

Chapter- 10

Conclusion

According to 1991 census, 19 scheduled tribes constitute 31 per cent of the total population of the state. So far as the official record goes the Molsoms, who constitute approximately one per cent of the tribal population, are a subgroup of the Halams, and are a scheduled tribe. The Molsoms thus are one of the lesser known and numerically insignificant tribal community in the state. The present study is an ethnographic, anthropological, and explorative account of the social, economic, political and cultural life of this lesser known tribe on which there has not been any comprehensive study so far. The present account has been the outcome of a prolonged fieldwork conducted in nine Molsom villages in the eighties, particularly before the tribal insurgency began in the state in a big way.

One of my major efforts in the present work has been to dispel the controversy about the independent status of the Molsoms as a tribe. As early as in 1931 Census the Mursums, and not Molsoms, were recorded as a separate tribe and in 1961 Census Murchum was recorded as a language. In all other Census reports there has not been any mention either of the Mursums or Murchums as a tribe or a language. For all practical purposes in the state, however, the Murchums have been recorded as a subgroup of the Halams, a larger tribe in the state. But by tracing the origin of the Molsoms, by constructing an oral history, by decoding their folk-tales, by studying their distinctive cultural practices, and the way they look at themselves I have argued that they are indeed an independent tribe. Subsequently I took up the

issue with the state government authorities and could convince them about the necessity of recognition of the Molsoms as a separate tribe, instead of referring to them as Mursums and as a subgroup of the Halams. I insisted that the name of the tribe should be corrected to Molsom because that is the term the villagers themselves use.

My study of the settlement pattern, house-type, food-habit and dress pattern suggests that the ecological set-up, the tradition, the available technological know-how, and the economic condition together shape these significant aspects of material culture of the Molsoms. The subsistence economy, for example, makes them heavily dependent on the materials like bamboo, thatch, stems of trees etc., which are easily available in their locality, for the construction of their house and fences. The elevated floor of the *chungin* is an adaptation to their ecological set-up, since while living in isolated hill areas and jungles traditionally, they required to protect themselves from the attack of the wild animals. The cluster of houses built in close proximity indicates their close interdependence for mutual support. The Molsoms dresses largely continue to be their traditional dresses, mostly colourful cotton cloths, weaved by themselves in their traditional looms. Their food items constituted what they could produce in their traditional shifting cultivation and the fruits and roots they could gather from the area. Their protein requirement was met from the domesticated birds and animals, especially hens and pigs, and from fish collected from the river streams. The traditional liquor, *rakzu* and *zukola*, constitute their prime drinks. But things are changing these days along with changes in their economy, the ecological set-up, and the social environment. Now the Molsoms have taken up settled cultivation in a big way, they have now settled mostly in the plain land in the settled villages and in the villages close to the urban centres, and they are now surrounded by the non-tribal Bengali speaking people. The improved transportation and communication system have broken their seclusion from the outside world in a significant way and they now come in frequent contact with the urbanites and the non-tribal population. Some of them are taking up

formal education and are in government jobs. All these factors are bringing changes in the areas of house-type, settlement pattern, food habit and dress pattern. Although things do not change as fast as they do in modern urban life but the material aspects of Molsom culture is, in no sense, static. The Molsoms respond to the forces of change and respond logically despite having all their liking for traditional patterns.

The economic life of the Molsoms is under transition. While in the last century and at the beginning of this century the Molsoms were almost completely dependent on the traditional shifting or *jhum* cultivation, which has now been abandoned in a big way, now they have taken up settled cultivation. In the nine villages that I have studied more than 90 per cent of the households were thus found to be dependent on settled cultivation. The increased pressure of man on scarce *jhum* land, the forests being taken over by the government, availability of suitable fallow land, and the diffusion of technology related to settled cultivation from the plains people are some of the reasons as to why the traditional shifting cultivators have taken to settled cultivation. The traditional method of collective community and family management of land was also possibly under pressure. Because of increased pressure of man on land there was perhaps a growing pressure in the Molsom society to go for individual ownership of property; this is now the normal practice in the settled cultivation.

The shift of Molsom economy from *jhum*- to settled cultivation has brought about or prepared the ground for far reaching changes in many other areas of Molsoms life, culture and society. Their occupational categories have changed; they are now stratified into various agrarian categories like the owner-cultivator, *bargadar* (the share cropper), and the agricultural labourers, as we see among the non-tribal settled cultivators. The traditional form of mutual exchange of labour, i.e., *ron*, can be still found, but when it comes to selling of labour to the non-tribal the payment is made in cash. It is now possible that after having taken to settled cultivation and with some

occupational diversification a small minority of the Molsoms can now produce some surplus. This has taken the Molsoms from an egalitarian to a stratified society. The unequal spread of education, and unequal response to the government-sponsored developmental programmes may contribute to the spread of inequality in the Molsom society further. The Molsoms are also experiencing some degree of geographical mobility these days. All these factors are contributing to some degree of disintegration of the collective solidarity that the Molsoms, along with the other tribal communities, are famous for.

Apart from shifting cultivation, hunting; which was once materially a significant component of the Molsom economy, too has lost its economic significance these days. It has lost significance because the animals collected through a collective hunting operation is too little to meet their food requirements. The environmental degradation in the form of deforestation, the legislation relating to protection of wild birds and animals have contributed to the decline of the hunting practice among the Molsoms as well as in other tribes of the state. Hunting, however, persists, although illegally, in the form of a ritual, in the form of a symbolic remembrance of their traditional collective operation. The Molsoms in all the villages that I have studied participate in the ritual hunting with a lot of enthusiasm while upholding the purity of all the rituals associated with group hunting.

Almost all the tribes of the state of Tripura as well as the tribes scattered all over India have their respective traditional authority structure. Usually five persons, all male, constitute the structure and for this reason these bodies are referred to as the traditional *panchayats*. Not only the tribes but also the non-tribal villages of India had their traditional *panchayats* to take care of the problems related to law and order at the village level. These natural institutions originated and matured over the ages in order to discipline community living, particularly at a time when the modern state system had not yet taken a concrete shape, to take care of the village level administration.

Structurally these *panchayats* have been male dominated, hereditary, kinship based and have been run according to traditional norms and customs. The male domination in the functioning of these *panchayats* is evident from the fact that the female do not have the right to be elected as the office bearers nor the right to take part in the deliberations of these *panchayats*. Even when litigation is on for a case involving a woman the concerned woman does not have the right to be heard. Thus, to use Max Weber's well known terminology, these are the typical examples of traditional authority.

Interestingly the Molsoms, unlike many of the Indian tribes, have a two-tier *panchayat* system; one at the village level, the Village Council, and the other at the larger community level, involving all the Molsom villages of the state, the Community Council. While the village council is vested with the task of managing village level affairs the disputes involving Molsoms living in various villages are looked after by the community council. Thus the tribal authority structure is not confined to a particular geographical territory; its jurisdiction extends as far as the members of the tribe are spread. The Molsoms follow the norms and dictates of their councils wholeheartedly. Traditionally, the punitive system was very harsh on the wrong doers, which means it is a repressive type of sanction, to use Durkheimian terminology. With the growth of the size of the community and with the some degree of disintegration of collective solidarity for the reasons spelt-out above the harsh punitive measures are gradually being softened. The repressive traditional laws are thus taking the shape of reformatory laws. I have also noticed with great interest that some democratic elements are being injected in the functioning of the village- and community councils. For example the Molsoms have introduced the system of calling back an office bearer before the completion of his tenure in case the person concerned has done something amoral or something not permitted by the norms of the society. Despite the fact that the females cannot participate the election and functioning the traditional village councils can be termed as democratic since the average villagers can participate and speak without fear.

The introduction of the modern *panchayats*, as a part of the democratic decentralisation programme of the state government, has come as a challenge of a sort to these traditional *panchayats*. As the modern *panchayats* are invested with more and more power the sphere of operation of the traditional *panchayat* is likely to get reduced. There is no denying that this has actually happened to some extent to the tribal councils, but it is also true that the traditional *panchayats* of the Molsoms have survived this challenge successfully and the villagers have made a natural classification of their problems which are to be covered by the traditional and modern *panchayats*, without any overlapping of their jurisdictions. Normally, the land related disputes, the criminal cases, and the cases of conflict with the non-tribal neighbour are referred to the modern *panchayats*. I have also noticed a kind of continuity of the leaders from traditional to the modern *panchayats* since many of the office bearers of the erstwhile *panchayats* are actually inducted into the modern *panchayats* through democratic elections.

The nature of social organisation of the Molsoms can be understood through a study of the family, marriage and kinship. Because of their social seclusion marriage with non-Molsoms is not yet the normal practice since they normally marry within the tribe, although, in the past, they believe to have marital ties with erstwhile ruling Tripuri family in the state. As an exception to the rule, however, there have been a few cases (one being that of a girl marrying one Jawhar Deb Burma in Manithang Bari) of marriage with the members of the neighbouring other tribes. But such unusual marriage practices are legitimised on payment of some fine decided upon by the village council and on committing in public that the non-Molsom will follow all the norms and practices of the Molsoms. The Molsoms have their own clans but unlike the other tribes the clan boundaries are not always rigidly maintained. While among other tribes clans are the exogamous kinship groups among the Molsoms clan-endogamy is not tabooed. An analysis of the folk-tales about the origin of the clans, however, suggests that groups of people living in

various places and villages in the long past have come together to constitute a common group, the Molsoms. Preservation and use of clan names remind the Molsoms, in their every-day-life, the story of 'coming together'.

Among the marriage rules a lot of freedom has been granted to the bride and the groom to mix freely before marriage and choose their partners. Even the selection of the mates has been given some kind of institutional form. The Molsoms have their devices to regularise and legitimise all kinds of mate selection. Any function of marriage and marriage negotiation involve almost the total village and adherence to all the rites and rituals. The members of the village council and the *awchai*, in particular, provide the leadership in the performance of marriage functions. Divorce is unfound among the Molsoms, while widow and widower marriage is an emerging trend. On the whole marital life is disciplined and well regulated.

Traditionally, the predominant form of family has been the extended family. The married couple used to stay with the family of the wife's parents in order to serve the family according to the requirement of the *samakachangte*. And after the completion of the required period the couple has the option to go back to the husband's parents' family or they could set up a neo-local family. Where the married couple and their children will stay depends primarily upon the material adjustment and outlook of the couple and the host family. The Molsom families thus can be extended by both son's and daughter's sides. Because when the daughter, along with her husband, is staying with her parents the son, along with his wife, can also come back to his parents after completing the *samakachangte* period in the family of his in-laws. But these days, as we see in the larger society, the preference for nuclear family is growing among the Molsoms. This may be the direct consequence of the emergence of a strong sense of private property, or may be an adaptive change to avoid maladjustment in an extended family. The younger generation of Molsoms are thus preferring to set-up neo-local families after the completion of *samakachangte*.

So far as the religion is concerned the Molsoms consider themselves Hindu. Living side by side with the non-tribal Hindus and being the subjects of the Hinduised Tripuri kings for generations it is not unusual for the Molsoms to grow a tendency to identify themselves with the Hindus and to adopt some of the Hindu religious practices. Some of the Hindu deities thus have been accepted by the Molsoms as their deities. The Molsoms, however, have not been absorbed into the body of the dominant Hindu society because of their relative seclusion and their tribal way of living. Despite accepting some of the religious practices the Molsoms have never tried to be absorbed into the fold of Hindu society. A large number of traits of their animistic tradition have been fused with the Hindu religious practices. For example, while performing Likhi (Laxmi among the Hindus) *puja* they sacrifice hens and the *awchai*, not the usual Hindu Brahmin priest, performs the rites. The extreme uncertainties in their life as they have to cope with an unfriendly ecological set-up make the Molsoms believe in the supernatural spirits. Thus in every sphere of their life spirituality comes to the fore in a big way.

The life-cycle of the Molsoms has been an extremely important subject of my study. It was interesting to note that the Molsoms do not make any discrimination between the male and female children, in their upbringing, nor there is any preference for the male child. This may be because of the fact that the females are, in no way, considered a burden on the family. The male and the female participate to work almost equally although they have a clear division of labour. The girls and the boys attaining puberty is a big occasion in the life cycle of the Molsoms. They add special significance to the puberty initiation ceremony for the girls which is known as *risabomb*. This is one occasion in which the girl attaining puberty, her close unmarried friends and the prospective grooms, with whom there can be marriage relations, take part. All the boys and girls drink *zukola*, the boys symbolically fight among themselves to impress the girl, and then the girl is completely unclothed before a lion cloth, the *risa* is tied over her breast by a youth, the prospective

groom. The free mixing of the boys and girls, drinking of *zukola* - all these have great educative value for all those who are allowed to participate in the ceremony. They are given the feeling that they are going to be the adults and some idea about what sex is all about.

The economic hardship require all Molsom adults, males as well as females, to work hard, mostly physical labour and some craft works, in order to earn a subsistence. They, however, do not show any symptom of "culture of poverty" and, instead, preserve all universal humane values in treating their women-folk, children and the aged. Although after loosing the power to work the aged of the Molsoms lose their 'essence' significantly they are not treated as 'unwanted' by the supporting family members because they have a long tradition of a strong support system in the family. In the division of labour in the family the aged men and women continue to find some useful functions which have great value in socialising the young.

Music, dance, mostly group-dance, games and sports, most of which are indigenous, constitute an integral part of Molsom life and culture. These cultural forms are the direct product of man's effort to make a 'good living'. Man's creative faculties are put to use for making the necessary musical instruments, write and tune the songs and choreograph the dance forms. Years of evolution and collective thought of successive generations constitute the genealogy of these cultural forms. Diffusion of the songs and dance forms, games and sports from one community to another is also very much possible. Thus one can notice some degree of similarity in the cultural forms prevalent among many tribes living in the region. While studying these aspects of Molsom culture one must notice the enthusiasm and sincerity with which they preserve and practice these cultural forms and their underlying effort to uphold collective solidarity. In this point one can draw a comparison with the larger society where the spontaneous collective participation in performing dance and songs is gradually vanishing as the society becomes individualised.

The present study has been an attempt to bring to light some of the dynamic aspects of the Molsom society and culture, to draw an account of how the Molsoms are responding to both the internal and external factors of change. I have particularly tried to see how they respond to the government-sponsored development programmes, to the 'threat' posed by the ever-increasing non-tribal population in the state, and to the forces of democratic decentralisation.

I have observed that the government sponsored development programmes are often late and inadequate in reaching the Molsom villages, and are often drawn out by the bureaucrats without having much knowledge about the felt-need of the population. But when these programmes are well chalked-out and the tribal are convinced that they are going to benefit from it they gradually make themselves prepared to accept the programme wholeheartedly. I have already spelt out how the Molsoms responded positively to the 'spread education' programme, the 'drinking water' programme, or the mobile health programme. The Molsoms who used to practice *jhum* cultivation earlier also responded positively to the Jhumia Settlement Scheme although the scheme had to be remodeled to fit their requirements. My understanding is that the Molsoms still living with a subsistence economy and amidst all kind of backwardness are eagerly waiting for a lot more developmental schemes. Because of lack of formal education the number of Molsoms taking the advantage of job reservation (for scheduled tribes) is insignificant. While responding to the schemes of development the Molsoms are even prepared to do away with some of their traditional beliefs and practices.

It is indeed a matter of fact that the non-tribal population in the state outnumbered the tribal population as early as in 1931 Census. Thereafter, the proportion of non-tribal population has increased further particularly due to immigration from across the Bangladesh border. Many cite this as one of the major reasons for the ethnic insurgence in the state. But looking back in history it is not true that all the non-tribal population are the immigrants from

outside while all the tribal population are the autochthones. The non-tribal population was encouraged to come and settle down in the plains of Tripura by the erstwhile Tripuri kings for the agricultural development of the state. The supporters of ethnic movements however always try to draw a tribal non-tribal comparison in terms of their development index and try to establish that the relative backwardness of the tribal population is solely because of domination and exploitation by the non-tribal people. This kind of understanding of the problem is causing a permanent damage to the otherwise cordial relationship between the two major groups of people in the state. It will not be out of place to mention that the Molsoms have so far remained immune to the influence of the on-going tribal insurgence in the state.

The experiment with participatory democracy and the moves taken by the state government for decentralisation of power down to the grassroots are likely to have far reaching consequences for the tribal population and for the tribal-non-tribal relationship in the state. There has been the creation of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTADC) and introduction of the village *panchayats*. The tribal population, irrespective of sex, is responding to these programmes with a great deal of enthusiasm. Besides, there is a package of developmental programmes for the tribal population. If these programmes are pursued with care and sincerity and if the benefits of these programmes reach the needy tribal population they will definitely see the logic of living in harmony with the other communities and participate more vigorously in the new experiment with democratic state building. The Molsoms, along with other tribal communities will thus get an opportunity to work alongside the non-tribal at the political level and will develop a sense of fraternity with their fellow class people among the non-tribal population.