



Changing Scenario of Socio-Cultural life of the Tribes of Jalpaiguri District, West Bengal (1869-2001) : A Historical Analysis

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Abstract:

The largest concentration of the tribal people is in India. "Unity in Diversity", is the main feature of India, like this. Same kind of unique feature is existed in Jalpaiguri. That's why it is called as the "mini-India". The original inhabitant of this said region is called as "Tribal" or "Adibasi". Among this diversification one of the main is feature is the presence of different type of tribal people. Not only that the bio-logical, and geographical features are also creating an unique feature of Jalpaiguri district. Mainly two kinds of tribal community are here, 1) Local Community and 2) Migrated Community. *Rabha, Mech, Garo* etc. belong to local community while *Santhal, Oraon*, etc. belong to migrated community. Since pre-colonial period those tribal communities had maintained primitive or their ethnic life but the arrival of colonial power here and also the impact of post-colonial period transformed their life.

Keywords: Tribal, Migrated, Indigenous, community, Inhabitant etc.

"The largest concentration of tribal people anywhere in the world, except perhaps Africa, is in India."¹ An analysis of the geographical background shows that North Bengal is the link between North- East India and the Aryan circuit. For this reason, geologists say that North Bengal is the gateway North-East India. Jalpaiguri, one of the traditional districts of North Bengal has been a silent witness to the past glorious history of this region since time immemorial. Since its formation Jalpaiguri was known as sparsely populated area, due to the impact of Malaria, black-water fever etc. "With the passage of time, the *Bratya Janapada* of the yesteryears become the 'capital' of the tea-planters, the highest tobacco producing district of India and also the most lucrative Centre of forest wealth".² In respect of different times this region came under the control of different rulers. Finally, on January 1st1869, it became a full-fledged district. After occupation of the Duars, the district, Jalpaiguri was formed with the western Duars since 1865 and the Jalpaiguri and Rajganj Police Station of Rangpur district since 1869. "From a feudal and the ocentric society, it entire to an imperial system which subjected to various changes."³

As we said earlier that India was tribal dominated area, so lets observe what is the present ratio of tribal in India. The main concentration of Tribes in India is in North, North-East India, Central and to some in Western India also. According to the census of 2011, 12% tribal population is in North-Eastern area. The highest concentration of Scheduled Tribes is in Orissa and regarding Union Territories highest concentration is in Lakshadweep (94.8%), Mizoram (94.4), and 3rd Nagaland (86.5%). Like India, Jalpaiguri was composed by the several tribal people. The original inhabitants of Jalpaiguri are generally known as "Tribes".

Some tribal groups came here for their own purposes or better to say in search of new places and some other for observing government order. But most of the time they settled here as permanent resident and at sometimes they got dismantled and went to different regions in search of new places and their places were filled up with other tribal groups. And then in the above process the present Jalpaiguri got formulated with the arrival and departure of the different permanently peoples on different occasions after the ending of pre-modern period. This region enjoys the flowing waters of the rivers like Jaldhaka, Teests, Raidak, Torsa, Deema, Sankosh.

However, before going to discuss the detailed features of tribal life, it is important to classify in to two group and they are as follows: -1) Indigenous or Local Tribes and 2) Immigrated Tribes.

Indigenous or Local Tribes :

The people who are mainly from “Mongoloid group” is generally known as “Local Tribes” or Indigenous Tribes. Because of their Anthropological characteristics they are called so. “An appraisal of the role of the Mongoloid peoples in the development of the composite Hindu or Indian culture, the peculiar line of development of this culture in its expansion in North-eastern and Eastern India through Mongoloid contact or participation- should be looked upon as an important line of enquiry in tracing the history of Indian civilisation.”⁴ The important names of Local Tribes are *Rabha*, *Mech*, *Toto*, *Drukpa*, etc. “*Jalpaiguri Jelar sthanio janojati baa di janojati praiekisomoi bono bhumi elakai basobas korten ebong jhum chas e obhostho chilen*”.⁵ (The local inhabitants of Jalpaiguri District are residing at forest area and habituated with the Jhum Cultivation.)

Rabha : *Rabha* is one of the most important tribal groups among the Mongoloid origin. “*Rabha Adivasi gosthike Uttar banger Jalpaiguri ebong Cooch Behar jelai bosobas korte dekha jai*”.⁶ (It is seen that Rabha tribal communities are the inhabitant of the Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar District).

The religiosity of the Rabhas is a very important thing for them. They keep their belief that many diseases or disasters are caused by unnatural objects. The Madankam aims at the well-being of cows. The slokas or mantras of the Rabhas associating the Madankam Puja are created by the youths of the *Rabhas* and they use their own language, rhythm and song in this concern. There came many changes in the cremation related matters among them except in one case as follow the traditional mode namely ‘*Maier bar chati*’ where traditionally the kins of the diseased dance and sing during the funeral procession of their own. The agricultural or the harvesting matter of the *Rabhas* have been some religious linkage, especially during the ploughing, seed planting, plant planting, first reaping of the grains they do some religious function as well as during the taking of grains at the storage they also celebrate the occasion and it may replicate the *Nabanna*. “Most of the *Rabhas* of West Bengal are primarily agriculturists. While some have resorted to jobs of day-labourer, business, and service. A large number of forest Rabhas are also earn their livelihood partially through agriculture and allied activities”.⁷ Upto few years back, most of the *Rabha* families were not conscious of their children education. Rice form the staple food of the *Rabhas* with an inherent liking for dried and powdered Fish, Pork and Rice-beer is their favourite drink and is prepared on festive occasions. Vegetables, Pulses etc. are also taken as an important part of diet. *Rabha* people traditionally practice a few animistic rituals. The *Rabha* society is also matriarchal and they are known in the society by the identity of their mothers.

Garos : - The *Garos* are seen in the different district of West Bengal mainly at Natuapara, Falakata, Dinhata, Putimari of Cooch Behar district and Damanpur bonbosti and Parobasti of Jalpaiguri district where *Garos* in the forest inside villages. “The *Garos* are believed to have come into the Duars from the Khasi and Jaintia hills”.⁸ Like other villagers, they are mainly Farmers. *Garos* used to grow crops in the Jhoom procedures. Jhoom harvesting is still in practice in some mountainous and weedful areas. They prefer to do harvesting, sowing seeds, using sharp khoontis etc. for their agricultural purposes. *Garos* eat fish, especially ‘Sutki’ fish is their favourite dish. They almost eat all the animal foods even snake, termite, spider etc. In the old times *Garos* never drank milk but now they take milk. They do not wear gaudy dresses; the males wear loin-cloth, which they called in their native language as “Gando”. The males wear turban on head and females wear “gana”. They preach many gods and for each object they choose separate gods or deities: The Christian Missionaries had taken good role in spreading education among *Garos* as they are very poor since long in that said field.

Mech:- The ancient most scheduled tribe group of north east India is the Mechs. They belong to the Indo-Mongoloid sect. They are known as barbaric scheduled tribe. They have been religiously encouraged and also been encouraged by ideology and choose simple ways of religious practice main way of *Mech* subsistence is cultivation. They started profession very soon after settling themselves in fixed place. Earlier they preferred to do *Jhum* cultivation. The Mech people are mainly honest, simple and laborious. They eat Pork, fish, lizards but abstain from beef, and the flesh of the long-tailed sheep. Among the vegetable item they are mainly found of potato, brinjal, ladies finger, beans, cabbage, cauliflower are used as vegetables. Guava, banana, papaya litchis are also cultivated. The main reasons of illiteracy among the *Mechs* are poverty. They are too poor to take the education. The *Mechs* are *Jhoom* cultivators. They also grew “cotton “and earned livelihood through sewing, fishing etc. Mech families are Patriarchal. Though women are given are due weightage. They are divided into many sections. They used many surnames like Suba, Roy, Khatam, Saiba, Karjee etc.

Immigrated Tribes :

Beside those above-mentioned Indo-Mongoloid characterized group there are also different other group who are known as Proto-Australoid group according to their characteristic. The prominent among those are as follows: -

Santhal:- “The Santhals are a Dravidian tribe, akin to the *Mundas*, most of those in Jalpaiguri district, came from Santhal Paraganas”.⁹ The *Santhal* tribal groups are subdivided into 12 *gotras*. Marriage in the same *gotras* has been a crime. Widow marriage is also prevalent within *Santhal* society. They love to do dance because they considered that dancing is in their blood. Dance with light music is their loving way to relax themselves after long day hard work. Widow marriage is also prevalent within *Santhal* society. They love to do dance because they considered that dancing is in their blood. Dance with light music is their loving way to relax themselves after long day hard work. They have no fixed religious idol and along with this they have no fixed temple of their own. Their main goddesses are Maranghburu. The celebration of Karam puja is another important feature of *Santhal* religious tradition. Boiled rice is the staple food of the *Santhals* like rest of the neighboring population. They preferred almost all kind of fish, meat, crab etc. They first collect all these meat, fish etc and preserve it in their own way. The *santhal* male and female prefer to wear two different types of dress. One part of cloth for the upper part of their body while another part they used for the lower part of their body. *Gamecha* is part of cloth which female *santhals* are used to cover their upper part of their body. But regarding *santhal* society we can say that illiteracy is the main cause of their backwardness.

Munda: The term *Munda* is not self- imposed. The British entrepreneurs brought them in Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri for tea cultivation purpose. The *Mundas* dress normally. The males usually wear long dress, while The *Munda* female are generally wear short length sari. They like to do “Tattoos” on their hand and body. The *Mundas* are mainly involving themselves with agricultural work as a source of their livelihood. They live on harvesting and agriculture. The norms and customs of the *Munda* marriage have been changed over the period. Until the Munda males learnt to make “ploughs” and the females learnt to prepare mat by cutting thread, marriage is not possible. The *Mundas* are preferred to take flesh or meat of animal. They like to eat frogs, snakes, rats, earthworms and snails etc. Wine and *Tari* are the drinks which they used during every kind of festive occasion.

Oraons: “The second largest tribal group in India is Oraon. Oraons are hard working and make excellent cultivators, they are good settlers, giving little trouble and paying their rent regularly.”¹⁰ The *Oraons* are having many *gotras* and sub-*gotras*. The traditional dress of Oraon is long cotton cloth with red border in each side. In prestigious occasion the oraon men are used shawl on their shoulder. Turban is another feature of their dress which they used during festive dance occasion. The ratio of literacy rate among Oraon is much more higher than the other existing schedule caste of not only in Jalpaiguri but also among others part of India. “The religion of the *Oraons* is of composite order, they believe in supreme order, they believe in supreme god, when they call Dharmesh”.¹¹ The *Oraons* are mainly non-vegetarian eat the flesh of Pigs, Goats, Chicken and Buffalo etc. Much of this meat is consumed of feasts following the sacrifice of animals at religious ceremonies. Their staple food is rice supplemented by wheat and maize. Vegetables, Pulses and spices are cultivated.

This is a short description of the tribal community and their lifestyle in the pre-colonial communities are reflected their characteristics proved that they are community based, agriculture based and their occupation is livestock farming. They have well expert in various types of worshipping a God. Besides they had a custom of sacrificing the animals towards their beloved god and goddess. Thus, every single community has retained or maintained their originality through their unique practices. This is the ethnic picture of those tribal communities of mentioned period.

Let's start our discussion with population. From very beginning this was termed as sparsely populated area, black-fever area, etc. but after colonial period the demographic character of Jalpaiguri changed drastically. The population of this said district increased with leaps and bounds.

Scheduled Tribe Population in Jalpaiguri district from (1961-2011)

	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Total	354741	428595	491791	589225	641688	731704
Rural	351774	427173	486239	580015	625585	690312
urban	2967	1422	5552	9210	16103	41392

Source: 2011, Census of Jalpaiguri

This data shows the picture of increase of tribal population in Jalpaiguri District. Now we will move towards Demographic field to educational field which is another important part of social life. Since pre-colonial period we watched the educational standard is far below than in compare with the other existing community. But since colonial period the educational picture changed step by step. The British merchant cum administrator who are here, realized the need of a group of educated Indians who can help them. In this connection the role of Christian missionary is remarkable one for spreading the idea of need of education among the tribal.

Now we can focus on the graph of development of education among the tribes in the district of Jalpaiguri by conducting some sample survey.

Malbazar, an area under the district of Jalpaiguri is largely or highly populated with the Tribals. The ST. Bartholomew School of this area had been established mainly for the Tribal based students. Besides the Pushpika Girls School has been established for the Tribals girls. Apart from these, in the Schools like Mal Adarsha Vidyalaya, Subhasini Girls' High School, Parimal Mitra Smiriti Mahavidyalaya, the presences of the tribal students are high inproportion. Along with this Government reservation is observed in normal course.

Jaigaon, is another town under the district of Jalpaiguri, is infested with the Tribal population. The prominent Schools of this area are as follows: -

1. ST. Anthony Convent School,
2. S.H.M.D. School,
3. Jaigaon College

All above mentioned schools and college are infested with huge number of Tribal students. This displays the growing tendency of educational mindset of the tribal people of this area.

Birpara is another Tribal belt area of Jalpaiguri district. The scenarios of Birpara High School or Birpara College tell us that the Tribals have not been established with the Primary education and they long for higher education also. They understood the need of Higher education and it is reflected in their daily life.

In this context, Alipurduar can be said to be the most tribal infested area of Jalpaiguri district of said period. Through survey among it comes to us that five blocks of Alipurduar (exKhoardanga, Santosh, Amarpur, Turturi and Newlands) are literate. Khoardanga, among five is an area of higher education. The four left out blocks, though not filled with but the presence of people with education of Madhyamick and below Madhyamick level are observed prominently. The tribals of Jalpaiguri district could take education from diverse educational institution apart from the government created mode of education for the tribals.

In the district of Jalpaiguri we could see the 1st presence of IGNOU centre in the College of Maynaguri, Later in Malbazar, Jaigaon, Alipurduar had been the centre of IGNOU. In addition to that in, we could see the school-based branch of in Binnaguri. All these stated places were tribal dominated.

Literacy rate of the Rural unit of Jalpaiguri districts.

Place	Male	Female
Raiganj	48.63%	21.50%
Malbazar	53.17%	27.86%
Nagrakata	49.52%	25.82%
Madarihat	50.22%	27.46%
Kalchini	55.18%	34.03%
Jaigaon	67.24%	50.92%
Kumargaon	55.57%	34.36%
Falakata	52.53%	27.63%
Dhupguri	53.10%	27.43%
Maynaguri	60.50%	35.48%

Source: 2011, Census Report

At present the main attraction of Duars Adivasi community is their changing economic life and the foundation of their livelihood is which is going far away from agricultural works. They are seeing different colours in the society through the farmers or farming class of people. Many types of urban style of occupational opportunity developed within Adibasi community like, business, Professional service etc. Different peoples from different parts of India clustered over here by seeing its prosperity. The immigrated peoples are also started living over here with the people of Adibasi community. This coming or convergence of people started to grow especially from 1869, after the establishment of the district of Jalpaiguri. After 1950, the coming of immigrants here and mixture of Adibasi and non-Adibasi started to grow in the society. Not only from the different parts of the country, but also from foreign countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, people started to come there. They considered it as their second home. These new comers are superior on the basis of their caste and utility. This superiority helped them to catch the language of production of market mechanism. That's why the non-tribal society tried to suppress the tribals with their superiority. It is tough to say that as stakeholders how much amount of land belong to the Adivasi society. In this connection, I want to say that the establishment of tea industry here really revolutionized the economic structure of that said area. We already discuss that number of tea garden had increased with a high speed very soon after its establishment at 1874. This increase of tea garden is due to the contribution of tribal people who came here and worked here as a worker since its beginning period.

Political power of the tribal community is also modified specially with the introduction of three-tier Panchayat system which not only reserved political seat for the tribals from where they reached the post of M.L.A and M.P etc. like Bulu Chikbaraiakh, John Barla etc. Beside Panchayati power, the growth of trade union movement also increases political power among the tribal community.

Now we will go through one example which shows the seats reserve for Schedule Tribe for the election-2001.

District Name	Total Population	Scheduled Tribe	Seat reserve for ST
Cooch Behar	2470155	14246	03
Jalpaiguri	3401173	641688	05
North Dinajpur	244794	124865	07
South Dinajpur	1503178	242317	05
Darjeeling	1609172	204167	05
Malda	3290468	227047	11

Source: Ghatak.Maitreesh and Ghatak Maitreta (2002). "Recent reform in the Panchayat system in West Bengal", Economic and Political Weekly (1), Jan 5th, 2002 p.47

Lastly, I want to present one name that is Mr. Tej Kumar Toppo, who is one of the chief leaders of *Duars Adibasi Bikash Parishad*. All members of his family include his wife engaged in different type of service which shows their transformation.

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