

Summary and conclusion.

For a long time the Mech tribe has lived in different parts of North Bengal. After many vicissitudes of fortune, they are now concentrated in some areas. After investigating the ~~area~~ economic conditions of the tribe in one of these areas, the non-homogeneous character of the tribal population becomes evident to us.

It is evident from our study that most of the economically affluent Meches of the present day are the descendants of more or less big land owners of the previous era. It is a fact that they can no longer enjoy the same extensive stretch of land which they enjoyed or their fore-fathers did enjoy, due to variety of reasons like imposition of ceilings on land, sub-division of the land among the family members or the sale of land.

But the smaller amount of land, owned by the present Mech descendants of the big land owners, has not affected their economic condition to a great extent. The opulence and prosperity, based on the vast area of land owned by some of the members of the past generation, have allowed some of the members of the present generation to find out ways and means to improve their own economic lot. Agricultural income of the family has been seen to be supplemented by income from non-agricultural sources. Even when non-agricultural sources are not explored, these families depending on agriculture exclusively, have taken measures to increase their earnings from agriculture. Thus, the present descendants of the big

land owners, who are operating on land, irrespective of the size of the present holdings have been able to maintain their relative position. We have shown in our analysis how the present position is determined by the land holdings of the past by taking the pre-ceiling land possession as the starting point. Similarly, our study also indicates that the present descendants of the big land owners, who are presently themselves not operating any land, have been found to be engaged in non-agricultural occupation of 'higher' order. But even here incomes of some who are mainly engaged in non-agricultural occupation are supplemented by income from agriculture.

This does not suggest that there is no exception to this above broad tendency. In fact, we have shown in the case-studies that some members whose forefathers used to hold large chunks of land, are no longer so affluent but leading a miserable existence either as a poor share-cropper or a landless labourer. Notwithstanding the exceptions referred to, the broad tendency is discernable.

Although from our study we cannot specially say that the 'rich' have become richer, we may perhaps suggest that at least some of the former 'rich' have been able to retain their relative position. On the otherhand, a large section of the Meches owing to poverty have become virtually 'immobile' with regard to occupation and have been tied to the soil; occupational change, if any, has not been able to improve the economic lot of this section, for mobility in majority of these cases has been ^{of} the 'descending

vertical order.'

The study also shows that the tribals of our study are not averse to adopt improved farm practices. What puts obstacle to their way to adopting improved practice is, however, their poor economic condition. From our investigation, we have arrived at the conclusion that the Mech households with a low level of income, are compelled to borrow for mere existence, and almost all the loans taken by them are utilised purely for non-productive purposes; but that if they get chemical fertilizers, improved variety of seeds, etc. even in terms of loan from the government, many of them reported that they would readily utilise it for productive purposes.

But the study also shows that a sizeable portion of the Mech families cannot procure 'two square meals a day' throughout a year. The extremely low level of their monthly income compels them to sacrifice sometimes at least 'one meal' in a day or both the meals. The study reveals that those who are very poor do not borrow, because credit worthiness and repayment capacity are extremely limited in these cases. The non-existence of borrowings together with a very low level of income of these Meches suggest that a sizeable portion of the Mech families are in a state of utter stringency. Hence, the low responsiveness of some of these Meches in respect of adoption of improved farm practices should be considered in the background of the economic status enjoyed by them. Those who cannot even procure the minimum subsistence, cannot naturally use either improved variety of seeds or chemical fertilizers. This is

not because that they are not development-conscious, but because their poor economic condition does not allow them to adopt improved farm practices.

Moreover, the study points out that a large section of the Meches cannot improve their economic lot through diversification of the family occupation because of the absence of 'minimum skill' required in non-agricultural occupation of 'higher order'. The required ~~in~~ 'minimum skill' can be acquired through education. But even though education has been made completely 'free' by the government at all levels for the tribals, the pecuniary condition of a large number of Meches does not allow them to keep their 'potential' family workers away from the present income-earning activities of the family, and therefore, it is found that most of the poor Meches cannot go beyond primary level of education. The study further shows that there is a close relationship between the drop-outs of the students at the primary level and the economic status of the family of the students concerned. It has been observed that factors other than death, marriage, etc. account for the major portion of the drop-outs of the students at the primary level with the ^{fall in the level of income of the} family of the students. The study has also pointed out that higher is the pre-ceiling land-holding, higher is the level of income of the present Mech families. Thus, the drop-outs on pecuniary ground increase with the fall in the pre-ceiling landholding of the family of the students concerned. The study has also pointed out that the families with low incomes are not unconscious about the beneficial aspect of education; in fact, it suggests that these families also

want that their children should ~~know~~ be educated so that they can improve their economic condition.

The study thus shows that the tribal society under investigation is not homogeneous. Moreover, our observation (Chapter 9) suggests a co-existence of two sections, where one section is retaining the old tribal habits and customs in a large degree, and the other whose adoption to social changes is spectacular.

But the study has shown that the individuals who lag behind, are not necessarily irresponsive to any change which may improve their economic lot. The study points out that the process of adopting social changes is intimately connected with the economic condition of the individual members of a community. It suggests that the main obstacle that is put in the way of development of a large section of the Mech community is their poor economic condition. The poor Mech tribals of the rural area where we have investigated, are, infact, a counterpart of the 'poor' of our rural community. As any egalitarian economic objective is expected to direct the effort towards ^{amelioration} ~~amelioration~~ of the poverty of the large section of the poor individuals, the study also suggests that the 'poor' among the tribal under investigation should need special care and treatment. Moreover, the study may also suggest that instead of directing our efforts only towards breaking the social inhibitions and taboos of a section of the tribal under survey, we ~~are~~ are to concentrate on their economic development, too. Once the economic condition is improved, they may be expected to get themselves well-adopted with the process of social changes.

In this context, we may perhaps mention the "Integrated Tribal Development Programme" (I.T.D.P) as has been undertaken by the Government of West Bengal in recent years. The developmental programmes, as planned under it, have been based on the assumption that the programmes would benefit the areas as well as the tribals. But there may be certain schemes which would benefit the tribals exclusively. With this aim in view, altogether thirty-four 'I.T.D.P'. Areas have been formed in the twelve out of sixteen districts of West Bengal. An area where tribal population forms at least 50% of the total population, has been covered by the 'I.T.D.P.' On this basis, the District of Jalpaiguri has four 'I.T.D.P'. Areas with Project Nos. 18, 19, 20 and 21. A part of the project No. 18 covers the area of our enquiry.

The Programme authorities of the 'I.T.D.P.' consider the growth of agriculture as the primary requisite of the growth of a rural area. As a part of the programme, they refer to the 'Mini-kit' programme of the Government of West Bengal, under which a packet of seeds, fertilizers and pesticides is given to a farmer to grow the crops in a plot side by side to the plot under the usual method of cultivation in order to generate 'demonstration effect' in the sense that the relative difference in yields in the two types of plot would make the farmer conscious of its economic value for further cultivation. But they feel that the 'Mini-kit' programmes has long been carried out on a 'limited' scale, and hence a vast majority of the tribals have remained outside of this programme. Thus,

to make the programme 'really' beneficial to the tribals, they suggest that the 'Mini-Kit' should be extended to all land under tribal cultivation. Together with this, they have also proposed to supply implements to the tribals on a group-basis or through the large-sized Multipurpose Co-operative Societies, as well as to extend soil conservation work to the tribal lands. The authorities also consider the creation of subsidiary occupation through the rearing of poultry birds, goat-keeping and house piggery, as a major thrust on the development programme of the tribals. Moreover, the development of various household industries, like sericulture, handloom, bamboo products, etc. is also suggested with a view to opening up scope for employment of the tribals. Further, the authorities place emphasis on the eradication of illiteracy and cent percent fulfilment of the primary education programme. According to them, the creation of adult education centre, rural library and more primary schools for the tribal children, would be necessary for the materialisation of the above objectives. The 'I.T.D.P.' also emphasises on a priority basis on the reconstruction of many school buildings which are, at present, not fit to be called school building at all, as well as on extending recognition to the un-recognised primary schools and opening up of a few Junior High Schools. The authorities, moreover, feel that the transformation of land from single to multiple-cropping would be facilitated once the irrigational facilities are diffused among all sections of the tribals, and hence suggest the extension of irrigational facilities to a large number of areas herein so long remained outside

the scope.

The authorities believe that the fulfilment of the programmes as suggested by them, would accrue benefits to the tribal communities in the form of high income, more employment and creation of infra-structures.

But our study suggests that the components of the tribal welfare programme of the government, like the 'Mini-Kit' scheme, creation of subsidiary occupations, development of various household industries, etc. should be aimed at on a discriminatory ~~basis~~ basis so that the impact of these schemes falls particularly on the poorer section of a particular tribe, which according to the present study can clearly be identified in specific areas. Package deal which treats a tribal area as a homogeneous unit is likely to add to the degree of inequality clearly discernible within a particular tribal group. In view of the constraints upon resources and of the widespread existence of ~~financial~~ rural poverty, it is essential that the quantum of financial and real resources that could in the near future be directed to reducing rural poverty should be concentrated amongst those most deserving of such resources and/or assistance. If the resources are spread too thin over amorphous group like an entire tribe, it could, at best, have marginal effect on the rural economic-landscape. Not only so, even the effort towards eradication of illiteracy would be a futile exercise unless the poverty of the vast majority of the rural tribal folk is reduced. In fact,

our study has shown that due to widespread existence of poverty among the tribal under investigation, the 'Free Tribal Education', even with the best of its intention, has not served its purpose.
