

Living beyond the Democratic frames; a study on the Dhimal community

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Abstract: Dhimals, one of the oldest and smallest tribal communities of the country, which requires immediate recognition and importance, are standing on the verge of extinction. Hence, in this paper my intention is not only to highlight their neglected historical past, their status, but also articulate inclusion and exclusion of the Dhimals within the Indian democratic rights, its impact and retaliation. The present study centres on the Dhimal people of Naxalbari block of Siliguri sub-division of North Bengal. It intends to highlight and discuss the present conditions and challenges of India's one of the smallest, oppressed and marginalised community of India who – by and large – have for hundreds of years – remained neglected and ignored in the social milieu. The people of Dhimal community have suffered cumulative domination, deprivation, political powerlessness, and poverty. Hence, some of these issues of the Dhimal community of north Bengal are of prime importance. Dhimals, who despite of the promises made by the government, have led an unrecognised life in the past, and are still doing the same. Not only that, their disappearance from the census and other government records eventually led to their alienation from the democratic frames of the country. Surprisingly, little welfare measures undertaken by the government and non-government organisations also failed to rescue them. Subsequently, caste-based discrimination, inequality and oppression comfortably survive and even thrive in this part of North Bengal.

Key Words: Dhimals, census, Backward class, marginalised class, Garjan Mallick, North Bengal.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Does democracy really means government by the people, for the people, and of the people, if yes, then does it cover its entire citizens. These are few questions that have been frequently asked by the marginalised sections of our society. Unfortunately, the answer is no, as there are still some less known and neglected community in India, which does not fit into the democratic frames of the country, and lives in utter confusion and uncertainty. And Dhimals of Naxalbari block under siliguri sub-division of North Bengal is one such example.

Yes, dhimals, one of the oldest and smallest tribal communities of the country, which requires immediate recognition and importance, are standing on the verge of extinction. Hence, in this paper my intention is not only to highlight their neglected historical past, their status, but also articulate inclusion and exclusion of the Dhimals within the Indian democratic rights, its impact and retaliation. The present study centres on the Dhimal people of Naxalbari block of Siliguri sub-division of North Bengal. It intends to highlight and discuss the present conditions and challenges of India's one of the smallest, oppressed and marginalised community of India who by and large have for hundreds of years remained neglected and ignored in the social milieu. The people of Dhimal community have suffered cumulative domination, deprivation, political powerlessness, and poverty. Hence, some of these issues of the Dhimal community of North Bengal are of prime importance. Dhimals, who despite of the promises made by the government, have led an unrecognised life in the past, and are still doing the same. Not only that, their disappearance from the census and other government records eventually led to their alienation from the democratic frames of the country. Surprisingly, little welfare measures undertaken by the government and non-government organisations also failed to rescue them. Subsequently, caste-based discrimination, inequality and oppression comfortably survive and even thrive in this part of North Bengal.

However, their grievances due to negligence on part of the government have no doubt given organisational shape to their movement in the subsequent years, and resulted in social awareness and political consciousness to develop self-respect and feelings of power-sharing. But the question which is pertinent to ask here is that, how far it is successful in achieving their demands. Or, are these movements are really presented in an organised form, if yes, then, does these movements by the Dhimals have any political assertions? Some of these tricky and bewildering questions often lead to utter confusion. Hence the situation of Dhimals and their voice for betterment needs to be heeded quickly as they are almost standing on the verge of extinction, and could be aptly called “minority within minority.

In order to understand the nature and extent of government negligence and the subsequent backwardness of Dhimals, it is pertinent to estimate the depth of the changes in their historical past and present existence. Hence, I have

divided my paper in three parts. In the first part, it is worthwhile to throw some light, on the historical past presented by the eminent ethnographers of colonial India like Hodgson, Dalton, Hunter, Riseley and O' Malley. The ethnological development of pre-colonial Bengal has been extensively studied and debated by the historians, but the ethnological question of Dhimal community in total and their socio economic development has not been adequately studied specially in the post- colonial period. Hence this led to the creation of a lacuna not only in historical context but also drag them to abject poverty and backwardness. Apart from the ethnological question, this paper also intends to direct the attention to an underlying question of representational blockage that exists in the history of Dhimals.

The second part focuses on Indian policies for solving the problems of caste discrimination, with special reference to the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and the other backward classes of the country. And to highlight how despite formal protections in law, discriminatory treatment and negligence remains widespread.

While, the third part would focus on the role and nature of the one and only organisation called Dhimal Astitva Rakksha Committee, formed by the dhimals, under the leadership of Garjan Mallick in 1980. It would also highlight its deterrents and determinants as well as its impact upon the people.

I

The Dhimal community with a population of approximately a thousand is one of the oldest and smallest communities in India. Dhimals are mainly resided in Morang and Jhapa districts of Nepal and Darjeeling district of west Bengal, India. Indian Dhimals are exclusively concentrated in twelve villages of Hatighisha and Maniram gram panchayat of Naxalbari block under siliguri subdivision. These villages are located at the border of Nepal on the eastern bank of Mechi River immediately below the foothills of Himalayas.

They are Dhimal, their ancestors were Dhimal, their language is Dhimal, their identity is that they are Dhimal, these ethnological assertions were first brought into limelight by Brian H Hodgson in his book- Essay on the first on the Koch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes . But unfortunately, several years after independence, they have been going through a non- recognition period, simply by wiped out from government census. There has been very less research done on Dhimal in India. Some stray articles has been published time to time in local newspapers and magazines making an attempt to bring the Dhimal's story into limelight, but they still lives in obscurity. However ,some references has been found in Hodgson' s account, which is the sole torch bearer in this matter, but hardly creates any vivid picture of the present situation.

Although, the Dhimal or Dhimal, an endangered community of North Bengal, had been categorized as non-Aryan tribe, as aboriginal tribe and so on by many eminent scholars like Hodgson, Dalton, Hunter, Risley, O' Malley and others, it is yet to get a tribal status. Not only this, even the pre- Independence Scholars like Bista, Gautam and Thapa- Magar, as well as Regmi of Nepal and Deb Burman and Chaudhari of India also suggested the same regarding status of this forgotten ethnic group. The obvious reason could be lack of any organised political organisation by the Dhimals.

E.T. Dalton pointed out in his book "Descriptive ethnology of Bengal" that Hodgson describes the Bodo and Dhimal tribes as of the same race, and there appears no reason for separating them in work of this nature, as their customs, religion and &.... appear nearly identical. It must be observed, however that the comparison of languages does not support so close a connection, and the names of the deities are different. Hodgson stated that "Dhimals, whose number do not now exceed 15,000 souls, are at present confined to that portion of Saul forest lying between the Konki and the Dharla or Torsha mixed with the Bodo but in separate villages and without intermarriage" . Latham (1859) in '*Descriptive Ethnology*' too believes that Dhimals are separated from Bodos as language, pantheons, marriage ceremony, funerals even festivals of the two are very much different. ". After that all writings are more or less influenced by and borrowed data from Hodgson's writings. Among them the writing of Edward Twite Dalton (1872) may be mentioned.

However, when Dhimals again reappeared in H.H Risley's "The Tribes and Castes of Bengal" it was pointed out that "Dhimal, Dhimal, Maulik, a non-Aryan tribe of the Darjeeling and Nepal Terai belong to the same main stock with Kocch ... rapidly losing their tribal identity by absorption into the large heterogeneous Rajbansi caste". Risley also opined that "they seem likely to disappear altogether as a separate tribe within the next generation". These findings are indeed alarming to the very existence of the Dhimals of north Bengal. A tribe which has survived the battle for survival for hundreds of years, irrespective of their small number and negligence, is about to lose its tribal character.

Who are to be blamed for this negligence? Surprisingly, it is a question with multiple answers. Is it the ambiguous census records, or the absence of any genealogical history , or the ongoing political changes with their multiple objectives in the post-colonial period responsible for it. The answers would surprisingly indicate to all these factors. However, to begin with, census deserves prime concern. As far as pre- independence period is concerned, it is evident that, due to lack of government's interest or negligence , many people were not counted and included into the census properly. WW Hunter in his book "Statistical Account of Bengal" clearly indicated the loopholes present in the

state machinery, as far as census is concerned. He argued that –“when I commenced the survey, no regular census had been taken of India; and the enumeration of 1872 disclosed that the official estimates had been wrong “. Not surprisingly, this trend was carried on in subsequent years. According to Shekhar Bandhopadhyay, Dhimals were last seen in the census records of 1931, sixteen years before independence, their numbers reduced to 375 persons only. Thereafter no single census has been drawing any traces on Dhimal community. It was only in 2003, the Dhimal reappeared in a survey with a total population of 989.

Table; 1. Dhimal ‘s population chart

| Year | Population | Source |
|-----------|------------|--|
| 1849 | 15000 | B.H Hodgson |
| 1872 | 873 | Census |
| 1881 | 662 | “ |
| 1891 | 631 | “ |
| 1901 | 607 | “ |
| 1911 | 444 | “ |
| 1921 | ----- | ----- |
| 1931 | 375 | “ |
| 1981-2001 | ----- | ----- |
| 1980 | 552 | Dhimal Sangha |
| 1994 | 804 | Dhimal Astitva Rakhsa Samity |
| 2003(dec) | 989 | Sources–Prasanjit Mallick & Garjan Mallick |

Source; Dhimal ‘s population chart by Shekhar Bandhopadhyay in his book “Dhimal”.

The way new colonial ethnological discourse motivated various indigenous social groups to create new histories of their own, many new sub caste groups came into the limelight and got identified as a distinct caste group. But unfortunately, lack of any genealogical history of the Dhimals perhaps obstructed them to get such recognition. As they failed to identify as well as acknowledge their ancestors and their family relationships, it became extremely challenging to perceive an accurate picture of their lineage. Even if we take a closer look at the sources that we have regarding Dhimals, right from Hodgson to Hunter, we will find that only issues related to their status, their socio-cultural aspects have been discussed, and no stress has been given upon their genealogy. Thus, the people of Dhimal community somehow not only failed to pursue their family history and origins but also lost the desire to carve out a place for their lineage in the larger historical picture, as well as, lost the sense of responsibility to preserve the past for future generations.

II

After India was declared a Democratic country right after the Indian independence, the Indian political leadership was committed to the development of the weaker sections of the society. It was felt that due to various historical reasons a large section of the Indian population was economically very poor, socially degraded and politically very depressed and it was proper that after the attainment of freedom, constitutional provisions were made to give this section more attention and help. Independent Indian leadership had made constitutional provisions for the uplift of the down trodden. Many noteworthy works have been undertaken, such as from 1947 the practice of untouchability was declared as illegal, other backward classes' came to be included in the ambit of reservation as a result of the Mandal Commission report and many more. Even the Directive Principles of the State Policy provide to promote with special care, the educational and economic interests of the, marginalised groups. To achieve the objectives of “Equality” with many facets, Govt. of India as well as State Govt. have been striving for socio-economic development of the people of these communities through administrative orders and plan process. But unfortunately the measures taken so far have not been able to eradicate the sense of deprivation, poverty and above all the political exclusion, because the approach so far has been in the shape of few schemes of ameliorative nature which could not make sufficient transformational impact and, therefore, much still remains to be done.

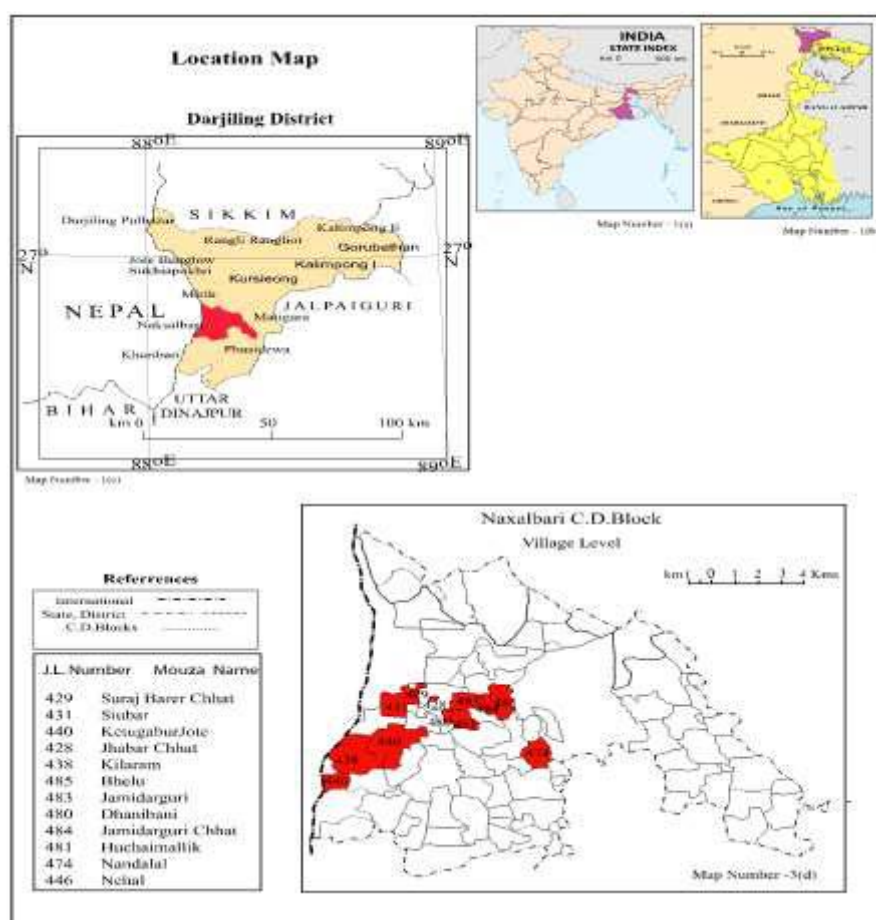
Despite, promises made by the government, a reconnaissance study of the last sixty years compels us to enquire about government's accountability. How far these rules and regulation facilitated the growth and development of the backward class people of the country? A closer insight would reveal the failure, on the part of the government, to protect and include its citizens within the democratic structure of the country. As there are still some communities

who are deprived of such benefits. The voices of Dhimal people of Naxalbari block under Siliguri subdivision of North Bengal, highlighting their experiences of exclusion and deprivation could be seen in many studies and even in the government records. Dhimals who have been included in the other backward class, are neither availing the OBC benefits (due to refusal of accepting the OBC certificate, as they are demanding for the tribal status) nor getting the tribal status.

It is not like that the government of India has not undertaken any special measures for resolving the grievances of the backward community. Several new and amended rules and regulations, funds etc., have come to the forefront. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment & Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India allocate fund for the welfare of SC & ST under three major heads, SCA to SCSP, SCA to TSP, Article 275 (1) of the Constitution of India. Allocation under these heads depends on guaranteed allocation of fund in the plan budget of all Government Departments proportionate to SC & ST population of the State. SCA to SCSP is meant for welfare of the Scheduled Castes while SCA to TSP is dedicated to the Scheduled Tribes. What is more disturbing is that, no specific guidelines have been introduced for the OBC category, nor are they included in the census properly. If we look into the census records of 2011, one will find that Dhimals are not there. If it is so, then the question arises, why? Do they live outside the country and doesn't fall within the Indian democratic structure? Or do they live in enclaves, whose entire issue of belongingness is clouded?

The answer is surprisingly negative. The area under present study is very much within the country, nor do they live in enclaves. It is located in the Naxalbari block of siliguri subdivision under North Bengal. Not only that, this area also comes under the census zone. In the 2011 census reports, we do find records of SC, ST, and OBC people residing in this area, but despite their OBC status Dhimals are not there. How could they be left behind, when every household of this area was supposed to be counted?

The given map clearly shows the position and location of Dhimal community residing in the twelve villages of Naxalbari block under Siliguri subdivision of North Bengal. Which is undoubtedly, an integral part of the country. However some evidence of few families living in the phansidewa and medical college areas of Siliguri subdivision have been found, but their number is very marginal. Dhimals mainly reside in these twelve villages of Naxalbari block of Siliguri subdivision of North Bengal.



2. Map (Source: Census of India 2001, West Bengal Administrative Atlas)

Dhimals have been granted OBC status long back in 1995, but their non-acceptance of the caste- certificate have further dragged them to exclusion. It not only deprived them of social, economical development but made them politically weak as well. For example West Bengal backward classes development and financial corporation has implemented five major schemes in compliance with the guidelines set by the national backward classes finances and development corporation (NBCFDC), such as Term Loan(other loan) ,New Swarnima, Micro-Finance and Mahila Samridhi Yojona and education loan , but for availing all the above schemes, an applicant must be from OBC community and he or she is in possession of the caste certificate issued by the competent authority. As a result, due to the non-acceptance of the OBC caste certificate by the Dhimals (as they are demanding for ST status), Dhimal students are not only deprived from such benefits but also lagging behind in many fields.

Thus, at this juncture, it is very essential to discuss the reason behind one of the demands beside the tribal status placed by the Dhimals i.e. the inclusion of their community into the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTGs) of India. Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTGs) is a central sector scheme run by the Government of India exclusively for the primitive tribes of the country. In West Bengal, three tribes i.e. Lodha, Birhor and Toto have been declared as PTGs. These PTGs are domiciled in Paschim Medinipur, Purulia, Jalpaiguri and Sagar Block of South 24 Parganas Districts Lodhas in Paschim Medinipur and Sagar Block of South 24 Parganas, Totos in Jalpaiguri and Birhors in Purulia. Government of India grants special fund under Central Sector schemes for the development of these PTGs. This fund is mainly utilized for the construction of houses for PTGs and execution of infrastructure development schemes like road, bridge/culvert, Minor Irrigation, Const action/ Re-const action /Repairs / Renovation of Ashram and School attached Hostel / School Building in PTGs dominated areas and also to create income generation through various schemes like Goatery, Piggery, Agriculture, Ginger cultivation etc. If the dhimal community gets included into the PTGs, the level of attention and preservation would eventually increase. As they are equally endangered and vulnerable as Toto , Lodha and Birhor tribes are. The educational and economic benefits entitled for the PTGs, would be automatically extended to the Dhimals.

Thus, it could be said that ,while standing, on the verge of globalisation and internationalism, where the entire world would be treated like a single entity, where people would get an opportunity to extend their limits beyond boundaries, Dhimals are stuck in a dimension of nowhere. Hence , a discussion on emancipation and development of Dhimals in India has become essential, not only within the modern historical norm but also in the on-going political and economic reforms. Hence the situation of Dhimals and their voice for betterment needs to be heeded quickly as they are almost standing on the verge of extinction, and could be aptly called “minority within minority”.

III

Before 1980, a sense of general awareness, political consciousness, a zeal for preserving their tribal identity , could be hardly seen amongst the Dhimals. It was only in 1980, when ‘Dhimal Sangha’ was organised for the protection and preservation of their community. Later, in 1989 its name was converted into ‘Dhimal Astitva Raksha Samiti’ with Khudan Mallick as its president, Garjan Mallick as its Secretary, Prassanjit Mallick as its assistant Secretary, and Malbar Mallick as its District Secretary. Their message to the Dhimal people was somewhat like this----

Dhimalder nikat anurodh,

Pratyeek dhimal jati-er nikat amader antarik anurodh, nijer jatir bhasha, sanskriti rakkharthe ghare ghare pounche din dhimal lokasangeet. Sathe sathe dhimal jatir astitva rakhsha samitike saktishali kore tolun amader bhabishote Santander jonno. Keu birodhita korle jhogra korar dorkar nei. Ekdin na ekdin tara bujbe kara sathik pothe choleche.sedin apnathekei bhul bhenge jabe. Amder laksha subho tai tai kaje badha bipotti asbei. Ete amader mathe noto korle cholbe na. ashun sobai mile dhimal er astitva rakhsha kori.

Binito,

‘Dhimal astitva raksha samiti’

It is an humble appeal to the all the Dhimal people ,to raise and protect their language, culture for their future generations. However this message also reveals one thing that they believed in non- violence and did not resort to violence for achieving their goal. Emergence of a non-violent and non- political organisation in a period which witnessed tremendous politicisation of communal identities is in itself a path-finder.

However , in the year 2009 it has been again converted to Dhimal Astitva Raksha ebong Kalyan Samiti. But unfortunately ,due to the non-political nature of the organisation, as claimed by its secretary Garjan Mallick, it failed to continue after 2010. There is no doubt that for re –registration it has been sent again to Kolkata, but lack of any political help created multiple obstacles. As a result , now the members of Dhimal Astitva Raksha Samiti are , planning to convert the organisation into an NGO, which was once voicing for the preservation and protection of their culture and identity. They want to protect their age-old tradition, culture and language, which is about to lose its original

character, due to the impact of the other dominant caste languages and culture of the area. As a result, their unsuccessful journey to establish themselves as a distinct identity, compelled them to focus on the social and economical development of the community only. Does this situation indicates that , in a world which is fully politicised, a non- political organisation has no existence? Does it mean that their ethnicity needs political backing to prove its distinctiveness? If in a democracy, people's democratic right to fight for their rights is at stake, then the word 'Democracy' is an illusion, which is really very impressive.

To tell the truth, running political organisation without the support of the people and funds is not possible. And in this case, both are absent. In one hand, some of the Dhimal people have either joined other political parties and avoid to raise their issues, or, have succumbed to alcoholism, on the other hand, funds are beyond question. As majority of the Dhimal people are living under precarious conditions, their economical participation is beyond question. Thus it could be said that, as their social, economic and political problems are intertwined with each other, breaking the shackles of one and reaching out for another one is next to impossible for them. According to Garjan Mallick – most of the Dhimal people are either farmers or work as daily waged labourers, even women goes to sell vegetables to Naxalbari. Some of them sell woods, while some of them are doing small business and a very few are doing jobs. In this kind of situation, none of them are seemed to be interested in raising their issues, as they are unaware of the past . Thus with a handful of hesitant population, Dhimals organisation is yet to become a mass organisation. The end of their sufferings with frustration and desperation for tribal status is yet to come.

Needless to say, the socio condition of the Dhimals too needs special attention. The social evils and superstitious beliefs that have crept into the society, have eventually led the community into darkness. The existence of superstitious beliefs, such as 'jharphuk', the existence of 'dayani' practice not only indicates their orthodox mentality ,but somewhere it also obstruct them to join the parallel lines of the mainstream society. Although the existence of the organisation 'Dhimal Astitva Raksha Samiti' and its political role is clouded, some of the efforts made by the leaders of the organisation such as Garjan Mallick in emancipating these social evils from their community is really commendable. Although, it is difficult to gauge the extent of its success at the moment, but it could be said that the efforts made by Garjan Mallick has brought some kind of light in the lives of the people of Dhimal community. By performing 'nataks' on the evils of the society such as alcoholism, AIDS, superstitious beliefs like 'dayani' practice etc, Mallick intend to reform their community.

Surprisingly, women's participation in these 'nataks' is remarkable. Dhimal women not only perform in those 'nataks' but also tries to spread the message against such evils amongst the youth . Self- empowerment is the new motto of these Dhimal peoples. Garjan Mallick encourages Dhimal women to join some of the self-help groups which has been established in these areas such as Dantabaranga SHG, Kanchanjunga SHG, and Lata SHG, for their economic development. But the amount of economic development happened in this area is very minimal. Hence, to understand this economical backwardness, I have tried to explore the participation of some self-help groups in these areas, and the outcome of this participation, to see whether the process contributes to the development of Dhimal women or not. The name of three self-help groups which deserve special mention here, which worked in this two villages, are "Dantabaranga" SHG, Kanchanjunga SHG,& lata SHG. "Dantabaranga" and Lata self-help groups involves and mobilise Dhimal women to come forward and join the chain of economic development, where as Kanchanjunga SHG is a group where other caste women along with Dhimal women are working . The economic activities undertaken by the SHGs include backyard poultry, duckery, piggery, sewing and tailoring, embroidery etc. But the question is , did these SHGs successfully empowered these women or ended abruptly after some time. According to Aloka Mallick¹⁵, one of the member of "Dantabaranga" group- these self-help groups helped them with poultry farming, taught them tailoring etc. in the beginning, but unfortunately, due to lack of infrastructure and proper help of the state, these SHGs came to a halt without providing any proper training to these women. However, Dhimal women of Lata and Kanchanjunga SHG are still uncertain about their status. Thus these amateur and untrained Dhimal women without proper training failed to understand the behaviour and character of the markets and respond appropriately to the challenges of competition. Markets being highly dynamic in character, Dhimal women are under constant risk of deprivation and suffering. With a monthly income of less than Rs 1000/-, they are living a precarious life.

It is a fact that education plays a catalytic role in socio-economic development of the society. But in the case of this Dhimal community ,as far as the educational development is concerned ,the goal is yet to be achieved. The number of students going to junior high school in these area is very negligible. Not only that, what is more disturbing is that, with a minimum infrastructure in these schools, they fail to cater to the needs of the villagers. As it is clear, the way govt. showed reluctance in opening schools in this area with timely intervention, the village people, especially the Dhimals felt no encouragement in sending their children's to these schools. Ultimately this resulted in illiteracy, school-drop-outs, or lack of interest in education. This reluctance among them has primarily effected girl's education here. The girl child either does not get admitted in the schools, or leaves school after standard v or standard X. Girls are not able to continue their studies. The reasons behind it are still unknown. Since the light of education fell upon Dhimals lately,

many of them are still illiterate, especially the elderly people. Absence of encouragement and absence of any adult night schools have deprived them of knowledge. According to Garjan Mallick, illiteracy and lack of knowledge have made them accept these helplessness as their destiny. Khukumoni Mallick, one of the member of the Lata SHG says- 'lekha pora na thakle ki korbo' (what shall we do without education).

Hence, it is this marginalised status, the deep-seated darkness and a sense of obliviousness among the Dhimals that forced them to live beyond the democratic frames of the country. However, it is heartening to note that their truth and identity is gradually revealing itself to the world. It is the efforts made by the leaders like Garjan Mallick and others, their surname 'Mallick' is not any more anonymous. Their achievements are unhesitatingly praiseworthy. However the point which is still clouded is that how far these efforts are going to get political recognition for them.

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Interview

- Data collected from interview with Garjan Mallick.