

**Role of Tea Garden Labour in North Bengal During the Colonial
Period: A Study on the Freedom Movement**

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Abstract: *Historical scholarships have been engaged in the last few decades to explore the nature of the labour and freedom movement in the colonial period. The present work explores the linkages between tea garden labour knowledge and colonial power using both archival and literary sources; it also explores the role of labour and its socio-economic and environmental impact in the tea plantations area of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling district specialty in Dooars tea garden areas in colonial India. Mainstream studies on colonial tea garden labour contribution of freedom movement missed Jalpaiguri and northern part of North Bengal other district being in the Bengal borderland. Therefore, the present article proposes to examine a detailed study of Northern district during colonial rule on the colonial policies. The source materials are exclusively collected from, colonial reports, statistical accounts, DPA reports, and the different literary texts composed by the colonial officers and the indigenous writers; some of the original records have been collected from the officials of different Tea Estates.*

Keywords: *Adibasi, Ecology, Economy, Politics, Society, North Bengal, Tea Garden etc.*

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Introduction

The emergence of modern North Bengal in 1869 was the stepping-stone of the historical growth and development of the so-called North Bengal in the administrative collage of undivided Bengal. We used the term 'So-called' because the terminology 'North Bengal' was not officially used by the colonial government of Bengal. It was not even authenticated by the contemporary oral tradition and recorded evidences. Still the year 1869 was regarded by the regional historians as the beginning of the modern geography of modern North Bengal. Both the geography and history of the region is inter-connected each other like the compartment of the railways. In this connection it is to be noted that in 1869, the crown Government declared the birth of a new history, that is, Jalpaiguri. The historians the geographers, the sociologists

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and political activists of the present day considered the birth of Jalpaiguri district as the beginning of the point of view of historians. The area which we considered today's North Bengal was part and parcel of the different states or people of the neighbouring regions. But this time this area had laid the foundation of a new kind of emotional thinking among the people of this region.

North of the main branch of the Ganges, now known as Padma, and west of the Brahmapurta lies the extensive region" of North Bengal, "which embraces the modern Rajshahi Division and the state of Cooch Behar."¹

Nowadays taxonomic geography of North Bengal is not only a geographical expression but also a historical development of a geo-historical concept which came to being (as North Bengal) in a process of transition in different forms like Poundra or Poundrabardhan, Gouda, Varendra, Uttariya, Uttardesa, and Kamtabihar. Emeritus Professor Ananda Gopal Ghosh described the process of terminological transition in North Bengal in his famous work, "Uttarbanga Namer Sandhane".² In the early phase of colonial rule, the term "Northern Bengal" was used geographically, which later changed to "North Bengal". However, during the middle phase of colonial rule, it took on an intellectual conception. During the post-colonial or post-independence phase, it came to be used as a geo-cultural entity.

History of North Bengal and Administrative Structure

During pre-1869 phase they glorified themselves as an inhabitant of the ancient Pragjyotispur - kamrupa - kamtapura kindom. This was specifically visible in the case of people of Northern North Bengal - Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling plain of Darjeeling district. On the other hand, the people of southern North Bengal i.e. Malda, two Dinajpur districts gave expression to their pride in uttering the names of Pundrabardhana - Varendra Gauro kingdom. Two groups of people cherished the different kinds of identity, but after 1869, a new identity was required for their existence. This requirement psychologically first led to the birth of a new kind of identity i.e. 'North Bengal' or 'Uttar Bengal'.³

The British Company and the later British Indian Government introduced various administrative systems in the northern part of present-day North Bengal. These administrative differences have accelerated the trend of today's isolation (politically, not constitutionally). For example, in the hilly region of Darjeeling, the 'non-regulation' area was directly governed by the Deputy Commissioner and the Governor! Such an administrative system was maintained in the Darjeeling-Dooars region until the day before independence. This system was maintained not only in the administration, but also in the field of land revenue. As a result, another North Bengal or a separate administrative territory was formed within North Bengal.

The five police stations of Rangpur, namely Boda, Panchagarh, Tetuliya, Patgram and Debiganj, were joined with the newly annexed Western Dooars (Western Dooars was annexed by the British after the Anglo-Bhutanese war in 1865) to form the district Jalpaiguri. It was bounded by Purnea district of Bihar and Darjeeling district on the West; on the north by the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan and some part of the Darjeeling district; on the south by the districts of Rangpur, Dinajpur and Princely State of Koch Bihar; on the East Goalpara

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district of Assam and some parts of Koch Bihar. The district consisted of two familiar tracts which differed from each other by the physical appearance, geographical formations, economic and production performances, tenurial arrangement, and administrative machineries in the colonial period. One tract covering the area of 879 sq. miles consisted of the Patgram and western region of the River Tista came under the British rule after the obtained of the Dewani; this region was a Regulation area and a part of the permanent settlement area. The other tract lying to the east of the River Tista having an area of 2053 sq.miles was known as Western Dooars or in generally Dooars annexed after the Anglo Bhutanese war in 1865; this was a non Regulation area and not a part of permanently settled area.⁴

The city of Darjeeling is now a world-famous name and is not unknown to everyone. In the 1840s, Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker made a remarkable observation regarding the health conditions in Darjeeling:

"I believe that children's faces give as good an index as any to the healthfulness of a climate, and in no part of the world is there a more active, rosy, and bright young community than in Darjeeling."⁵

But we also receive a description of the incredible beauty of Darjeeling from Hooker:

"The most eloquent descriptions I have read fail to convey to my mind's eye the forms and colours of snowy mountains or to my imagination the sensations and impressions that rivet my attention to these sublime phenomena when they are present in reality, and I shall not therefore obtrude any attempt of the kind upon my reader. The latter has probably seen the Swiss Alps, which, though barely possessing half the sublimity, extent or height of the Himalaya, are yet far more beautiful."⁶

Geographical Structure of North Bengal

Northern Bengal, with its diverse topography, extends from the Darjeeling Himalayan ranges to the riverine, inundated agricultural lands of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Malda, Pabna, and Bogra. The 1911 census described the physical environment of northern Bengal as follows: North Bengal lies from east to west between Purnea and the Brahmaputra, and from north to south between the lower Himalayas' spurs and the Ganges. To the north, there is an unhealthy submontane region, the Tarai, from which the land slopes gradually southward into a wide alluvial plain fed by rivers flowing south from the Himalayas, interrupted only by the Barind. This high belt of laterite formation, near Dinajpur, Malda, Rajshahi, and Bogra, produces only one crop—late rice—and is thus prone to scarcity during years of low rainfall. The remainder of the area features rich sandy loam soil, mainly cultivated for rice, which accounts for about two-thirds of the cultivated land. Jute is also extensively grown, covering around one-tenth of the cropped area. Tea is cultivated in the submontane regions, known as the Duars in Jalpaiguri and the Tarai in Darjeeling, as well as on the hills of the latter district. Except in the south-east,

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communication is primarily by land, and the need for rapid transportation has driven significant railway development.

Due to the geographical location of North Bengal, geography has played a controlling role in the history of North Bengal since the dawn of history. It has the Himalayas on one side and the Ganges on the other. Since it is adjacent to the Himalayas, its commercial and cultural relations with Tibet, Bhutan, and Nepal are of the present day. To come to the plains from these Himalayan countries, one has to come through North Bengal. Nepal is, however, somewhat connected to Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand. The northern part of North Bengal is thus intrinsically connected to the Himalayas. On the other hand, the southern part of North Bengal has maintained its connection with the rest of India through the Ganges. During the Maurya, Shunga, and Gupta dynasties, the southern part of North Bengal came under the spotlight of history. Again, if we look at the overall judgment, it can be seen that the Indo-Mongoloid and Aryan populations met in North Bengal. The Indo-Mongolian group is known as the Kirat people in Indian languages. Kirat civilization and Aryan civilization have given birth to a mixed culture in this region. The combination and synthesis are significant from many aspects. The presence of the great kings of the North Bengal region and the Matsyadesh kingdoms in the mythological history of Arya Bharat is noteworthy. Another important point is that several kingdoms and empires were established in different parts of India in the Middle Ages. Among them, the name of the empire of Koch Maharaja Naranarayan is particularly noteworthy. In the North-East and East India, apart from the Ahom king Rudra Singha, Naranarayan was the only one honored as the founder of the empire. Naranarayan's empire collapsed due to family feuds. However, the kings of this dynasty ruled the Cooch Behar region until 1949 as a tributary state of the British Company.

Establishment of Tea Garden

“The high prices fetched by the tea sent home in 1838-9 to the Board of Directors at once attracted the attention of enterprising businessmen alike in Calcutta and London. Early in 1839, the Bengal Tea Association was formed in Calcutta, and a few weeks later, preliminary steps were taken by a separate group of individuals for the formation of the Assam Company in London”⁷

The 'renaissance' in colonial rule was the vehicle of economic change and communication revolution. A new era in the economic field began in the northern part of colonial North Bengal with the establishment of the tea garden industry. The establishment of tea gardens in the Darjeeling hills-plains-Terai and Jalpaiguri Dooars led to the development of a migrant society here. This migrant society developed in two ways. One, in the urban area, and two in the tea garden area. People from both areas were 'outsiders' or migrants. The tribal people of Chotanagpur - Orans, Santals, Mundas, Nepalese of eastern Nepal - came to the tea garden area, while the residents of eastern Bengal came through the new administrative-land settlement-revenue tea garden system. As a result, the demographics of the two northern districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri changed radically. The historical significance of this event has not yet been properly assessed. 'Colonies', 'towns' or colonial cities were formed in both the districts. Except for Kalimpong, of course. Kalimpong had

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developed as a commercial communication center between the hills and the plains before colonial rule. As was the case in Malda. That is, not immigrants, but local merchant groups controlled trade in Kalimpong and Malda. However, one thing must be said in this context. That is, it was through this tea-gardening tradition that the name Jalpaiguri-Darjeeling spread to other parts of Bengal and various parts of the Indian subcontinent. Because the initial phase of tea-gardening spread to the Jalpaiguri-Dooars-Darjeeling hills and Terai regions. Of course, today's Assam also became known on the all-India map due to tea. At that time, tea was a symbol of status for the upper class of society. Naturally, curiosity about not only tea, but also the birthplace of tea grew. And it was around these tea gardens that Bengali initiative entered a new era. The economic history of Bengali initiative is related to the initiative of Prince Dwarkanath Tagore. With the closure of the Union Bank of Dwarkanath in 1849, the sun of Bengali initiative set. But this is not true. The sunrise of Bengali initiative occurred with the expansion of tea gardens in the northern part of Bengal in the last decade of the nineteenth century, not its sunset. I will give only one piece of information in this context. That is, the number of banks established in Jalpaiguri was not seen in any other district of Bengal. Renowned economist Professor Binay Kumar Sarkar highly praised the economic prosperity of Jalpaiguri. Of course, this is not the overall economic picture of North Bengal, but only the economic picture of Jalpaiguri city can be remembered. Bengali entrepreneurs started establishing tea gardens in Jalpaiguri-Dooars-Darjeeling-Terai and plains, keeping pace with the English entrepreneurs.

In fact, tea cultivation began in India on a commercial basis in 1833. The first Indian tea company, the Bengal Tea Company, was started in 1839 under the initiative of Prince Dwarkanath Tagore. The Assam Company was started in London in the same year. The establishment of tea gardens on a commercial basis in Bengal began in Darjeeling. In 1835, the King of Sikkim gave Darjeeling to the East India Company as a token of friendship. Darjeeling district was formed in 1850. The first Deputy Commissioner, Arthur D. Campbell, planted tea trees in his 700-foot-high garden. It was originally a Chinese variety, Campbell also planted coffee gardens. However, tea gardens in Darjeeling began in 1854. In a very short time, by 1874, 24 companies, 17 associations, 70 private ownerships, 6 mortgage ownerships were formed in Darjeeling. Then, due to the shortage of land here, the British tea tax came down. In 1874, 18 years after the first tea plantation in Alubari in 1856, Bluhm started the first tea plantation in Gazaldoba. This was the first tea plantation in the Dooars or Jalpaiguri.

The area containing the seven 'entry points' of Tibet and Bhutan is known as the Dooars. In the 17th century, the western Dooars came under the control of Bhutan. Initially, the British were not very interested in the Dooars. This was because Bhutan was a dangerous forest, but later this view changed. In 1831, Hajman said that if tea was produced here, there would be more opportunities for export. To this end, in 1864, the British, led by Sir John Lawrence, recovered the land from the Bhutanese. After that, the establishment of tea gardens in Dooars began. Tea gardens began in Dooars 35 years after Assam, in 1874. In the meantime, the lion's share of the Darjeeling tea market was prevailing. The British government also facilitated tea gardens in Dooars by passing the 'West Land Act'. This law allowed only tea plantations to be established on forest waste land and in this case, land

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tenure was not required. Through this, free land was given to the new tea growers. In 1875, Phulbari, in 1876, Dalimkot, Bagrakot, in 1877, Kumlai, Dumdim, Washerbari, Manabari, in 1878, Manihop in 1878, and from 1875 to 1900, 170 tea plantations were established in this region. Along with this, in 1874, the railway came to exploit the tea trade and the 'gold mine' of forest resources here. First the Northern Bengal State Railway, later in 1896 the Bengal Dooars Railway or BDR. Although the British were initially exclusive in tea plantations, in 1878 Rahim Baksh started tea plantations in Jalpaiguri as the first Indian to start 'Jaldhaka'. After that, Biharilal Ganguly established a tea garden in Altaganga.

This phenomenal growth of the population since 1872 is due to two main causes, the development of the tea industry and the influx of settlers to exploit the waste lands of the district. How great the effect of the growth of the tea industry has been may be judged from the few statistics given below. In 1872 the number of tea estates in Darjeeling was only 74 with an area of 14,000 acres planted with tea. In 1881, the number of these estates had risen to 153, and the acreage under tea to 30,000, the number of estates having thus increased by 200 per cent. and the acreage being more than doubled. Ten years later there were 177 gardens, and 45,000 acres were actually under tea. These figures sufficiently denote the prodigious development of operations whose characteristic is the employment of an enormous quantity of manual labour. To this rapidly increasing demand the local supply of labour was quite unequal; the result was an unexampled immigration; and at the census of 1891 it was found that no less than 88,000 persons resident in the district were born in Nepal. During the decade ending in 1901 the tea industry passed through a period of depression, and its expansion was checked, the acreage under tea amounting in the year 1901 to 51,000 acres and the number of estates to 170. Even so, however, the census of that year showed that the tea-garden coolies and their children accounted for more than two-thirds of the total population.⁸

Role of Adibashi Labour in the Freedom Movement

Promoth Nath mentions that in his valuable book *Swadhinota Aandolone Uttarbonger Adibasi Somaj*, the agitation in the Dooars alarmed the European tea planters and the British rulers. In January 1917, the president of the Planters Association, an organisation of European tea planters, expressed deep concern about the movement in his speech. Loyal Oraon chiefs were appointed as special constables and given the responsibility of monitoring the movements of the Oraons. Armed police camps were set up in the tense areas, and a special tribunal was formed to try several Oraon workers on charges of sedition. In the trial, 29 people were convicted and sentenced to imprisonment. List of names sent to the D.P.A. by the Superintendent of Police, Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for 1917. These tribal workers were the first victims of the royal wrath in the undivided Jalpaiguri district for participating in the anti-British rebellious mass movement. Later, people from the tribal community were involved in other movements in this region, including hat boycotts and burning of discarded clothes, which later intensified the Indian independence movement. Here is a list of the names of inhabitants Oraon workers who were convicted for participating in this anti-British movement: - Shunia Oraon, Janua Oraon,

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Lalmohan Belly, Sukha Oraon, Zahura Oraon, Jethu Bhakta, Dukhan Goala, Mongra Oraon, Gannu Oraon, Bajjnath Mahali, Jagarnath Mahali, Charoa Oraon, Bahra Oraon, Jahuriya Oraon, Khengthu Oraon, Debi Oraon, Somra Oraon (another), Chhegna Oraon, Gendoa Oraon, Poraha Oraon, Mangkhu Oraon, Shibu Oraon, Jalla Oraon, Budhu Oraon (small), Etoa Oraon, Chhutia Oraon, and Somra Oraon.⁹

During the civil disobedience movement, Ram Oraon was arrested in this area. Gurja Munda, a worker of the Patharjhora tea garden, killed the owner of the garden, Mr. Bitton, with a spade. He was sentenced to death in the trial. However, the High Court ordered his deportation. However, he was probably the first tribal worker of this area to be sentenced to deportation. In 1931, the workers had to face the wrath of the British authorities over the construction of a Kali temple on the leased land of the Ramjhora tea garden.¹⁰

The list of some of the names of the workers and peasants who participated in the Terai-Dooars workers' revolt and Tebhaga movement and who died and became martyrs is mentioned here. The list of names of the tribal workers and peasants who were killed in police firing during the Tebhaga movement in Dooars is as follows: Hopan Majhi, Budhu Khadia, Krishna Orao, Ram Munda, Birsa Orao, Etoa Orao, Chhattara Orao, Bechga. Khadia, Jitu Kumar, Lodhra Munda, Sahrai Munda, Karmi Orao, Budhuni Orao, Swarnamoyee Orao, Etowari Munda etc. (The list is incomplete). In the history of this tea-worker-Tebhaga movement of Dooars, Lal Shukra Ora. on of Chalsa-Meteli is a shining name. Lal Shukra Oraon had to go to jail twice before independence, protesting against the exploitation and deprivation of the Jotdar-Zamidar-Tyrann tea-garden manager. When the Mal-Meteli-Chalsa-Domhani-Nagrakata of Dooars were in a state of agitation in the heat of the historic Tebhaga movement, Lal Shukra used to sing such inspiring songs:

“জেল গেলি ফাটাক গেলি
তেও নাই আজাদ পালি
গুলি খালি লাঠি খালি
তেও নাই স্বাধীন পালি
ঘরে নাখে আন ফিরে
কেইসে বাঁচব প্রাণ”।

[Free English Translation: “Jail went, crackers went, but he did not leave free, bullets were empty, sticks were empty, but he did not leave free, if he did not come home, he would not be able to save his life.”]¹¹

Similarly, the names of Mangal Das Bhagat, an indigenous man from Shishubari region, and Shalha Mandal, a Rangali musician, emerged as organizers of the Tana Bhagat movement in this region. The names of Maili Majhi, the 'Quit India' movement, definitely deserve a mention.

It is also necessary to remember the names of those who participated in the anti-British movement in the tea gardens of Dooars before independence and some of them were martyred and some were imprisoned. Because there is no information so far that they were honored with a 'Tamra Patra' or 'Pension' as freedom fighters posthumously or during their lifetime. These are Maharani Oraoni, Shukhu Oraon, Madhu Oraon, Bachchu Oraon, an

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unidentified Santal youth who were killed in police firing in 1947. They joined the protest movement at the big dighi mata charka of Mal police station. In 1947, while collecting their share of paddy near Mangalbari Hat of Meteli Police Station, they were attacked by Murla Oraon, Odlabari tea plantation worker Jitiya Oraon, Lachchu Oraon, Netai Oraon, Chhatra Oraon, Pola Oraon, Bhulu Oraon, Sukdev Nayak. However, Sukdev Nayek was shot in the hand and chest during the Mangalbari movement. From there, he was carried on his shoulder and brought to Odlabari. He was given cow dung as a native treatment. Finally, he was taken to Jalpaiguri Hospital and recovered. He even lived until 2004.¹²

Conclusion

Finally, we can say that before the British came to North Bengal, all the places were full of forests, i.e. water, swamps and forests, these three are known as the good things here. Tea gardens were established in Darjeeling in 1854 and Jalpaiguri in 1874, which was their real purpose to earn profit. As a result, many activities of the British were not accepted by the workers of the gardens, for example, it can be said that Western medicine and Western education, as a result of which many movements emerged. This movement created a fear in the landlord class and the English.

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¹¹ *Ibid*,pp. 47-48

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