



Unity and Social Solidarity in a Tribal Village of Dooars

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ABSTRACT

Following Rudra Datt Singh's work at Senapur (U.P.), this paper studies the Kodal Basti village on the basis of Prof. Singh's methodology. Kodal Basti is a tribal village in the Dooars region where the 100% ethnic population is tribal. Here live only the Oraon and Rabha communities, which belong respectively to the Proto-Australoid and Mongoloid stocks. The village economy is totally dependent on the forest, paddy cultivation and nut farming. In this article, based on field work where data were collected with the help of Observation, Interview, Schedule, FGD, and Case Study, their social, economical, political and religious unity are discussed in detail.

Introduction

Unity is a state of internal consistency and lack of persistent conflicts, which cannot be regulated. It is the sense of solidarity arising out of sharing common values such as cultural activities, language, religion etc. Societies are based upon the feeling of similarity by which people identify with one another. It can be either a physical similarity, emotional similarity or a similarity of a culture in a group like clothes, views, likes-dislikes. We can see a village as the smallest and best example of unity and social solidarity. And also it can be said that a village shows geographical unity or territorial unity and within a territory it presents varieties of unity.

The concept of unity is a well known fact when Rudra Datt Singh, an eminent anthropologist, explains it in his study of an Indian village. He said that a village can be recognised by many common things which connect people, such as their common deities where people worship their deity at least once a year. It is people's belief that if they do not worship it, it will bring misfortune. So, it means that the belief system of all villages makes them unite and consciousness of commonness raise the feeling of solidarity and social unification. Also in a village, every community or group performs its assigned function and lives a harmonious life with the others by maintaining an attitude of mutual

respect. They are also united by specialised occupations. In a ceremonial occasion, many specialised groups are brought together in an institutional framework. The Jajman- parijan system in a village also helps to improve the level of solidarity among people. Living together and working for the following generations helps to connect the bonds of relationships. Extension also works as a factor of unification. The best common example of extension is the practice of village exogamy where women go to other villages after marriage and new contacts begin through this marriage and thus both villages create a mutual bond. On many occasions, they share gifts, food and thus it raises the expectation of social solidarity among the people of both the villages. Nowadays unity and extension have become the methodology for the study of any village.

In Anthropology and sociology, in his book “The Division of Labour in Society” (1893) Emile Durkheim explored the concept of social solidarity. Social solidarity is an idea of understanding or measure the strength and viability of the society. Specifically it connects the people to one another within a society and also connects their society as a whole. He discussed two different methods by which people feel connected to each other and society, that is mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. In simple societies, we can easily see the mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity found in a complex society where there is a major focus on specialization and people are mostly depended on each other. Social solidarity is based on two things: social regulation and social integration, where the former is based on a number of rules, strictness of enforcement and predictability of life and the latter deals with how connected you feel to your society and how you interact socially. Overall, Emile Durkheim says how people feel connected to one another and their society and what are the mechanisms that connect people to their society.

Research Methodology

For this empirical study, based on field work and purely qualitative in nature, I have used the path of unity and extension by Morris E. Opler and Rudra Datt Singh. I also tried to study the Kodal Basti village by applying this methodology to present the factors of unity which bind people in one thread. Both primary and secondary data have been used. For primary data collection, research techniques such as observation, schedule, Interview, FGD, case study, G.T., Photographs and Audio has been taken into account. Synchronic approach was used for this tribal village study in order to explain contemporary factor of unity. While all the population of the village provided the sample size, I have selected some key informants; I equally focussed all the age groups and gender to define and justify the elementary factors of unity in the village. Secondary sources such as research articles, published & unpublished material and internet were also used.

Geographical Setting

Dooars in North East India is an attractive region which attracts tourists because of its natural beauty and panoramic view (fig. 1). Mainly it spreads in some parts of Assam and West Bengal. Dooars literally meaning is The Door in Assamese, a Bengali language, that is a gateway between India and Bhutan, one of the eighteen passages between the Bhutanese hills and the Indian plains. The region is also divided into two areas by the Sankosh river i.e. Western Dooars, also called the Bengal Dooars, and Eastern Dooars, also called Assam Dooars.

The Dooars region is a tribal region whose people belong either to Mongoloid or Proto Australoid; the Mech, Rabha, Limbu, Bhutia, and Leptcha are Mongoloid, and the Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Ho, Lohra,

Mahali, and Chickbaraik represents Proto Australoid tribes. Most Proto Australoid tribal groups residing here are tea crops and forest migrant labourers and the Oraon are most dominating tribe among them.

In Dooars, Kodal Basti is a forest village under the Mendabari gram Panchayat, the Kalchini block of the Alipurduar district of west Bengal, where the Kurukh speaking Oraon and the Kochkrow speaking Rabha live. The Kochkrow language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family and the Kurukh is a Dravidian language, and they use the Sadri and Bangla language as common language to communicate with each other.

Kodal Basti is situated in the Chilapatta forest close to the Jaldapara wildlife sanctuary, and the Torsa and Kulti Rivers flow by the village, and represent the main resource of livelihood. People residing here are generally based on the work assigned by the forest department. In the rainy season they use to do agricultural work, but mostly they are labourers.

The Rabha

The Rabha are the traditional forest dwellers of Northern West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya. They are one of the important but little known scheduled tribes community residing in the north-eastern corner of India, known for their unique customs, tradition and beliefs. Rabha people mainly live in Jalpaiguri District (now in Alipurduar District) and Cooch Behar District in West Bengal and Goalpara, Kamrup District in Assam. In North Bengal the Rabhas are the inhabitants of the Dooars region from the river Teesta to the Sankosh. The whole area of the eastern and western Dooars may be termed as the cradle land of the Rabha, who belong to the Indo-Mongolian group of people and have similarities with other group of the Bodo section such as the Garos, Kachari, Mech, Rajbonshi, Hajong and others (fig. 2). They entered India through the north-eastern hills and gradually they spread over North Bengal as well as South East Asia. They are migrated from Tibet since long back and settled in north Bengal and Assam. They use to speak in the Kochkrow dialect of Sino-Tibetan or Kirat language family. Today they also speak Bengali and Sadri as a lingua franca. They trace their relationship with the Cooch kingdom of Coochbehar.

The forests Rabha are divided into a number of exogamous clans, known as the Husuk: the Banda, Kantrang, Mahji, Pomrei, Chinchet, Kara, Kencham, Panchbok, and Lombak. Traditionally they were a matrilineal community, inheriting their mother's clan or Husuk; today this community is in a transitional stage between matriliney and patriliney, but there is still a strong respect for the female lineage. One of the Rabha's prime sources of livelihood is the cultivation of rice, along with the production of nuts (palm nuts), Banana and coconuts. Fishing is the other important source of their livelihood. The forest Rabha are the worshippers of various spirits and natural objects such as spirits of various rivers, springs, forests, wills, wild, animals, and other natural objects. Their various spirits and deities are: - Rishi, Rungtuk & Basek, Michik Bai, Dekal, Jourakal, Buri Teesta, Buri, Torsa, Nalraja, Goncha Devta, Portani-Maitani, Bulua Bai. Their chief deity is a male god called Mahakal. Nowadays, however, they are influenced by Hinduism.

The Oraon

The Oraon live in Chhotanagpur, their cradle land, in East-Central India as well as in the Raigarh, Sarguja and Jashpur districts of Chhattisgarh, in the Ranchi, Lohardagga, Latehar, Gumla, Simdega,

Palamau of Jharkhand, in the Alipurduar district of West Bengal, in the Sundergarh districts of Odisha, Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Nagaon, Golaghat, Jorhat, Dibrugarh of Assam, in the Purnia and Katihar districts of Bihar and also in some part of Myanmar and Bangladesh. Even in Nepal we can find a number of Oraon. Historically, they arrived from Rohtashgarh to Chhotanagpur through the Sirasital, which at present belongs to the Dumri block of the Gumla district of Jharkhand. Apart from this, in the mid of the 19th century, a sizeable number of Oraon migrated to the north eastern part of the Dooars to work as tea labourers and forest worker in British estates.

The Proto-Australoid Oraon speak Kurukh, a Dravidian language written in the Tolongsiki alphabet. They also speak Sadri or Nagpuri to communicate with other people to trade in the Dooars Region. The Oraon is a patriarchal society where both Nuclear and Joint type of families exist. The Gotra or Totem system plays a very important role in the Oraon social structure: the Lakra or Tiger, the Ekka or Turtle, Kachhap or another type of Turtle, Minz or Fish. One cannot marry within one's Gotra, and the bride lives at the groom's house after marriage.

The Oraon follow the Sarna Dharam (Sarnaism), based on nature worship: the supreme god *Dharmesh*, i. e. the Sun, and perform religious rituals under the shade of a sacred grove of the Sakhua tree, accomplished by Pahan or Baiga, the village priest, who combines both the sacred and the secular powers. Women traditionally wear thick cotton sari with detailed stitched borders of red thread, especially for the *Lal Par Kichri* as known in their local dialect. In the past, men generally use to wear a long piece of cloth called *Tolong*, but in recent times, this traditional attire is limited to special occasion only. For ornament, they generally use brass jewellery (fig. 3).

The Oraons generally used to eat boiled rice, vegetables, other grains like, wheat, jwar, millets, fruits, fish and meat, but their food habits also underwent a change recently. During festivals and other occasions, they consume an alcoholic drink called Hadiya, a rice beer made from fermented rice. The Oraon depended on the forest and farm for their economic livelihood, but in my study area, they are working as tea labourers in the tea estates, in timber production and also as tourist guides etc., while few of them depended upon agriculture for their livelihood.

The Unities of the Village

a) Social Unity

A tribal village constitutes a social unit made up by different social classes and communities based on mutual obligations. Marriage, kinship, language; common places like sacred groves, Akhra, youth dormitories, etc. are significant to maintain solidarity in a village. For example, Marriage does not connect only two individuals but also it connects two families as well as village. In Oraon patriarchal society, a bride goes to another village after marriage but in the matriarchal Rabha a groom is welcome in their village after marriage. For representing the unity, a person uses many common kinship terminologies to define the bonding of different individuals such as *Kaku* (Uncle), *Dada* (Elder Brother) and *Kaki* (Aunt). Consanguineal relations work as a factor of unity within a village: in Oraon communities these relations are known as Khens whereas in Rabha society Matrikins are termed *Ningosa* which means 'We are same and the one'. Affinal kinship ties work for unification between two villages.

The Akhara is the common area where social unity can be easily seen in Oraon society where all

the males and females of the village participate in communal dances and songs though they are from different social group.

Youth dormitories are the social institution where unmarried male and female members of a community learn their traditional customs, songs, dance, indigenous knowledge and moral values. Youth dormitories are known as Noksa by the Rabha and Dhumkuria by the Oraon. In any village, this type of institutions are very helpful in creating the bond among members since childhood as they learn to work together and it also helps support a feeling of brother/sisterhood. Child or unmarried males/females or members of a youth dormitory help each other when working for the welfare of the villagers, that is when they are occupied in house making, cultivation, nut farming, gathering, hunting, fishing and protecting agricultural produce from animals such as elephants.

Language has always had a special strength in forming social bounds. Here in Kodal Basti we can see that the Rabha people communicate with other Rabhas in Kochkrow and the Oraon communicate with other Oraon in Kurukh but both the communities use a common language when communicating with each other. They use the Sadri and Bangla language for communicating purpose in places like the market where people from different social groups gather. A common language helps create a good bonding between the people.

b) Ritual Unity

The ritual unity of a village is amply demonstrated on the occasion of festivals and other religious observances such as jatra, marriage and worship. People of different communities take actively part in these occasions of celebration by mixing themselves together without any feeling of superiority as their position hardly matters during festive occasions. In Kodal Basti, the Oraon Pahan and the Rabha Huzi are the specialist of the sacred, who look after the relations between the villagers and the supernatural powers. They also offer worship and sacrifice at the village Sarna or sacred grove. In Rabha, the sacred grove is known as *Batangharam* and in Oraon is known as *Sarna*.

In Kodal Basti the major festivals are the *Sarhul*, *Rungtuk-basek*, *Mahakal Puja*, *Gram Puja*, *Lakhi Puja*, *Karam* festival. These are occasions that unite people both within and outside the village. The Sarhul is considered the most important Oraon festival in Kodal Basti, and it is celebrated in the Chaitra month of the Hindu calendar. In the Sarhul festival the Pahan of the village used to meet with the people to worship the gods in the of Sarna and offer sacrifices of fowl and pigs. All people of Kodal Basti participate and help each other to do the work assigned for them. During this ritual, the Pahan used to put two earthen pot after chanting a mantra and people believe that if the water in the earthen pot decreases, this is a bad omen but if the water of the earthen pot is still at the same level, this is a good omen because it will be rain and therefore good crops, in sum, it will be a good year. The Jatra also plays an important role in extending the social field of village: it is a special occasion in tribal life that provides the sense of solidarity when young people also find their life-partner, which creates new relations or social contacts.

Among the Rabha community, the Rungtuk Basek is the major occasion when people get united on a single platform to perform the worship rituals. It is celebrated in the month of Baisakh and every married person use to sit for the worship, and they believe it will bring happiness and wealth in the family. This worship is done in the courtyard of the house and two earthen pots are placed to represent the deities Rungtuk and Basek. *Chokot* (a type of holy drink) is served at the end of the ritual. Feasts are organised at the end of every ceremony and the local *Chokot* and *Hadiya* drinks are given to the

people as *prasad* (religious offering material substance of food). In Kodal Basti, the Oraon and Rabha communities invite each other to participate in every occasion which binds them socially on the basis of ritual unity.

c) Political Unity

The village is a distinct political unit as its boundaries are well marked and well known. In every society, a traditional political institution, the headman, exists generally to settle disputes and conflicts in the village court.

In earlier times, the Oraon and Rabha had their own traditional governance system: the Oraon Mahto is the headman while among the Rabha is the Marab with the help of the Marabson or council of the elders. But during the mid-20th century, after the creation of Kodal Basti Beat the traditional village headman is known as the Mandal, selected with the help of the forest officer. The Mandal resolves minor disputes and looks after the forest hazira. Before in Kodal Basti, there was one Mandal for each ethnic group i.e. selected on the basis of qualification. But after the implementation of the *Panchayat Raj Extension*, the role of the Mandal has gradually declined. Even in the Panchayat Raj system, people of Kodal Basti maintained the unity factor in its unique way. In the election of the Panchayat member every five years, if member is Oraon for first five years then for the next five years it will be a Rabha and this tradition is still going on since long.

d) Economic Unity

Most of the villagers are united by their common interest as their economy is based on paddy cultivation and also they used to cultivate supari. People do help each other on mutual basis whenever it is required and also they work as forest workers. The whole economy of the villagers based on interdependency, mutual help and cooperation. It works as a cohesive force among the people, one of the major factors of village unity.

In Kodal Basti, people usually work together exchanging reciprocal help either in agricultural work or other activities, such as house building. Usually people is paid back in kind, that is someone who has helped a neighbour to build his house, usually is helped by him when it is his turn to build. Often a fest is considered a way to pay back one's contribute to house building. Borrowing a plough means that your neighbour will reciprocate when you need help in ploughing your field, etc. However, of someone cannot reciprocate in kind with a similar service, he or she is expected to pay for the services received. People at Kodal Basti also cooperate in the exploitation of forest resources as well as in fishing activities (fig. 4).

The local weekly market or Hatt is a meeting point where villagers meet to sell their produce, such as paddy, nuts and so on, as well as exchange messages with relatives living outside the village by means of the peddlers. Thus, they build a network of strong relationships among a number of villages.

Conclusion

In Kodal Basti the Oraon and the Rabha form two communities with different languages and traditions; however, they succeed in cooperating, by means of a lingua franca, the Sadri and Bangla language, and a habit of reciprocating services among neighbours as well as working together in a

number of activities, such as fishing and exploitation of forest resources. This way, they constitute a social unity, the village, where, albeit conflicts may happen, there are common institutions strong enough to overcome those local conflicts and support peaceful resolutions both within and without. In sum, although in this village two communities are divided by language and origin, actually they are able to build up a web of strongly knitted reciprocal relations which permeate all the village's social fabric, hence subduing conflict and favouring unity and social solidarity.

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Images

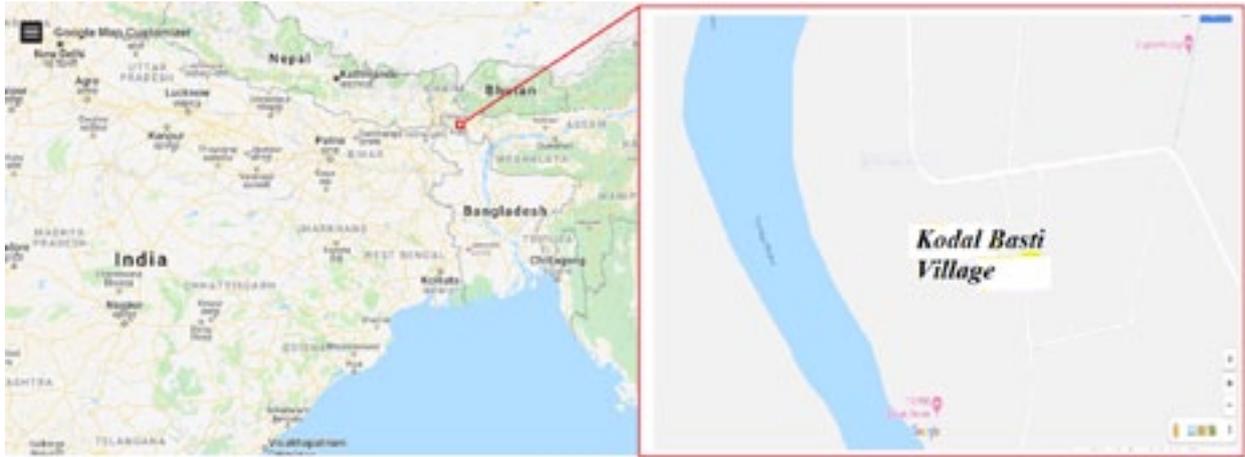


Fig. 1: map showing the field area (kodal basti, kalchini block, alipurduar, w.B., India) on the basis of the google satellite map.



Fig. 2 (Left): A Rabha (Mongoloid) couples of Kodal Basti village where earlier men were traditional headmen.

Fig. 3 (Right): A traditional priest (pahan) of the Oraon tribe (Proto-Australoid) of Kodal Basti village.

Fig. 4 (Below): Rabha and Oraon women working together, which shows the unity and solidarity of the village.

