

Role of education in the Mech Community.

Education is generally looked upon as an "investment" in human resources<sup>1</sup> for income generation in any community. But this investment in education is always balanced against a 'special type of cost' by the individual members of the community. In a primarily agricultural community, for instance, an individual generally considers education as an 'investment' in the sense of building up a member of the family capable ~~of~~<sup>of</sup> earning income from 'sources other than agriculture'. Therefore, education may be looked upon as a 'revenue-yielding process,' which gives result at a lag of some years. It can very well be assumed that the 'revenue', expected to be generated by education at some late years, is balanced against a 'cost' by the individual members in such a community. The cost here is calculated on the basis of the 'direct costs' incurred by the fees paid and other associated and incidental expenditures. Further, cost should include 'income foregone' by the family due to non-availability of the members receiving educational facilities for the purpose of cultivation. When education is made 'completely free', all educational expenses are borne by the government in the form of granting financial assistance, and thus, the 'direct' cost of education tends to become nil. Hence, the question of imparting educational training is primarily connected with the development of two attitudes among the individuals: the one is the revenue-generating power of education, and the other is the opportunity cost of education. The 'revenue' aspect of education would encourage a family to

receive education training, whereas the 'cost' aspect of education in all probability would produce discouraging effect. But the relative strength of the two attitudes towards 'revenue' and 'cost' would depend on the economic position of the family concerned. An economically sound family can wait for the fruits to be recouped from the members, getting education facilities. Financial assistance on the part of the government only strengthens their existing capacities for receiving educational facilities. The 'cost' aspect is strongly outweighed by the 'revenue' aspect of education, for, the financial position of the family permits the sacrifice of the present revenue. In other words, in a community marked by inequalities in income distribution, even when education is made completely free, the beneficiaries of free educational facilities may be unevenly distributed. The well-to-do class by virtue of their financial position may introduce certain changes in the occupational structure of the family in the sense that some of the members may be retained in the traditional income-earning activity of the family and some others may move to some other occupation outside agriculture. The occupational mobility is possible because the 'special type of cost' of education loses some of its force in this section of the community in view of their strong financial position. In some other cases the governmental assistance towards education to the financially handicapped families may not produce the desired result, because the 'cost' aspect of education may outweigh the 'revenue' aspect.

In an unequal rural agricultural community, number

of primary school-going students may be sufficiently large among all members irrespective of their financial position. The reason may be that such family-members are yet to be termed as 'working labour' in the truest sense. Thus, if education is made completely free, the financial cost of imparting educational training to family-members becomes nil; at the same time, for the 'would-be-workers' the 'special type of cost' of education also becomes nil. Hence, in such a community, even the families at subsistence level do not hesitate to send their family-members to different educational institutions for taking educational facilities at the primary level. But when the members attain the 'working age', the 'Heads' of such families would in all probability calculate, in addition to the costs borne by the government, the 'special type of cost' referred to above. This opportunity cost of the 'potential labour' would now affect the decision of the 'Head of the family' for sending the family-members to educational institutions. It may be realistic to assume that in a majority of the cases, the 'Head' of this type of family would be less inclined to send their family members to educational institutions when the members themselves attain the 'working age'. Hence in a rural agricultural community with a vast number of its population living at the subsistence level, the number of persons receiving educational facilities starts falling as we move from the primary level to the upper echelons of education. In other words, the utter poverty of the rural people would appear as a great hindrance in the matter of getting educational opportunities even if education is made completely free. This does not mean, of

course, that education is not considered as an 'investment'; but the fact is that the 'profitability of investment' dwindles when account is taken of the 'potential loss' to be sustained from the non-utilisation of the members of the family for the immediate income-yielding process, traditionally operated by them. The latter cost should fall heavily upon those who lead a subsistence life, with the result that the 'occupational mobility' of 'higher' order become virtually absent among this section of the community.

It follows, therefore, that even if education is made completely free, the number of beneficiaries may be small unless the poorer members of the community are not assured of a minimum subsistence level of living.

It may be argued that education may help the society in reducing the inequality in income distribution; for education appears to be a great instrument to the incumbent for changing the mode of life and pattern of occupation. This aspect gains importance when account is taken of the large number of the labourers who are really in disguised unemployment. The incidence of disguised unemployment is generally high among the poorer strata of the community. If the members of the poorer strata attain some level of education, they may improve their economic lot by depending on some non-traditional income-generating activities, thereby reducing the volume of disguised unemployment. In other words, education increases the occupational mobility which helps in bringing about equality in income distribution. Education would

provide some security to the economically downtrodden people; it would allow them to improve their pecuniary condition from the newer types of economic activities. But all this is possible only when the member concerned attaches relatively more weight on 'future' gains made possible due to educational training than the sacrifice of the 'present' gains due to non-availability of the family-members in the traditional income-generating activities of the family. So long as the 'Head of the family' is not able to provide a minimum subsistence level of living for his family-members, he is destined to sacrifice the lagged-fruits of education. This attitude of the rural people towards education destroys the vast potentiality of education in reducing inequality in the rural areas.

On the contrary, education might appear as a great agent in increasing economic as well as social inequality already in existence. Let us turn to the case of a typical backward rural community composed of a scheduled tribe, similar to our present study. 'Free government-sponsored education' is now opened up. At the time free education was introduced, the community was predominantly agricultural with an unequal distribution of land. The economic stratification, as it is well known, depends traditionally on the amount of cultivable lands possessed by each family of the community. It can be shown that education helps in maintaining the differences in social and economic status within the present members of such a society. Even if we assume that the present descendants are no longer fortunate with regard to land owning, still they may be

able to retain their economic and social status in the community by virtue of the advantages enjoyed in the past. Those who remained poor in the previous generation may not be inclined to take educational opportunities due to their utter poverty and this group normally prefers present gains to the future gain available through education. The absence of education within the poorer strata of the community would encourage dependence of this class on land because they are not skilled enough to move to other occupation. But the richer sections can afford to send their family-members for taking education facilities which in turn improve their potentiality to earn in future and which in its turn has a tendency to diversify the occupational structure. For instance, some may look after the traditional activities of agriculture, some others may explore other non-agricultural fields of occupation. The resultant effect would be an increase in the level of income of this section of the community; for this may increase the earnings per person from agriculture due to reduction in the number of disguised unemployment in the family. In addition, the earnings of the family from agriculture would further be supplemented by the earnings from non-agricultural pursuits. It is thus apparent that one section of the community due to their utter poverty may develop a peculiar attitude towards education which in turn increases their dependence on agriculture. On the other hand, those who take education, improve their economic position; and it has a snow-ball effect on the future earning potentiality of the members.

Hodgson in 1847 has stated that the Meches have no education in the modern sense and they can count upto seven.<sup>2</sup>

Grierson also states that they can count upto ten.<sup>3</sup> Dalton notes in 1872 that the Meches can count upto eight.<sup>4</sup>

But the 'Handbook on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of West Bengal,' published by the Tribal Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal in 1966, remarks, "In comparison with the progress of education as made by the other communities of the Scheduled Tribes as well as that of the Scheduled Castes as a whole, the spread of education among this community [Mech] is to some extent satisfactory. About 34.3% of the expected number of school going students in the secondary stage had attended schools during 1962".<sup>5</sup> The Bulletin of the cultural Research Institute<sup>6</sup> (Calcutta) in 1968 shows that out of 533 Scheduled Tribe students in the post-matric stage during the period 1966-67, Mech contributed 4.13%; and of all the Scheduled Tribe Community, only eight communities, viz., Santals, Bhutia, Lepcha, Oroan, Bhumiz, Munda, Mech and Kora, cover 98% of the total Scheduled Tribe students of West Bengal in the post-matric stage during the period 1966-67. These eight communities comprise 91% of the total Scheduled Tribe population of West Bengal. The district of Jalpaiguri covers 5.44% of the Scheduled Tribe students in the post-matric stage and of these, the Mech Community claims 48.28% of the total Scheduled Tribe students in the post-matric stage during the period 1966-67.

Thus the Meches are receiving modern education. The

level of education of the Meches in the district of Jalpaiguri, in the year 1961, is presented in Table 6:1.

Table - 6:1

Level of Education of the Meches - 1961 (Jalpaiguri District).

Level	No. of Persons	Percentage
Illiterate	10,617	80.57
Literate without education level	1,533	11.63
Primary or Junior Basic.	949	7.20
Matric and above	79	0.60
Total	13,178	100.00

Source: Jalpaiguri District, Handbook, Census - 1961 (P.339)

The Table 6:1 shows that about 19% of the Meches are literates; the corresponding percentage of literacy, it should be noted, in the district of Jalpaiguri for all communities is 19.22% and for the State of West Bengal, 29.28%.<sup>6</sup> Thus, according to the Census of 1961 whereas the percentage of literacy for the Scheduled Tribe population is as low as 7.5%, the only tribe to achieve some degree of success in the matter of education is, however, the Mech.<sup>7</sup> The percentage of literacy among the Meches, though falls far short of the state average, is almost equal to the district average.

According to our estimation of the level of literacy

among the Meches in the area of our enquiry in 1973, about 21% of the Meches have been found to be literates. We present, below, in Table 6:2, the level of education of the Meches of the area of our enquiry in 1973.

Table - 6:2

Level of Education of the Meches - 1973 (Satali Villages)

Level	No. of persons	Percentage
Illiterate	4,283	79.26
Literate without education level.	635	11.75
Primary	343	6.35
Above Primary	111	2.05
College/University others.	32	0.59
Total	5,404	100.00

Source: Investigation.

The Table 6:2 above shows that the Meches of the area of our enquiry are accredited with a percentage of literacy to the tune of about 20.74%. It may be worthwhile for us to study <sup>the distribution of</sup> education within the Mech community of the area of our enquiry.

The total number of Mech students at all levels in 1973 in the area of our enquiry was 174. Of these, students at the 'Primary' level (Class I-VI) constituted about 62.64%, students at

the 'Above Primary' level about 34.48% and students at the 'Post-matric' level about 2.88%. Thus, the number of students enrolled at all levels has fallen once we move from the 'Primary' level to the upper levels.

In order to examine the beneficiaries of educational facility in the Mech community of the area of our enquiry, we have attempted to discuss at the outset the state of education of the Mech students of the area at the 'Primary' level in the year 1973. This we have stated by classifying the Mech students of 1973 at the 'Primary' level in our area in accordance with the status of the father/guardian of the students in respect of landowning in 1973. We have further examined the percentages of enrolment of students at the 'Primary' level over the age-group of 7-12 years\*. Table 6:3 below would depict these.

Table - 6:3

Distribution of Mech students at the 'Primary' Level, 1973 -  
(Satali Villages)

Status of father/ Guardian of the student in respect of landowning in 1973	Number of Mech stu- dents.	Number of Meches in the group 7-12 years.	Percentage of Mech stu- dents over the age group 7-12 years.
Rich and Upper Mid- dle landowner.	37	215	17.20
Lower Middle land- owner	13	117	11.11
Small landowner	17	222	7.65
Marginal landowner	23	327	7.03
Landless	19	316	6.01

Source: Primary School Register and Pre-Matric Tribal Scholarship Documents.

\*We have taken the age-group of 7-12 years, assuming that one is expected to get oneself admitted into the Primary school at the age of 7 years and to complete the primary education when he has completed 12 years of age.

An examination of the Table 6:3 above shows that the percentages of Mech students over the age-group of 7-12 years in the area of our enquiry increase with the improvement in the status of the Mech father/guardian in respect of landowning in the year of our investigation. But the Table above also shows that Mech students at the 'Primary' level have come from all categories of land-owning families. It may, therefore, be interesting to enquire as to whether the Mech students, irrespective of the status of their father/guardian in respect of landowning, continue their studies at the 'Primary' level once they get themselves admitted into the 'Primary' schools. For this, we present Table 6:4 (P.168) the 'Drop-outs' of the Mech students of the area of our enquiry at the 'Primary' level of education over the years 1969-73\*. We have shown the 'Drop-outs' by classifying each 'Drop-out' student in accordance with the status enjoyed by the father/guardian of each Mech 'Drop-out' student, in respect of landowning in 1973, and have specified the reason for such 'Drop-outs'.

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\*The method of calculation of the 'Drop-outs' of the Mech students has been discussed in the Appendix - 6A of this chapter.

Table - 6:4

Drop-outs of Mech students at the Primary level of education, 1969-73-  
(Satali Villages)

Status of the father/guardian of the Drop-out student in respect of landowning in 1973	Drop-out students among the Meches		Reasons of Drop-outs							
			Death		Marriage		Voluntary Discontinuity		Others	
	No.	PC	No.	PC	No.	PC	No.	PC	No.	PC
Rich and Upper Middle Landowner	8	100.00	3	37.50	2	25.00	3	37.50	Nil	Nil
Lower Middle Landowner	3	100.00	Nil	Nil	3	100.00	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Small Landowner.	7	100.00	2	28.57	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	5	71.43
Marginal Landowner	6	100.00	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	1	16.66	5	83.34
Landless	18	100.00	1	5.55	1	5.55	Nil	Nil	16	88.90

Sources: Primary School Registers, Pre-Matric Tribal Scholarship documents, and Investigation.

An examination of the Table 6:4 above shows that 100% 'Drop-outs' of the Mech students of the 'Rich' and 'Middle' landowners at the 'Primary' level was either voluntarily or due to death or marriage. Hence, we may conclude that none of the 'Drop-outs' at the 'Primary' level of education in the 'Rich' and 'Middle' landowning families of the Meches of the area of our

enquiry, has been due to pecuniary reason. But for the 'Small', 'Marginal' and the 'Landless' families, marriage, death as well as voluntary discontinuity do not cover all the 'Drop-outs'. The factor/s other than marriage death and voluntary discontinuity has/have shared the greater portion of the 'Drop-outs' in the above mentioned families. It seems that perhaps pecuniary reason is the 'other' reason for which the students of those families have discontinued their studies at the 'Primary' level. If this be so, then we may state that the percentages of 'Drop-outs' on pecuniary ground among the Mech students have increased with the fall in the status of the Mech father/guardian in respect of landowning. For instance, the Table above shows that the percentage of 'Drop-outs' in the 'Small' landowning families on account of reason other than death, marriage, and voluntary discontinuity is about 71.43%, whereas in the 'Marginal' landowning families, the reason other than those just mentioned, covers about 83.34% and in the 'Landless' families about 88.90% of the 'Drop-outs' respectively. Incidentally, it should be pointed out that the percentages of 'Drop-outs' usually have been found during our investigation to be higher at the stages of Class IV to VI when the students concerned perhaps can be effectively utilised for the income-generating activities of the family. We have not, however, stated the percentages of 'Drop-outs' separately at the stages mentioned above.

To examine further the level of education of the Meches in the area of our enquiry, we state below in the Table 6:5, the distribution of the Mech students at the 'Above Primary' level

in 1973 where each student has been classified like the students at the 'Primary level', in accordance with the status enjoyed by the father/guardian of each student in respect of landowning in the year 1973.

Table - 6:5

Distribution of Mech students at the 'Above Primary' level of education, 1973 (Satali Villages)

Status of father/guardian of the student in respect of landowning in 1973	Mech students	
	No	PC
Rich and Upper Middle Landowner	30	50.00
Lower Middle Landowner	10	16.66
Small Landowner	6	10.00
Marginal Landowner	6	10.00
Landless	8	13.34
Total	60	100.00

Source: Pre-Matric Tribal Scholarship documents and Investigation.

The Table above shows that although about 50% of the existing Mech students at the 'Above Primary' level of education belong to the 'Rich' and 'Upper Middle' landowning families in 1973, the percentage of students enrolled in the 'Above Primary' of the 'Landless' families as well as those of the 'Small' and 'Marginal' landowning families is about 33.34%. In order to get further information with regard to 'Above Primary' level of education of the

Mech students of the area of our enquiry, we have classified the Mech students at the 'Above Primary' stage in respect of the 'Pre-ceiling landholding of their father/guardian in the Table 6:6 below.

Table - 6:6

Re-distribution of the Mech students at the 'Above Primary Level', 1973 ( Satali Villages)

Status of the father/guardian of the students in respect of pre-ceiling landholding (In acres)	Mech students classified in respect of the status enjoyed by the Father/Guardian of each student with regard to landowning in 1973						
	Rich and Upper Middle	Lower Middle	Small	Marginal	Land-less	Total No. of students	Percentage
	No. of students	No. of students	No. of students	No. of students	No. of students		
Above 100	13	1			3	17	28.33
90 - 100	9	1			2	12	20.00
60 - 70	3	1	2	2	1	9	15.00
50 - 60	3	1	1	2		7	11.66
40 - 50	2	3				5	8.33
30 - 40		1	2	1	2	4	6.67
20 - 30		1	2	1		4	6.67
10 - 20			1			1	1.67
Below 10		1				1	1.67
New Entrant							
Miscellaneous							
Total	30	10	6	6	8	60	100.00

Source: Record of Right, Pre-Matric Tribal Scholarship documents, and Investigation.

The Table 6:6 above shows that if the fathers/

guardians of the existing 'Above Primary' Mech students of the area of our enquiry is classified in accordance with their pre-ceiling landholding, then the percentages of students enrolled in the 'Above Primary' stage more or less increase with the rise in the pre-ceiling landholding. The presence of the students at the 'Above Primary' stage from the families of the 'landless' as shown in Table 6:5 above, is perhaps explained by the fact that about 75% of the existing students of that stage come from the families whose pre-ceiling landholding was more than 60 acres. Similarly, about 66.66% of the students of the 'Marginal' landowning families and 50% of the students of the 'Small' landowning families had more than 50 acres of land in the pre-ceiling period. It should also be noted that almost all the students of the "Lower Middle", 'Small' and 'Marginal' landowning families as well as the 'Landless' families of 1973 belong to the "Upper Middle" landowning families as defined by us in chapter 3 above in the pre-ceiling period. Moreover, about 48.15% of the 'Small landowners', about 62.84% of the 'Marginal landowners', and about 63.01% of the 'Landless' of 1973 belonged to the 'Upper Middle' landowning group in the pre-ceiling period.\* This, perhaps, also explains the presence of the students at the 'Above Primary' level of education in the families of 'Small' and 'Marginal' landowners as well as 'Landless' in 1973.

We have also calculated the 'Drop-outs' of Mech students at the 'Above Primary' level over the periods 1969-73.\*\*

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\* Please see Table 3:11 of chapter 3.

\*\* The method of calculation has been given in the Appendix 6-A of this chapter.

It is found that 64 Mech students have discontinued their studies over the above mentioned period and of these 'Drop-outs', 7 are from Class VII, 52 from Class VIII, 1 from Class IX and 4 from Class X. It is found on investigation that the reason for 'Drop-outs' in all the cases is either death or marriage or that the student/s concerned has/have voluntarily discontinued their studies. As none is found to have discontinued their studies at the 'Above Primary' level on grounds other than marriage or death, or as the 'Drop-outs' if any, have been made voluntarily, we have not made any attempt to relate the 'Drop-outs' of the Mech students at the 'Above Primary' level with the status of their father/guardian in respect of landowning.

We have also made an attempt to state the level of education at 'Post-Matric' stage of the Mech students of the area of our enquiry. We present below in Table 6:7 the distribution of the beneficiaries of 'Post-Matric Scholarship' among the Mech people of Jalpaiguri District over the periods 1971-72 to 1972-73.

Table - 6:7

Distribution of the beneficiaries of "Post-Matric Scholarship for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes" - among the Mech of Jalpaiguri District, 1971-73.

Year	No. of Mech Beneficiaries.	No. of Mech Beneficiaries in Satali Villages.	Percentage of Satali-Mech Beneficiaries over the total Mech Beneficiaries of Jalpaiguri District.
1971-72	31	4	12.90
1972-73	37	4	10.81

Source: Post-Matric Scholarship documents (Tribal).

The Table above shows that the percentage of Mech students receiving 'Post-Matric Scholarship' among the total Mech beneficiaries of Jalpaiguri District has fallen. But our investigation in the area of enquiry has revealed to us that during 1972-73, one Mech student of Satali Villages has received 'Post-Matric Scholarship' outside the Jalpaiguri District. If this is taken into account, then it may be said that the percentage of Satali Mech students receiving 'Post-Matric Scholarship' over the total Mech students receiving such scholarship at the Jalpaiguri District has slightly increased from about 12.9% in 1971-72 to 13.5% in 1972-73.

We have also tried to locate the beneficiaries of 'Post-Matric Scholarship' in relation to the present landowning status as well as the pre-ceiling landholding status of the families of the students. It is found on investigation that all the students enjoying 'Post-Matric Scholarship' belong to 'Rich' and 'Upper Middle' landowning families of 1973 and all of them also belonged to those families who had more than 50 acres of land in the pre-ceiling period.

Although the incidence of higher education on the Meches of the area of our enquiry is very limited, it is interesting to point out that almost all the students taking higher education belong to the categories of families enjoying a higher status in forms of landholding. Perhaps the greater incidence of higher education on this section of the Mech tribals of the area of our enquiry, has permitted them to diversify their occupation as has been shown in Chapter 5 above. The lower incidence of higher education

on the families enjoying a 'lower' status as well as the nature of 'Drop-outs' among the Mech students, may perhaps suggest that this section of the tribals in the area of our enquiry ~~are~~<sup>is</sup> influenced by the 'Special type of costs of education', of which we have referred to earlier in this chapter, even when tribal education is made completely 'Free'. Absence of education has increased the dependence of this section on land. With the decrease in the amount of tenanted land of the Meches of the area of our enquiry, as was shown in Chapter 2 above, it may be interesting to enquire about the issues involved in the matter of adoption of different techniques of farm production by different strata of the Meches. This we propose to study in the next chapter.

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Appendix - 6A

In this chapter we intend to ascertain whether the students enrolled in primary section (Class I-VI) in 1969 staged a 'Drop-out' at any stage (within Class VI). For this we have taken the period between 1969 and 1974. In order to ascertain the 'Drop-outs' we collected from the school registers, the names of the students along with the names of the father, of the sessions 1969-74 for the Classes I to IV. The names of the students from Class V onwards along with the names of the father could be collected from the 'Pre-Matric Scholarship' documents of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, kept at the office of the Special Officer, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Welfare Department, Jalpaiguri. The said documents were scrutinised upto the year 1974 in order to ascertain whether the students found in enrolment in the year 1969 at the primary level had continued their studies after Class IV. Moreover, a comparison of the school registers of different years from 1969 to 1974 was made. The names of the students were further checked from the 'Pre-Matric Scholarship' documents of 1969 to 1974, which also enabled us to ascertain the 'Drop-outs' of the Mech students of the area of our enquiry at Classes V and VI. The students of the area of enquiry studying in any other educational institution outside the Jalpaiguri District were also <sup>Covered</sup> ~~covered~~ during our investigation in the Satali Villages.

Thus, we could make a list of 'Drop-outs' of 'Primary' students of Class I-VI during the years 1969-74.

Further, the scrutiny of the documents of the 'Pre-Matric Scholarships' from 1969 to 1974 enabled <sup>us to ascertain the 'drop-outs'</sup> at the 'Above Primary' level. The number of existing Mech students at the 'Above Primary' level in the year 1973 could similarly be ascertained from the said documents. The list of existing students of 1973 as well as the 'Drop-outs' at the 'Above Primary' level over the periods from 1969 to 1974 was also checked during our household enquiry.

The names of the students at the 'Post-Matric' level in the year 1973 were also found out from the documents of the 'Post-Matric Scholarship' kept at the office mentioned above. Other relevant information regarding this was also collected during our investigation.

Moreover, it is to be noted that all the existing Mech students have been found to be enjoying either the 'Pre-Matric' or the 'Post-Matric' scholarships in the year of our investigation.

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