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**Evolution of Tribal People in West Dinajpur:  
A Demographic Study**

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*Abstract: In West Dinajpur district share of the tribal population was considerable and important tribes were Santal, Munda, Oraw, and Mahali. They are generally called adivasi, but actually, in this region, they had migrated from Chhotanagpur of Bihar during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the Santal rebellion. The Zamindars had welcomed them for reclamation of land. After partition, the tribal fall into the Pakistan side had migrated to West Bengal, no doubt in West Dinajpur also. As a huge number of refugees came into the district, naturally, the increase of the tribal population was slower than the overall population growth. They were basically agriculturists and used to live in the rural areas, though the percentage was higher than in the state. The sex ratio of tribal was more favorable than the overall scenario. Their literacy lagged behind but the pace of literacy development was hopeful. The work participation rate among them was higher than the district rate.*

**Keywords:** Census, Population, Literacy, Rural, Tribe, Sex Ratio, Urban

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**Introduction**

In the state of West Bengal, a considerable share of the population is of tribal communities, in the West Dinajpur also the share of tribal people is not less than the state but far beyond the state, and they are locally known as 'adivasi'. Here it is necessary to introduce the district of West Dinajpur. It may be said that the West Dinajpur district (present days North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur

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unitedly) was the bi-product of the partition of India and Bengal. In the colonial period, Dinajpur was a district of Bengal province in-between rivers Nagar and Karotoya bounded by Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Bogura, Rajshahi, Malda, and Purina districts of Bihar. Partition of the subcontinent (1947) caused the division of Bengal province and the international boundary had drowned across the district Dinajpur. Two third of Dinajpur was sent to Pakistan and one-third remained in India as a district of West Bengal named West Dinajpur. On the Indian side, there were 10 police stations divided into two subdivisions. The district headquarters Balurghat, a subdivision consisting Balurghat, Kumarganj, Gangarampur and Tapan police stations. Hili police station was created in 1948. Raiganj subdivision was another consisting of Raiganj, Kaliaganj, Hemtabad, Itahar, Kushmundi and Bansihari police stations. In 1988 the western part of Bansihari police station separated and police station Harirampur was created.<sup>1</sup>

In district West Dinajpur the major portion of adivasi people were the Santal, Oraon and Munda people. About them, the important fact was that none of these peoples' homelands was West Dinajpur. Basically, they were the people of Bihar; particularly the Santal peoples' homeland was the Santal Pargana of Chotanahpur region. Regarding the Oraon and Mundas, the fact was the same. From there in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they had been spreading to Bengal and other contiguous areas of their homeland. There were few historical reasons behind the spread of these tribes to Bengal along with Dinajpur and their resettlement in the region showed particular features.

Generally, the adivasi people of Bihar used to come to Dinajpur during the colonial period in a particular season for the search of work in the agricultural field and household industries like oil mills, sugar mills etc. Those who got permanent work in the district settled there permanently.<sup>2</sup> It is also known to all that in the Santal Pargana and Chotanagpur region after the imposition of permanent settlement the oppression and exploitation of zamindars, money lenders and their collaborators were high degrees. Generally, the adivasi people used to leave the region in search of a better livelihood.

During the Santal rebellion (1855-57) the people of these communities had merged to Bengal in huge numbers to escape from the oppression of the government and its collaborators and a big portion of them had settled in the Dinajpur district.<sup>3</sup> In the host region of Dinajpur, the agricultural economy was also ready to welcome these people. During the time of Robert Clive the blow of famine in 1770 and the exploitation of Devi Sing, one-third people of Dinajpur district died. Naturally huge quantity of agricultural land became barren for lack of manpower. In such a situation

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the Dewan of Dinajpur Raj Janakiram first had imported Santal labor into the region.<sup>4</sup> Mr. Gait, the superintendent of the census in 1901 wrote,

“About fifty years ago it occurred to the manager of a government estate that the wasteland might be reclaimed if Santals were imported and settled there. The experiment was made and proved such a success that the influx has continued ever since... their lead has been followed by a few Mundas and Oraons from Ranchi.”<sup>5</sup>

The migration of the Santal people in the district was appreciated by the Zamindars. Because of the barren land or forest, the Zamindars could not get any profit. So they welcomed the laborious people and initially created no bondage of tax but after completing of reclamation of the land they imposed taxes on this land, even evicted the people and made them sharecroppers or wage labor.<sup>6</sup> Regarding the Oraon People scholars assumed that during Mughal time due to oppression they had been scattered from their homeland of Odisha, Chotanagpur, and the mountainous area of Rajmahal to the North Bengal region along with Dinajpur.<sup>7</sup> The process of immigration of the adivasi people has continued in the twentieth century also. Between 1911 and 1921 the number of Santal people who immigrated to the Dinajpur district was 53350.<sup>8</sup> It is also to be mentioned that the settlement of the Santal and other adivasis were distinct. They settled in the Barind<sup>9</sup> region. Because the climate and soil of that region were somehow similar to the Santal Pargana and the Santal people knew how to reclaim the land. Naturally, the Zamindars of that region welcomed them to reclaim the wasteland.<sup>10</sup>

### **Demographic scenario**

It is clear from the above discussion that the important three tribal communities of West Dinajpur were from the Bihar region. The tribes of Islampur subdivision were belong to Bihar state before the inclusion of the region in West Dinajpur in 1956. As the adivasis of Islampur area was included in West Dinajpur the socio-economic condition and their problems are different from the rest that is Balurghat and Raiganj subdivision area. But no doubt the demographic calculations were altered by the inclusion of Islampur in the district. Lets we see the demography of West Dinajpur excluding Islampur subdivision during the colonial period.

Table-1 : Decadal increase of Santal, Oraon and Munda people in West Dinajpur 1872-1951.

Community	1872	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951
Santal	1039	6813	6515	74101	109620	120211	130328	87723	94910

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Oraon	2735	**	1386	10271	14881	16046	18667	14188	20674
Munda	-----	**	-----	5873	6355	7512	9193	5463	8374

Source: A, Mitra, *The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal*, West Bengal Government Press, Alipore, 1953. (\*\*= Not available)

The table above unfolds a matter that in the census of 1931 the number of Santal and Munda people had reduced in the census of 1951 in the district West Dinajpur region.<sup>11</sup> It may be that right after the partition of Bengal and Dinajpur as a huge number of refugee people started to come, the Santal and Munda people had been returned to the contiguous region of Bihar. Because with the coming of refugees they were losing their job as labor, as the refugee people were working at a low wage in the agricultural field and other sectors. It also may be that during the famine (1943-46) the adivasi people had emigrated to elsewhere, as they were basically of a section of share cultivators or wage labor might move easily.

The district West Dinajpur was reorganized in 1956. Generally, a comparison between 1951 and 1961 data is not possible as the data of the 1951 census of Islampur region are not available.

Table-2: Distribution of Tribal population in 1951 was as below.

Particular	Number
Total tribal population	124194
Hilli + Balurghat + Kumarganj	50988
Tapan +Gangarampur	34055
Banshihari + Kushmundi +Kaliaganj	20964
Hemtabad +Raiganj +Itahar	17066
Rural	123073
Urban	1121

Source: A. Mitra, W.B.D.C.H.B., West Dinajpur 1951.

In the district of West Dinajpur 22 scheduled tribes were returned in the census of 1961. In addition, some persons were recorded as a scheduled tribe but did not report the specific name of the tribes to which they belonged.<sup>12</sup> In the next census, the number of tribes in the district increased to 30.<sup>13</sup> The share of the scheduled tribe population in West Dinajpur was higher than in the state of West Bengal. Only 6 percent of the total population of the state belongs to scheduled tribes but in West Dinajpur 12.90 % of the total population returned to scheduled tribes and the district of West Dinajpur contributed 8% of the total tribal population of West Bengal in the census of 1961.<sup>14</sup>

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**Table- 3**

### Distribution of the tribal people in West Dinajpur from 1961 to 1991

Name of CD Block	1961	1971	Proportion to total population	1981	1991
<b>Islampur Subdivision</b>	<b>19985</b>	<b>37391</b>	<b>6.59 %</b>	<b>45639</b>	<b>53722</b>
Chopra	3001	5821	5.73 %	8259	10515
Islampur	851	3717	2.77 %	4055	5344
Goalpokhar-I	6164	6825	5.85 %	8661	8321
Goalpokhar –II	----	7173	7.38 %	8354	10642
Karandighi	9969	13853	11.34 %	16310	18900
<b>Raiganj Subdivision</b>	<b>62026</b>	<b>69744</b>	<b>9.53 %</b>	<b>81561</b>	<b>95717</b>
Raiganj	12480	14140	6.79 %	15608	20023
Hemtabad	3082	4087	6.59 %	4159	4340
Kaliaganj	5837	5451	4.45 %	6704	6881
Itahar	10345	14265	9.99 %	16635	19346
Kushmundi	11494	8927	9.38 %	10430	11377
Bansihari	18788	22874	22.60 %	28025	33750
<b>Balurghat Subdivision</b>	<b>88148</b>	<b>114182</b>	<b>22.52 %</b>	<b>132960</b>	<b>158048</b>
Gangarampur	16388	20158	17.40 %	22120	27761
Kumarganj	13333	18203	21.11 %	22397	24108
Balurghat	28132	35758	18.91 %	43226	51070
Tapan	23701	31308	25.75 %	35030	43008
Hilli	6594	8755	20.10 %	10187	12101
<b>West Dinajpur Total</b>	<b>170149</b>	<b>221317</b>	<b>11.90 %</b>	<b>260160</b>	<b>307487</b>

Source: Census of India, 1961,1971,1981,1991.

The above table ventilates that the block-wise increase of the tribal population was uneven. In the blocks of Balurghat and Raiganj subdivisions, the increases were little. Even in the blocks Kaliaganj and Kushmundi the numbers of the tribal population had decreased between 1961 and 1971. During the consecutive decades up to 1991 of these blocks, increases were too poor. But the scenario of the blocks of Islampur subdivisions was different. During 1961 and 1971 in the blocks

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of Chopra, Islampur, Goalpokhar and Karandighi increases in tribal population were very high nearly 100 percent. In Islampur block it was 336.78 percent.

The Santal was the main scheduled tribe of West Dinajpur district accounting for nearly 72% of rural tribal and about 86% of urban tribal in 1961. The Oroan made up 13% of the total tribal of the district and next came Munda constituted 9%. Other important tribes of the district were Kora, Mohali, Malpahariyas and Mahli. The Malpahariyas and Mahlis were treated as scheduled caste in the 1951 census.<sup>15</sup> Though the tribal communities were scattered all over the district the highest concentration of Santal was found in Balurghat, Banshihari, Tapan, Gangarampur Kumarganj, Raiganj, Itahar and Rarandighi police stations; the Oroan were in Tapan (42% of the Oraon), Balurghat(20%) and Gangarampur police stations. The Mundas were in Kushmundi and Hilli; the Koras in Raiganj, Banshihari, Kushmundi, Hemtabad and Kaliaganj; and the Mahlis in Balurghat, Gangarampur, Kumarganj and Tapan police stations.<sup>16</sup> In the census of 1971, the ratio of these communities to the total tribal population had decreased as new communities had been included in the scheduled tribe list. The Santal with the strength of 130473 accounted for about 60% of the total scheduled tribe population in the district in 1971.<sup>17</sup>

So it is clear that a little more than half of the total scheduled tribe population has resided in Balurghat subdivision. Balurghat police station had the largest numerical concentration of the scheduled tribes. In Tapan police station they constituted a fourth of the total tribal population. Banshihari of Raiganj subdivision which was contiguous to the Sadar subdivision also had a large number and proportion of tribal. In Islampur subdivision Karandighi police station was the abode of the Maximum number of persons belonging to scheduled tribes. 13 percent of the total population of Karandighi belonged to the scheduled tribes. As elsewhere in the state the tribal resided mostly in rural areas, being mainly agriculturist and tied to the soil. Their number in the town was negligible.

The overall increase in tribal population in the district of West Dinajpur was slower than the increase in total population.

Table -4: Comparative scenario of increase of total population and tribal population in west Dinajpur, 1961-1991, (%)

Period	Increase in total population	Increase of tribal population
1961-1971	40.50	30.10
1971-1981	29.31	17.60
1981-1991	30.25	18.19

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Source: Census of India, 1961, 1971, 1981 and 1991.

The comparatively low pace of increase of the tribal people in the district of West Dinajpur may be due to their low consciousness about daily lifestyle and health hygiene. All over the North Bengal region, the tribal villages are still in unhealthy condition. There have no proper facilities for drinking water, sanitation, etc. even in 21 century they are habituated not to going to doctors or hospitals and belief in various superstitions. Generally, malnutrition and a high death rate prevailed among them.<sup>18</sup> Another important cause was that the total population had increased highly due to a huge refugee influx in the district from East Pakistan, later on to Bangladesh. Comparatively influx of tribal refugees was very low, as because they were mainly the people of lower strata and from that group migration from East Pakistan was very low.<sup>19</sup> Only in the decade, 1961-1971 at the time of the Bangladesh liberation war migration of tribal people of East Pakistan increase by a considerable number. It is clear that the migrated tribal had been resettled in the Islampur subdivision area. During this period in Islampur, Goalpokhar areas many tribal villages were set up such as Baragaon, Majlispur, Lohajong, Tiyabari etc. The tribal inhabitants of these villages almost totally migrated from East Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> In this decade the increase in tribal population in the district had crossed 30 %.

### **Rural-Urban Distribution**

The rural-urban distribution of the tribal population in the district during the period of study was not moved to maintain any trend. In the 1961 census, the proportion of tribal people used to live in the urban areas was only 1.12 %. After a decade in the census 1971, the same decreased to 1.10, but in the census of 1981 it showed an increase to 2.12 % and then in the consecutive decade it went to decrease again (1.30 % in 1991). The ratio of tribal population in urban areas was higher in the district than in the state. Whereas in the state 0.6 percent of the urban population was belong to tribal communities, in the district nearly 2 % of the urban population belonged to the same.<sup>21</sup>

### **Sex Ratio**

The sex ratio among the scheduled tribes of the district was 956 against the state average of 955. The ratio among the scheduled tribes was much more favorable than among the total population of the district (921) in 1971. It was somehow perplexing that the sex ratio among the scheduled tribes of the district which was above unity (1002) in 1961 had moved downward during the consecutive decade.<sup>22</sup> This was contrary to the upward trend of the ratio observed in the total as well as the tribal



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population in the state and the total population in the district. But it was not the demographic characteristics but the economic, social, and cultural traits that differentiate the tribal from the general population. In fact, the backwardness of the tribal was related mainly to their economic poverty which again had brought about and perpetuated many other evils.

Table -5: comparative sex ratio of general and tribal population of west Dinajpur and west Bengal, 1961 to 1991

Census year	Sex ratio of west Bengal	Sex ratio of west Dinajpur	Tribal sex ratio of west Dinajpur
1961	878	906	1002
1971	891	921	956
1981	911	937	957
1991	917	930	967

Source: Census of India, 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991,

### Literacy condition

The condition of literacy among the scheduled tribe of West Dinajpur was not very encouraging. In the rural areas, only 50.19 percent of STs were literate and in the urban areas, the percentage of the same was 12.39 in 1961. So the level of literacy amongst the tribes was much below that of the general population in the district.<sup>23</sup> The district as a whole was educationally backward and the tribal people were much behind others in respect of education and literacy. The extent of female literacy amongst them was almost negligible. In the urban areas, female literacy amongst the tribes had been found to the extent of 3.42 % in 1961. In the urban areas of the district, only two persons had attained their educational level as matriculation and above. They were of the Santal community. In the rural areas, 68 males and 3 females had passed the matriculation examination.<sup>24</sup>

Table -6: literacy among the scheduled tribes in west Bengal and west Dinajpur compare to total population 1961 & 1971

Census year	Name of unit	Total population			Tribal population		
		Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1961	West Bengal	29.28	48.08	16.98	6.55	11.20	1.76



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	West Dinajpur	17.06	25.96	7.24	<b>5.27</b>	<b>9.65</b>	<b>0.98</b>
1971	West Bengal	33.20	42.81	22.42	8.92	14.49	3.09
	West Dinajpur	22.12	31.09	12.37	<b>11.30</b>	<b>17.79</b>	<b>4.51</b>

Source: M.C.Datta, W.B.D.C.H.B., West Dinajpur, 1971.

Lack of education was one of the crippling disabilities of the tribal communities because the medium of education in the district was not their mother tongue. Simultaneously their poor economic condition existed as a hindrance to the education of the tribal population.<sup>25</sup> The rate of literacy among the scheduled tribes of state was 8.92% as against total literacy of 33.20% in 1971. In west Dinajpur, the scheduled tribes were relatively better off with a literacy rate of 11.30% against poor general literacy of 22.12% only in 1971. The rate by itself was appallingly low, but the tribal of the district had no doubt achieved some good progress in the field of education from 1961 to 1971. While literacy among the scheduled tribes moved up only slowly from 6.55% in 1961 to 8.92% in 1971 at the state level the same for the district doubled itself from 5.27% to 11.30% during the same period. This was a significant movement indeed. The more spectacular had been the progress among the tribal women as the female literacy shot up to 4.5% in 1971 from the below 1% a decade back. It has to note that female literacy had moved quite fast in the total population too from 7.24% to 12.37% and the literacy differential between the general and scheduled tribal population was quite marked and trend to continue.

### Work Participation

The work participation rate was higher among tribals than in the general population. In the 1961 census, 43% of the total tribal population was returned as engaged in work, whereas the percentage of workers amongst the general population in the district was 32.72. The majority of workers' were agriculturists. 63 percent of the total tribal workers were engaged in cultivation and 32 percent worked as agricultural laborers. The remaining 5 percent wad worked in other categories. Nearly 60% of the male and 26.5% of the female tribal population were returned in the 1961 census as workers.<sup>26</sup> Amongst the non-workers of the tribal population very few had returned as unemployed or seeking employment. But the trend revealed in the consecutive censuses was somehow disappointing.

Table -7: Trend of work participation of total and tribal population in west Dinajpur (%)

Census year	Total	Cultivator	Agricultural	Other	Non-
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		workers		labour	workers	workers
1961	Total	32.72	20.22	6.90	5.60	67.28
	Tribal	43	27.09	13.76	2.15	57
1981	Total	32.05	14.03	10.30	7.72	67.95
	Tribal	40.47	16.63	22.15	1.89	59.23

Source: Census of India, 1961, 1981.

The table reveals that the tribal people of the district were losing their land and becoming agricultural laborers gradually. Though the overall trend was the same, the increase in the percentage of laborers among the tribal people was higher than the general population. That means the pace of losing land was higher among the tribal population than others.

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<sup>9</sup> . The south-western portion of undivided Dinajpur district was known as Barind. Geologically it was of old alluvium and was an undulating country interspersed with ravines.

<sup>10</sup> . Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> . As the census of 1941 was not conducted properly due to war calamity of British, the census of 1931 has considered more important in this concern.

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