

Chapter - 1DESCRIPTION OF THE MECHEs.Origin of the Meches.

Writing on the Meches, Edward Tuite Dalton stated in 1872, "All the authorities agree in considering the Mech and Kachari as the same people, or at least of common origin"¹. Dr. Francis Buchanan observed in 1806, "The Mech are a tribe of Kamrup, that appear to have been once more numerous, than they are at present and to have undergone great changes they differ very little from those of the Kachari"² W.W. Hunter also remarked in 1876 that the Meches are the Western branch of the great Kachari tribe.³ He further stated that in the Eastern Duars the Meches are indiscriminately called either Mech or Kachari, whereas in the Assam Districts they are called Kachari alone, losing the name of Mech altogether.⁴ According to N. Vasu, Meches and Kiratas belong to Asura Dynasty, and they are called Mlechhas, of which Mech is simply an abbreviation.⁵ In 1903, Grierson opines, "The Bara folk who live to the west of the Kamrup district are called Mech by their Hindu neighbours. This word is probably a corruption of the Sanskrit 'Mlechchha,' which corresponds to the original meaning of our word 'welsh', i.e., foreigner, stranger."⁶ Hodgson maintains that the Meches have come from Morong of Nepal and states further that Mech and Kachari belong to the same race.⁷ John F. Gruning stated in 1911 that "the Meches are of Mongolian origin and are believed to be the Western Branch of the Kachari or Bodo tribe."⁸

It is better to state that "Meches are a mixed tribe. The history of the evolution of men of this tribe leads one to think that they are a combination of many tribes and castes like Rajbansis in the east and Rajputs in the West of India."⁹

Writing on the movement of the Meches, E. Gait remarked in 1891, "The first historical notice of the Kacharis of which I am aware is found in the annals of the Ahom who debouched from the Patkoi in 1228 A.D., and found the country at its base in possession of the Moran and Boranis, whom they at once subjugated. They next fought with the Chutiyas, who occupied the north-east portion of the Brahmaputra valley, and then came into collision with the Kacharis, whose country lay to the west. This was in 1488 A.D., when the Kachari capital was probably still at Dimapur, from which place it was removed to Maibong in 1536 A.D., after a decisive victory had been gained by the Ahoms. The capital remained there for two centuries, when the attacks of the Raja of Jaintia necessitated a further retreat to Kashpur in the plains of Cachar. These migrations were shared in only by the Raja and a few of his followers. The great bulk of the Kacharis remained behind, and became the subjects of the Ahoms in Upper Assam, and of the Koch Kings lower down the valley."¹⁰

According to C. C. Sanyal, "the Bodos, migrated into India through Patkoi Hills between India and Burma and gradually spread themselves into the whole of modern Assam, North Bengal and parts of East Bengal. They ruled over these tracts of land for many years. It is probable that they marched towards three

directions. One part went south upto Kachar and were called Kacharies. The second part went along the river Brahmaputra and established themselves in the whole of modern Assam upto Goalpara and parts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch-Bihar under the name Bodo or Bara."¹¹ He states further that the Bodos "were further subdivided into four classes, namely, Mech, Koch, Rabha and Garo. The Meches went towards the west along the foot of the Himalayas upto the river Mechi between India and Nepal and settled on the north bank of the said river as Mech or Mechis. They crossed the river and established themselves in the deep forests of Darjeeling Terai and Baikunthapur of Jalpaiguri. Again they merched eastwards, crossed the Tista and spread themselves in the Duars, Jalpaiguri. They gradually moved further east, crossed the Sankosh and went towards Goalpara in Assam."¹²

Dr. F. Buchanan remarked in 1806 that "a large district, Mechpara, derives its name from having been their [Meches's] abode; but there the whole have disappeared, and it is to be presumed, that they [Mech] assumed the title of Rajbangsi, when Viswo Singho, the son of a Mech's wife, became sovereign of the country, and, being ashamed of his barbarous ancestors, discovered that he was the son of a God. In Mechpara, however, and the territory adjacent towards the west there are a good many families of a tribe called Kuri, who are said to have originally been Mech; but, although they have adopted the language of Bengal, and some of the Hindu customs they have not been able to wean themselves so completely as the Rajbangsis from their impurities, and are not

therefore permitted to assume this name, as they live in a part where the Hindu customs prevail. Near the West Bank of the Brahmaputra are a good many Mech, who have exactly the same customs as the Kuri, and who are not ashamed of their original name. A few families of the Mech, who, as the Hindus would say, continue to wallow in all their impurity, frequent the woods of this district towards the borders of Nepal and Bhotan; but the tribe forms a chief part of the population in all the territory between Vihar and the mountains; especially near Dalimkoth and Lukidwar".¹³

A. Campbell noted in 1839 that "to the east of the Teestah river, and in the Duars of Bootan they [Meches] are still numerous, and to this latter portion of their habitat they point as the original seat of the tribe, although its name would indicate its derivation from the Mechi river."¹⁴

E.T. Dalton mentioned in 1872 that the Meches "are to be found in the recently annexed Butan Duars."¹⁵

G.A. Grierson stated in 1903 that in Goalpara of Assam the Mech "speakers are scattered all over the District. There are three settlements of them in Jalpaiguri, while in Cooch Behar they are confined to the eastern and northern tracts of the State, comprised within the Tufanganj Sub-division".¹⁶

However, C. C. Sanyal pointed out that "the Meches lived side by side with their branches, namely the Garos, Rabhas, Koches and also the Rajbansis for centuries but with very

little cultural fusion. They were conservatives and rarely went out of their forest habitations and hence had hardly any chance to carry the effects of other cultures." ¹⁷

He further remarked, "The Meches have chosen the sub-montane area of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts among deep forests and near the turbulent hill-streams." ¹⁸

Settled life and Nomadic life.

A. Campbell in 1839 noted that the Meches "keep entirely to the forest in which they make clearances, cultivating crops of rice and cotton with the hoe, and grazing buffaloes. The malaria of the forest so deadly to strangers does not at all affect them; on the contrary, they are remarkably healthy race, and dread visiting the plains, where they are subject to severe fevers. They have no towns, and rarely even live in permanent villages, generally quitting a clearance after having had two or three successive crops from the land, to take up their abodes in a fresh portion of the forest." ¹⁹

B. H. Hodgson described the Meches in 1847 as follows: "The condition or status of the Bodo ... is that of erratic cultivators of the wild. For ages transcending memory or tradition, they have passed beyond the savage or hunter state, and the nomadic or herdsman's estate, and have advanced to the third or agricultural grade of social progress, but so as to indicate a not entirely broken connexion with the precedent condition of

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things; for though cultivators, all and exclusively, they are nomadic cultivators, so little connected with any spot that the Bodo ... language possess a name for village! Though dwelling in those, wilds, wherein the people of the plains (Ahirs and Gwallas) periodically graze immense numbers of buffaloes and cows, they have no large herds or flocks of their own to induce them to wander; but, as agriculturists little versed in artificial renovative processes, they find in the exhaustion of the worked soil a necessity, or in the high productiveness of the new a temptation, to perpetual movement."²⁰

Hooker also wrote in 1864, "Malaria in Duars and Terai is such which no human being can endure. But this remarkable race, the Meches have made it their home for ages. They not only live but thrive well. Practically they breathe malaria with impunity. They are healthy. They have practically tenanted the wilds they live for centuries and is a miracle of human kind."²¹ Hodgson was also very much impressed by the Meches. He wrote, "they are amiable, intelligent, docile and free from prejudices; they are honest, truthful in deeds and words. They are steady and industrious. They are void of all violence towards their own people and their neighbours. They are free from arrogance, revenge and cruelty. To their women, they have great respect. To wine, not enslaved. To power, they have not temptation. They consider all equal. They are good husbands, good fathers and not bad sons. They are hospitable to their own people and never averse to strangers."²² Eulogising the Meches, Hodgson further remarked, "Among their own

communities there are neither servants nor slaves, nor aliens of any kind; whilst their circumstances tend to perpetuate equality of means, neither their traditions, their religion, nor their usages sanction any artificial distinctions of rank. Though they have no idea of a common tie of blood, yet there are no diverse septs, clans, or tribes among them, nor yet any castes; so that all Bodo are equal absolutely so in right or law — wonderfully so in fact. Nor is this equality the dead level of subject want. On the contrary, the Bodo are exceedingly well-fed, and very comfortably clothed and housed; they are very shy of strangers -- their voices, looks, and conduct all proclaim the absence of that grovelling fear and cunning which so shock one in one's intercourse with the people of Bengal, and the mass of whom are much worse fed, and distinctly worse clothed and housed, than...
 Bodo²³"

E.T. Dalton noted in 1872 that the Meches
 "are very nomadic in their habits, seldom settling down in permanent villages but continually shifting their cultivation and abodes, that they may have the full benefit of the virgin forests to which they
 cling."²⁴

J. Tweedie described the Meches as "nomadic husbandmen, who wander from spot to spot in the jungles, breaking up the virgin soil with their daos or bill-hooks, cultivating cotton and rice, and seldom remaining more than two years in the same place. They pay a capitation tax of £. 2 (4 Sh.) per annum per

man, in return for which they may cultivate as much land as they are able."²⁵

W. W. Hunter in 1876 stated that the Meches "are of very migratory habits, seldom staying in one place or cultivating the same fields for more than two or three years, a practice which is dictated, or at least aided, by the large amount of rich virgin soil at their disposal. They prefer cultivating clearances in the forest when available, and grow a considerable deal of cotton in addition to the ordinary crops of rice, mustard-seed, etc. The Meches are an able-bodied, well-to-do class of people, and well-behaved, cases of serious crime being of very rare²⁶ occurrence among them; they are, however, extremely superstitious."

Writing on the Meches, H. N. Choudhury stated in 1903 that "the occupation of the Meches is agriculture. They are given to roving and do not stick to the same land or neighbourhood for a long time, but roam about from place to place, seeking, among light jungles, unbroken soil and fresh pastures."²⁷

However, there is at least one author who described them as "pastoral people". H. Beverley in his census report of 1872 wrote, "The Meches frequent the Terai and to all appearance thrive in a climate which is fatal to other races. They are mainly pastoral people keeping large herds of buffaloes, which graze on bamboo leaves or other such fodder as may be picked up in the jungle."²⁸

Thus, we find that the Meches are sometimes described as ^{nomads} ~~nomads~~ and sometimes as agriculturists living in some villages in the Sub-Himalayan region. Most probably when the British came to this area, some had already started a settled life and some were moving from one place to another.

Regarding the Meches of North Bengal, W. B. Oldham, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, remarked in the first decade of the present century that "they are disappearing, absolutely dying out faster than any race The reason is, no doubt, that their distinctive cultivation is by jhum, which is barred by government forest conservancy, and the spread of settled plough cultivation from the south."²⁹

But F. Gruning on the contrary observed in 1911 that the Meches are not "dying out in the Jalpaiguri district; they numbered 8,760 in 1881, by 1891 they had increased to 17,984, while at the Census of 1901, 22,350 of them were enumerated. It is probable that much of the increase between 1881 and 1891 was due to migration from Rangpur and Cooch Behar, but there is no obvious reason ^{why} ~~when~~ [^] the Meches should not increase naturally; they are practically immune to fever and the average number of a family is about six. There is no doubt, however, that the Meches are being gradually driven towards the east, owing to the pressure of more intelligent races; they are improvident and drink heavily whenever they can get liquor; they are lazy and borrow readily from anyone who will lend them money without regard to the consequences. As a result they have fallen an easy prey to the money-lenders and

speculators, who have exploited the Western Duars in recent years and many of them have lost their land and been compelled to migrate to the more thinly-peopled tracts in the east of the district. Meches resent the introduction of strangers among them, and it is not uncommon, when one Mech in a hamlet has sold or been compelled to part with his land to a man of another race, for his fellow villagers to do the same and all move away together to some more remote spot where they hope to live undisturbed."³⁰

W. W. Hunter also observed in 1876 that although the Meches "are very few in number in the permanently settled portion of the District [of Jalpaiguri], the Census Report returning their number as only 40. In the Western Duars, however, next to the Rajbangsis, they are the most numerous section of the population. The Deputy Commissioner's Census, taken in 1870, at the time of the settlement of the Duars, returns the number of adult male Meches in the Western Duars at 3841, out a total adult male population of 30,972."³¹

D. Sunder, the Settlement Officer of the Western Duars, stated in 1895 that "the habits of the Meches were very nomadic, and they used to shift their cultivation and homesteads from place to place that they may obtain the full benefit of the virgin soils. But finding themselves ousted from their lands by the tea planters on the north and by Rajbangsis and Muhammadans on the south, they at last see the necessity of changing their habits and settling down permanently."³² But Sunder could also see a

number of Meches who led nomadic life when a section of them had already settled down permanently. He imposed capitation tax on the nomadic Meches where each adult Mech nomadic cultivator was liable to pay Rs. 4 per head per annum.³³

The nomadic behaviour of the Mech community may be understood in the context of certain geographical and economic factors.

In the olden days, there was a vast supply of fertile lands in the Western Duars of North Bengal. Land was no constraint to the Meches. They adopted a system of cultivation known as "Jhum". The Meches used to practice "Jhum" cultivation according to all available records. For some Meches it meant "cultivation at different places of the same owned areas" and for some other Meches this would mean "cultivation at different places of the different areas". Asley Eden remarked, "The Meches seem to change their cultivation constantly as would naturally be the case with so much virgin land at their disposal."³⁴

As the land was available in plenty, the Meches practiced shifting cultivation. The Meches used to burn "clearings and raised scanty crops of rice and cotton by methods of 'nomadic husbandry'. This probably means the method of jhumming by which a portion of the forest is burnt down and cultivated for a year or two and then abandoned."³⁵

There might be yet another alternative hypothe-

sis for their nomadic behaviour. The alternative hypothesis is that they had to move from one place to another in order to escape the rigour of the Bhutanese administration.

It should be remembered that a vast tract under present Duars area was under Bhutanese control. To put it differently, before the British brought Duars under their control, the Bhutanese Durbar used to levy taxes on the people of this area.

A brief discussion is necessary to understand the land revenue and tenancy system as was prevalent in the tracts of Western Duars.

The officer entrusted with the administration of ^a Duar was known as Subah. J. Tweadie, the first English officer to assume the administration of the Duars between the river Sankosh in the east and the river Tista in the West, immediately after Bhutan was defeated at the hands of the English in 1864-65 and vacated the Duars, has left a valuable note in this connection. ³⁶ He noted that /a Subah was a Bhutanese, and so a foreigner among the people he was to govern. He was the man who represented the Dev Raja in his judicial, military, and mercantile capacities. His duty, connected with the revenue, consisted solely in remitting a portion of it to the Dev Raja, while retaining another portion as remuneration for his own troubles. His appointment was a temporary one; originating in the supremacy of the 'party' in Bhutan to which he belonged, his continuance in office depended on that "party's" ability to remain

in power. In the hot and rainy seasons, the Subah resided in his mountain-fortress; in the cold season, he descended to the lower hills, and visited the plains to enforce obedience or to invade the territory of the neighbouring states.³⁷

Immediately below him, officers were chosen from among the people of the country. "Almost all the principal officers in charge of these Duars in the plains are Kacharees, Assamees or Bengalees appointed nominally by the Sunnud of the Dev Raja, but virtually at the recommendation of the Pilos in whose jurisdiction they are comprised, and without whose sanction they would never be able to retain their situations for an hour."³⁸ The Chief Subordinate officer was known in the Bengal Duars as Katham; in the Assam Duars, he was known as Laskar, it being a Kamrupi word for any subordinate officer in the revenue department. This officer was a man of respectable birth and of good repute in the country. But, at the time of his appointment, due consideration was given to the highest bid, made by an individual applicant for the post, to pay the revenue of the district to the Subah. The recognised income of this officer was from the collections made from specified localities, which he was allowed to retain for himself. The existing rent was generally low, but between four to six times that rent was demanded by the Subah. The revenue officer under the Subah also kept for himself a handsome profit, very nearly equal to the sum he despatched to the Subah. In addition to his duties as revenue officer, the Katham and the Laskar assisted the Subahs in the exercise of civil

and criminal authorities.

Below the Katham, was the Jotedar, who was also a superior landlord to the Chukanidar, Ryot and Praja. One became a jotedar by purchase of a land or by a grant of land from the Subah. Often the Subah allowed settlers to occupy unpopulated tracts for a term of five years, more or less without any payment of revenue. At the end of such a term, however, the settler became a jotedar and paid such a revenue as would be fixed by the Subah.³⁹ In cases of alienation, and succession, the Subah was entitled to a fee. The Jotedar was obliged to pay benevolence or forced money, which the Subah demanded from time to time. Chukanidar was a servant for fixed rent and fixed tenure. The Ryot was tenant for a year, while a Praja, absolutely depending upon his lord, was a tenant-at-will paying half the produce of his land.

It would be wrong to suppose that these four classes, viz. jotedar, chukanidar, ryot and praja are always found one above other on the same land, the last being the actual cultivator, and the other three living on his labours. In fact, most jotedars ploughed their own lands and those who employed prajas, used them only as the small farmers use the labourer they hire. The ryots are not said to hold under the chukanidars from whom they are distinguished only by the length of the term for which they engage. In British revenue settlements these two classes were amalgamated under the name of chukanidars. This was in pursuance of a policy aimed at settling the land in the Western Duars with

resident small capitalists who would in general cultivate some or all their lands themselves.⁴⁰

There were other taxes like "Dao tax", levied from those who temporarily squatted in the jungles. This tax was designed rather to realise something from the wandering Meches.

For facilitating the collection of revenue (in kind) the entire area was divided according to certain principles by the Bhutanese Debrajas. The land in between two rivers would be divided into Zones. These Zones were under the control of Subah or the primary rent collector. The primary rent - collector would again divide the Zone into certain sub-zones. The official in charge of each sub-zone for rent collection was given the right to collect revenue from the village or from the area as a whole.⁴¹ The ultimate rent paying unit was the village and not individuals.

The Bhutanese officials enjoyed the absolute power of extorting as much revenue as possible because their office was temporary. The officials did not get any salary but certain areas were made over to him from where he used to collect rent. He had no fixed tenure as rent Collector. More he could extort, the longer would have been the tenure of his service.

The system of rent collection was so harsh that many Meches had no other option but to move out of the place - especially from West to East and further East. That the Meches of the Western Duars cultivated lands temporarily is evidenced from a

letter dated Dec. 4 1872 by the Commissioner of the Cooch Behar Division to the Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri :- "It has been my principle to put no greater taxation on the Meches cultivating temporarily than the capitation fixed. Under Bhutan rule and our early arrangements they were taxed yearly according to an estimate of the land they had cultivated -- a system which roved open to considerable consideration abuse. Moreover, the right to tax them was farmed out, and more than once defalcations occurred, hence the introduction of the capitation tax which the Meches gladly accepted in lieu".

The contents of the above mentioned letter point out that for the Meches of the Western Duars, the general land revenue system of Bhutan for the Western Duars as described elsewhere was not applied. For the temporary Mech cultivators, the Bhutias levied taxes according to an estimate of the land they had cultivated -- this tax was called 'Dao tax' whose amount varied accordingly to the wishes of the Revenue-collector. It was observed by Asley Eden in 1863-64 that the Meches "do not cultivate more than is necessary to supply their own wants and to enable them to comply with the demands of their rulers, for any surplus which they produced would merely form an additional temptation to plunder on the part of their Booteah task masters. They know they can never be rich nor ever improve their position and they do not therefore attempt it."

Added to this was a common "custom" preva-

lent in the Duars. It was the feeding of Bhutanese soldiers and officials who happened to be in the Duars or passing through the inhabitation on some kind or other of official business. It would appear that corvee, forced requisitions, oppression of Bhutanese officials and 'endless' civil strife in the Duars had made the lot of the cultivator an unenviable one.⁴⁴

Moreover, the arrival of the party of Zeenkafs (Bhutia rent - collector) of the Paro Pilo (Government of Bhutan) on any pretence was a calamity.⁴⁵ The ravages inflicted on the inhabitants of the Duars reduced the tract to a very pitiable state, depicting only a few wretched huts thinly scattered amongst immense thickets of reeds or a few sal forests.⁴⁶ The constant pressure was exerted by the Bhutanese to pay their rent. This process had two outcomes --

First, Meches were moving from one place to another to free themselves from the burden of paying taxes.

Second, Meches had no incentive to create surplus. As long as they had anything which was sufficient to eke out an existence, they desired no more, for they were convinced that if they possessed more, more would be extracted from them by the Bhutanese masters.

This might lead us to point out that the Meches who are described as "indolent", "idle" "lazy" etc. are really due to certain objective conditions prevalent in the area. The objective conditions were such that they had no incentive to create

surplus for reinvestment. Hence in the midst of plenty they were in want.

Their poverty during pre-British period must be understood in the background of a historical force, namely the nature of rent collection. It was so harsh that the Meches had hardly any surplus either for technological improvement or for re-investments.

The society remained stagnant because of lack of surplus, for any surplus generated by the villagers with the primitive method of production would be forcibly taken by the Bhutias.

The concept of surplus is undoubtedly tricky. Actual economic surplus i.e. the difference between society's actual current output and its actual current consumption is identical with saving and capital accumulation. In the primitive society where technique of production (like Jhum) was primitive, there was no scope for any economic surplus. Even if there was any scope, there was no incentive for investment or improving the technique of production. Therefore, life in the Mech Society in the Bhutanese period was devoid of any change. The society remained tribal and only "dynamism" that could be witnessed was the incentive to move away from the Bhutanese control. In this context the society remained static, stagnant and inward-looking. The society was "equal" in stagnation.

With the coming of the British in North Bengal,

*Please see Appendix - 1 regarding early history of the Western Duars.

the political and economic system were completely overhauled. For the first time a political unity was imposed by the British and the constant war between Bhutia king and Koch Rajas was stopped. A new class of British-trained civil servants endowed with the requirements for government and imbued with European sciences slowly evolved in the area. The Railway lines were laid in the distant parts of Duars. New Roads were constructed and completed in record time. New cities sprang up. The area was divided into districts and districts into sub-divisions. The isolation of the different areas was broken.
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The land revenue system that the British introduced in this area was a break from the past, yet it was not a complete break. During our own investigations we could know from our family survey that some of the Meches were using titles like Mandal, Katham, Gabur, Suba* and Karji conferred on their forefathers during Bhutanese subjugation of the Western Duars. Now, granting of Bhutanese titles to the Meches in recognition of their service to the Durbar would perhaps suggest that some of the Meches during the Bhutanese control of the Western Duars, had settled there permanently. That this was a fact could be known from the information given in Sunder's settlement report. Sunder during his settlement of the Western Duars in 1895 could find some jotes including those of the Meches which were held by the occupants since Bhutanese days. These jotes are known as O.M. jotes. In addition, he could also detect some other jotes the owners of which could not prove that * Suba is to be distinguished from Subah.

they were in possession of those jotes during Bhutanese regime but were cultivating the land for a longtime. These jotes are known as R. M. jotes. The presence of these two types of jotes in the Mech Community would suggest that at least a section of the Meches were not leading nomadic life during Bhutanese rule. Thus, the description of the Meches as nomads by the early authors must be treated with a qualification. A section of the Meches came under the periphery of the Bhutia system of land revenue, whereas the majority of the Meches were paying "Dao tax" as they were leading nomadic life.

In order to settle the wandering Meches in different parts of the Western Duars, Sunder set aside a block of land for the Meches in his settlement. But he agreed that his settlement could cover only a fraction of the wandering Meches and the majority was still leading a nomadic life and thus were required to pay 'capitation tax.'

Our analysis would suggest an important characteristic of the Mech Community. During the Bhutanese regime as well as sometimes after the British annexation of the Western Duars, we find a co-existence of two sections in the Mech Community: the settled and the nomadic.

The British, through the detailed survey tried to settle the nomadics. Thus, the concept of "private property" slowly stepped in the Mech Society -- especially among the wandering

population.

It might be noticed that a large number of jotes was created by the British with the explicit purpose of settling the nomadic Meches. Nevertheless some of the jotes were settled with the Meches who used to cultivate lands during the Bhutanese period. But more important point to note is that some of the Meches used to hold a large amount of land before the land ceiling Act. Some of the Mech families used to hold more than 100 acres of land, while others were settled with a small plot of land.*

It is difficult to know the reason for this inequality in treatment by the British in the early stage of settlement of the Duars. In order to solve this riddle we happened to meet the present family members of those Meches who used to own a vast tract of land.

According to their version Sunder allotted a large tract of land to chiefs or the influential members of the Mech community who used to pay land-revenue during the Bhutanese period. This has been corroborated by our personal investigation.

Therefore, the new settlement made by the British was unequal in size -- some used to own a vast tract of land to the tune of 100 acres or more and some others even to the extent of below 1 acre of land.

We have stated already that those who used to hold

* Please see statements 1 to 4.

land were considered to be "influential" by the British. The term 'influential' in a tribal society should include the clan-chiefs as well as tribal-chiefs. From our personal investigation, we came to know that some Mech families held a large tract of land because their forefathers were chiefs of the Mech society or holding important position during the Bhutanese regime. It should be stressed, however, that it is difficult to prove indeed that those who owned a large tract of land were really the chiefs of the Mech tribal society. Nonetheless, it is a plausible hypothesis.

British understood the potentialities of this area and declared a large tract of land as "waste", and utilised the "waste land" for cultivation and plantation of tea. By declaring some areas of Duars as "waste", the British authority separated this area from the rest of Bengal. The land laws and Regulation which were relevant in other parts of Bengal were declared "inapplicable" in this area. The whole Duars area was brought under direct control of the Government. Further, the British Government declared the whole area as "undeveloped."

One of the reasons for declaring this area as "waste" is to develop a large tract as "tea gardens". Since the declaration of this area as "waste" land, the number of tea gardens increased by leaps and bounds. As the land was "waste", suitable parties could take "lease" of the land at a "throw-away" price. With the help of the "imported" labour, the English planters opened

tea gardens one after another in the Duars [Viz. Gazoldoba (1874) Phulbari (1875), Dalimkote (1876) Bagrakota (1876) Baintbari (1877) Kumlai (1877) Damdim (1877) Washabari (1877) Money Hope (1878), Patabari (1878) Ranicherra (1878).

The British managing houses, no doubt sent profits to Britain but it is also true that large amount of ^{profit} ~~profit~~ earned in tea was reinvested in the expansion and opening of tea Gardens. The roads were constructed, Railways connected distant parts with the port of Calcutta, and Duars was opened to the outsider.

Apart from declaring a large tract as waste land, the British tried to settle tribals in certain areas. In any tribal society the "chiefs" occupy an exalted position. They are the natural leaders of the tribal community. When the land was settled in the name of certain individuals, the British took note of the fact that the revenue at the village level was collected by the chiefs for payment. The British had no intention to alienate the chiefs in an area which was newly acquired by them. Thus the chiefs of the tribal society in all probability became the owners of a large proportion of settled lands.

The chief in any tribal society perform a number of functions. He is the priest, he is the doctor, he is the protector and also the arbitrator in disputes. He had "executive, judicial and legislative powers" over the other members. He is also

the temporal head as well as the spiritual leader. He had acquired this position either by hereditary rights or by "special" powers. In the Mech society which we study we have ascertained from the family history that in all likelihood the right to be chief was hereditary.

The reminiscence of some of the very old members of the Mech community points out an interesting fact during our investigation. When in the initial period, the British conferred the vast tract of land on the "chiefs", it does not necessarily follow that the chiefs were tyrants or oppressors. The chief had to look after the welfare of his fellow-members and he treated them as part of his family. Some of the Meches who did not receive any ownership right used to work in the vast tract of land by clearing the jungles owned by the chiefs. The chief was always concerned about their welfare. The landless Meches were used to be treated as part of the family members. In fact the chief was always treated as the "father figure" by other Meches and got recognition and reverence from them.

It has been pointed out earlier that Sunder noticed, a large number of Meches have either been uprooted by the establishment of Tea gardens or were leading a nomadic life. Mr. Sunder with a view to settling them permanently in the Western Duars set apart a block of land of 20,594 acres for the Meches by creating 766 Jotes.

When Sunder first settled the Meches in the land, he "restricted" the right to transfer the land. But this was never strictly adhered to. John F. Gruning observed in 1911 that the Meches were losing land very fast; they were the great sufferers in respect of land holding as they were improvident and intemperate and fell an easy prey to the speculator on the money lender. ⁴⁸ He stated further that "an attempt has been made to found a Colony for persons of the aboriginal races, who were being exploited by their more intelligent neighbours and were in danger of losing their lands. The Mech and Garo Colony is situated in the Alipur tahsil, east of the Torsa river and south of the road leading to Rajabhatkhoa.* No special measures were, however, taken to ensure that the tract of country, containing an area of 30 square miles, should be kept only for Meches and Garos for whom it was reserved; the ordinary leases were issued and there was nothing to prevent the jotedars from transferring their holdings. A special enquiry was made in 1907-08 with a view to discover the actual state of affairs and it was then found that there was not a single Garo in the colony and that more than half of the jotedars were outsiders, mainly orans.... It is proposed to prevent the Meches, who remain in the Colony from transferring their jots to outsiders from sub-leasing to chukanidars and from employing adhiars who are not Meches, and to make new settlements, only with Meches. If this is done the land, of which the Meches still retain possession and the waste land which has not yet been settled, can be kept for the people for whom the colony was founded." ⁴⁹ Milligan also noted in 1916 that the land was transferred from Meches to others. ⁵⁰ This right to sell and transfer

*This is exactly the area of our investigation.

land to non-Meches had created a number of problems in subsequent period.

But the British not only created different jotes but distributed ownership of land to a large number of Meches. In distributing land, the British followed three criteria:

Firstly, they conferred vast plot of land to a few families who were most probably the traditional Chiefs of the society. Thus some of the chiefs were converted into landlords. These landlords were ^{well-} ^{and} ~~to-dos~~ perhaps acted as friends of British in an area newly conquered by them.

Secondly, the British conferred the right of ownership to some actual tillers of the soil. They were not chiefs but were probably cultivating land from the Bhutia period.

Thirdly, the British wanted to settle the nomadic Meches in certain areas. For this a large tract of land was given to the Meches.

A question may be raised, namely, why the British were interested to settle the Meches in lands? In order to understand this problem, one has to understand the geographical position of the area in which the Meches were settled. The place was politically important. It lay as buffer between the hill countries and plain districts. For political reasons this "buffer area" should be filled in by loyal subjects. If the British does not

adopt this policy, the area may be occupied by "infiltrators and unwanted persons". So British government was interested to bring Moches in this area, because the loyalty of this people could be counted as their chiefs and important persons were given a vast tract of land.

Furthermore, with the growth of tea gardens, demand for agricultural commodities started to rise. The British thought that the area was fit for cultivation and increased cultivation in the vast tract of land would satisfy the local needs.

Land was plentiful and population was scarce. The density of population in Jalpaiguri in the year 1872 (The first Census) was 144 per Sq. mile as against 407 in Cooch Behar and 619 in Rangpur -- the two adjoining areas of Jalpaiguri Duars.

However, in the first Census Report it has been mentioned "the population rapidly thins as we approach the deadly terai ... In the recently acquired Duars the population is scanty being no more than 67 per Sq. mile ... It appears to have doubled since it came under British rule".

A little more detailed picture would be available from the general statement [Table - 1:1] where population density of different thanas and sub-divisions was given. Jalpaiguri was shown having the following thanas in 1872: Siliguri, Pakirganj, Maynaguri, Boda and Patgram.

Table - 1:1

Houses per Sq. miles and population according to the First Census

| Name of the Area | Houses per Sq. mile. | Persons per house |
|----------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Siliguri | 44 | 5.3 |
| Fakirganj Maynaguri | 67 | 5.8 |
| Boda | 51 | 7.8 |
| Patgram | 71 | 5.1 |
| Total Area 1026 Sq. mile | 46 | 5.94 |
| Western Duars 1880 Sq.mile | 8 | 5.9 |

Source: 1872 Census.

The figures in Western Duars at least shows that the whole tract was not properly inhabited. The density of population in 1872 is given below:

Table - 1:2

Density of population

| Name of the Area | Population per Sq. mile |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Siliguri | 233 |
| Fakirganj & Maynaguri | 376 |
| Boda | 298 |
| Patgram | 558 |
| Western Duars | 48 |

Source: 1872 Census

It shows again that Duars was thinly populated area. Furthermore, the scanty distribution of population could be understood by estimating villages per Sq. mile. In Rangpur district in 1872 there were 1.21 villages, in Dacca district there were 2.02 and Pabna 1.39, whereas in Siliguri thana there was .09 villages Maynaguri and Fakirganj combined was .08, Boda .15 Patgram .27 and Western Duars .01 per Sq. mile.⁵² Perhaps in 1872, Jalpaiguri was one of the backward districts of Bengal and Duars was the most backward region of the backward district.

It is in this background of Jalpaiguri district and Western Duars of Jalpaiguri, the British could afford to allow the Mech Chieftains to own a vast tract of land. Further, as land was no constraints and as British were keen to settle some inhabitants Meches were settled in a vast area.

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