

Laleng Indigenous Community of Sylhet: Changing Pattern in Political Organization

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ABSTRACT

The Laleng, a little known and small decaying indigenous community living at Sylhet region in Bangladesh, had an own traditional political organization. In the changed condition, this system is not existed in its original standpoint. By using both qualitative and quantitative data generated from primary as well as secondary sources this ethno-political study explores the Laleng political organization focusing on its changing pattern. It founds that Laleng society has suffered the consequence of contact with the large-scale Bengali societies. Although Laleng society is still ruled by own political systems, but these systems are not so effective today. They are not able to maintain their traditional political organization unaltered by inside and outside influences. The findings of the present study would encourage other researchers to carry out further research on the political organization of indigenous community.

Keywords: The Laleng, political organization, indigenous community.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term political organization refers to those aspects of social organization specifically concerned with the management of the affairs of public policy of a society (Haviland 1974). It seeks to control the appointment or activities of the individuals or groups in the society (Fried 1967). Anthropologists and political scientists share an interest in political organization, but the anthropological approach is global and comparative (Kottak 1991). From the anthropological point of view, a political organization mean through which a society maintains social order and reduces social disorder. If politics is defined broadly as competition for power over people and things, then it is clear that all societies have some sort of political organization (See:

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http://anthro.palomar.edu/political/pol_1.htm).³ Cultural anthropologists have identified four major types of political organizations among contemporary human societies. These political organizations are (1) *bands*, (2) *tribes*, (3) *chiefdoms*, and (4) *states*. It was noted that the significant differences among such organizations tend to be based on (1) the size of human population, (2) the historical ways a society has used the resources of the earth region in which it lives, and (3) increasing complexity in economic and political life as new ideas are developed concerning the best ways to manage daily social life. It is important that a society can change its political organization either to greater, or lesser, forms of complexity (Williams 1999). The *Laleng*, an indigenous community living at Sylhet region in Bangladesh, has their own language, traditions and customs (Biswas & Asaduzzaman 2006; Rahman 2007). Political organization is one of the most important cultural elements of *Laleng* community. Unfortunately, this element has been changed due to several causes. The present study explores the changing pattern of *Lalengs* traditional political organization focusing on its changing pattern.

2. DECAYING LALENG COMMUNITY: A SHORT PROFILE

Bangladesh's geographical location and history have made it a home to people of diverse origins, races, colors, and descent (Dizon 2009). The majority of Bangladesh's 143.3 million people are Bengalis, and approximately 2.5 million are indigenous peoples belonging to 45 different ethnic groups. There is no constitutional recognition of the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh. They are only referred to as 'backward segments of the population'. Indigenous peoples remain among the most persecuted of all minorities, facing discrimination not only on the basis of their religion and ethnicity but also because of their indigenous identity and their socio-economic status (Wessendorf 2009). The bulk of the ethnic minority populations are concentrated in the frontier areas of Chittagong Hill Tracts, Sylhet, Mymensing, Rajshahi, Dinajpur and Rangpur (Hussain 2004). The main ethnic groups in Sylhet are *Khasi*, *Manipuri*, *Garo*, *Laleng*, *Bishnupriya*, *Tripura* and *Santal*, although ECDO's (2009) non-formal survey identified 35 indigenous groups in total. Each group has distinct linguistic and cultural practices. *Laleng*, the also known as *Patra*, *Pathor* or *Pator*, is a small tribe living in Sylhet area of Bangladesh. They were mentioned as *Chutiya* in Nath's (1948) *Background of Assamese Culture*. In their own language, *Patras* call their tribe *Laleng* (BAS 2003). There are very few historical evidences so far found regarding the ethnic formation of this community. They lived mainly in the plain land adjacent to the forest and hilly zones (Ghani 2006). The dwelling places of *Laleng* are situated in the Sylhet Sadar, Jaintiapur and Guainghat

³ It may initially seem to the casual observer that some small-scale societies have no politicians or political organizations at all, but they are present in very different forms than people in modern large-scale societies expect.

upazillas (subdistrict). Now they are living in the 25 villages, which are as: (1) Fotahpur, (2) Malgoan, (3) Chiknagul, (4) Goandaeer, (5) Kushergoal, (6) Foring Ura, (7) Alaibohor, (8) Doloipara, (9) Khusal, (10) Lougul, (11) Noeergul, (12) Phatantula, (13) Borogul, (14) Kalisshori, (15) Poshchimchuti, (16) Kulaiti, (17) Khandar Digi, (18) Barar Hat, (19) Makor Khula, (20) Dadar Anie, (21) Ramnogor, (22) Rajar Bagicha, (23) Kohy Bohor, (24) Bhober Gul, and (25) Mukampunji. A remarkable number of *Laleng* peoples are living in India who was migrated in 1971, during the time of liberation war (Chakrabarty 1998; Hye 2007). The number of the *Laleng* community people has come down to only 3,365 now, though they had a glorious tradition in the past and their forefathers⁴ had ruled the Sylhet town and its surrounding areas since arrival of saint Hazrat Shahjalal (*New Age*, May 29, 2009). The *Laleng* society is patriarchal. They have an own language but it has no written form (Biswas & Asaduzzaman 2006). There is a lack of clarity about their religious belief and ethnic identity. The religious rites and rituals of *Lalengs* reflect a combination of tribal and Hindu beliefs. A section of them show Mongolian features (BAS 2003). Sultan (1984), however, argues that the *Laleng* is generated with the mixture of Mongoloid and Proto-Austroloid. *Laleng* is one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable indigenous communities. Land-grabbing, threats, evictions and have marginalized them to such an extent that their existence in Bangladesh is currently at stake.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is prepared based on the content as well as qualitative analyses. Secondary sources of information like books, journals, research reports and newspapers are heavily used in this paper. Relevant literature has also collected through internet browsing. Some information regarding political organization of *Laleng* community has been collected through participatory observation and the informal discussion with the older persons of the community.

⁴ *Lalengs* claim that Gaur Govindo of Sylhet belonged to their community (Mohanto 1999). The expansionist policy of Sultan Shams-ud-din Firuz Shah (1301-1322 A.D.) of Lakhnauti (now a city of India) took him to Sylhet which he occupied in 1303 A. D. His General Sikandar Khan Ghazi led the Muslim troops against Raja Gaur Govindo of Sylhet (Karim 1999). The famous saint Shah Jalal with his 360 accompanying *aulias* and large number of followers joined the battle with the Muslim army (Choudhury 1999). Gaur Govindo was defeated and fled from Sylhet. In that time, the *Laleng* lost the right to live in the capital *Gour*, and after then they were living in deep forest of northern Sylhet which was formed as the *Laleng* villages in course of time (Hye 2007).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Traditional Pattern of Political Organization

The traditional political organization system in the *Laleng* community was a two-tier one. The most important tier was at the village level called *panchayet*. The village *panchayet* had been formed with a village chief who was known as *samuta*, clan⁵ chiefs who were known as *lar*, and a group of older people who were known as *montany*. *Samuta* conducted the village administration with the help of *lar* and *montany*. The *lar* discussed the problems and helped the *samuta* to take decision. The *montany* were advisor and they also helped the village organization by proposing (Hye 2007). All the members of the village *panchayet* were selected hereditary. The posts of village *panchayet* had great prestige. There was no opportunity for women to participate in decision making in the *panchayet*. The village chief and other offices (*lar* and *montany*) were totally hereditary in the male line. On the other hand, the apex tier of the *Laleng* political organisation was at the intervillage level called *barguite*. It was organised into 10 or 12 villages of the *Laleng* society. The *Lar*, *montany*, and *samuta* of the representative villages were the members of this council. Usually this council sat once or twice a year. Normally the senior and thus most experienced member was chosen as the chief of the council. The structure of the traditional political organization of *Laleng* community is shown in the Figure 1.

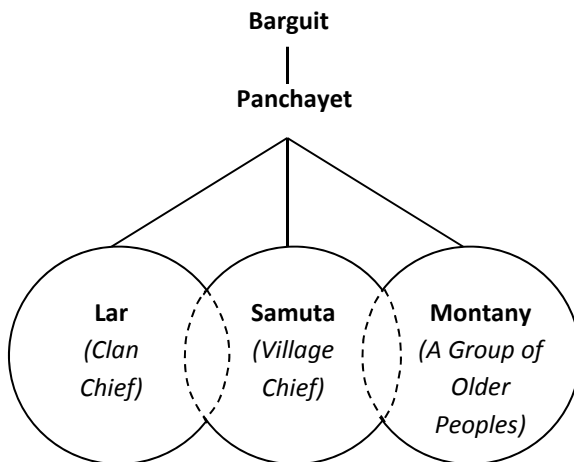


Figure 1: Traditional Political Organization of *Laleng* Community

⁵ There are sixteen clans in *Laleng* society. These are Gab Roi, Tongra Roi, Thakla Roi, Tukri Roi, Aloï Roi, Longkhi Roi, Chamang Roi, Tipra Roi, Langthu Roi, Kalang Roi, Baroi Roi, Chondra Roi, Chundi Roi, Pon Baboi Roi, Golla Roi and Tongraba Roi (Chakrabarty 1998).

The village *panchayet* controlled the entire social system of the *Laleng*. The influence of *panchayet* over the *Laleng* was more and its power was unlimited in the internal affairs. Village *panchayet* was the institution that settles all the disputes of the villages. *Laleng* community as a whole maintained certain uniform customs and laws with relation to marriage, divorce, birth etc. The *Laleng* villages were social and political entities with great cohesion and continuity. *Panchayet* often worked in the community to ensure community members abide by customary laws on the land use, hunting and respect traditional rules prohibiting wrong actions such as killing someone, couples living together before marriage and other wrong actions. If anyone made any social crime, the members of *panchayet* called meeting to punish him or to solve the problem. The sources of conflict among *Lalengs* were: sexual offenses, land disputes, conflicts over money, cases of evil eye, jealousy, and witchcraft. The distribution of property and the solution of the economic and other social problems were also dealt by the village *panchayet*. According to Ghani's (2006) information, the ownership of the nets and hunting weapons were treated as communal property controlled by the *panchayet*. On the other hand, *barguite* dealt with major offences and unresolved cases, and thus it was used as appeal court. When village *panchayet* failed to solve any problem, then the case transferred to the *barguite*. Besides, the meeting of *barguite* were called regularly once or twice a year for identifying the entire problems of *Laleng* community. In that meeting the traditional leaders also made some solutions for solving their problems. The above two councils act as legislative bodies and they had both legislative and executive power. After the conversion into Hindu religion the traditional political system has become inactive.

4.2 Changing Pattern in Political Organization

Panchayet is a traditional political organization that has gone through changes over the years. In the changed condition, the post of *samuta* and *montany* has abolished and the *lar* is yet existed. Though *montany* is abolished, now it is seen a group of people who are known as *murobbi*. In any problem, the *lar* and *murobbi* combinedly take decision where the meeting is presided over by the *chief*, who is considered as economically strong, literate and oldest (Hye 2007). He presides over the village *panchayet* meetings when they are held to discuss the matters related to village. *Lar* is not nominated as a clan chief in the present time. The person whose quality as like as village *chief* (like economically strong, literate and oldest) is nominated as the *lar* in the *Laleng* society. The tradition of taking posts of *lar*, *murobbi* and village *chief* through hereditary is cancelled in the changed time (Chakrabarty 1998). In the changed condition, the *Laleng* political organization is characterized by democratic equality. The clans are regarded as equal to other clans and there is no class distinction either in status or occupation. The village is generally multi clans and there is no dominance in the *panchayet* of any special clan. The structural changes of traditional village *panchayet* are shown in the Table 1.

Table 1: Structural Changes of *Laleng* Traditional Village *Panchayet*

Sl. N.	Traditional Pattern		Comment	Changing Pattern	
	Name of the Post	Nature of the Post		Name of the Post	Nature of the Post
1	Lar	hereditary	Existed	Lar	Nominated
2	Samuta	hereditary	Abolished	Village Chief	Nominated
3	Montany	hereditary	Abolished	Murobbi	Nominated

In the previous time, the village *panchayet* controlled over the economic activities of the village. But in the present time, it only controls the social problems (Rahman 2007). *Panchayet* has religious, ritual, ceremonial and adjudicative functions. It also protects the norms and values of the village. Village *panchayet* played an important role in the settlement of disputes of the village. In the changed condition, many cases are settled by compensation, usually through *panchayet* and sometimes through Bangladesh courts. Although *panchayet* structures still exist and are respected in most *Laleng* people, there is often confusion when people deal their cases in the government courts at the same time. In the eyes of the community, there is now a hierarchy between the traditional village *panchayet* and government courts. Some-times, they also deal their problems in local Union Parishad.

4.3 Possible Causes of Changes in Political Organization

All the major critical problems that indigenous peoples are facing, such as political marginalization, repression, deteriorating rights and access to land and other natural resources, poverty and economic marginalization, social problems, lack of recognition of indigenous cultures etc. have, to various degrees, their roots in the lack of self-determination (Erni and Jensen 2001). Changes occur in culture when certain processes are set in motion, cultural anthropologists recognize four major processes of cultural change: (1) innovation (or invention), (2) diffusion, (3) acculturation, and (4) modernization. Each of these processes of cultural change also includes one, or more, *sub processes* of cultural change (Williams 1990). The characteristics of above process are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Process of Changes in Culture

SI. N.	Process	Characteristics
1.	Innovation (or invention)	Individuals use the cultural traits available to them to develop something unknown in a culture.
2.	Diffusion (or cultural borrowing)	Cultural traits from one culture spread widely to other cultures, often through direct contact among members of different cultures.
3.	Acculturation	Social groups with different cultural systems come into direct, first hand, and continuous contact over a long period.
4.	Modernization	The rapid and multiple changes being experienced in many formerly isolated cultures as they move from a traditional way of life to one that approximates European and American life.

Source: Williams 1990.

The role of traditional institution with all its social, religious and cultural activities has also its political significance. Most of the time the traditional institutions are abolished when it loses its social functions and people's demand for it (Mahboob 2003). The traditional *Laleng* political organization in terms of its structure, area of function and governing process has changed a lot from its original standpoint. All the processes mentioned in Table 2 have been done action combinedly behind the changes in *Laleng* political organization. The present study has tried to analyze the changing condition of *Laleng* political organization. A field survey was conducted among the *Laleng* community to know the major causes of changes in the traditional *Laleng* political organization. Their responses have been summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Causes of Changes in Political Organization of *Laleng* Community

	No comments	Comments	Causes of Changes (Internal & External forces)
No. of respondents	2	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decrease of their economic situation. • Migration of Bengalis in the <i>Laleng</i> villages. • Influences of dominant Bengali culture. • Influences of existing state structure and policy. • Influences of globalization. • Modernizing and urbanizing forces. • Identity crisis of <i>Laleng</i> community. • Democratic mentality of young and educated <i>Lalengs</i>.

Lalengs economic situation has been weakened due to several internal and external forces. The general definition of poverty is not applicable for the *Laleng*, because their condition is under poverty level. Being lost their land property; most of the *Laleng* families are now destitute and perishable. They are now excluded from fundamental human rights to the same degree as the mainstream groups enjoy. Many of them lost their land property for borrowing from creditor. On the other hand, idleness is part and parcel of their character. It was habit of some people to sell the land and leads the life too. However, the economic problem of the *Laleng* peoples is integral. Robert Chambers argues in his book *Rural Development* that integrated poverty includes poverty, physical weakness, isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness (Figure 2). From the Figure 2 one may understand and perceive what the economic situation of the *Laleng* community is.

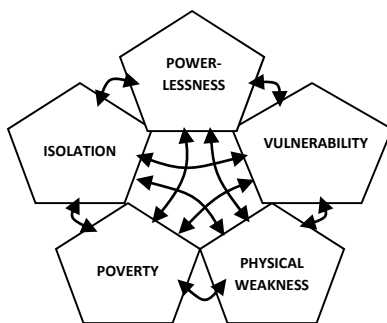


Figure 2: Economic Situation of the *Laleng* Community⁶

We can apply the Marxian approach to analyze the *Lalengs* political organization. Politics is super structure and economy is basic structure, in the Marxian sense, since Marx's whole theory is based on economic grounds. Political system is depends on the economic system. This analysis indicates that *Lalengs* traditional political organisation is weakening and disintegrating due to their decaying economic situation.

In the previous time, *Laleng* villages were dwelling place only for them where not the people of any other groups. As a result, the political organisation was powerful and it controlled their socio-cultural and economic life. But at the present time, the inhabited areas of *Laleng* are encircled by the majority population of Bangladesh, it becomes difficult for them to maintain and practice their distinct customs and cultural practices freely. The mainstream Bengalis are also migrated in their village. Their laws, values, customs and perspectives have been eroded by the influence of mainstream culture. There is no question that influences of dominant Bengali culture have also dramatically influenced the political organization of *Lalengs*.

⁶ This idea has shared with Robert Chambers. For details about his idea, see Tigga's (1999) article.

Plain land indigenous peoples are more vulnerable than hill indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. Most of their traditional customary systems, local government and judiciary system are still legally unacceptable, although governmental law approves the traditional headman ship system and many other local government systems of Chittagong Hill Tracts (Ahmed 2006). As a plain land indigenous, *Laleng* peoples cannot establish most of their customary rules and laws into the existing legal system of the country and many of their customary laws, rich systems of life and traditional judiciary system which is operated by *panchayet* and *barguite* are disappearing. The *Lalengs* were able to solve their own problems through *panchayet* and *barguite* without external intervention. It has been eroded in recent times largely due to outside administration from the central Bangladesh Government.

State policy is also responsible for decaying their political organization. The government accrued their village land for *Jalalabad Cantonment*, *Osmani International Airport* etc. Though they were paid for land, they could not able to buy same quantity land as they wasted money for their idleness to maintain daily life. It is cleared that this kinds of state policy create economic marginalization of *Laleng* and it influences the political organization indirectly.

The world is becoming more and more globalize. The indigenous peoples can not keep themselves aloof or out of this globalization process. Either they join hand in the process or they perish as consequences of these processes (Tigga 1999). Under the globalization process, the world is changing fast. Hence its impact and influence are reflected in the ways of living of the *Laleng* community also. Globalization triggers change in the scale of political organization of this community. In fact, a political organization is a mechanism for integration, unity and solidarity of the individuals of a particular community. But due to the absence of dynamic and effective leadership the traditional political organization failed to bring about needed and desired changes. As a result, their traditional political organization is decaying day by day.

Alam *et al.* (2006) argue that Sylhet city is becoming extremely crowded. The city area is endowed with educational institutes, residential areas, hotels, community centers, restaurants, banks, pharmacies, office building, health clinics, etc. For this reason, the city is growing day by day. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics records the area of Sylhet urban area as 46 sq. kms (17.76 sq. miles). This city acquired many elements of modern life which transformed it into a much more organised society free from the curse of old days. Modernising and urbanising forces have largely escalated the standard of life, but virtually it becomes threat to cultural existence and distinctive life style of the indigenous people. Their cultural distinctiveness and the legendary form of group solidarity are consequently being concealed with the touch of the un-even level of development that has spread in to cultural differentiation. The forces of modernization and urbanization have made *Laleng* traditional political

organization critical. On the other hand, most of the inhabitants of Sylhet region live in London. The influences of foreign currency increase the value of land in the Sylhet city and its nearest areas. It is remarkable that the most of the *Laleng* villages are situated nearest the city. In these circumstances, the crucial eyes of land grabbers have fallen among the *Lalengs* land property. The *Lalengs* are becoming poorest through losing their lands. This decaying situation have broken or weakened of their traditional political organisation.

Identity crisis is one of the fundamental problems of the *Laleng* community. Locally and governmentally they are identified as Hindu, not as a separate indigenous group. In broader context, the *Lalengs* represent them as a Hindu, but in their personal and family life, they always try to practice their traditional *Laleng* culture. The local Bengali community don't differ them from Bengali Hindu. Dual identity crisis is the main problem of their social life and it is also viewed in aspire of their political organisation.

The tendency of influence in decision making in the *panchayet* and *barguite* is observed among the educated persons of *Laleng* society. Some-times, they don't care their traditional leaders. They want to follow democratic system at the time of selecting the leaders and taking the decisions in their political organisation. This democratic mentality of young *Lalengs* is more responsible for weakening or brokering their traditional power structure.

From the above discussion, we can see that their rich self-government system had a unique character. Everybody was loyal to the self-government. Though this traditional organization had no legal recognition, *Laleng* life was highly influenced by this system. Unfortunately, the age-old political organization of the *Lalengs* is undergoing changes due to several internal and external forces. In effect, culturally they are in a transitional state of situation. If this process of disintegration and transformation continues under the intervention of internal and external forces, time may come when they will assimilate with the national political system of Bangladesh, leaving behind their distinct political tradition.

5. CONCLUSION: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Indigenous peoples of Bangladesh are descendants of the original inhabitants of their land and areas and strikingly diverse in their culture, religion and patterns of social and political organization. *Laleng*, in the Sylhet region, is now threatened with extinction as the ethnic minority people are being forced to leave their ancestral homesteads and traditional culture due to several causes over decades. Without self-determination, their traditional cultural elements will not be protected. We must respect given to their traditional political organization. We should underscore the need for bringing the *Laleng* community into the mainstream society keeping their own traditional culture unchanged. A *Laleng*

Cultural Institute should be established for protecting their indigenous culture and customs. State attention and policies are much needed for the protection of the *Lalengs* traditional political organization. Government should approve their traditional political system like Chittagong Hill Tracts. They would keep it unchanged if the government ensures their basic human rights, including protection of their homesteads, from land grabbers.

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