

Chapter - 7Agrarian and other allied activities of the Meches.

Almost all the authorities on the Meches agree in considering the Mech community as the agricultural community. For instance, J.F. Gruning in 1911 pointed out, "In the Western Duars, the number of races is extraordinarily numerous, ranging from European planters to Meches and Garos, who have recently begun to abandon their nomadic habits and rough system of cultivation by juming and to settle down and till the land in the ordinary way."¹ So also, W.W. Hunter in 1876 described the Meches as the agriculturists.² Writing on the Meches, B.H. Hodgson in 1847 had found them to be primarily agriculturists.³

We have, therefore, made an attempt in this Chapter to analyse first the present economic activities of the Meches connected with agriculture. We shall present this analysis by describing their behaviour regarding adoption of improved farm techniques. This will be followed by an analysis of other economic activities allied to agriculture in the Mech community of the area of our enquiry.

On investigation it is found that almost all the Mech farmers of our area utilize farm-yard-manure (FYM) while cultivating their lands. Almost about 80% of the farmers, when enquired, reported about their awareness of the fact that

the utilization of chemical fertilizers would increase the yield of their lands cultivated. Only a few reported that as they were habituated in utilizing only FYM, they could not say anything about the benefits to be received from utilizing chemical fertilizers in their lands cultivated.

During our investigation we collected information from each Mech cultivators regarding their attitudes towards improved farm techniques as well as the extent of their utilization of improved farm techniques. It is found on investigation that although about 80% of the Mech cultivators are aware about the usefulness of utilizing chemical fertilizers in cultivation, about 86% of those who are aware, cannot take the advantage due to their pecuniary condition. It is also found on enquiry that these farmers have developed in their mind an 'interest' about it by seeing the improved yields of the lands cultivated by those farmers who have happened to utilize chemical fertilisers and hence can 'evaluate' the advantages of its utilization, but cannot pass through the process of 'trial' and cannot 'adopt' this improved practice due to their poverty*. Again, it is found that of the

*Adoption has been described as "a process. Every farmer has to pass through this adoption process before he adopts an improved practice. He becomes aware about the practice first but lacks interest in it. Then he develops in his mind an interest about it and he seeks further information about the practice. He then evaluates the advantages of the practice and decides whether or not he will try the practice in a small scale in his own farm situation. After this he makes a trial of it, and if he is satisfied with its result he adopts it." S.K.Basu - How Adoption Studies can help extension workers, P. 3.

non-adapters of chemical fertilizer, about 12.59% of them had practiced this sometimes in the past but had to discontinue due to their poverty. Moreover, about 15.31% of the present non-adapters reported that they had discontinued utilizing chemical fertilizers as they thought that without proper irrigation facilities it was no use applying chemical fertilizers, and also complained that application of chemical fertilizers on land encouraged a particular type of skin-disease and hence they had discontinued its utilization. Moreover, of the non-adapters about 24.53% reported that they did not apply chemical fertilizers as because they were afraid that their pecuniary condition would not permit them to apply chemical fertilizers in their cultivated lands every year, whereas non-application of it in any year, if applied once, would produce bad effect on the fertility of the soil.

In fine, of the total cultivators, about 19.58% are unaware of the benefits of utilizing chemical fertilizers. About 80.42% are quite aware of it, but of them about 86.22% have not adopted the practice in the year of our investigation.

Further, it was found on investigation that about 87.03% of the Mech cultivators were quite aware of the benefits from utilizing improved seeds in cultivation, while about 12.97% were indifferent and refrained from giving any opinion. On enquiry it was found that of the Meches who had reported

their awareness only about 14.91% of them could utilise improved seeds during the time of our investigation. It is also interesting to note that none of the present non-adapters of this practice was reported to have ever utilised improved seeds in the past.

Similarly, it was found on enquiry that all the Mech cultivators were willing to have artificial irrigational facilities, if available. The Meches have been reported to have the tradition of irrigating land artificially through jampo⁴is. This system is still prevalent in the Mech community.** But a very few were found to avail themselves of the advantage of jampois during our investigation, as the existing jampois could cover cultivating lands of a very few Meches. Almost all the non-receivers of the facilities emphasized on the necessity of opening up more jampois for irrigation. Among the non-receivers, a very few were seen to irrigate their lands, either through tube-wells or from well. In short, of the total Mech cultivators, only about 6.84% at present can utilize the existing jampois. And of the non-receivers of benefits from jampois, only about 3.29% are seen to irrigate their lands either through tube-wells or from well.

It may be interesting to make an attempt to locate the users of improved farm practices in the area of our enquiry. This we may do by examining whether operational holdings of the Mech cultivators as well as their levels of education have

**Jampo is are artificial channels cut by cultivators generally for irrigation of their lands.⁵

got anything to do with their adoption of improved farm practices. To carry out our analysis, we have designated a Mech cultivator as an adapter of improved practice if he has adopted any of the three farm practices cited above in the current year (i.e. during the time of our investigation). It is found on investigation that some of the Mech cultivators have utilized all the three practices together, some of them only two and some others only one, a detailed account of which we have not presented in the following analysis. We have first related the adapters of improved farm practices to their current operational holdings. Next, we have related the same set of adapters to their pre-ceiling land holding of the family. This has been followed by an analysis of the behaviour of the cultivating-households regarding improved farm practices+

Table-7: below depicts the first part of our analysis.

Distribution of adapters of improved farm practice according to size-distribution of operational holdings*

Operational holdings (In acres)	No. of Cultivating House-holds.	No. of Adapter House-holds.	PC. of Adapter House-holds.	No. of Non-Adapter House-holds.	PC of Non-Adapter House-holds.
Above 20	21	12	57.14	9	42.86
10 - 20	42	27	64.29	15	35.71
Below 10	361	12	3.32	349	96.68

Source: Investigation.

~~Some information of which is given above shows that the per-~~

+ To ascertain this, we have shown the percentages of literates among the cultivating-households where each of the households has been categorised in respect of their pre-ceiling land holdings. Further, we have shown the percentages of adapter-cultivating households over the literate-cultivating households.

An examination of Table 7:1 above shows that the percentage of adapters of improved farm practice is only about 12.03% of the Mech cultivators and about 87.97% of the Mech cultivators are non-adapters. Moreover, it can be calculated that more than 76% of the adapters are operating more than 10 acres of land; and thus, it can be said that almost three quarters of the adapters of improved farm practices are either 'upper middle' farmers or 'rich' farmers as defined by us in Chapter 3 above. It can further be calculated that about 57% of the 'rich' farmers and about 64% of the 'upper middle' farmers have adopted improved farm practices during the time of our investigation. But the Table above also shows that about 3% of the farmers other than 'rich' and 'upper middle' have also adopted improved farm practices. To get further information regarding adapters, we have rearranged our adapters in terms of their pre-ceiling holdings in Table 7:2 (P.185).

Table 7:2 (P. 185) shows that the percentages of Mech cultivating households adopting improved farm practices increase with the increase in the pre-ceiling land holding of each family. Thus, for all the Mech cultivators who have adopted improved practices, adoption is an increasing function of the possession ^{of} lands in the pre-ceiling period. For instance, the Table (P.185) shows that about 45.23% of the cultivating households having more than 100 acres of land in the pre-ceiling period, have adopted improved farm practices. The percentages fall with the fall in the pre-ceiling landholdings. This perhaps

Table - 7:2

Distribution of adapters of improved farm practice according to size-distribution of pre-ceiling land possession of the family.

Pre-ceiling land -holding of the family. (In acres)	Cultivating Households		Adapter cultivating Households	
	No	PC	No	PC
Above 100	42	100.00	19	45.23
90 - 100	22	100.00	9	40.90
60 - 70	25	100.00	8	32.00
50 - 60	22	100.00	7	31.81
40 - 50	39	100.00	6	15.38
30 - 40	34	100.00	2	5.88
20 - 30	43	100.00	Nil	Nil
10 - 20	71	100.00	Nil	Nil
Below 10	66	100.00	Nil	Nil
New Entrant	3	100.00	Nil	Nil
Miscellaneous	57	100.00	Nil	Nil
Total	424	100.00	51	12.03

Source: Investigation

enables us to state that farming behaviour of the present day Mech community of the area of our enquiry has largely been determined by the past economic position, depending on land possession, of each family of to-day.

Moreover, it has been found on investigation that all the adapters of improved farm practices are literate-

cultivating households. Of the total Mech cultivating households, about 25.47% has been found to be literates either with an educational level or without any educational level. But of the literates, only about 47.22% have been found to have adopted improved farm practices in the area of our enquiry. We have already seen that the percentage of adapters increases with the increase in the pre-ceiling holdings of adapter-cultivating households. We have made an attempt to examine the percentage distribution of literate-cultivating households in each category of cultivating households arranged in accordance with their pre-ceiling landholdings and to examine further the percentage-distribution of adapters, among the literate-cultivating households where both have also been arranged in accordance with their pre-ceiling holdings. This we present in Table 7:3 below.

Table - 7:3

Percentage distribution of literates and adapters among cultivating Mech households arranged in respect of pre-ceiling holdings (Satali Villages).

Pre-ceiling Land Holdings (In acres)	Percentage of literate cultivating Households among total cultivating Households.	Percentage of adapter-cultivating Households among literate cultivating Households.
Above 100	57.14	79.16
90 - 100	54.54	75.00
60 - 70	52.00	61.53
50 - 60	50.00	63.63
40 - 50	38.46	40.00
30 - 40	20.58	28.57
20 - 30	18.60	Nil
10 - 20	15.49	Nil
Below 10	7.57	Nil
New Entrant	Nil	Nil
Miscellaneous	3.50	Nil
Total	25.47	47.22

Source: Investigation.

The Table 7:3 perhaps corresponds to our earlier observation made in Chapter 6 above, where we have already seen that the percentage of literacy increases with the increase in the pre-ceiling holdings of the family. In the Table above, for instance, the percentage of literate-cultivating-households has been seen to rise with the rise in pre-ceiling holdings of the cultivating-households.

It is also interesting to observe from the Table 7:3 above that although all the adapter-cultivating-households have ~~been~~ been found to be literates, all the literate-cultivating-households have not been found to have adopted improved farm practices. But the percentage of adapters among the literate-cultivating-households increases almost unequivocally with the rise in the pre-ceiling holdings.

It thus appears that in the Mech community the extent of economic well-being as dependent on the amount of land held in the pre-ceiling period, has determined largely the extent of literacy as well as the extent of adopting better techniques of production among them.

Moreover, it is found on investigation that a section of the Meches of the area of our enquiry is not depending simply on the production of traditional crops like paddy, jute, etc. Some of them have started utilizing a part of their land for the development of orchards of ^carea-nuts and of fruits like pine-apples and bananas. It is also interesting to observe that

all the growers of pine-apple have been found to have raised simultaneously traditional crops in their field. The land devoted towards the production of pine-apples has been found to vary between 1/6th of an acre to 1/3rd of an acre per household. We present below in Statement 7:1 the number of Mech cultivators found to grow pine-apples in different villages in the area of our enquiry in 1973.

Statement - 7:1

Growers of Pine-apples: Satali Villages.

Name of the village	No. of cultivators growing pine-apples.
Satali Mondol Para	8
Madhya Satali	5
Purba Satali	2
Paschim Satali	2
Dakshin Satali	3
Total	20

Source: Investigation.

The Statement 7:1 above shows that altogether twenty Mech cultivators have been found to have devoted a part of their land for the production of pine-apples. This is something new in the Mech community and has been reported during our investigation as a phenomenon of late sixties of this century. Before

that, land was reported to be utilized primarily for raising 'Rabi' as well as "Khariff" crops only. The utilization of a part of land for the non-traditional products like pine-apple has been reported to be done mainly for marketing purpose. It has, moreover, been found on investigation that utilization of land for the non-traditional products as such, has mainly been undertaken by the 'Rich' and 'Upper middle' cultivating households, defined by us previously. Of the twenty growers, ten own more than 25 acres, three own 20-25 acres and three others own 15-20 acres of land, and four own 10-15 acres, of land in 1973.

Furthermore, all the growers of pine-apples have also been found to grow areca-nuts, mainly for marketing purpose. In addition to them, fourteen others have also been found to grow areca-nuts mainly for marketing purpose. It should, however, be noted that orchard of areca-nuts is to be found in almost all the houses of the Meches in the place of our enquiry, although, for marketing purpose, only 34 households have been found to grow areca-nuts. We present in the Statement 7:2 below an account of those landowners who grow areca-nuts mainly for marketing purpose.

Statement 7:2Growers of areca-nuts (Satali Villages)

Name of the Village	No. of cultivators growing areca-nuts.
Satali Mondol Para	11
Madhya Satali	6
Purba Satali	5
Paschim Satali	7
Dakshin Satali	5
Total:	34

Source: Investigation.

The phenomenon of growing areca-nuts either for home-consumption solely or for home-consumption as well as for marketing purpose is not something new in the Mech community. But the peculiar feature of this phenomenon as has been observed by us during our investigation, is that, like growers of pine-apples, the growers of areca who mainly grow the products for marketing purpose, have all been found to belong to the 'Rich' and 'Upper middle' landowning group. However, we have also observed a new tendency among the Meches other than the 'Rich' and 'Upper middle' landowners in the matter of growing areca-nuts. For instance, we have been reported during our investigation that some of the Meches other than the 'Rich' and 'Upper middle' landowners have started planting areca-nuts with a view to marketing the products

when available recently. But the number of such Meches is very small.

Thus, a section of the Meches has been found to earn revenue from land not only by raising traditional crops but also by growing non-traditional products. This diversification is reported to have been done mainly for increasing the farm income of the family concerned. But as almost all the households who have introduced diversification have been found to belong to the 'Rich' and 'Upper middle' landowning group and as all the 'Rich' and 'Upper middle' landowners of 1973 had more than 30 acres of land in the pre-ceiling as shown by the Table 3:11 of Chapter 3 above, we may say that diversification in the matter of utilization of land, like diversification in the matter of occupation as shown in the Table 5:4 of Chapter 5 above, has been made mainly by that section of the Meches who had a relatively good economic position in the past.

Writing on the economic activities of the Meches connected with agriculture, Sunder noted, "The crops cultivated by Meches are the same as those grown by Rajbansis, namely, paddy and mustard seed, also a little jute and tobacco. The method of cultivation is the same".⁶

C.C. Sanyal stated that the Meches "raise many crops of which rice (mai) is the principal one. They are experts in areca-nut (guai) cultivation and thriving orchards of

areca trees adorn the house of any well-to-do Mech family. Betel vines climb up the areca trees. These are their cash crops. Personally, they are much addicted to betel leaves and unripe areca nuts which they chew almost constantly."⁷

W.W. Hunter noted in 1876 that the Meches used to grow a considerable deal of cotton, in addition to the ordinary crops of rice, mustard-seed, etc.⁸ Writing on the agricultural activities of the Meches of Jalpaiguri District, J.F. Gruning pointed out in 1911, "Meches ... throw away the straw as soon as they have finished threshing or allow anyone who pleases to take it away."⁹

Almost all the authorities mentioned that the Meches used to cultivate crops of rice and cotton. In a note written by A. Campbell in 1839, Meches were described as nomadic cultivators, but cultivating rice and cotton by making clearances in the forest with the hoe.¹⁰ He also mentioned, "In the arts the Mechis have made but small progress, they excel in the care of their cotton agriculture, but as they grow only the common annual plant, the produce is not of a superior kind."¹¹ Sunder observed that the Meches used to grow cotton.¹² He also gave an account of 'how cotton is cultivated by Meches.' This, he described as follows: "Among Meches the process of cultivation [of cotton] is as follows: - The jungle is cleared by men with the dao, and is allowed to dry for about 10 or 12 days, when it is fired, the ashes being used as manure. Then some men who have

previously made sharp pointed bamboo sticks, each being about 5 feet in length, strike the ground with them, and make holes all over the field about two inches in depth. Othermen take the cotton seed and rub it up well on the ground with a little water. By this operation the hairs on the seed are worn off, and the seed can be sown with facility. After this, two or three seeds are placed in each hole, which is then left uncovered. The seed germinates in about three or four days. When the plant is about two feet high, any jungle in the field is cleared and weeded with the dao and allowed to rot on the ground. This weeding is done in the beginning of Asar* and is called "Samdangni". When the plant is about four feet high, a second "Samdangni" operation is performed. This is called the "do-nika sam", and is done in Assin* month. The pods ripen and burst in Aughran* and Pous* months. The bursting of the pods is called "Khun-bed bai." The white cotton is called Khun-gofut. The brown variety is called Khun-gomu." ¹³

Although most of the early authors mentioned that the Meches used to grow cotton, curiously enough, in the area of our enquiry none of the Meches have been found to grow cotton during our investigation. It was, however, reported that once cotton was grown by them plentifully in the area of our enquiry. The entire disappearance of this production is due to the

* Asar - June - July.

Assin - September - October.

Aughran - November - December.

Pous - December - January.

competition of the mill-made yarn with the yarn produced by the Meches. Our investigation corresponds to the observation made by C.C. Sanyal when he remarked, "Short-staple cotton (Kshun or Khun) they [Meches] grew is becoming the less profitable crop owing to the competition with mill-made yarn and imported cotton of longer staple and consequent loss of the market. At present most of the Meches do not spin their yarn at home, but they buy mill-made yarn. Before the Second World War the Japanese used to buy this short staple cotton to mix with wool. But after the war the market has shrunk down to practically nil. The demand is gone¹⁴ and so the initiative and interest in this line has disappeared."

Similarly, another important economic activity of the Meches is gradually disappearing from the Mech community. Sunder noted, "The Meches cultivate castor oil plant called Endi (Ricinus communis) for the purpose of rearing worms for silk.....¹⁵ The cloth known as Assam silk is made by Mech women from this." A. Campbell had described the manufacturing of endi silk by the Meches as entirely a domestic affair and observed that endi silk was generally woven by Mech women who also used to colour it with¹⁶ the lac dye.

But writing on the folk industries of the Meches, C. C. Sanyal had observed in 1970, "Endi was made in almost every house by the female folk of the Meches. They reared the cocoons, spun the yarn and weaved the cloth".¹⁷ But he further observed, "In 1966 about fifteen families in South Satali

were found to be carrying on this industry. But, for want of finance and proper encouragement this indigenous industry, the main stay of these families, was on the brink of a collapse. Endi industry is even now found in all Mech settlements in Terai and Duars, but is dwindling."¹⁸

During our investigation, we have found that some of the Meches cultivate castor plant for rearing endi worms and the Mech women perform spinning and weaving. But in almost all the cases, endi cloth is woven for domestic purpose. However, it was reported to us that many of the Mech families formerly took this household industry as the subsidiary occupation of the family, but due to lack of finance they could not carry on with this trade. That this decaying household industry is still gasping in some families is due to the fact that wearing of cloth made of endi-silk is required in some of the social ceremonies of the Meches. For instance, the traditional dress of a Mech woman, called "dokhna" is generally spun and woven from endi-silk. Most of the Meches of the area of our enquiry were reported to bring from Assam through their relatives or friends endi-cloth during their necessities. It was also reported to us that rearing of endi-worms, and spinning and weaving of endi-silk are very much prevalent among the Meches of Goalpara District of Assam. The revival of this household industry would open scope for employment to the Meches.*

*The Siliguri Planning Organization rightly observes that the government assistance for the development of household industry like agriculture in Project No. 18 and 19 of the I.T.D.P. areas of the Jalpaiguri District (which also cover the area of our enquiry) will open scope for employment to the tribals, and the development of this industry would suit the needs of the tribals. S.P.O. Report Dec. 1976, Pp. 6 and 83.

In the sphere of raising agricultural products, certain new items are reported to have been incorporated by the Meches in the post-independence period and especially after the fifties of this century. For instance, the Meches have lately started cultivation of maize, called dumba, on high lands.¹⁹ Similarly, we were reported that they had started the production of brinjal, seeing them to be grown by the refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) who had flocked to the Western Duars after the partition of Bengal in 1947.

Mention has been made in Chapter 1 of the different stages of evolution in the system of cultivation of the Meches, e.g., from nomadic husbandry to settled cultivation. But all the earlier authorities are silent about the pattern of cultivation of the Meches. From our investigation we got the impression that probably double cropping pattern was unknown to the Meches for a long time. In fact, a large number of aged households of 60 years and above, reported that during their young ages they did not find a single Mech cultivator who used to raise more than one crop from his land. They advanced the availability of plentiful cultivable land as the main reason for sticking to single cropping pattern. They further pointed out that even where land was not plentiful, the Meches did not shift to double cropping, and advanced indolence and laziness as the main reason for the continuance of the habit.

However, during our investigation we have found that double-cropping pattern has increasingly been practised in the

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Mech community of to-day. We present below in the Table 7:4 the utilization of land by the Meches in the area of our enquiry as found by us during our investigation.

Table - 7:4

Land utilization of the Satali Meches - 1973

Land Utilization	Area (In acres)
Area held by the Meches	2,853.65
Total cultivable area	2,737.47
Current Fallow	20.00
Net cropped area	2,717.47
Double cropped area	1,209.31
Gross cropped area	3,926.78

Source: Investigation.

It can be estimated from the Table 7:4 above that about 99% of the cultivable land of the Meches of the area of enquiry has been brought under cultivation. Again about 46% of the net cropped area has been brought under double cropping.

Moreover, wheat as an agricultural product is being produced by some Meches. But as the production of wheat requires proper irrigation, the growers are limited. It was found on investigation that the Meches who had produced wheat had been found irrigating their lands through wells ^{or} pumps. We could locate only 17 Meches who have grown wheat in their fields during 1972-73;

of them 6 belong to Satalimondolpara, 5 to Madhya Satali, 5 to Paschim Satali, 1 from Dakshin Satali and none from Purba Satali. It is to be noted that all of these Mech cultivators belong to the 'Rich' and 'Upper middle' farmers of the area of our enquiry.

Our analysis and account of the economic activities of the Mech community so far probably point out that the Mech community at present is being swayed by a host of new attitudes in the economic front. But the implementation of the new attitudes in practice is confined within a few. Thus a dual structure of the economic condition has probably been possible. To comprehend this 'duality' of the Mech community, it may be useful to study the consumption pattern so that we may be in a position to examine the extent of poverty of the Meches. This we have proposed to do in the next chapter.

NOTES AND REFERENCES.

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 2. Hunter, W.W., op.cit., P. 254.
 3. Hodgson, B.H., Miscellaneous Essays Relating to Indian Subjects, Vol. I, P. 117.
 4. Sunder, D., op.cit., P. 71 (Report of Colonel Money quoted).
 5. Mukherjee, B.B., op.cit., P. 4.
 6. Sunder, D., op.cit., P. 71.
 7. Sanyal C.C., The Meches and the Totos of North Bengal, Pp. 9-10
 8. Hunter, W.W., op.cit., Pp. 254-5.
 9. Gruning, J.F., op.cit., P. 63.
 10. Campbell, A., op.cit., P. 624.
 11. Ibid, P. 626.
 12. Sunder, D., op.cit., P. 71.
 13. Ibid, Pp. 101-02.
 14. Sanyal, C.C., op.cit., P. 10.
 15. Sunder, D., op.cit., Pp. 71-72.
 16. Campbell, A., op.cit., P. 626.
 17. Sanyal, C.C., op.cit., P. 13.
 18. Ibid.
 19. Ibid., P. 10.
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