

Dualistic character of the Mech community.

A casual observer to the area of our enquiry may even take cognizance of a distinctive feature in the Mech community of our study. This is a sort of "dualism"¹ or the non-homogeneity in the social life of the Meches. Economic dualism is always present in any type of community, marked by inequality in income distribution. But the stratification of the community on the basis of economic condition sometimes may also divide the community sharply from the point of view of culture and attitude towards life. This may be manifested in the existence of two groups of people within a community -- the one who can be described as modernised and the other, not.

In this modern age, perhaps no community lives in isolation because of the spread of the vast net work of transport and communication.² Similarly, the Mech tribals of our study have come in direct contact with the different ethnic groups. Further, with the growth of money economy, commercialisation of agriculture, beginning of plantation and starting of industrialisation, there have appeared a sharp cleavage in the Mech community itself. Some are quick to adapt themselves to the ways of life prevalent outside their own society, but some others are not so quick enough to accept the new values even if they are exposed to different parameters of modernism. Consequently, a group of Meches have been found to imitate the habits and customs of those whom they

consider, for reasons known to them, "culturally superior".* In the area of our enquiry, we have found that a group of Meches constantly imitate the habits and customs of the 'Bengalee Hindu middle class'. They have, so to say, entered into the thin edge of Hindu society and have adopted the common mores, values and habits of the ordinary Bengalee middle class. During our investigation, we have found that some of the Meches are quite indistinguishable from an 'ordinary' Bengalee people. Side by side, there are also other Meches who have retained their old habits and customs, so to say, in an unadulterated form.

But the absorption of a particular group of the Meches in the Hindu culture and way of life may, however, suggest that they have imitated and are imitating the 'Bengalee Hindu culture' as because the Bengalees are the dominant economic class. This should have been a possibility, for "in the science of physics, we are told that electricity flows from high potential to low; and in culture also it seems to flow from an economically dominant group to a poorer one when the two are tied together to form a larger productive organisation through some historical accident."⁴ In other words, this tribal absorption in Hindu culture should have been described as the "demonstration effect" or an attempt to keep up with the Joneses. It is known that the standard of living in any society is highly interdependent. One's habit, consumption pattern, preference, etc. depend to a large extent upon the persons with whom one comes into contact or upon one's own

*This is a particular form of the process of "Sanskritization" which indicates that "some lower caste groups begin to emulate customs and styles of upper castes in their region, give up some of their own low-rank customs and seek to get recognition for higher caste status within the system." ³

neighbours who may belong to a higher income scale. It is in this context social competitiveness expresses itself in the form of a certain pattern of living. This pattern of living may be the result of pure "Veblen effect" or pure prestige, self-esteem and attitude to social stratification. These subjective factors alter to a great extent the behaviour pattern, success and failure in life and levels of aspiration. These are, perhaps, group-determined, or to be more specific, one group determines the behaviour of another group. There may be a follower-leader relationship, or there may be a pure interdependence of cross-section of different communities.

The long contact of the Mech tribals with the Bhutanese ought to have influenced the Mech community to some extent at least. Particularly, it could be assumed that the Mech tribals who came into direct contact with the Bhutanese officials or who held high positions during the Bhutanese regime, would have followed the Bhutanese way of life and culture. But the impression that we got during our conversation with some of the very old members of the Mech community who could recollect the way of life that their ancestors led, was that the Meches did never imitate the way of life of the Bhutanese. On the other hand, they had imitated the Bengalee Hindu way of life. This tendency has also been marked by us during our investigation in the place of our enquiry.

We, however, do not want to ascribe any reason for their tendency to imitate the 'Bengalee Hindu culture'. We

simply submit to point out that a group of the Meches have been found to imitate the 'Bengalee Hindu culture', whatever the reason/s may be.

But what is interesting to note is the fact that the group of Meches who have adopted the "Bengalee Hindu way of life", are those who belong mostly to the higher strata in terms of income. In a family they observe the Hindu rites and festivals and follow the same procedure in worshipping the deities. The Hindu religious ideas have penetrated into their culture. They believe that their customs and rites have been modified due to their absorption in Hindu culture. It is also necessary to stress that the Hindu customs and habits have not only entered into affluent families but also percolated to a number of other Meches who are at the moment not so affluent. It is found on investigation that some of the members of these families used to belong to those families which had once held a large amount of land. On the contrary, it has been found that it is mostly the very poorer section who cling to customs and practices which are handed over to them from time immemorial. But this is not to suggest by any means that the 'Hindu way of life' is superior to the 'Tribal way of life.' Rather, what we may broadly suggest is that, under exceptions and reservations, the relatively affluent class of the present as well as past days, have more or less merged themselves in the main stream of 'Hindu life and culture', and the poorer sections, have ~~retained~~^{retained} their 'traditional way of life.'

Our analysis in the previous chapters have, perhaps, pointed out the existence of dualism based on economic positions in the Mech community. But the analysis also points out technological dualism in the Mech community of ours under investigation, in the sense that some of the richer farmers are using modern methods of cultivation, whereas some others are still clinging to the existence of dualism in the Mech community of the area of our enquiry, in the social field.

The existence of social dualism has been highlighted in some of the case-studies cited in the Chapter 4. The case-studies show that a certain group, imitating the 'Bengalee Hindus,' are using Brahmin priests in their festivals and family worships, whereas the other group, whom we may call the 'traditional' group are following the 'old tribal method of worshipping' their own traditional deities like Batho, Mainou, Mahakal, etc., In case of illness, physicians are consulted as a matter of routine by the former group, whereas for the "traditional" group, village 'ojhas' are the main healers. The former group feels that the natural and scientific causes are to be found in the treatment of diseases, whereas for the latter group, all diseases are caused by certain evil influences of certain supernatural powers and therefore, should be driven out with the help of ojhas. The social dualism is, perhaps, most conspicuous in its presence in the ceremony of marriages which we have the privilege to attend more than once. We have noticed certain visible changes in marriage customs in the former group. Like some of the tribals of West Bengal, the Mech-bride previously used to come to the bride-groom's house for

marriage. The payment of bride-price or 'Madom taka' is a practice which is prevalent in the Mech community from the olden days. But now like the 'ordinary Bengalee Hindu middle-class', 'groom-prices' are offered by the 'Hinduised' Mech families. In the traditional marriage, mostly followed by the 'traditional' group, the father of the bride or the negotiator in marriage, demands along with 'Madom taka', a certain quantity of 'jou' (country liquor) from the bridegroom's family. But this practice has seemed to have changed among the 'Hinduised families' -- jou are no longer demanded*.

Moreover, it is also found that sometimes the 'Hinduised' Meches rationalise their new methods, customs and habits by pointing out formalities, plenty of sacrifices of chickens, pigeons, etc. which are not longer possible to follow in the present day conditions. It is also an interesting experience of ours that some of the Meches feel and believe that by following the standard Hindu religious customs they can go up in the social ladder, and in fact, some of them argue that a new form of religion, in sharp contrast to their old tribal religion, would simplify the elaborate rules and regulations of their old religious habits - this they describe as "Brahma" religion, and during our investigation, we have found a group of Meches who have adopted the surname of "Brahma". This 'neo-Mech' section are either the affluent Meches or the descendants of those Meches who used to hold a large amount of land in the past.

The change is rather quite spectacular in the dresses of the women at home. To quote Sunder, the Mech "women

* A note on the old customs, etc. of the Meches is given in the Appendix-II.

wear a silk sheet called endidokna, or a cotton one known as dokna gofut, with which they cover themselves from their bosoms upto their ankles. The sheet is tacked on the left side or over the chest."⁵ This is a profile of a Mech woman that one would notice in almost all the poor families. But the Mech women, dressed like an 'ordinary Hindu Bengalee' woman, is not a rarity. This difference in dress is, perhaps, a reflection more on the economic condition than on the attitude towards life of the Meches.

But the difference in attitude is quite visible when a number of Meches during our investigation reported not to count on the family planning measure or did not feel any necessity of limiting the numbers of family through family planning device. A section, as our case-studies show, blamed their fate for their poor economic condition. They are the traditional group, whereas a section of the Meches reported to understand the benefits from family planning device and infact, many of them had adopted family planning practice -- they are the modern group.

Inspite of so many changes which the Meches are exposed to, the Mech culture flows subterranean. Even the Mech families, otherwise become 'Hinduised', have retained some of the old beliefs and customs. For example, the affluent families like their old ancestors, take domestic servants from the poorer Mech families and treat them not as slaves but as part of their families. This servant, boy or girl, as the case may be, is brought up in the family along with other members, sharing the same kitchen and food. It is the responsibility of the head of the family to see that the

girl or the boy is married properly. The purchase of boy or girl, it was reported during our investigation, was considered as a "status-symbol" in the Mech community in the old days and is accepted with an equal vigour in the present day community, too.

This sort of link with the past has not completely been ~~severed~~^{severed} amongst the Meches who have even embraced Christianity. This link is undoubtedly a reflection on the retention of old Mech customs by a group who think that they have freed themselves from the old tribal habits and customs; nonetheless, this is also a reflection on the existence of utter poverty of a section of the Mech tribals who are compelled to sell away their sons and daughters.

Another interesting feature of the Mech community is worth mentioning. Apparently, the Christians have a different mode of life, at least different pattern of worship. Amongst the Christians (although small in number in the area of our investigation, but have been found in large numbers in other places of North Bengal) we met a few families who are very poor and a few others who are relatively affluent. Among the poorer section of the Mech Christian community, we have noticed that they also consult the village ojhas in case of illness, diseases or personal calamities. Even in the marriage ceremony, it is reported, after performing the rites in the Churches, they give a 'village feast' where normal procedure of entertaining a guest according to traditional Mech customs, is observed.

Thus, inspite of so many changes, transformation,

transliteration, the Meches have remained a distinct ethnic group, tied by old customs, habits and attitude to life. In spite of social dualism, the Meches are a proud tribe, keen to develop themselves to forge ahead with a strong tradition of distinctive Mech culture behind them. The past has certainly influenced them towards their groping to modernism. Some of the Meches have surely succeeded themselves in conquering the inhibitions of those old tribal culture which put obstacles in their way to development. The other group, mostly the majority of the Meches, have not been so successful, not because of their lack of desire in them for change but mainly because of the circumstances created by economic conditions. The social dualism that we notice is largely a reflection of economic dualism. It is a difference in attitude of those who are or were economically affluent and those who are or were not. Those who had more lands in the past could take up education, newer methods of agricultural production, newer commodities in view of the marketability of products; and moreover the newer attitudes nurtured by the affluent ancestors of the present descendants have been transmitted to the present descendants irrespective of their present economic conditions; but the poorer sections have remained bound to their own old tradition and inhibitions to social changes because they cannot afford to take education or under the economic constraints could neither accept the modern method of cultivation or follow a newer vocation not related to their traditional agricultural occupation. Their mobility is low, their horizon is limited and they are circumscribed by the lack of economic opportunities. In fact, we may broadly suggest that social dualism is a result of different economic opportunities either of the past or of the

present, to the different sections of the Mech community. To be more precise, the social dualism is mostly due to technological and economic dualism.⁶

NOTES AND REFERENCES.

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2. Roy Burman, B.K., Methodology of Village Study, P.2.
3. Singh, Y., Modernization of Indian Tradition, P. 195.
4. Bose, N.K., "The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption," Culture and Society in India, P. 205.
5. Sunder, D., op.cit., P.65.
6. Meier, G.M., Leading Issues in Development Economics, P.48.