



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Social Science

ETHNIC RELATIONS IN A VILLAGE IN WEST BENGAL

KEY WORDS: Ethnic group, ethnic relation, inter-ethnic co-operation, ethnic harmony.

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ABSTRACT

Relation between people of different ethnic groups is an important issue in today's world. At both the national and international levels, ethnic conflicts have become frequent which hampers social harmony. In this work I have made an attempt to map ethnic relations in a village. The major objective of this paper is to understand the ethnic relationship in terms of various social and economic aspects among the different communities in the study area. The village which I have studied has four ethnic groups, viz., Lodha, Bhumij, Oraon and Teli. In terms of percentage the Lodha community constituted 79% out of total population in the study area. In this village I did not find any caste hierarchy. The different communities in the village were related through (i) economic co-operation, (ii) inter-community marriages, (iii) participation in communal and village festivals, (iv) traditional village organization, (v) access to common property resources and (vi) participation in the rituals related to rites of passage and (vii) common language. In this paper, I have described through representative case studies how the above factors behind the different ethnic communities operate in a harmonious relationship.

INTRODUCTION

An ethnic group refers to 'a social group of people who identify with each other based on common ancestral, cultural, social, or national experience' (*Peoples, James; Bailey, Garrick;2010*). For the present study, ethnic relation means interaction among the different ethnic groups living in the village. However, according to Schermerhorn's, an ethnic group can be defined as: 'A collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their people hood' (Schermerhorn,1996:17). Ethnicity is as Warner and Lunt (1972) observe one of the several characteristics that modify a social system and are modified by the latter. Here in my study area there are four ethnic groups viz.,Lodha, Bhumij, Oraon which are under scheduled tribe and Teli, which is a backward class's community. The four communities of the study area were related through economic cooperation, inter-community marriages, participation in communal and village level festivals, traditional village political organization, access to common property resources etc.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The major objective of this study was to understand the ethnic relations in terms of various social and economic interactions among the different communities in the study area.

METHODOLOGY

For collecting data the major anthropological methods like observation, interview, participation, case study and genealogical methods have been employed. I have used household surveys and questionnaire schedules and collected qualitative and quantitative data.

Study area and the village

The study was conducted in a multi-ethnic village named Phulpahari, which is situated 3 km away from Midnapore town. The village is under the Kankabati Gram Panchayat within Midnapore Sadar Block under Midnapore Sadar sub-division in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal. The village by its nature reflects typical characteristics of a western Bengal village with majority of people belonging to Scheduled tribe and the village is surrounded by dense forest and wide open agricultural land.

The village is bounded in the north by Amrhatala village and on the south by agricultural land. On the eastern boundary of the village there is another multiethnic village named Golapichak and the western side of the village is bounded by forest and Khairullachak village which is mainly inhabited by resettled refugees from the then East Pakistan and present

Bangladesh belonging to various Hindu caste groups.

The village is inhabited by 423 individuals among whom, there are 208 males and 215 females. In this village I have found four different types of communities, viz. Lodha, Oraon, Bhumij and Teli. Most of the villagers are engaged in daily manual labour which includes construction labour, contractual agricultural labour, road construction labour, loading and unloading of goods, and also under MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), etc. Besides, a large section of the villagers are also dependent on forest products for their livelihood.

The settlement pattern of the village reveals community wise clusters of houses which are arranged in a linear fashion within a cluster along the unmetalled village roads. There are roughly three clusters of houses in the village. The largest cluster lies on the southern side of the village inhabited by the Lodhas who are the numerically dominant community of the village. The second cluster is situated in the middle portion of the village in which live some Oraon families along with the Lodhas and a few Hindu families belonging to the Teli caste. The northern cluster of houses is most dispersed and the houses belong to the Bhumij community. On the eastern side of the village lie the plots of agricultural land which are located at a much lower height from the land where the houses are constructed whereas on the western side lie a stretch of sal (*shorea robusta*) forest. Most houses of the village have mud walls with roofs made of asbestos and tin. There are some brick built houses in the village and majority of such houses have asbestos roofs.

The villagers get purified drinking water supplied from deep tube wells installed by the forest department located in the nearby Khairullah Chawk village. For other kind of water they depend on water from the dug wells. Medical facility is available at the neighbouring village named Amratata which has a government health sub-centre. Recently, a missionary hospital named St. Joseph Hospital has been established in the Khairullachak village. The villagers also go to this Hospital for the treatment of their diseases and ailment. In case of serious diseases they also go to Midnapore Sadar hospital. The village has received electric power facilities in a recent period and a majority of the houses of the village has got electric lamps and a few families were also found to use table fans.

Findings of the study:

Economic cooperation: The villagers of Phulpahari are mostly depending on forest product and by working on daily labour basis. The livelihoods of the villagers are thus going through this way. Few peoples are engaging in others

occupation. As the village is very close to dense forest so that each family has a representative in Forest Protection Committee (FPC) or JFMC. According to the Forest Act 2006, 75% forest products go to the Government and rest of 25% equally divided between each family of the village Forest Protection Committee. Agricultural field within the village is very limited and agricultural activities depend on the co-operation between different ethnic groups of the village. Sometime, the villagers depend on the labour of neighboring village. Instead of paying remuneration to labours, villagers paid them by giving crops. It is reflected a kind of barter system of economy within the village. Cooperation is also seen when someone need money as the villagers go forward to provide a loan for the needed person. The absence of banking system and Self Help Group (SHG) is the main reason for this phenomenon. The recovery of money is a systematic process, as if someone failed to paid money, then villagers informed head Mukhiya (village head man) and he will take the case. The villagers mainly collected leaves, fuel wood for their earning and also for their cooking purpose. The collected fuel wood is use for collecting feast and it is also used by needy person. For village communal festivals money has been collected from villagers and the amount of money is based on the economic condition of the particular villagers. Each villager must have to pay certain amount of money for village worship. Dowry system is another features of this village for which many bride father is largely depend on villagers help by accumulating money. Villagers are also working on different Government development scheme like MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), PMGSY (Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana). The working days are distributed equally between villagers. Any types of forest departmental works are also done by villagers.

Inter-community Marriage: Earlier marriage occurred between own community and in a particular way i.e. marriage by negotiation. Usually marriage occurs with a bride or groom from neighboring village within their own caste. On that time, marriage distance was much longer between bride and groom. Cause the economic condition of the villagers was so poor on that time. Many villagers give their daughter marriage early age because of their poor economic condition. And in case of boy's, the family wants to marriage their son early in the hope of coming bride would help in domestic work. But due to the development of economy, education and a closer to city culture villagers have change their mentality regarding marriage. Now a day's restriction of marriage with other caste is not prevailing. In present scenario, instead of marriage by negotiation marriage by love is dominant. As a result choice of bride and groom is much important in this matter. Most of the love marriage cases is found within the village i.e. both bride and groom is from the same village and breaking the previous norms of marriage. In case of family restriction on the newly married couples, a "Gram Sabha" has been called by the village head man for accepting solution. But conflict arise in love marriage when if bride or groom any one is from outside of the village. Then a meeting is held between "Gram Sabha" and if accepting solution is not coming then they informed police.

Table 1 : Distribution of population on the basis of inter community marriage

Name of the community	Lodha No. (%)	Oraon No. (%)	Bhumij No. (%)	Teli No. (%)	Total No. (%)
Lodha	7 (73.33)	01 (0.95)	02 (1.90)	01 (0.95)	81 (77.14)
Oraon	0 (0.00)	03 (2.86)	0 (0.00)	01 (0.95)	04 (3.81)
Bhumij	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	12 (11.43)	0 (0.00)	12 (11.43)
Teli	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	08 (7.62)	08 (7.62)
Total	77 (73.33)	4 (3.81)	14 (13.33)	10 (9.52)	105 (100.00)

Participation in communal and village festival: Every community has some specific God and they worship them. For example Bhumij worshiped Jaher Buru, karakata, baghut, tusu, karam and lodha's worshiped boram etc. But at present time due to the long staying over a place and due to the advancement of time they integrated into Hindu ritual system and a decline in their traditional ritual is noticed. Now the whole village organizes Sitala and Manasa pujo two times in a year. Sitala pujo is conducted by the Gramsabha at the build temple of the village. The puja is organized over three days and all villagers mandatorily participate in it. They had given money for the puja purpose. A committee is organize consist of every community for the smooth conduct of the puja. Beside this, worshiped of shiba is also organized at Shiba temple in the month of Shrabon. The shiba temple is situated at the entrance of the village. On the day of "Shib churtodoshi" younger boy and girl are participated to worship Shiba. A large ceremony is also organized in "Shib Chutordoshi" and it is conducted by every community of the village. Beside this, specific communities worship their specific deity like lodha's are worship Boram at Poush month. This specific worship is conducted by collecting money from the respective community. But they invite all the villagers and they participate it with great encourage. But a significant change is noticed in Boram puja of the lodha's. Like a "Deheri (Lodha Priest)" is present to worship Boram. But in this village, there is absence of "Deheri" and a Hindu Brahmin is worship to it. Earlier this ceremony of Boram Puja was conducted in the occasion of Chaitra Sankranti, Poush sankranti and Baishkha month and on the day of Jemel. But now a day's Lodha's are celebrate "Boram" only in the month of Poush (Bengali month). In the month of Magh, Saraswati Puja is conducted at the primary school of the village. Every students and family of each community participate on it with great encourage.

Traditional village political Organization:

All community of the villagers doesn't have any rules regarding political matters. A committee is formed consist of 10 members of the village is actively take part on political matters. This committee is constituted with village head man and others nine respected person of the village. Though there is no female representative in that particular committee, but they can take part in Gram Sabha. The village committee has certain rules that have to be maintaining by each of the villagers. The village committee actively takes part in the matters of conflict between villagers or if there is any problem. The village committee whatever decides regarding any particular problems is the final decision. If anyone found to be guilt and disobey village committee decision, then the family has been boycotted by the others villagers. They are not able to take part any village festivals even general conversation with the family is restricted. In case of conflict among others village, then Gramsabha is conducted between the two villages. If any acceptable solution is not coming from this two Gramsabha meeting, then one group might go to police station. The Gramsabha is conducted in front of Sitala temple.

Access to Common Property Resources (CPR): Various types of CPR have been found in this village. Play ground in front of Sitala temple is an example of CPR. Peoples of different communities have go there and share their sorrow and joys. Beside this, a play ground is also situated near the forest. Children's of different communities played there. A pond at the end of this village is another example of CPR. Most of the year it was dry except in rainy season when it is filled by water and peoples used it. A cremation ground is situated at the site of the village that is under forest department. All communities peoples are use this cremation ground.

Participation in Rites of passage: When a villager is died, than his family member requested to the villagers of all communities, to help his/her family. All communities peoples are help his/her family. In that village there is not any other

cremation ground for different community. A general cremation ground is available at the north site of the village. In marriage ceremony all communities peoples invite by the villager. Here all communities' peoples are come to join the feast. Most probably all family member come to the bride or groom family and gives some gift. All communities' people sitting to eat in same sitting place in this ceremony. But when other villager comes to the ceremony, they were not sitting with other communities peoples.

Common Language: Although the four ethnic communities have different communal language, but when they communicate of the other communities people in this village they use a common local language.

CONCLUSION:

From the above manifestation of different types of economy and their economic correlations, it is observed that a clear economic relation between different ethnic communities is a prominent feature of the village Phulpahari.

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