Choudhury 2002: 95-101).

But after the introduction of Gaon Panchayat system in the post-Independence period, some major changes have taken place in the traditional political structure of the Barman community. Now-a-days, the Gaon Panchayats are operative in the Barman villages. Yet, they are continuing their traditional political system alongwith the panchayat system. The activities of *Khunang* and other executive members are limited to social, cultural and religious occasions in the village instead of administrative activity. The *Khunang* never interfere in the activities of Gaon Panchayat, but whenever necessity arises he goes forward to the panchayat, consult them and proposes on behalf of the villagers (Paul 2001: 258-59).

**The Urban Situation**

The urban Barmans in Silchar town also have the traditional political system wherein a *Khunang* is assisted by two *Deliks* and six *Habaiskaos* but no *Daolatho*. The position of *Daolatho* has been dropped in the urban setting. Because, as the area of Silchar town is not very large and the executive body has two Deliks who assists one another, the body has dropped the post of Daolatho. The executive body is named as
Silchar Dimasa Samaj (S.D.S.). The structure of the present executive body is as follows:

1. **Khunang** (the head man) - Sri Suresh Chandra Barman

2. **Delik** (assistant headman) -
   (i) Sri Akhil Barman
   (ii) Sri Sudhir Barman

3. **Habaiskao** (area-in-charge) -
   (i) In Tarapur - Sri Barid Barman,
       Sri Debnath Barman
   (ii) In Rongpur - Sri Biswajit Barman
   (iii) In Malugram and Itkhola -
       Sri Ajoy Kumar Barman
   (iv) Jhalupara - Sri Ronodhir Barman
   (v) National Highway and Hailakandi Road -
       Sri Himadri Barman
   (vi) Sonai Road - Sri Priyo Barman

Source: Sri Suresh Chandra Barman, the Khunang

The distinguished persons of the urban Barman community select the Khunang, Deliks and Habaiskaos. They are selected after every two or three years at the time of their community ritual, i.e., Kalipuja in the month of February. If the members are not selected unanimously, then, the necessity of election occurs.

Every year, before the time of their Kalipuja, the executive body raises a fund for which each and every Barman family of the town has to contribute a fixed amount. The contribution may vary year to year as per the requirement decided by the body. Of the fund a small portion is utilized during the puja and the rest for various social welfare activities of the Barman community.
The committee has set a norm to sanction a fixed amount (presently Rs. 2000/) on the death of any member of the community for funeral ceremony. Besides, the body sanctions every year a fixed amount of money (Rs. 500/- at present) to felicitate meritorious students of the community.

The executive body is empowered to take all major decisions for the community and anyone who defies the decisions is excommunicated. Whenever any dispute, quarrel or misunderstanding arises among the community members, they seek help of the headman instead of any legal action, in order to settle the matter. As soon as the executive body takes a decision, the Habaiskao communicate to all the community members in their respective areas.

One of the major responsibilities of the executive body is to maintain their clan exogamy and tribe endogamy. Traditionally, in case of violation of either of the rules the executive body excommunicated the deviants. But, now-a-days, the executive body of the urban Barman community has become a bit permissive in the matter of tribe exogamy because such instances are happening at present and the body is unable to restrict the young generation from doing so. Out of the fear of depopulation, the executive body, now-a-days has decided to accept those deviants by using the Dandi (atonement, i.e., some purificatory rites alongwith some money as a compensation decided by the executive body) to redeem the situation. But the body never pardon the deviants of clan endogamy at any cost. None of the executive members can attend a marriage violating clan exogamy and, therefore, such marriages never get social approval of the Barman community.
In this way, all the Barman people of Silchar town are living in a very much integrated manner in the town in spite of the modern political system existing side by side.

Traditionally, in the Barman community the woman enjoys a position of respect and dignity in the society. But a woman is never selected for the post of headman. Such tradition is maintained in both the rural and the urban Barmans and woman has been selected for any of the post of the executive body till date.

A case study of the present headman Sri Suresh Chandra Barman is mentioned below:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Case</th>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Position</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birth place</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tarapur, Silchar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Date of Interview</td>
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Sri Suresh Chandra Barman is the present *Khunang* of the Barman community in Silchar. He has been fulfilling this responsibility since 27/02/07. As the *Khunang* he is respected by all. He takes care of almost all the affairs concerning his community and issues instructions on every occasion. He should mandatorily be invited in any community meeting organized by the Silchar Dimasa Samaj, i.e., the executive body itself or other socio-cultural, socio-economic and welfare organizations of the Barmans. He should also be invited by all the Barman families at the time of marriages.
and funerals. On the other hand, he tries his level best to remain present in all the meetings, marriages and funerals. But whenever unfavourable circumstances arise he sends the Deliks on behalf of himself. He settles disputes and his judgments are honoured by fellow members. He will remain in the office until a new Khunang is selected in the next community ritual (Kalipuja) to be held most probably in February 2008.

In sum, the traditional power structure of the Barman community was changed after introduction of Gao Panchayat system. Like the rural Barman community, the urban Barman community has been maintaining the traditional power structure, but their functions become limited on social, cultural and religious activities rather than political. Moreover, few structural and functional changes have taken place in the traditional power structure of the urban Barman community now-a-days, such as, the position of Daolatho has been dropped; the body unable to do much developmental activities due to financial crisis; and the body has become a bit permissive in special circumstance of tribe exogamy. Yet, the post of Khunang is considered as the most honourable post in the urban Barman community and his judgments are honoured by all its fellow members.

Thus, continuation of the traditional power structure is perceived within the Barman community in the town despite living in the large modern political system.

REFERENCES


Paul, N. 2001 Social Change among the Barmans of Barak Valley, An Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis Submitted to the Assam University, Silchar