

JANAJATI DARPAN

Janajati Darpan
— A Multi-lingual International Series
on Tribals & Dalits of India

2020

ISBN

978-93-82158-74-5

Published by :

Subhrajyoti Paul

on behalf of Multi Books

in collaboration with

Knowledge bank Publishers & Distributors

Series Editor : Indranil Acharya

Arranged by : Sukumar Gupta

Printed by : Rabindra Press

Composed by : PRESS SYCEM

Cover Design : Prasanta Nandi

Price : ₹ 250.00, \$ - 12



Prasadikar
Principal
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Goaltore, Paschim Medinipur

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Dhimal Tribe During Pandemic

Garjan Kumar Mallick (Dhimal)

Dhimal Tribe is one of the oldest tribes among other tribes in North Bengal. In spite of so many opinions regarding the arrival of Dhimal tribe in India, it is believed that the ancestors of Dhimal tribe were one of the sub sections of Kirat group who lived in the North East Himalayan Zone of Indian sub-continent. Coming about 1000 (thousand) years before the arrival of the Aryans, the people of Indian Dhimal tribes have been living in the Terai region of North Bengal throughout the ages as aboriginals. At that time, this region was poachy, morbid, Malaria and Kala-azar prone area. It was full of deep jungle with ferocious tigers, bears, different types of snakes, peacocks, deer and other wild animals and birds. Enduring many obstacles, the people of Dhimal, Mech, Tharu tribes survived by hunting, fishing and collecting fruits from jungle. Later, a colossal disaster affected the life style of these aborigines. Bit by bit, the government has deprived them of their right to forest and soil. Losing land and being uprooted Dhimals and Bodos are advancing towards the dense forest of West and the East respectively. The ancestors of today's Dhimal tribe remained amidst the deep forest of the Terai region of Darjeeling District which is full of epidemic and wild animals. Over 150-200 years ago Dhimal people were completely unlettered. To save themselves from Malaria and Kaal-azar they relied totally on midwives or the conjuration of shamans and on the herbal weeds. Even today, these rituals have been kept up by the academically backward Dhimals.

Even now, Dhimals go to the house of midwife or shaman when they fall sick. Finding out the reason of illness, the midwives or shamans sprinkle sanctified water, oil and ghee to the gods who are enraged and prepare medicines with herbs. Gradually, because of the death of the midwives or shamans and the destruction of jungles the practice of herbal medicines has been discontinued. The midwives and shamans won't like to teach these things to anyone. If their sons or close allies of their own community would request them earnestly or make them their adopted father, only then they teach the art. As Dhimals have no literacy, nobody had written about those medicines. Though there were some deeds, but these are either buried or thrown or burnt along with the death of the shamans. Dhimals believe in superstition that if they keep any of the things like deeds or clothes of the dead in their house, the soul of the dead will torture the folks in the family.

Translated into English by Shovan Maity



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Aboriginal Dhimals who are the sons of the forest have the might to fight against illness in their body. Collecting various types of fruits, flowers, weeds, honey, fig, ferong, kurchila tekor, taise, birali, pennywort etc. they used to eat those somehow by adding a little oil, garlic, ginger and green chilli. They had used very little spice and oil. They used to eat wild periwinkle, snail, oyster, hunted fish, jungle basil and meat of wild pig, deer, puma by roasting and adding green chili and salt. Dhimals in the past remained relaxed by drinking home-made wine, gossiping, beating drums, composing rhymes, playing harp and dancing. Former Dhimals were eating boiled vegetables, meat, fish etc. They used to survive from severe illness after eating and even working under the sun and rain. Even so, if epidemic comes now and then, the Dhimal women, being cautious, mopped the outskirts and inside of the house with cow dung, took bath in hot water with neem leaves. Maintaining social distance these panicked people used to save themselves from the clutches of epidemic. That village where cholera and other diseases spread out, the native Dhimals would not pay visit there because of fear. In the past Dhimals had a different room for an outsider. The outsider used to leave after gossiping in that room. Even today Dhimals would not allow outsiders into their room. Their western room is reserved for the head of the family where the altar of Sadi Berang deity is seated. Except the family members nobody is allowed there. The kitchen is generally one or two feet high from the ground. A thick layer of grass and cow dung is given on the floors. For this, during rainy season, the kitchen and other rooms remain dry. It is a method to stay well. Former Dhimal aboriginals had used dish, glass, bowl made of bell metal; kept water in clay pitcher and drunk it in bamboo glass; used to eat vegetables. There was no custom of using plastic and thermocol in this tribe. During festivals, they used to eat rice, curd, flattened rice, treacle either on pecheng leaf or banana leaf or banana barks. In ancient times, there was dense forest, huge water and wind. They ran away from their village to other villages during epidemic.

Now, we, the Dhimals come to know so many things and do not fear the deadly diseases like Corona. Unfortunately, we are not obeying the rules that keep us safe and well. We have to wear mask, wash hands time and again, and maintain social distance. We have to stay at home also. We should not conceal our disease. We have become educated and civilized and in spite of this we are breaking the rules. For our own profit we are deforesting and polluting the river water. We are working against the laws of nature. Former aborigines of Dhimal tribe hunted wild animals and collected vegetables according to their need. Even today, Dhimal tribes worship trees, stones, hills, rivers, animals by commemorating them. For this, nature has kept them alive. At present, people coming from outside, are destroying forests and polluting rivers.



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Because of extreme greed for wealth, they are cutting forest and killing wild life mercilessly and randomly. Pouring poison and propelling electricity into river water they are catching fish against the rules of nature. For these man-made misdeeds air, water, soil are getting poisoned day by day. If human beings are not cautious and aware, there would be more diseases like Corona. The humankind will die. In order to save us from epidemic the people have to learn the common and simple life style of aboriginals. We have to protect nature, otherwise our existence would no longer be there in this planet.

Word notes:

Dhimal- The Dhimal or Dhemal are an ethnic group residing in the eastern Terai of Nepal. They are a Sino-Tibetan-speaking ethnic group of the eastern Terai.

Boro- The Boro is the largest ethnolinguistic group in the Assam state of India. They are a part of the greater Bodo-Kachari family of ethnolinguistic groups and are spread across northeastern India.

Kirat- Kirat or Kirati are indigenous ethnic groups of the Himalayas (mid-hills) extending eastward from Nepal into India, Burma and beyond.

Mech- The Mech is an ethnic group belonging to Bodo-Kachari group of peoples.

Tharu- The Tharu people are an ethnic group indigenous to the Terai in southern Nepal and northern India. They are recognized as an official nationality by the Government of Nepal.

Ferong, kurchil tekori, taise, birali – Vegetables which are usually found in the Terai region and sometimes used as herbal medicines.

Sadi Berang- The main household deity of Dhimal people.

Pecheng leaf- A big jungle leaf like banana leaf which Dhimals are usually using to make cake during festivals.



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An Interview of Garjan Kumar Mallik (Dhimal)

in conversation with Shovan Maity

Garjan Kumar Mallick is a teacher, social activist and writer. He is one of the representative voices of Dhimal community. He has written a good number of books and articles to his credit. This is an online interview. It was conducted during this pandemic period. Mallick had been really cordial and cooperative during the interview. He replies all the questions with utmost care. The interviewer extends his heartfelt gratitude to him for sparing his precious time for this interview.

Shovan : *Who are Dhimals?*

Garjan : The Dhimals are one of the oldest indigenous ethnic groups of eastern Terai Nepal and the Terai region of West Bengal, India. As we have no written history except oral tradition it is supposed that the Dhimals have been living in the Himalayan region in the north-east of the Indian sub-continent since the Aryans came into this land. We are closely associated with the Kiranti group of the mongoloid race. Many similarities have been found among the Dhimals, Rai, Limbu, Koche, Meche, Tharu etc.

Shovan : *How do the Dhimals make themselves unique through dress?*

Garjan : The Dhimals are known for their unique dress code. It is one of the markers of Dhimal identity. The males used to wear a loin cloth (Langauti), vest (Bhoto), waist coat and cap (Topi). But nowadays the Dhimal people wear pants and shirts. The Dhimal women, however, still wear 'bona' (a black plain cloth with red stripes on the border) - this is five to six feet in length and is hand-woven, covering the body from breast to the knees. They also use hand-made ornaments like bangles, neckless, ring etc.

Shovan : *Say something about the food habits of the Dhimals.*

Garjan : Food habit of Dhimal tribe is very simple. Usually we eat Bhat(rice), Dal (pulse), and Tarkari (curry). The Dhimals still make less use of spices, oil, ghee. The non-vegetarian Dhimals preferred pork very much. Food served on bell metal utensils along with banana leaf is a sign of aristocracy in the tribe. In every social gathering we drink home prepared liquor irrespective of sex.

Shovan : *What are the superstitious beliefs that the Dhimals are practicing even today?*

Garjan : The root of superstition is very deep and strong among the Dhimals. We are



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very much reluctant to go to hospitals. We believe in herbs or natural herbals. We go to Ojha for healing and curing the sick in the villages. The ojha used to do exorcism and witchery. They give talisman to tie up on wrists or necks especially for the children and women. If any person visits someone's house frequently on Tuesday or on Saturday or on Full moon or on New moon time he/she has been scanned by the suspicious eyes of the society and often labeled as a dain who cast evil influence on the family.

Shovan : *What role does nature play in the life of Dhimals ?*

Garjan : The Dhimals are the descendents of Nature. Though we had to survive by hunting and fishing, we never harmed the eco-system of animals, birds, forests and human beings. We do not destroy the forests and natural resources such as river, canal, animals, trees in the forests etc. We worship rivers, hills, jungles, fields, the Sun, the Moon, pond, stones, roads, new crops, etc. as deities and pray to protect us from plagues, calamities, famine, diseases and drought; keep us safe and healthy.

Shovan : *What are the musical instruments that you have used during singing and dancing?*

Garjan : Dancing and singing are part and parcel of our culture and tradition. During festivals and ceremonies we, wearing traditional dresses, used to dance and sing with our own unique musical instruments. Dhol (drum) is the main instrument which we beat in every festival. Besides, there are Urni, Tunja, different types of Flute, Binayu etc. Almost all the instruments are made of bamboo. Dhimals create these in their own hands. We play these instruments during marriage ceremony, rice ceremony, cultivation festival of village gods etc. with utmost care and passion.

Shovan : *How do the Dhimals feel when others (researchers, film makers etc.) have entered into their province and studied them?*

Garjan : A mixed type of feelings do the Dhimal people feel when others enquire about us. A section of people who are not educated or less educated feel that it is mere wastage of time. Sometimes they get irritated and refuse to answer the queries or narrate their story. But there are few people like us who cooperate with the interviewers as far as practicable. We know it very well that if we want to save our culture, tradition and identity from the ravages of time we need to reach to the global audience through people like you. Our heritage and problems must be addressed as well as presented properly so that we can draw the attention of academicians, researchers, social workers and the government.



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Shovan : How do young generations of Dhimal tribe come forward to preserve their own culture and tradition?

Garjan : Our new generations are very much indifferent in this case. There are very few who are thinking about our culture and tradition. As these young people read in the medium of other language and sometimes have to stay outside for a long time for study, they do not feel the urge from within. This is not their fault altogether. To compete with others in the age of globalization they are doing so. But, I am saying through you that nothing can be achieved in life at the cost of identity. I am pleading to the Government and other authorities to look into our matter seriously and take proper step to preserve our culture and identity.



An Uros artisan by the Lake Titicaca.



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