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Colonial Economy and Polity of Oraon, Munda, and Santhal in Terai-Duars of North Bengal

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Abstract:*The tribal communities of North Bengal, notably Oraon, Munda, and Santhal, have historically remained economically and politically marginalized. Their livelihood has long depended on agriculture land and tea plantations, mostly in remote areas far from urban centers. With the expansion of British rule, the region underwent major political and economic transformations, drawing these communities into the colonial economy through their incorporation into tea plantations and agrarian tracts. This study examines the economic conditions and political experiences of these communities within the broad historical context of colonial Terai and Dooars of North Bengal.*
Keywords:Adivasi, British,Communities, Movement, North Bengal, Munda etc.

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Introduction

Terai and Duars, historically surrounded by forests, rivers, and hills, remained an isolated and neglected region for centuries. The advent of British rule brought political stability, particularly in the Terai and Duars, leading to the growth of the tea industry, commercialization of agriculture, and the expansion of railways. These developments integrated North Bengal into national and global markets. Aimed these transformations, the Oraon, Munda, and Santhal communities migrated to the region, gradually adopting it as their homeland. Locally referred to as Dhangars, Coolies, Adivasi, and Banbasis, they form a significant share of the Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal, as reflected in the 2011 Census.

Though found other districts of North Bengal and South Bengal, Indian states, even in Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, their concentration in Terai and Duars have been particularly notable.Over time, these communities developed culture similarities through coexistence. While they continue to preserve ancestral traditions and clan identities, many have adopted Hinduism or Christianity and speak Sadri, Nepali, Hindi, or Bangali. Superstitions such as belief in spirits and witchcraft still persist, though to a lesser extent. Despite exposure to education and urban influence, tribal societies in North Bengal remain economically, politically, and educationally disadvantaged compared to other communities.

Labour, Resources, and Traditional Practices

In earlier times, the tea-growing tracts of today's Terai and Duars were sparsely populated and considered unhealthy, inhabited only by a few tribal groups such as the Mach, Dhimal, Rajbanshi, Bhutia, Toto and Limbu. When the British colonial power-initiated tea cultivation in these regions for commercial purposes, the industry expanded rapidly within few decades, transforming Darjeeling, and subsequently the Terai and Duars, into the "green gold mines" of the British Empire. Although commercial tea production first began in the hills of Darjeeling, the limited availability of suitable land for cultivation there led to efforts to expand tea plantations into the Terai and Duars. In 1862, Mr. James White established the first tea garden in the Terai at Champta, near Khaprail. Soon after, large-scale expansion took place under the initiative of Bengali entrepreneurs.[1] Among the notable plantations were Orajong Jhora, Ashuman, Chuniya Jhora, Atiabari, Ram Jhora, Kanthal Guri, Diana, Deb Para, and Cha Murchi, among others. According to O'Mally, "32 estates with an area of 7,900 acres under tea lie within the Terai." The following table presents data from 1940, showing the number of tea estates and workers in the three thanas of Terai region.

Thana	Numbers of gardens	Numbers of labourers
Siliguri	27	13867
Phansidewa	13	8719
Kharibari	11	5999

Saha, Kartik, Demographic profile of North Bengal in colonial and post-colonial period (1871-1991): A Study on economy, culture and political changes, University of North Bengal, 2018, p.231

The sparse population of the Terai, combined with the unwillingness of local tribal groups to work as labourers on the plantations, compelled tea garden owners to recruit workers from outside the region. Thus, when the process of establishing tea plantations began, labour demand was initially met by employing Nepali workers, much like in the tea gardens of Darjeeling. However, the unhealthy climatic conditions of the Terai proved unsuitable for the Nepali labourers. Consequently, planters began to recruit Oraon, Munda, and Santhal workers as coolies from regions such as Chota Nagpur, and the Santhal Parganas, and Odisha, similar practices followed in Assam. L.S.S.O'Mally, in his Gazetteer of Darjeeling, notes that "the Terai receives a large number of coolies from Chotanagpur and the Santhal parganas."[2] According to the 1931 Census, around 3,000 labourers were recruited during the cold season to work in tea plantations, road construction, timber cutting, and harvesting in the Terai region. Some Dhangars were also employed in the laborious work of carrying palkis mainly in the Darjeeling High Road.[3]

With the success of the Terai plantations, the British government extended further encouragement for tea cultivation in the Duars by granting land to British entrepreneurs on lease at very low rates. In fact, for the first twenty years, planters were exempted from paying any interest to the government. The first tea garden in the Duars was established at Gazoldoba in 1874. Within a short span of time, plantations spread throughout the Duars, from the Teesta River to the Sankosh River. Initially, there were difficulties in expanding plantations east of the Diana River due to scarcity of water. However, within the following decade, tea gardens had extended as far as the Rajabhatkhawa Reserve Forest.

The numbers of tea gardens and workers in Jalpaiguri district was as follows: -

Statistics of Tea and Labourers in Jalpaiguri (1874-1951)

years	No. of Tea Gardens	Total area in under tea	Approx. - mate yield in lbs	Averages yield in ibs. Per acre of mature plants	Number of Labourers employed		
					Permanent	Temporary	Total

1874	1	--	--	--	--	--	--
1881	47	5637	--	--	--	--	--
1891	79	35683	--	--	--	---	---
1901	235	76403	31087537	441	47365	21254	68619
1911	191	90859	48820637	582	6693	18622	75315
1921	131	112688	43287187	426	86693	1871	88564
1931	151	132074	66447715	534	112591	4262	116853
1941	189	131770	94604450	765	136491	4896	141387
1951	158	134473	137194660	1020	---	---	176196

Gupta, Ranajit, Das, Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal: Jalpaiguri 1869-1947, Delhi: Oxford University Press,1992, p.57

Like in the Teari region, the tea plantations of Duars initially employed Nepali labourers brought from Nepal and Darjeeling. Later, however, Oraons, Santhals, and Mundas were recruited in large numbers. Ranchi alone supplied about 80,000 labourers, mainly Oraons and Mundas and the Santhals Parganas 10,000.[4] Their numbers increased particularly when new tea gardens were established. For example, the Oraon population, which was only 210 in 1881, rose to 62,844 in 1901, and further to 115,350 by 1921. Similarly, the Munda population, recorded as 1,835 in 1891, grew to 11,672 in 1901 and 34,601 in 1921.The Santhals, numbering 10,857 in 1901, increased to about 24,000 by 1921. As a result, the overall population of the Duars, which stood at only 90,668 in 1872, increased nearly sixfold within fifty years, reaching 558,971 in 1921. According to Manik Sanyal, “In 1878, the two districts of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling together had 125 gardens with a total workforce of 14,000; by 1911, this number had risen to 159,606 (among them 55,000 Oraons, 17,00 Mundas, 11,000 Santhals, and 19,000 Nepalis).” The recruitment process was largely controlled by middlemen or labour contractors (arkatis), who, through fixed contracts, enticed landless tribal populations with various promises. In the early years, most labourers worked for a fixed period and then returned home. Gradually, however, many began to settle permanently in the tea belt, clearing the surrounding forests for habitation, often with active

encouragement from the plantation of permanent labourers grew in comparison to temporary workers. However, with the rising demand for tea labourers across India, a turning point came with the introduction of the Minimum Wages Act in 1950-52. This led to large- scale retrenchment of plantation workers, from which the Terai and Duars workforce was not spared. It is said that in West Bengal, the number of tea workers fell from 329,000 to 282,000 as a result of this policy.

The labourers were responsible for every stage of tea cultivation- preparing the land for planting, sowing saplings, watering them at regular intervals, plucking the mature tea leaves, and transporting them to the factories. They carried out these tasks while enduring the dangers of dense forests, wild animals, and frequent outbreaks of disease. At the same time, they were subjected to the oppressive policies of colonial rule and the harsh exploitation of plantation owners, forcing them into a state of near servitude. Thus, the flourishing tea industry of the Terai and Duars- the so called "green gold mines"- was built upon the hard labour and sacrifices of the Oraon, Santhal, and Munda workers. Even today, their descendants continue to toil in these plantations, struggling to sustain their livelihoods.

However, it was around the tea plantations that patterns of settlement began to emerge in the Terai and Duars, accompanied by the construction of railway lines, roads, and the growth of markets. The clustering of railway stations, gardens, and weekly haats (markets) gave rise to several garden towns in these regions, such as Malbazar, Birpara, Kalchini, Banarhat, Madarihat, Hamiltangang, and others.[5] These weekly markets became integral to the everyday lives of plantation labourers, where a wide range of goods – from essential household items and food grains to cash crops- were brought and sold. Dr. Sujit Ghosh, in his work ("Economic Life of North Bengal in the 19th and 20th Centuries and Other Essays"), notes that to meet the enormous demand for food grains among plantation labourers, large quantities of rice were imported from Brahmadesh (Burma), Rangpur, and Dinajpur.[6] By the mid- twentieth century, however, rice from Jalpaiguri was being exported to various districts of East Bengal.In addition to tea and rice, other significant commercial crops of Jalpaiguri district included tobacco, jute, maize, pulses, and oilseeds.

For centuries, the Rava, Garo, Mech, and Dhimal communities sustained their livelihood through jhum (shifting) cultivation and animal husbandry. With the advent of tea plantations, however, many ex-teas garden labourers purchased land and began to settle permanently. Alongside the growth of tea estates, a number of tribal labourers also engaged

directly in agriculture activities. According to D.H. Sunder, "many Oraons of the Ranchi district may be found in Mainaguri, Falakata, and Alipur tahsils, where they have settled permanently as Jotedars."[7] Furthermore, through Sunder's initiative, 29 square miles of land were reserved at Shamuktala in Alipurduar for the establishment of a Santhal colony, whose residents primarily depended on agriculture for their livelihood. J.F. Grunning, writing in 1907-08, noted that ex-tea garden coolies cultivated as much as 3,400 acres of maize. In addition, some permanent plantation workers utilized vacant or marshy lands within tea estates for the cultivation of rice, maize, and vegetables.

Alongside agriculture, animal husbandry was another important means of livelihood. They commonly reared cattle and buffaloes for ploughing fields and for cart-pulling, while goats, ducks, hens, and pigs were kept both for consumption and as a source of supplementary income. Reports suggest that, in 1907-08 alone, tea garden managers recorded nearly 2,417 instances of livestock being taken for veterinary treatment by labourers. The Terai and Duars also offered abundant forested and fallow lands for grazing. During the winter months, large herds of cattle were brought into the region from Bihar, Rangpur, and Cooch Behar for seasonal pasturing.

The expansion of tea plantations, coupled with the demand for cheap labour and the circulation of agricultural as well as forest products, necessitated the development of a more advanced communication network- most crucially, the railway system. Scholars have emphasized that growth of railways in the southern districts of North Bengal, namely Maldh, Uttar Dinajpur, and Dakshin Dinajpur, was not merely a matter of connectivity but was intrinsically linked to the requirements of the tea economy. A number of companies, including the Eastern Bengal Railway, Northern Bengal State Railway, Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, East Indian Railway, and Cooch Behar Railway, undertook the responsibility of extending railway lines into the region. Yet, the construction process was arduous: dense forests and difficult terrain posed severe obstacles. To overcome these, colonial authorities relied on the recruitment of large numbers of migrant labourers to clear jungles and transport essential materials. The 1921 Census Report reveals the extent of this dependence on migrant labour. Out of a total of 32,260 railway and steamer coolies, 9,008 originated from various districts of Bengal, 5,032 from the United Provinces, 4,874 from South Bihar, 3,676 from North Bihar, 2,325 from the Chota Nagpur plateau in the then province of Bihar and Orissa, 1,824 from Orissa, 182 from Madras, and 2,626 from other regions of India.

Thus, the railway in North Bengal was not simply an infrastructure project but a colonial instrument of economic extraction- facilitating the movement of tea, timber, and other commodities, while simultaneously reshaping the labour geography of the region.

Political Resistance

Long before the establishment of British rule in India, the tribal village society was highly organized. Villages were administered by officials such as the village headman, accountant, watchman, boundary keeper, priest, teacher, or scholar. The village headman was elected by the villagers, and he was responsible for protecting the village and determining its relationship with the outside world. Farmers paid taxes to the headman, who in turn deposited the revenue to the landlord or landholder. Among the tribes, there was no concept of individual private property. Instead, they held collective ownership of land, which was a defining feature of the tribal economy. However, with the introduction of the Permanent Settlement by the British government, the tribals lost their traditional right of collective ownership and became alienated from their land. This alienation eventually reduced them to the bondage of the tea plantations of North Bengal.

Scholars note that the tea plantation workers of the Dooars were not penalized contract- bound labourers; they were technically free. Yet, this did not mean they were free from the exploitation of the platers, middlemen, and the oppressive policies of British rule. Within the plantations, the owners functioned like kings- controlling rules, administration, and even the government officials. The labourers were always kept isolated from the local population and under the constant watch of guards. According to Manik Sanyal, “The planters understood that keeping such a large labor force separated from the local society was essential in order to maintain expoilation.”[8] The workers had had no proper food, shelter, or access to healthcare and education. They suffered in the midst of dense forests, wild animals, and deadly diseases such as kala-azar, malaria, dysentery, and cholera, with death being the only escape. In return for slaving away all day in the plantations, they received only a meager wage. Citing Sutapa Sengupta, who refers to S.K. Haldar’s report: “The existing rate of daily wages in the Dooars even in 1948 was 6 annas for male adult, 5 annas for female adults, and 3 annas for child labor.”[9] Along with the extremely low wages, there was also gender- based wage discrimination. Under these conditions, the workers gradually began to feel the need to

unite and protest against the denial of security, human rights, the exploitation of the planters, and the oppressive policies of the British government.

As protesters, the Adivasis did not hesitate to adopt divers from of resistance such as strikes, looting, boycotts, and even the use of arms. In 1906, when the price of rice suddenly increased, the tea plantation workers of the Dooars became agitated. According to the Gazetteer, groups of Santhal workers from the Dumdim, Malbazar, and Chalsa areas banded together and looted several shops near the Bataigola market and Chalsa railway station.[10] They were later joined by Oraon, Munda, and other communities. Reports also indicate that workers resorted to strikes when they were burdened with excessive workloads. Among the various movements initiated by Adivasis in the Doors and Terai during the early twentieth century, the Tana Bhagat Movement was particularly significant. This movement, led by Jatra Oraon and his disciples, first began in the Chota Nagpur region in 1914. Initially, it took the form of a cultural and religious reform movement, confined to a limited area. However, in its second phase (1915-16), when it acquired a political character, its influence spread widely into the tea plantation regions of the Dooars. A leader named Landru, an Oraon sardar from Chota Nagpur, carried the messages of the Tana Bhagat Movement to the area.[11] Upon receiving this message, the majority of Oraon workers, along with Santhal, Munda, and other tea garden labourers, joined the movement. The agitation spread to numerous plantations, including the Birpara, Shishubari and Dalgam tea estates, the Champaguri Hope Tea Garden in Nagrakata, the Gendropara Tea Garden under Banarhat police station, the Nidas Tea Garden and Gurujonjhora Tea Garden in Malbazar, and the Shamuktala Hatipota Tea Garden in Alipurduar. Movement leaders would secretly organize meeting at night in different plantations, where they sang devotional songs dedicated to the so-called “German Baba.” They firmly believed that with the support of the Germans, the British Empire would collapse, leading to the eventual establishment of an independent Oraon kingdom. However, the British authorities did not allow this aspiration to materialize. Through a combination of diplomacy and force, the colonial state suppressed the uprising. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the movement in its essence assumed the character of an anti- British struggle in the tea plantation regions of the Dooars.

The movements that initially emerged within the tea plantations gradually began to take shape in the wider world. This transformation was largely influenced by the efforts of the Communist party, which fostered the growth of national consciousness among the workers.

Although they had not directly seen Gandhi, they were nonetheless aware of Gandhian ideologies. In 1920, a workers' organization was established with the aim of uniting labourers and presenting their collective demands. With the efforts of Biren Dasgupta, the Rail Road Workers' Union was founded at Domohoni in 1938, where both railway workers and tea plantation labourers joined forces. Communist party leader Deb Parsad Ghosh, popularly known as Patal Babu, also came forward in support of railway and tea garden workers. As a result of such initiatives, the labour movement began to assume a mass character. United in their struggle, the workers launched movements against the exploitative policies of the British rulers and the oppression of plantation owners. Their demands included higher wages, bonus payments, cheap ration supplies, the implementation of pay scales, maternity benefits, and the introduction of plantation labour laws. To strengthen their struggle, organizations such as the Workers' Union and the All ndia Plantation Labour Federation were formed. Widespread protests and strikes were witnessed in several tea plantations, including Lakhipara, Grassmore, and Nagrakata. The intensity and violence of these protests compelled both the Indian government and plantation owners to take the workers' concerns seriously. As a consequence, the Minimum Wages Act was enacted between 1950-52, and in 1951 the Plantation Labour Act was passed in the Legislative Assembly. Beyond demanding their own right, tea plantation labourers also stood in solidarity with peasant struggles. A striking example of this was the Tebhaga Movement of 1946, during which several tea plantation workers- such as Magra Oraon, Hosna Oraon, Bhulan Oraon, Budhu Oraon, and Shukra Oraon – were injured in police firing.[12] Alongside them, the Adivasi communities of Malda and Dinajpur also actively participated in the struggle.

Conclusion

In the Terai and Dooars, the establishment of tea plantations, industrial enterprises, transport networks, housing, and human settlements was made possible primarily through the availability of cheap labor provided by the Oraons, Santals, and Mundas. Despite the hostile conditions of sparsely populated forests, the threats of wild animals, rampant diseases, the exploitative policies of the British government, and the oppression of the local intermediaries, these tribal communities continued to work as laborers. The very sacrifice of their toil and

suffering laid the foundation for what constitutes today's tea- producing regions of the Terai and Dooars.

Consequently, the tribal society has become an inseparable part of the economic structure of this region. Moreover, the historical evidence demonstrates that whenever exploitation and deprivation were imposed upon them, the tribal communities never remained passive observers, nor will they in the future. They resisted-sometimes through cultural assertion, at times through organized collective struggles, and, when necessary, by taking up arms. In doing so, they not only asserted their rights but also added a distinctive tribal dimension to India's struggle for independence, thereby imparting momentum to the broader anti-colonial movement.

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