

# Economic Transformation of Tribal People from Primitive to Tea Garden Workers in Dooars of Jalpaiguri District

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**Abstract:** The tribal people in India live in the forests, hills and naturally isolated inaccessible areas. Most of the tribal people are economically backward, literacy rate is very poor but they have rich cultural diversity. Throughout the globe the tribes are continuously forced to leave their age old traditional economic practices due to gradual economic development, shrinking of forest areas, increasing population and non-availability of natural resources. As a result their rich cultural values are gradually decreasing. In Dooars region of Jalpaiguri the immigrated tribal people were employed in tea gardens. This transformation has many negative impacts which have been focused in the present paper.

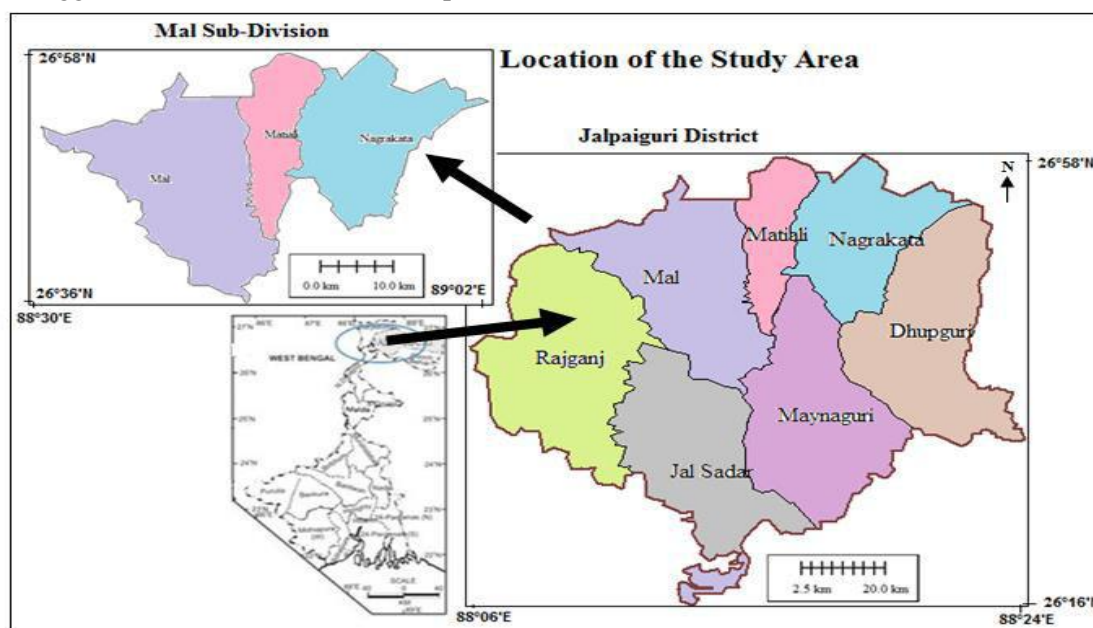
**Key words:** tribal people, cultural values, traditional economic practice, natural resources.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The present paper focuses the economic transformation of tribal people now living in Dooars region. The name Dooars or place of the Himalayan foothills, may have evolved from the word 'Doors' or passages used by the Bhutanese to communicate with the riverine peoples of the south for trade and barter. Administratively this is the Mal subdivision of Jalpaiguri District in West Bengal. There are undulating terrain, forests, torrential rivers includes that the Tista and Jaldhaka. The aboriginal people of this regions are Indo-Mongoloid tribes, who came to settle in this fertile land. Most of them continued to live on even today. The majority of the Indo-Mongoloid class are the Rajbangsi's. Apart from them there are the Meches, the Rabhas and the Limbus who had immigrated crossing nearby Mech River. Large tracts were uninhabited. After occupying by the Britishers, tea gardens were developed and tribal people were engaged to cultivate tea leaving their age old traditional practices of hunting and gathering.

The objective of the study includes:

- To review the historical background of changes of physical and cultural landscape of Dooars
- To examine the changing impact of occupation of tribal people.
- To suggest remedial solutions of their promotion.



## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

For a long time, the tribal people have been the focus of study for social scientists. A bulk of description is available about the different socio-economic aspects of tribal people. Indian tribes have been studied by the scholars of different disciplines from different points of view. Hunter's (1875) 'Statistical Account of Bengal', is a pioneer

work about the history of British ruled Bengal. The tenth volume is described about the Dooars of Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Princely Cooch Behar state. Physical, socio-economic and anthropological aspects are analyzed in descriptive way in Hunter's work. Sunder's (1895) book 'Survey and Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri 1889-1895' is a minute description of land revenue system of Dooars. Gruning, John F. (1911) in his district Gazetteer of Jalpaiguri elaborated details picture of the district. S.K. Bose (1954) has dealt with both the aspects of capital and labour in the Indian tea industry in his book 'Capital and Labour in the Indian Tea Industry'. L.P.Vidyarthi and B.K.Rai (1976) describe the tribes from the anthropological viewpoints in their book 'The Tribal Culture of India'. All sorts of livelihood have been focused in this book. Awasthi (1975) in his book 'Economics of Tea Industry in India' has presented a detailed account of the history, growth and development of tea plantation and manufacturing. Sanjay Kumar Roy (2008) in his monograph gives an outline of the work participation trend among the tribal population in North Bengal and highlights the areas of gender gap and gender discrimination in the use of women labour.

### 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS:

Economic transformation of the tribal people living in Dooars is a historical phenomenon. Information relating to this have been collected from the past literatures. To know the present positions, primary data have been collected from the field. Primary sources include schedule and questionnaire methods to acquire data from the field. A size of 2-5% tribal households has been randomly selected for each 22 Gram Panchayats in the study area covered. A total of 1000 Tea garden based tribal households have been surveyed. The data have been analyzed by to give a clear picture of transformation of occupations of tribal people.

### 4. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE TEA ECONOMY IN DOOARS:

After the Anglo-Bhutan war which ended with the treaty of Sinchula in 1865, the Britishers easily captured the Dooars region from the Bhutan king. The British Government declared the Dooars as non-regulated area for the purpose of using the land for colonial economy. In 1871 under the supervision of Mr. Becket the lands were divided in three categories viz. (1) Land for agricultural purpose, (2) Land for reserve forest and (3) Land for tea cultivation. In this context, Gruning (1911) writes, "It was soon found that the soil and climate of the Western Dooars was suitable to the growth of tea; Government offered land to investors on favourable terms and the industry developed rapidly." The first tea garden in Jalpaiguri district was planted in Gazoldoba in the year 1874 by Dr. Brougham. He appointed R. Hagauhton as manager who was a pioneer of tea plantation in Dooars region. First tea garden of Mal subdivision was established in Bagrakot in the year 1875.

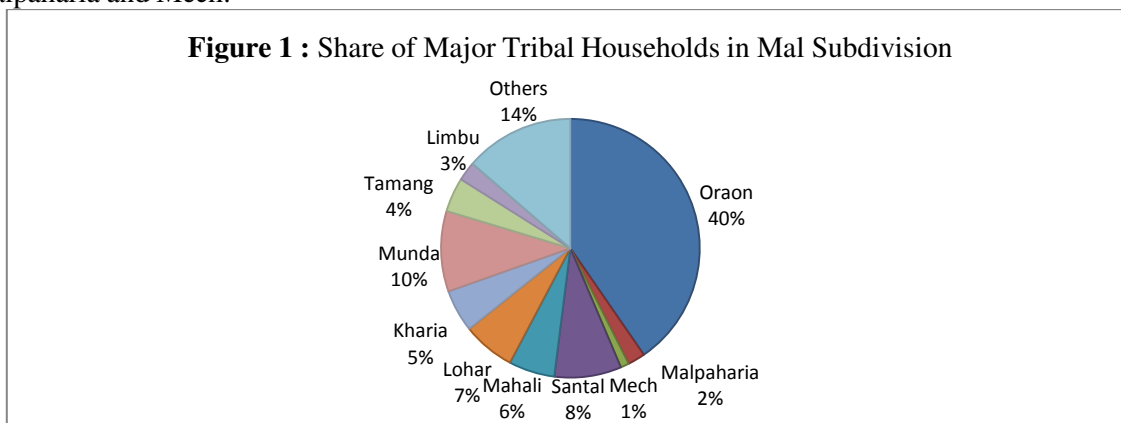
As lands for tea estates were demarcated and acquisition of land were being continued the indigenous people of the study area, the Mech, the Rabhas and the Koch-Rajbanshis faced problems as they were dependent on their traditional village economy of subsistence agriculture, weaving, fishing and often hunting and were accustomed in living in the community-clusters of houses together. The tea planters then were forced to depend on outside labors. The tea planters in collusion with the Government decided to bring labourers from the Santal Parganas and Chhotonagpur plateau areas of the then Bihar (now Jharkhand) where large number of tribal as well as poor people namely Santals, Oraons, Nageshias, Mahalis, Malpaharias, and the Mundas lived without fixed and settled economy. These people for generations were dependent on jungles but the new forest policy of the British Government whereby felling of trees in reserved forests were prohibited and declared punishable by law, deprived them of their traditional ways of living in the forest enclaves at Chhotonagpur. It was for that reasons, thousands of laborers emigrated from Chhotonagpur to the tea gardens of Dooars (Sunders, 1895). Beside tea cultivation, Britishers introduced *jotdari* system creating *jotes* and giving to the '*jotdars*'. A *jotdar* is a person who holds lands directly under Government and his holding is called a jote. The *jotdars* cultivated their whole lands by the '*adhiars*' or sharecroppers.

There are many age old tea gardens in Dooars occupied by merchants, traders and rich businessman or multinational groups. In this context some important tea estate owners' name may be mentioned: Goodricke group, Duncan's group, Diana group, Bijohnagar tea Company, Ellenbari Tea Company etc. Besides, there are many small tea gardens planted by small farmers and local people in their own land. Some small grower gardens were similarly established in Dooars area. According to the Tea Board of India, small growers are those whose plantation area is having 20 acres of land. They took tea cultivation because of assurance of better income over what they used to get from traditional agricultural practices (Sharma & Das, 2009). There are 84 big tea gardens in Mal subdivision. Among these, Chengmari tea garden is the largest tea garden having an area of 4577.53 acre of land located in Nagrakata block.

### 5. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF TRIBAL PEOPLE IN DOOARS:

As per 2011 census, Mal subdivision has a total population of 5, 69,711 distributing in three blocks of Mal, Matiali and Nagrakata and in a single town namely Mal. The rural area composed of 5, 44,493 populations. The share of Scheduled Tribes to total population of this subdivision is 40% with a varying degree of concentration across the

blocks. Among the tribal groups Oranos are the dominating in number followed by Munda and santal. The major tribal groups of the Mal subdivision as per descending numbers are Oraon, Munda, Santal, Lohar, Mahali, Kharia, Tamang, Limbu, Malpaharia and Mech.



## 6. PROBLEMS OF ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION:

Due to transformation of tribal economy from the hunter gatherer to plantation workers, they are facing many problems. These are:

- i. **Problems of Identity:** Due to continuous mixing of different tribal communities, each individual community has lost their own identity. The indigenous people of the Dooars, the Mech, the Rabha, the Garo and Totos were originated from Indo-mongoloid race. They had their own culture, own system for treatment; own system of judgment or solution of any kind of problem among them. It was the ethnic culture. But after increasing of population the indigenous tribes face an identity crisis because they had been losing their rights and liberty in the Dooars. Now, they had been transferred to settled cultivation from shifting cultivation. They had to pay revenue to the government which they did not pay earlier. By entering into global world and global culture the young generations are going to forget many things of their own traditional culture.

As a result of immigration, the population of different castes and classes had been increasing gradually in Dooars but the population of Mech, Rabha and Garos who were indigenous and lived independently, decreasing gradually. Separate colonies were established for the protection of the Mech, Garo and Santals. But due to identity crisis, they left the place and moved towards east. Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal (1973) writes, “Analysis figures of the census report it appears that there was a large exodus of the Mech from Bengal towards Assam and then further eastwards”. A number of Garo tribe still remain in the forest village, but none in the colony, because they never patronized the colony to any extent (Miligan, 1919).

During the field survey among the tribal people, a few questions were asked about their identity, origin and culture. But in most of the cases the respondents were not able to answer such questions.

**Table 1:** Statistics of Identity Crisis in the Tribal Society in Dooars

	Questions asked	Answered by the respondents (%)		
		Unknown	Wrong	Right
1	Which was your predecessor’s place of origin?	63	22	15
2	What are the names of your community God?	47	30	23
3	What is the name of your clan?	80	14	06
4	What is the name of your community totem?	60	30	10
5	Which religious system do you follow?	30	20	50

*Source: Field survey, June, 2017*

- ii. **Problems of assimilation with the non-tribal People:** The indigenous people of the Dooars were the Koch-Rajbanshis, the Mech, the Rabhas and the Lepchas. They were well dependent on their traditional village economy of agriculture, hunting, fishing, and forest based economy. After the introduction of tea plantation in Dooars, the planters encouraged the immigration of the Nepalese, and then the tea planters decided to bring labourers from the Santal Parganas and Chhotonagpur plateau. In the second part of nineteenth century, a large number of tribal people mainly of Oraons, Santals, Mundas and Malpaharis in-migrated to the Dooars. Again after the partition of the country in 1947, and emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, streams of immigration or infiltration from East Pakistan and Bangladesh occurred in the areas. The immigrated Bangladeshi people occupied a vast areas in almost everywhere. Thus the Dooars grew into a new hub of

multi-racial and multi-lingual people, and of course, this led the demographic and cultural environment to be too complex for the future.

- iii. **Loss of Control over Natural Resources:** Before coming of the British, the tribals enjoyed unhindered rights of ownership and management over natural resources like land, forests, wildlife water, soil, fishes etc. Indigenous peoples have an intuitive relationship with nature, a wealth of traditional knowledge, and have used natural resources for their livelihood. But, after the introduction of plantation farming in the Dooars, livelihood has been changed. Jungles were cut, forests disappeared in large amount, and control over natural resources has shifted from tribal people to the Government. With the concept of protected forests and national forests, the tribals felt themselves uprooted from their property of forests. Even the concept of earlier forest village is abolished recently by the notification of the government. The forest villages of Apalachand forest under Mal block, namely, Gajoldoba, Mech Basti, Magurmari and Sologharia etc have been converted to revenue mouza. Same fate of conversion also occurred at Nima Tandu forest village under Matiali block, namely, Baradighi, Bamni, South Indong, Bicha Bhanga, Saraswati, Murti, and Uttar Dhupjhora (Kolkata Gazette, 29/09/2014). Hence the right of forest is abolished today.
- iv. **Land Alienation:** The British Government declared the eleven Bengal Dooars as a non-regulated area for the purpose of using the land in accordance with the design of colonial economy. Under the lease rules for tea gardens, lands were granted to any capable entrepreneur for a term of five years, after expiry of that if the conditions of lease fulfilled all terms and conditions be renewed for a period of thirty years and so on for similar periods in continuity. In the present time, tribal lands are gradually transforming to tea gardens due to the ignorance of the tribal people. During our field survey it is learnt, that for the tea gardens different private entrepreneurs have borrowed land from the farmers in a condition that one or two members of each family would be permanently employed in the tea garden. But after agreement, they were cheated, no one is employed in the garden, or the garden is abandoned after few years. Hence there is no production as well as no employment. Land of tribal people is forfeited in such a way.
- v. **Unemployment:** Tea gardens are the main employment source of tribal workers in Mal subdivision. One most critical period happens during the closing of tea gardens. Incident of closing of tea gardens are nothing new in this region and it happens suddenly. The tribal laborers lose their job during the closing of the gardens. The laborers shifted to another profession after a long waiting. From the closed tea gardens a few male laborer force to migrate to the different western states of the country, the women and young age workers are employed in different hard construction works such as lifting and breaking stones from the river beds etc. Due to unemployment in tea gardens every year, hundreds of tribal girls mostly teenagers have gone missing over the past few years from the poverty-stricken dying tea estate areas of the Dooars. Driven out of home by poverty and because of the dream of a better life, these girls have fallen prey to human trafficking. They have been trapped by local agents promising lucrative jobs in big cities of the country. After leaving home, however, these girls have become untraceable (Sumati, 2013).
- vi. **Man-Animal conflicts:** Earlier entire Dooars area was covered by forest and all forests were connected, population were very poor in number. Wild animals were very common to wander through the thick jungles. But after thinning of jungles for plantation and settlement, the wild animals' habitat has been degraded rapidly. In recent years man-animal conflict has gone up steeply owing to the increase in human population; land use transformations, developmental activities; species habitat degradation and fragmentation. Tea plantations have taken heavy toll on adjoining grasslands and also the industry has produced huge amount of unplanned human settlements. Elephant is the main wildlife in the Dooars which harms the people's life and property. Habitat fragmentation or obstruction to migration path brings about human-elephant conflicts resulting in damage to agricultural crops, property, household and injury and mortality to both humans and elephants. On an average, they annually destroy crops over an area of 0.8 to 1 million hectares which in turn affect the livelihood of at least 5,00,000 cultivators (Sukumar & Murali, 2010). The Dooars region perhaps experiences one of the highest levels of human-elephant conflicts in Asia.

## 7. SUGGESTIVE MEASURES:

The tribes of Dooars are facing some common problems as it is in state and national level and some unique problems which require strategic solutions. It is very hard to return them to their primitive stage of self-regulating society and economy. The following can be suggested for their promotion from the present state.

- a) **Improvement of Literacy Rate:** Poor illiteracy rate and high School dropout rates are big problems of tribal society in Dooars. In the government sponsored schools most of the teachers are from Bengali background



while the students are not able to understand Bengali properly. As a result, the students lost their interests on studying. Hindi medium schools may be opened, as most of them understand Hindi better than Bengali. *Sandri* being main communicating language, teachers may be appointed from the sections who understand *Sandri* properly. The missionary schools focus English language as medium of study. Moreover, children can study if they remain free from hard work in their early life for earning. Such a situation can be developed if there is sufficient income in the family.

- b) **Creation of Job Opportunities through Alternative occupations:** Alternative occupation facilities can change the situation of the tribal people in Dooars, so that extra labor burden may not obstruct the garden authorities. Creation of Self Help Groups (SHGs) for female workers, mobilize different segments of the society particularly the youth for attraction of other jobs than the tea garden, opening of different household industrial units in some places to attract the poor people like masonry, carpentry, tailoring, food processing etc. can be alternative occupations.
- c) **Assurance of Job Securities in Tea Gardens:** In tea gardens, tribal people are mainly work as laborers. Their daily wage is as little as Rs.128.50 only. It is very hard to maintain the family expenditures with these little earnings. Problems become more serious when the tea gardens remain closed for months even for year after years. Sometimes provident fund moneys of the retired tribal workers are forfeited by the tea-garden authorities. Government should take care so that tea gardens remain open throughout the year. Job securities for tea garden workers are very essential for stable economic sustainability. Recently, the state government has announced to construct a Tea Directorate for the wellbeing of the tea garden workers.
- d) **Maintenance of Tribal Culture and Development:** The tribal art, dance, music and song have greatly enriched the composite culture. The routine work is an act of art and joy. They sing and dance in forests, fairs, rites and festivals and in the evening hours in the village. The women enjoy high status in the society. The discipline in social life, dignity of labor, the collective and cooperative support in the socio-economic activities, the hospitality and friendship and above all honesty and simplicity are some of the finer cultural values of tribal society (Samal, 2006). Tribal culture should be nurtured and maintained. Imposition or assimilation will surely erode their identity. But for ecological point of view and for sustainability of tribal people it required special attention to take developmental efforts not to harm their social structure but to cope with this. Government and administration should encourage the tribal people to nourish their cultures.
- e) **Role of NGO and Missionaries:** The Christian Missionaries have been active in tribal areas of Mal, Matiali and Nagrakata blocks. They have been primarily interested in conversion of tribes to a new religious faith. They should emphasis more on welfare works of educational, economic, hygienic and social values. Voluntary social service organizations have done considerable humanitarian work in the tribal areas to uplift them; their idealism and spirit must reach up to the need of the tribal people.

## 8. CONCLUSION:

The tribal people have to be taught to learn self-help. We should aim at change amongst the tribal people so that they themselves jettison irrelevant practices (Shrivastava, 1995). The development practices should be based on the cultural characteristics, environmental peculiarities and traditional skills of the tribal people. Tribal welfare programme should be based on the felt needs of the people. Planners should be well acquainted with these needs. In implementing the development schemes, the local political leaders and administration should have good will to serve the poor tribal, otherwise the benefits will not reach up to the root level.

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