

# An Ethnographic Profile of Dhulis of Cachar, Assam

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**Abstract-** The Dhulis in Barak valley are the depressed section of society who occupy a very degraded social status in the social ladder of caste hierarchy. They are known as duglas or dhulis, or Shabdakar or badyakar. The main occupation of the community is beating dhools or drums, a musical instrument made up of wood and skin. Most of the dhulis write surname das. The dhulis or duglas of the district consists of mainly two groups of populations, one being migrated from the then East Bengal and other from West Bengal mainly from its Birbhum district. The dhulis of Cachar is highly dominated by the migrants from west Bengal in terms of its number<sup>1</sup>.

## I. WHY ETHNOGRAPHY?

The depressed community of the Indian society not only do not have any visibility in the development map of the society but also they are hardly known to the engineers of development. Very less is known about their culture, knowledge, religious practices, beliefs, ideology, outlook, worldview and the ethnomethodology of their life. The literature on this society is either hollow or blank if some one turns over the pages on their ways of producing and reproducing their social structure..

Barring a few, who are dominant numerically or a better of in terms of bargaining for their status, most of these are not known to academic community or development planners. This is highly evident in case of the community of Dhulis who have migrated from West Bengal. This made it necessary to get a holistic view of the life and living of this community. Hence is an ethnographic approach.

## II. THE MIGRATION OF THE COMMUNITY

The community came to this region out of a deal at the time of British rule. A group of Dhuli people came to this region only. It seems that the people count five generations in this valley. It is known that the community was in a precarious living condition which led them to migrate to this region in search of their livelihood, i.e. working in the tea garden. As narrated by one member of the community, there was a story of their migration. The story says that the British told these people to come to Assam, where the money plant are sown and any one can avail the chance to collect money from that plant, once they come to Assam. A sincere thought tells the fact. This plant was nothing but the tea plant which is also known as the green gold of Assam. Important to mention here is that the Dhuli came to this part of assam in a period when a number of communities many of whom being tribals, have migrated to the state in hordes in different phases. All of them migrated to work as labourer in the state. The British could keep the profit margin high paying abominably low wages to the laborers brought almost as slaves from the poverty

stickmen areas of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Madras presidency. By 1905-06 the adult laborer on the plantations in Assam rose to 417,262 of which only a few thousand were local. By 1911, the tea garden laborer population exceeded 13 million. The tea garden labourers in Assam thus became an important demographic component of Assam.

## Population

The population of this community was 4013 which was 0.44 percent of total SCs of Assam in 1971. The literacy percentage of this community in the same year was 15.02 percent of total SC population. According to 2001 census total population of Dhuli community is 6,364, which is 0.3 percent of total SC population in Assam.

## Geographic distribution

Around 1514 Dhuli families are settled in different parts of the district, numbering around 8581 member in its totality. As the main reason for the migration of this community was to work in the tea gardens of Assam, all the clusters of dhulis are settled in the vicinity of tea gardens of the district. They are highly concentrated in Dharamkhal, Dudh patil, Punichhera etc. The Dhuli distribution can be assessed from the following:

- Dharamkhal : 293 families
- Dudh Patil : 92 families
- Panichhera : 158 families
- Binodnagar Tea garden : 52 families
- Bhubandor : 63 families
- Jaroiltola : 62 families
- Chenkuri Bagan : 58 families
- Dakhin Tilla : 13 families
- Bishnupur : 37 families
- Sicooree bagan 10 families
- Sicooree camp 7 families
- Dormikhal 38 families
- Dikhush 78 families

## The social organization of the dhulis

The Dhuli community belongs to the depressed section of the lower castes of the Hindu society. Barring a few, all the dhulis of the district use surname Das as is used by the many lower caste groups like Koiborto, Patni, Namasudra etc. The community keeps its traditional values and caste rule intact despite the change of occupation of most of the community members.

The entire community is divided into clan or gosthis. The size of a gosthi varies from few to 200 members depending on the willingness of the members to continue with such large groups. All the members of a clan has to follow different types of rites and rituals pertaining to marriage and death and also other

programs related to the members. An example can be given that if a member of the gothi dies then each member of the clan become polluted and has to go through a ritual process of purification before the main ritual of the funeral.

The organizational structure of the caste administrative body is as follows:

*Bongeswar*  
*Poramanik*  
*Dalal*  
*Murol*  
*Srimukhyo*  
*Mukhyo*  
*Kole (man)*

The *Dhulis* have their own *Shasan* or rule which they assert is more stronger and older than the Constitution of India. No one knows when this system of administration was established, but consider it to be practiced from the time of their forefather. The *shasan* of *Bongeswar* is spreaded through out all the *Dhulis* in different parts of Barak valley where *Dhuli* settlements are observed.

Each status is ascribed. The son of *Bongeswar* only becomes *Bongeswar*. If there is no son of *Bongeswar* the position goes to the next male member of the family or larger kin unit of *Bongeswar*. Similar is the case with other positions. All *Dhulis* believe in that and is very much aware of the status and role of each member of their administrative unit. In each village there is one *Murol* and the successive positions.

The role of *Gyati* is well understood from the felicitation of the *gyati* members at the time of marriage and funerals. The whole body of *gyati* is invited by the host of the program and a permission of *gyati* is taken before the feast is started. The very ritual does not start until the caste body gives blessing in a particular way. Even at the time of marriage not only the bride is blessed in a ritualistic way by the caste body, but also the newly arrived groom is also blessed by the *gyati* members.

### The caste in practice

The role of caste *panchayat* is very much observed among the members of the community. Each activity within the community must follow the dictat of caste *panchayat*. Most of the important decisions about the community is taken through a meeting called *baisha*. There are two kinds of meeting : *baisha* and *chourashi* . The people are still not clear what does a *chourashi* mean yet they can make out the difference only in terms of size of the population that attend the meeting.

An understanding of the rule of caste *panchayat* can be made from the writing of G S Gurhye 2

Some of the affairs that the body looks into are:

- 1) Eating, drinking or similar practice with the community with which such social intercourse is restricted.
- 2) Marrying a member of another caste or community.
- 3) Seduction or adultery with married women
- 4) Refusal to keep promises of marriage
- 5) Non-payment of debts

6) Petty assaults

7) Defying the customs of caste regarding feasts etc. during marriage and other ceremonies.

The governing body of caste performs all the functions that a caste *panchayat* does. The violation of caste rule is punished by the body. This takes place in the form of 1) out-casting either temporarily or permanently 2) impositions of fines 3) feasts to be given to the caste man 4) apolosing to the members of the caste in public. This kind of practice can be understood from two recent incidents of such violation of custom and rule. The first incidence was the defying the customs of the caste regarding feast . It was informed that the host of the marriage party did not invite the caste member according to caste norm.. As a result the bongeswar and other members of *sashan* did not attend the marriage party, This also resulted in non attendance of the party by other members of the caste. The marriage party remained almost unattended. This resulted not only an environment of unease and unhappyness of the family members of the host but also led to an enormous wastage of food items accounting to an waste of a couple of lakhs of rupees. The host learned a lesson from the incident and went to *Bongeswar* to forgive him. The member was accepted by the fellow members for which he had to vow in front of the community that he will not repeat such mistake.

Another instance of such violation was the elopement of a girl of the community with a different caste member from Bihar. This caused to resentment of the members of the community. A *baisha* was called on the request of the family members of the girl. The *baisha* suggested that since the marriage has taken place so , there is no point to take further action .The *baisha* asked ntimated the girl's parents not to keep any further contact with the girl and the family of her husband .

The caste exogamy is so highly prohibited that the violation of this rule may not only lead to the ostracisation of the immediate family of the defier but also the immediate kins of the kin members

### Religion

As is known, the *Dhulis* are the believer of Hindu religion. Along with the worship of the other Hindu Gods and goddesses, the *Dhulis* consider *Gandheswari*, a form of Goddess *Durga* as their community god. Though no reason behind this could be explored, the community considers that there can not be any *dhuli* who do not worship *Gandheswari*.

The members of the community are again follower of different sects. Some are the follower of lord Ramakrishna, some follow the path shown by Anukul Thakur, some follow Swarupananda , again some follow the path shown by the pundits who come from Benaras.

As the community came to the region to work in the tea garden, the settlement of *dhulis* developed along with the settlement of other laborers migrated from different parts of the country mainly Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, West Bengal etc. this has an impact not only in their language, food habits etc but also in their religious practices. Very often the rituals are performed by the priests of the *Hindustani* community. As is the practice, the priest of one linguistic community is usually from the same community, an

unusual case is observed with this community which actually belong to Bengali community, but about 50 percent of the rituals are performed by the *Hindustani* priests. An admixture of Bengali and Hindustani ritual is observed in such cases when the mantras are chanted according to the Hindustani style but certain customs are followed according Bengali tradition. The calling of priest from other community may be the cause of lack availability of Bengali priests in the immediate locality and the growth of a tea garden culture due to a process of acculturation or cultural homogenization that is very often observed by the scholars<sup>3</sup>.

### Family, marriage and kinship

The family of the *dhulis* are generally nuclear in type, sometimes extended family is also observed. The descent follows male line. Marriage takes place mostly through negotiation. The residential pattern follows patrilocal type.

The community has a deep sense of kinship. The community is highly divided into clan or *gosthi*. In one of the settlement of Dhulis, namely Dharmakhal, there are near about 25 *gosthis*. The size of the *gosthi* varies from few to even 200. Very often the *gosthi* gets separated when the size becomes very big and it becomes difficult for the members to follow the rules of *gosthi*. This separation or break up takes place through a ritual known as *gua kata*. It is observed that betal nut plays an important role in any ritual. The invitation to clan members follow a symbolic gesture of sending betal nut along with invitation letter. So when a breach or separation of *gosthi* takes place it involves ritual where few betal nut are taken and separated in the name of two *gosthis* in the presence of *Bongeswar* who is the head of all *gosthi*.

### Occupation

The actual occupation of the dhuli community is to play *dhools* and make *dhools* or drums. It must be remembered that the community came to this region in horde in search of life and livelihood. The community is unable to estimate how many members of the community came to this region at the time of their migration. Many families are settled there for four or five generations. After their migration most of the forefatherers of the present dhuli population started working in tea garden. As a result they were given a land entitlement and wages besides some facilities to get certain item of daily need (rice, oil etc) in subsidized rate. But it has been observed that due to increase of its population and gradual deterioration of the economic condition of the tea garden many of these dhuli community have left the tea laborer's job and started being engaged in different occupations. Thus occupational mobility of this community makes an interesting observation. There was a first generation of change to occupation of labourer. The third generation shows a major change where around 15 to 20 percent of them are engaged in tea garden. Around 20 percent of them are engaged in business and a major portion of them are engaged as day laborer in nearby township or areas. A handful of them are found to be engaged in

government services. Around 5-7 percent of the members practice their traditional age old occupation. The rest of the population are engaged in agricultural activities.

The present generation of the community do not show much interest in their age old occupation as most of them consider that unrewarding in terms of money and status. It is only a handful of dhulis who continue with their traditional occupation, due to the fact of lack of any other source of earning.

### Social upliftment and positive discrimination

The community is yet to hit the strike in so far as the absorbing of the benefits of positive discrimination is concerned. The community is yet to count ten graduates from its entire set of population. As is informed by the Murol of dhuli community of Binodnagar garden, the ninety families settled over there can count only a single matriculate of its total population in that garden. The Dharamkhal tea estate which hosts more than 300 families, is yet to count 10 graduates from its total population settled over there. The picture is same with all the other Dhuli constellations.

In so far as the accessibility to job opportunity is concerned, the community is yet to avail it. Out of the total Dhuli population there is hardly one percent of the Dhulis who could avail the job opportunity provided by government of India to the underprivileged section of the society.

A spatial mobility followed by occupational mobility in the new settlement in Cachar thus could not bring much change in their lot and social standing in its starting of new life and livelihood in the region. Some noticeable changes are also observed in the community. The community witnesses few graduates and few have started climbing up. A few are uplifting their social status by engaging in business. The changes though appear microscopic but the trend gives some hope for a better future. Though the present scenario of social upliftment is grim, the future seems to be better to the community as is envisioned by the members of the community.

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