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Nomads of today-a case study on socio-political dimension

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Abstract

World is striving to advance technologically and in an eco friendly way. These changes are now being witnessed in first, second and in third world countries also. But there are some people who also live in these worlds without caring for this progress. They live in the world of their own. They are misfit to these ever changing worlds. They are 'nomads', the bohemians cling to their own lifestyle not at all caring for future. Today is only important to them but tomorrow. Tomorrow is left for tomorrow.In the long past they had ancestral homes, good arable lands, but in course of time they were stripped of their hearth and home, forced to move to unfriendly infertile land by superior race. As such they found it difficult to continue living there and left it to eke out living elsewhere and become 'nomads' Nomads are found in many countries of the world. They are also found in many states of India viz. Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal etc. in West Bengal nomads of different origin are also found. These people never stay permanently anywhere. They live in open air or somehow made 'Jhopries', by the side of railway tracts, dilapidated buildings, outside of villages etc I.e. far from the madding crowd. They eke out living of anything I.e. sometime as agricultural laborers, performing black art, i.e. magic, tight rope walking, and circus tricks, as snake charmer etc.

Introduction

Our center of study is around such a community known as 'mal'. They hail from East and West Midnapore district of Burdwan. In the remote past they were driven out of their homeland. Since then they roam from one place to another in search of livelihood. They work as marginal laborer, perform magic; sometimes beg for alms. They are oblivious or unconcerned about the development going all around. Spending time by thinking about their future is like luxury to them. In the present treatise an attempt has been made to present their thinking about their life, children, future,

view about present day development & changing world; In present discussion our endeavour is to explore the world of 'nomads' through the Mal's.

The word Nomad, coming from Greek word 'nomas' means wondering in search of pasture. A group of people who have no fixed nome and move according to the seasons from place is called Nomad. Actually they are breeded in the lap of nature and die in nature. Nomadic communities can be divided in two groups namely pastoral and non pastoral. Nomads in India whether pastoral or non pastoral are most neglected and discriminated social group (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia). They have lost their livelihood niche because of drastic changes in transport, production, distributional system and developmental project. They are the victim of past and present colonialism and are determined to survive. Through very poor, and deprive they are still not facilitated with any constitutional safeguard and concern. They are forced to fit into societies for means of livelihood in which they feel like aliens.

Nomads of today

Nomadic life is facing an increased strain due to conflict with the contemporary society. Nomads are not popular with national bureaucracies, always on the move, difficult to count, to register or to school herding peoples tend to be perceived as a combination of threat and nuisance. Political security and bureaucratic convenience have frequently been important motivation behind to scheme to settle the nomads in permanent homes. Competition from agricultural cultivation of the land and herding has steadily eroded the resource base of nomadic societies (Wikipedia; Union of International Associations, World Problem-Issues Online). The main cause is the structure of land ownership and land use whereby the most fertile land is devoted to capital intensive cash cropping with subsistence farmer being pushed into remote regions, even drier and more unsuitable for agriculture. Areas which were once grazed by the nomad alone are now becoming occupied. This is the principal threat to the nomadic way of life.

Nomadic groups in Burdwan

In Burdwan district we find various nomadic groups who mainly live in govt. vacant or dilapidated areas outer fringe of village, side of road, railway station, bus stand etc. and where the common people do not disturb them. They are found in Memari and Burdwan bus stand, railway station, Masagram, rail station, Satgechia, Ghordour Chatti, etc. In Burdwan district we have noticed many nomdic groups like Mal, Malpaharia, Sabar, Gouria, Bhada, Bagdi, Nayza Santhal etc. Among them some are seasonal migrant, come to Burdwan in harvesting time to earn sufficient money and back to their home after certain period. They have own house, land and permanent shelter. Behind their migration the main cause is to improved their economic condition like Santhal, Sabar. But some nomadic group roam from here and their just in search of livelihood and food. They have no permanent abode, no land and no house. They live under the open sky and tolerate all the vagaries of the nature. They don't have any future plan to improve their status and economic conditions like Mal, Bhada, Gouria, Karen etc.

Case study

Selection of the study area i.e., Masagarm rail station and adjioining rail line areas (on Howrah-Burdwan Chord line) is a temporary residing place of a nomadic group named as Mal coming from both the district of East and West Midnapore (Tamluk, Balichak, Nimtala, Faring danga, Ramgarh, Belpahari, Jhargram etc.). Our study area selection is typically influenced by our purpose to explore the unchanging/slow changing nomadic life in current century. There are two major groups named as Mal and Mal paharia. One is belong to schedule caste and other is schedule tribe.

There is a doubt about the studied people that which group they belong to. But it is obvious from their speech that they are low caste and completely separate from the mainstream society. Bisnu Mal a young member of this nomadic group expressed it in his short speech 'we are Pardeshi', i.e. they are compelled to adjust in that area which is not for them.

Historical background

It would be an incomplete discussion unless and until we unfold the historical background of this community. The Mal coming from the western plain-plateau fringe area; geographically their homeland lies in undulating terrain, high water runoff, soil erosion and resultant unfertile lateritic soil, and also some adverse climatic and geophysical conditions. They are traditionally habituated to nomadic life as those lands are mostly unproductive in character devoid of modern agricultural facility like irrigation because of less stream and canals (Maharatna. A; Interregional Seminar on Reproductive Health, Unmet Needs and Poverty : Issues of Access and Quality of Survices during 25 to 30 November, 2002).

The probable history behind their nomadic way of life goes back to 15th century when the Junglekhand or the adjoining regions of Jhargram of West Midnapore were ruled by 'Mal' rajas mainly from tribal groups. But the tragedy started when Raja Sarbeswar Singh of Rajputana came to visit Srikhestra (Puri) and decided not to go back rather decided to stay and invade the junglekhand. Raja Sarveswar Malla Dev won and captured the Junglekhand by defeating Mal Raja and most probably this tribal community was pushed back to the unsuitable unaerable dense jungle areas. We guess these tribals viz. Bhumij, Mal, Santal, Sabar, lodha, Malpaharia (www.jhargram.in, History of Jhargram). But somehow they used to manage their living in the unfavorable terrain till 19th century. But during the great famine in that century they were forced to leave their homeland to earn livelihood elsewhere i.e. in different places in West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar etc (Living with snakes: the life style of snake charmers (saquakela) Mohanty S.C. ADIVASI; volume 44, Numberv1&2, June & December 2004.

Their history of migration did not end there. In 19th century during great famine they split up into different groups and spread out to different places of West Bengal, Orissa and Jharkhand and still on move to find out their livelihood and security. Such a nomadic group we find near Masagram rail station, Burdwan which is our studied group.

Origin

According to anthropological research the oldest human race of Midnapore district belong to Australoid which is usually observed with the indigenous population of plateau fringe area (Glimpses of Paharia Tribe; Dr. DaradhiyaS.K, former Head of the Depertment, Dept.of Botany; Godda Collage; Godda.). Their head is elongated; nose is moderate to pointed with dark complexion and short height. They are mainly cultivators. Other two human races that are found in western part of West Bengal are Indo-Aryan and Dravidian. Our Studying group mainly belongs to Australoid group but a few fair complexioned Mals are found which may belong to mixed recial group (www.midnapore.org).

Cause for their nomadic life style

Actually they were the inhabitants of forested areas and unaerable lands of East and West Midnapore district forest area and unaerable land. The soil in this region is harsh, relatively rocky and less fertile belonging to laterite and red soil group which is unable to provide sufficient nutrient for agricultural production. So, likely they travel from here and there in search of enough means of earning. That's why they migrated to the areas of agriculturally productive

region where resource potentially and carrying capacity is relatively high. Not only is that, behind their migration from their native place is also for physical security as those jungle areas is were infested with wild animal like elephant etc. A very common incidence in these jungle areas is the herd of elephant that often visit the place from neighbouring Jharkhand state in search of food and demolishes their 'Jhopries' and threaten life. In their homeland thaycan not get enough cash money (liquid money) by which they can buy their essentials for living.

Nature of migration

From time of their fathers and fore fathers as they recall, that they are roaming from here and there of Burdwan and Hugli district. They have no definite aim and goal of life or they have any distinct direction to move. They do not have any proper plan when and where and where to migrate. Because it is revealed from study that, some families are staying for 4 or 5 years, some for 6 months. Mainly they came after Durga Puja and leave the place after Holi or just before the Sitla Puja the main festival of the Mal community observed in their homeland. Usually these nomads live in abandoned dilapidated govt. structure, like different railway structure and open govt. 'khas' land until any government project setin there. In rainy season they migrate to the rail station of Tarakeswar (Hooghly) to protect themselves from the inclement weather. The entire family move collectively, only the women in advanced stage of pregnancy and very old and sick person who are unable to move are left behind.

Demography

As they are nomadic groups and roaming from one place to another thus majority of them are not included in the census. Only a few residing in some housing in their homeland and in some other places like Ghordourchati of Burdwan etc. are included in the census. As their infant mortality rate is high & both male and female are actively participating in gathering and collection of means of livelihood the birth rate is moderate to low. Their marriages are held at an early age of 12-15 in case of girl and 15 to 17 for the boys. They are very weak and sick in health. The children and female are suffering from malnutrition and various other diseases. Infant mortality rate is also moderate to high because of malnutrition, ignorance, lack of proper medical facility, lack of shelter and poverty. Most of their senior members die within the age of 50 to 60. Their demographic pyramid have a pyramidal structure with broad base but due to infant mortality it became narrow upward and it ceased between 50 to 60 year of age because life expectancy is low in this group.

Occupation and livelihood

Economic base of the Mals is very fragile in nature. Basically they are not producers but consumers as they thrive upon the contribution of the others. They have no definite economic practices and accept the opportunity wherever they get. Their prime occupations are catching the poisonous snake, snake charming, extracting venom and sell it to local 'Ostad' of Jhargram. They also work as agricultural labourers. Other works they do are digging pond, cutting trees, cleaning safety tanks, jugglery, bird catching etc. Here they work in agricultural fields especially in the harvesting season. They are mainly collectors and gatherers. They steal potato, and other vegetables, domestic chicken, ducks etc. They also beg in train, station, bus stands and also in the villages. They used to sing some of their local folk songs which signify their daily tales of life by biting on their back with a stick called 'Hapu'. In this way they earn hardly 70/80 Rs. in a working day, to meet their daily need. Male and female members of family both engaged themselves in earning and they equally share their domestic work also.

Society and culture

They have distinct socio-cultural traits and rules of their own. They belong to patriarchal society. The decisions in the family are made by the eldest working male person. They live in joint families. Generally they live in small group in make shift tent or 'jhopries' or in the open air braving the orgies of nature. They have strict rules of group endogamy, inbreeding or intra keen marriage. Marriage are strictly made within their community as well as with other selected clan namely 'Bhadu', 'Bhadu', 'Gouria', 'Nayza' etc. change of life partner is the acceptable norm in their society.

Food habit

They take rice, in lunch and dinner, and also take vegetables, fishes especially Silver cup, Puti, Pakal, Ban etc. They catch different birds like Duck, Salikh, Bak, Pankouri, Balihas etc. They also eat grilled skins of chicken, lizard etc; but they have restrictions in eating beef & lamb meat. Usually the males are addicted to smoking, smelling dendrite, drinking liquor etc. While wandering they camp at different dirty places and cook their food under polluted conditions.

Festivals

Their religious beliefs and practices mainly revolve around the cult of the mother goddess i.e. Sitla, Mansa etc. which are believed to grant them success and protection from their dangerous profession of snake catching. They observe five major festivals in a year viz. Sitlapujo held in the Bengali Chaitra month (March-April), Makar snan (January), Holi (March) and Biswarkarma Puja (September) and Manasa Pujo or Jhapan (July-August).

Conclusion

In present study our main endeavor is to explore ethnic origin, their nomadic lifestyle, hope, aspiration, future plan, cultural attitudes and the impact of modernization of them with the passage time. We have done this to highlight the plight and helplessness of the people who were once settled in their fertile homeland but letter on driven out by the greed and avarices of the social upper caste. They are not aware of about the modern social civic amenities and opportunities etc. The sophistication of civilization has not been able to make a dent into their life because of their illiteracy and incapability to adopt the changing face of civilization and environment. Nomadic life is facing an increased strain due to conflict with the contemporary society. Nomads are not popular with national bureaucracies, always on the move, difficult to count, to register or to school herding peoples tend to be perceived as a combination of threat and nuisance. Political security and bureaucratic convenience have frequently been important motivation behind to scheme to settle the nomads in permanent homes. Competition from agricultural cultivation of the land and herding has steadily eroded the resource base of nomadic societies (Wikipedia; Union of International Associations, World Problem-Issues Online). The main cause is the structure of land ownership and land use whereby the most fertile land is devoted to capital intensive cash cropping with subsistence farmer being pushed into remote regions, even drier and more unsuitable for agriculture. Areas which were once grazed by the nomad alone are now becoming occupied. This is the principal threat to the nomadic way of life.

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