

Chapter - 2Immigration of population in the Western Duars and its impact on the Meches.

The adult male Meches in 1870 constituted roughly ¹ 12% of the total adult male population of the Western Duars. The total population of the Western Duars² in 1870 was, however, 1,00,111. In 1891, the total population of the Western Duars³ was 2,96,348 and the Meches constituted roughly 6% of the total population of the Western Duars.⁴ The population of the Western Duars after the British annexation increased very rapidly. "At the close of the Bhutan War, a survey of the Western Duars was made in 1865-67, and rough estimate made by the Survey Officer returned the population at 49,620. It cannot be expected that this census was very accurate, but the country had long suffered from the depredations of the Bhutias, and it is probable that many of the inhabitants left their homes temporarily during the war. In 1870 the Deputy Commission^{er} made the first settlement of the Western Duars and conducted a special Census in connection with it; this showed the population to be 1,00,111. After making due allowances for errors in the enumeration made in 1865, it is clear that a migration of the people of the neighbouring districts to the fertile waste lands of the Western Duars began as soon as British rule ensured the safety of life and property".⁵ Thus the subsequent Censuses showed remarkable increases of population.

Table 2:1 would illustrate this:

Growth of population in the Western Duars.

Table - 2:1

Year	No. of Persons.
1865-67	49,620
1870	1,00,111
1881	1,82,687
1891	2,96,348
1901	4,10,606
1921	5,58,971

Source: 1. Census, 1961 - Jalpaiguri District Handbook, P.27
 2. Census ~~1921~~, 1921-Vol. V, Part I, P.66.

The Table 2:1 above shows that within a span of roughly 50 years, the population of the Western Duars has doubled. O'Malley in his Census report of 1911 noted, "In Jalpaiguri, which lies at the foot of the Himalayas, the average [density of population] is reduced by the large area under forest, the reserved forests alone accounting for more than one-sixth of its total area. If these forests and the Baikantpur forest are left out of account, the average rises to 381 per square mile. The Sadar sub-division, where cultivation is most advanced, supports nearly twice as many persons per square mile as the Alipur sub-division, where the average falls as low as 162 in the

Alipur thana to the east. The latter sub-division is, however, by far the more progressive of the two, as the waste lands available for settlement are being rapidly taken up and reclaimed, the result being that since 1901 its average density has been nearly doubled."⁶ Between 1872-1921, the population of the District of Jalpaiguri increased by 244.2%. It mounted higher and higher as one went further east until in Kalchini, Alipurduar and Kumargram the increase reached the fantastic figure of 1,042.3%.⁷ The growth of population of the Jalpaiguri District between 1921-51 was the least, amounting roughly to a little over 1% per annum indicating that immigration of labour in the tea-gardens and of cultivators in the forests and agricultural spaces had already reached a very substantial level in 1921.⁸

Beverley in his Census report of 1872 noted, "In the recently acquired Duars the population is 67 to the square mile. As it is, it appears to have doubled since it came under British rule and still to be increasing at a rapid rate, the increase being due of course to immigration from the more populous part around."⁹ O'Donnell in his Census report of 1891 stated that the population per square mile in Jalpaiguri Sadar was 450 and in Alipurduar 57 in 1881, whereas in 1891, it was 451 and 89, immigrants from other districts to Jalpaiguri in 1891 were 87,944 persons.¹⁰ W.H. Thompson in his Census report of 1921 observed, "Tea was introduced into Jalpaiguri in 1874 The population of the

Western Duars was 90,668 in 1872 and it increased in 1921 to 5,58,971 i.e. six times."¹¹

D. Sunder in his settlement report [] stated the population of the Western Duars in 1891 to be 296,964,¹² and hence "the figures of the census of 1891 compared with the census of 1881 show an increase of 114,277 in the population of the Duars.

This increase is accounted for as follows:

Immigrants from Darjeeling	...	1,588
Ditto Dinajpur	...	505
Ditto Rangpur	...	10,101
Ditto Kuch Bihar	...	32,224
Total from contiguous districts	...	44,418
Immigrants from other districts in		
Bengal proper	...	11,364
Ditto Bihar districts	...	8,491
Ditto Orrissa	...	292
Ditto Chota Nagpur	...	20,341
Ditto Other provinces	...	29,371
		<u>114,277</u>

Of the people who have come into the Duars, those from Darjeeling have settled on tea gardens as coolies, while those from Dinajpur and Rangpur are chiefly cultivators who have taken up land in Maynaguri and Falakata tahsils either as jotedars or chukanidars.

Most of those from Rangpur are from thana Dimlah. The number of people from Kuch Bihar is very large, and is chiefly from the chukanidar and adhlar class of tenants who have taken up land in Falakata and Alipur tahsils as jotedars."¹³

The various statements presented above show that the population of the Western Duars increased very rapidly due to influx of a large number of immigrants into the region after the introduction of the British administration in the Western Duars. But over the whole period, there ~~was~~^{was} a considerable variation of the Mech population in the Jalpaiguri District. No separate figures are available for the Mech population of the Western Duars. We present below in Table 2:2 the variation of the Mech population in the Jalpaiguri District over the period from 1872 to 1961. It should be noted that Census, 1971 does not give the Mech population statistics separately for the Jalpaiguri District.

Table-2:2Growth of Mech Population of Jalpaiguri District.

Year	No. of Population	Index
1872*	40*	—
1891	21,608	100
1901	22,350	103
1911	19,893	92
1921	10,777	50
1931	9,510	44
1941	6,886	31
1951	10,507	44
1961	13,178	61

Sources: 1. Census of India, 1931, P. 550.

2. A. Mitra - Tribes and Castes of West Bengal, Census, 1951 - p. 116.

3. Handbook on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of West Bengal - Table VI B.

* The Mech population figure of 1872 is, however, incomplete, since it has taken into consideration of the regulated portion of Jalpaiguri District and has left out the Western Duars portion. The total Mech population of the Western Duars is not available. Similarly, the District figures of the Mech population for the year 1881 are not available separately. The total Mech population of Bengal recorded in 1881 was 9,009 (A. Mitra - Tribes and Castes of West Bengal, P. 116).

The Table 2:2 above shows that over the whole period of 1891-1961, there was a decline of the Mech population to the extent of more than 50% in some periods.

On the other hand, there ^{was} ~~was~~ considerable increase in the Mech population in the Goalpara District of Assam. In 1881, the Mech population was 57,390; in 1901, 73,760; in 1911, 68,900; but in 1931, it was only 8,292 and the Kachari people recorded was 99,867; whereas the Mech people recorded in 1961 was 147; the Bodo people, 160,351, and the Kachari people, 13,184.¹⁴ According to C. C. Sanyal, "the fall in number [of Mech People] is significant. The real cause is not known. Probably they went from Goalpara to further east or were absorbed into other castes or they recorded themselves as belonging to other branches of the same tribe. This is corroborated by other figures of 1961 census where in Goalpara there were 160,351 Bodo, 13,184 Kachari; in the rest of Assam there were 185,632 Bodo, 223,752 Kachari but in 1911 the figure was 168,429 in the whole of Assam."¹⁵ In the rest of Assam, the population figures for the Meches stood at 495 in 1881; 1,035 in 1901; 924 in 1931; and 6,840 in 1961.¹⁶

But if we accept Hodgson's contention¹⁷ that Mech and Bodo are the same and Mech is a name imposed by strangers and the people call themselves Bodo, which, of course, is the proper designation, or Grierson's observation¹⁸ that the term Mech is, at

present day, confined to the speakers of plain Kachari or Bara who dwell west of the district of Kamrup, then the Census figures of the Jalpaiguri district and the district of Goalpara of Assam show that the number of Mech people ^{has} ~~have~~ fallen continuously in Jalpaiguri whereas the number ^{has} ~~have~~ increased steadily in Goalpara over the periods from 1891 to 1931. C. C. Sanyal observes, "Analysing the figures of the Census reports it appears that there was a large exodus of the Mech from Bengal towards Assam and then further eastwards." ¹⁹ He further states after analysing the Census Report on the Mech population of 1961, that "the fall in number in Darjeeling district from Rajganj (209) in Baikunthapur forest between the Tista and the Mahananda, to areas between the Tista and the Jaldhaka (520), to the Jaldhaka and the Toorsa (802), to between the Toorsa and the Sankosh (11,647) upto the borders of Goalpara, Assam, is a matter to be thought of." ^{20*}

*The Meches of the Darjeeling district are distributed as follows in 1961. From the Mechi to the Mahananda rivers (west to east): Naxalbari P.S. - 158; Kharibari P.S.-16; Siliguri P.S.-63; Total-237. [Source: C.C.Sanyal - op.cit. P.20]

The Meches of Jalpaiguri district are distributed as follows (West to East) in 1961:

1. Between the Mahananda and the Tista	=	209
2. Between the Tista and the Jaldhaka	=	520
3. Between the Jaldhaka and the Toorsa	=	802
4. Between the Toorsa and the Sankosh	=	11,647
Total:	=	<u>13,178</u>

Adjusted data from

[Source :/C. C. Sanyal - op. cit. P. 20]

B.B. Mukherjee also pointed out in the settlement report of the Western Duars that in competition the Meches could not stand the greater intelligence of the Rajbansis and the Mahammedans to whom they ~~had~~ sold their lands in the more developed area and moved eastwards towards the less developed tracts, and most of them had crossed over to Assam.

Though the 'real cause' of the exodus of the Mech people from North Bengal to Assam may not be known, we may suggest that the establishment of tea-gardens in Duars might have prompted them to move eastward. This is, perhaps, due to the fact that tea-gardens were established by converting the jungles and bushes where the Meches used to practice their shifting cultivation, into plantations. Mention here may be made of a report made by Maulvi Wajih Uddin Ahmed, the settlement officer, to the Deputy Commissioner, Jalpaiguri, on April 3, 1895. He mentioned in that report that "some specific area may be reserved for them [i.e. for the Meches], as in the event of all the lands hitherto occupied by them being taken up for tea cultivation, they will have no place to live in, and no land to cultivate It will simply be driving them to starvation and ruin."

The growth of tea-gardens in the Jalpaiguri district was phenomenal. The figures presented in the Table 2:3 below would show the growth of the tea-gardens in different decades in the year 1874, as mentioned earlier.

Table - 2:3Growth of Tea Gardens and acreage under cultivation in the Jalpaiguri District.

Year	No. of Tea Gardens	Acreage under Tea (In acres)
1874	1	-
1876-77	13	818
1881	47	5,637
1882	60	8,268
1891	79	35,683
1901	235	76,403
1911	191	90,859
1921	131	1,12,688
1931	151	1,32,074
1941	189	1,31,770

Sources: 1. Census of India, ¹⁹⁵¹ Vol. VI, Part IA, P-263, Statement 1.89.

2. Jalpaiguri District Handbook, Census, 1961 - P.27.

Though the number of tea-gardens in the Jalpaiguri district varied due to many factors, there was more or less uniform increase in the acreage under cultivation.

Most of the tea-gardens of the Jalpaiguri

district were established in the areas between the river Tista and Jaldhaka, Torsa and Raidak, and Raidak and Sonkosh.²³ Comparing the location of the Tea Gardens with the areas where Meches were reported by D. Sunder in his settlement report to cultivate lands,²⁴ we may state that almost all the tea-gardens were established in those areas where there had been large concentration of the Meches. For instance, Atiabari Tea Company which was established in 1904, was reported by Sunder to be inhabited only by Meches who cultivated land by payment of Dao Tax. The establishment of this Tea garden completely ousted the Meches who used to cultivate land in that area. Similarly, Bhatkawa Tea Estate and Rajabhat Tea Estate which were established in 1903 and 1910 respectively, had perhaps usurped the opportunity of the Meches to cultivate in those areas. Furthermore, the opening up of tea estates between the Borojhar and the Buxa forests²⁵ which were also reported by Sunder to be inhabited by the Meches,²⁶ had thrown the Meches out of cultivation from those areas. The examples of the conversion of land once cultivated and inhabited by the Meches into tea plantation can be multiplied.

In fact, the progress of tea plantation depended on the speedy settlement policy in the "waste" land. But speedy settlement resulted in uprooting the Meches from the traditional places of habitats, and perhaps they moved further east where land was still plenty. This is, of course, a guesswork and like Shri Sanyal we might say that the "real reason" of the movement of the

Meches to the eastward portion of the Western Duars and to Assam⁷ is not known. But one may find a correlation between the increase in the acreage under tea gardens and decline in the absolute number of Meches in the Jalpaiguri district upto 1941 when the establishment of any more new tea gardens was stopped altogether by the International Tea agreement of 1935. The relation may or may not be causal but a degree of association may be discerned.

Another factor may be noted. Though the tea gardens were established in the Duars, yet the indigeneous inhabitants of the area including the Meches did not work in the gardens. "The bulk of the garden labour force consists of coolies recruited from Hazaribagh, Chota Nagpur, and Sonthal Parganas."²⁷ Moreover, "the castes of coolies employed in tea gardens are Paharies who come from Nepal and Darjeeling, Oraons, Mundas, and a few Kols, who come from Chota Nagpur districts; Uriyas from Ganjam and Sonthals from the Sonthal Parganas. Meches and Garos, and Dhimers, who come from the other side of the Brahmaputra, as also a few Bhutias, may also be seen working in gardens; but their number is very few."²⁸ Thus, almost all the tea garden labourers were brought from outside. The growth of labourers in the tea gardens can be understood from the Table 2:4 below.

Table - 2:4Growth of labourers in Tea Garden in Jalpaiguri District.

Year	No. of Labourers of all categories
1901	68,619
1911	75,315
1921	88,564
1931	1,16,853
1941	1,41,387

Source: Computed from the Census of India, 1951, Vol. VI
Part 1A.

That almost all the tea garden labourers recruited in the Jalpaiguri district are from outside, is not an isolated case. This pattern of recruitment from outside is more or less ^a rule rather than ^{an} exception in most cases of plantation industry in other parts of the world.

Prof. Myrdal has given considerable thought to this problem. He points out in his famous book "Asian Drama".²⁹

"As in Mercantilist times, there was little enthusiasm in the colonies for experimenting with the wage scale to test responses. Indeed, there was never, even on the intellectual level, a discussion of using higher wages to induce workers to conditions of steady, disciplined work. It was also cheaper and

simpler to seek out labour -- usually from considerable distance -- that could be acquired at low wages. Organised recruiting had a further recommendation: workers when far removed from their homes, were more amenable to discipline The vested interest of employers in a cheap labour supply was often plainly demonstrated. In Burma, where new land for cultivation was readily available, the local people could not be persuaded to work at wage rates which imported Indians would accept. ... On this point a Mercantilist way of reasoning was most clearly apparent for the Government subsidised the importation of Indian coolies with a view to bringing down the rate of wages."

Furthermore, -- "In Malay, Indian and Chinese workers formed the wage labour force, the former serving the rubber estates and the latter mining the tin mines. In the early period of Dutch rule in Java, Chinese workers were imported in large numbers as coolies on tobacco plantations and also serve as intermediaries between the government and indigenous population. Similarly the successful operation of tea plantation in Ceylon depended on the large scale importation of Tamil workers from Southern India."

"The picture was less clear cut on the Indian subcontinent. In places where a particularly rapid development in a new line of activity raised the long-term demand for regular labour, as for instance on the plantation ... or coal mines ... labourers were brought in from remote regions. That, in India, resort to

foreign labour -- that is, labour from other colonies -- was not taken is simply a reflection of the fact that India, being so large, included regions in which labour could be made plentifully available. Often tribal people (from other parts) were herded together and made to work under strict supervision at low rates of pay."

"From an economic and social point of view, those were imported to work in mines and on plantation in India were equally or almost, as foreign as the imported plantation workers in Ceylon and Malay."

The plantation owner had the authority of government behind him in maintaining control over his workers. As noted by Surindra J. Patel,³⁰ --- "when the plantations began to develop at the close of the first half of the nineteenth century, planters found it difficult to attract an adequate supply of cheap labour to the mostly malarious hill tracts To help the plantation owners (who are mostly British) in their task of recruiting such a labour force from distant parts of India, the government granted them certain statutory rights regarding their employers. These rights empowered the owners to carry on the practice of indentured labour".

"The general scheme" remarked The Royal Commission on Labour, "was that the labourer was bound by a contract to serve for a specified period on a garden to which he was recruited; if he failed to work without reasonable cause or

absconded, he could be punished criminally and the planter had the right of arresting an absconder."³¹

W. Nasseau Lees, in his Land and Labour of India gave a graphic picture of the way in which the contractors of labour recruited workers for plantations. He wrote, "False representation, corruption and oppression of every and the worst description were used to swell the numbers of contractors' recruits. The old and the decrepit, the diseased and the dying-were pressed into service of the most degraded (the contractors of indentured labourers). With some truth it may be said that the horrors of the slave trade pale before the horrors of the coolie trade"³²

Edgar S. Furniss and G. Myrdal have both noted that the economic thinking about the labour market in the colonies was originally of a Mercantile type. Furniss defined Mercantilist doctrine in this context as --- "The Mercantilist did not perceive that the poverty of the majority was incompatible with the wealth of the whole; quite the contrary: he came to believe that the majority must be kept in poverty that the whole might be rich."³³

G. Myrdal writes³⁴— "The domestic economic policy of Mercantilists in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Europe tended always to view the labour market from the perspective of employers. Though the details of Mercantilist policy differed in various parts of Europe and altered through time, a plentiful supply

of cheap, docile and disciplined labour was assumed to be in public interest A main purpose of the regulations of labour conditions established by state and municipal authorities was to assure employers of an adequate labour force available on favourable terms

"Colonial government represented, in a sense, an extreme variant of an inegalitarian power structure. The colonies were governed from far away metropolitan capitals. The new entrepreneurs were also outsiders, mostly from the ruling country itself or from other European countries"

"It was also natural ... for these entrepreneurs to feel that their interests coincided with economic progress for all ... The Mercantilists were not simple and morally corrupt cynics, but men who argued and acted to advance what they conceived to be The Common Good ..."

The result of this policy of Mercantilism was that there were unprecedented inflow of "immigrants" to the Western Duars and Jalpaiguri districts.

Apart from tea gardens, the settlement of land for ordinary cultivation progressed rapidly. During 1894-1901 the settlement on lands for ordinary cultivation continued to progress. Consequently the ratio of persons born outside Bengal continued to increase over the years. This is shown in Table 2:5 below.

Table- 2:5Immigration to different Districts 1881 - 1921

District	Born outside Bengal per 10,000 population				
	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921
Jalpaiguri	995	1264	1762	2300	2349
Dinajpore	276	457	635	851	660
Darjeeling	4800	5856	4646	4199	3601
Rangpore	124	144	239	376	309
Bogra	149	276	175	272	243
Pubna	74	155	122	179	107
Malda	566	680	861	793	640
Rajsahi	105	149	176	240	239

Source: Computed from different Censuses.

From the above Table it is clear that the ratio of immigrants from outside Bengal was high in case of both Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts, during the period under consideration.

The immigrants from outside Bengal were mostly labourers for tea gardens, ^{whereas} immigrants from contiguous districts were mainly attracted by the fertile land available in this area.

Hence, the Meches of the Duars had to face at least three different groups of immigrants --

(1) The first group ^{consisted} of the tribals of Chotanagpur - Bilaspur area who were mostly Santals, Oraons and Mundar.

(2) The second groups constituted agriculturists from the contiguous districts of North Bengal/Bengal.

(3) The third group, ^{that of} was the "Bhadralok" class who worked in the bureaucracy, law courts, offices and shops.

There is, of course, another group, namely British officials and Planters (both Europeans and Indians) who started to develop the tea gardens in the area. Though numerically not important, yet their policy had far reaching impact on the tribal society like that of Meches.

Doubtless major changes in the traditional agrarian rural structure would have occurred even if Europeans had never intervened. Colonial rule nevertheless acted as an important catalyst to change, both directly through its effects on property rights and indirectly through its effects on the pace of monetisation of the indigeneous economy and the growth of population.

In its approach to land, European policy was largely guided by the view that a system of private property should be encouraged and reinforced by law. Essentially this amounted to an attempt to superimpose on traditional societies of North

Bengal, Western types of tenure arrangements as they evolved in Europe, even if it meant riding roughshod over the distinctions drawn in the traditional system between rights to occupy land, to receive tribute from it and to dispose of it. Often these distinctions were not clearly perceived by European rulers and where they were, the Europeans tended to disregard them for their own reasons or to view them as symptom -- if not cause -- of backwardness.

There were obvious reasons why colonial authorities should insist on the development of land tenure system within which rights and responsibilities could be identified and individuals held accountable before the law. Administrative convenience demanded the creation of a simple and quasi-automatic system for taxing the land. The transfer of Western legal concepts to backward areas of Duars was clearly a useful device for this purpose. But in some cases at least, it was also hoped that regularisation of land titles would advance the interests of the ordinary cultivator, both by protecting him from the whims of native chiefs and by giving them incentive to expand his output.

Eric Stokes writes, "Hitherto rights over land had no more than precarious existence, taking their origin in the unwritten customary law of the agricultural communities but suffering constant modification from the efforts of arbitrary rulers to determine the state share of the produce and the agency of collection at their own discretion. Even at its best, tradition provided no model to follow, for it gave rights no secure

definition and certainly supplied no safeguard against the mal-
practices of the Company's revenue officials".³⁵

Generally speaking, the transformation of the traditional system proceeded on the following lines. Village lands not under permanent cultivation remained in collective ownership, but often with the important difference that the right of ownership was transferred from the village community to the government. They were no longer village lands but "Waste lands belonging to the crown" and people who started cultivation on them were often considered "illegal squatters", whether they belonged to the local community or not.

With the beginning of tea gardens, in the "Waste lands" some Meches were perhaps reduced to the Status of "illegal Squatters". Some of them were of course "resettled"

*By a notification No. 666A, dated Calcutta, the 20th June, 1895, a block of land measuring, more or less, 30.7 square miles, situated in the Alipur sub-division, Western Duars of the Jalpaiguri district, was not available for the cultivation of tea and the said land was kept reserved for a Mech and Garo Colony. [Source: Revenue Department Proceeding, July, 1895. Proceeding numbers 118-197]. The boundary of the colony was the following: North - The western boundary of Mr. C.C. Gulliland's tea grant; East - The western boundary of the Gaburbasra Forest Reserve, and the Alaikuri river from the point where it leaves the Gaburbasra Forest to the point where it meets the western boundary of the Borojhar Forest Reserve; West - The eastern boundary of the Borojhar Forest Reserve.

[Source: Revenue Department Proceedings, November, 1895, Proceeding no. 397].

It should be noted that the Mech colony was created in the Satali group of villages and the Garo Colony in the adjacent Garopara, and the boundary as depicted above covers the Mech Colony of Satali as well as the Garo Colony of Garopara. The block of land for the Meches and the Garos were kept reserved by Sunder during the settlement operation of the Western Duars in 1895-98.

[Source: Milligan, J. - op. cit. P. 1107]

but not all of them. The "resettlement" occurred also after a considerable "time lag" (10 to 15 years). Meches were not given jobs in the tea gardens. The condition of working was so severe and the wage rate was so unattractive, that the Meches or at least some of them went further east to Assam. In fact the Meches were the "Victims of development".

It has been pointed out earlier that Meches used to live in deep forests of the Western Duars. Most probably they ~~had~~^{did} not come in contact with the 'Bengali Babu-Middle-Class'. Even if they had come in contact with some "Bengalis" before the British, their numbers were not likely to be significant. The terrain was difficult, the villages were isolated, the place was malarious, the tract was inhospitable. Hence, in all likelihood their contacts with outside world was minimal. But with the growth of British administration from the later half of the nineteenth century, there were various structural changes. Roads were constructed, Rail-lines were laid, tea gardens were opened, cities grew around, shops came into existence. Along with the British administration came the "Bengali Babus". ~~Probably, the~~ 'Bengali Babus' were the creation of British Administration. It may or may not be true for other parts of Bengal (or India) but it is more or less true in Jalpaiguri.

Jalpaiguri was a small village on the bank of the river Teesta in the early part of the 19th century. When Hooker

visited Jalpaiguri in 1840, it was a small hamlet. The importance of Jalpaiguri rose when Anglo - Bhutan war started. Jalpaiguri was the headquarter of the British forces. When Bhutan war was over a new district was carved out of places taken from Bhutan. Jalpaiguri was chosen as the District Head quarter.* The first settlers of Jalpaiguri were those who came in connection either with government service or Bhutan war. Some people came for business. Some acted as contractors.

The upper caste Hindus mainly migrated from Pabna, Dacca, Faridpur, Barasat, Noakhali and Mymensingh. These people could be broadly divided into two groups namely Rarhi and Barendra. However, the largest number of immigrants to Jalpaiguri District were from Pabna district. The regional groupings like Rarhi or Barendra are important things to remember because promoters of Indian tea companies were sharply divided into two groups led by Pabna (Barendra) and Dacca (Rarhi) groups.

Some of these immigrants were moderately educated so as to act as government officials. They had sharp eyes to seize any opportunity of making money and position. They came from densely populated or highly competitive rural areas. Their mobility was not hindered by social and economic status. However, the mobility that took place among these groups is important from the point of development of this area. Before 1870 people came either by river or by cart as the rail link was

*- Please see Appendix - 1.

established only in 1870 and this rail link was helpful in bringing new immigrants to this district.

The legal practice at that time required no degree or diploma in Law. A certificate from the Collector or Magistrate was all that was necessary. There were many civil and criminal cases and in this atmosphere the legal profession flourished. Most of the Indian pioneers of tea industry used to belong to this legal profession.

The growth of towns and cities in a place where there were many tribal groups created two divergent forces -- ~~contemporary societies~~ comprising Modern and traditional society respectively. In this picture, traditional society was depicted as a static one with but little differentiation of specialisation, with a low level of urbanisation and of literacy. Modern Society, on the otherhand, was seen as a society with a very high level of differentiation, literacy and exposition to mass media. Above all, traditional society has been, conceived as bound by the cultural horizons set by its traditions while the modern society is culturally dynamic, oriented to change and innovation. The Jalpaiguri Urban Society belonged to the category of "modern", whereas societies of "Mech" and other tribes remained traditional.

The "modern" societies "impinge" on the traditional societies. This "impingement" may be on "micro" or individual level or may be on ^{macro} "macro" or aggregative level.

In a ~~Macro~~ level competition may be said to be a critical ingredient of modernisation. Competitors may lead to optimisation of resources, provided the competitions are of ^{strength} equal/s^{to} and there are no external economies or diseconomies. But competition between a tribal group and educated middle class is rarely even. Terms of trade may go against the weaker party. One of the important features of this competitive existence that occurred over a number of years is that the Meches have lost a substantial part of their land to Hindu immigrants both high and low caste. This has occurred even in places where Sunder had "reserved" the area for the Meches only.

By creating individual titles to land, European intervention produced an environment in which another agent for change in the rural structure -- the money lender -- could flourish. The money lenders in Jalpaiguri rural and urban societies were mostly immigrants.

Once the land tenure system had been adapted to western concepts of private property, land became a negotiable asset. It could now be used as security for loans and in case of default could be forfeited and transferred. Not only did European rule provide these conditions; it cast them within a system of law that made contract enforceable.

These circumstances alone were sufficient to produce profound changes in the traditional system but their force is

heightened by another factor -- the spread of money economy and commercial agriculture. Most taxes were levied in money and payments to workers were generally made in cash. When plantations were set up, wage employment expanded further. These developments, combined with the growth of new administrative and commercial centres augmented the demand for saleable food-stuffs. Speaking about Malay, Meek maintains "that the conferment on the peasant of a title, the value of which he did not understand, except as a means of raising cash, made him an easy prey to the Indian money lenders"³⁶. Similar things happened in the Mech areas of North Bengal. From our investigation of the Satali areas we come to know that a large proportion of the Meches ^{who} work as domestic servants now, once held considerable amount of land.

This is not to suggest that the Meches sold their lands only to the non-Meches, because there are many cases where relatively less prosperous Meches sold their land to more prosperous Meches*.

Again, it is not true to suggest that money lending was **unknown** during the pre-British period or that previously "they did not exert a major influence on rural life." As long as production remained directed almost exclusively to subsistence, the function of money lenders in rural districts was necessarily different from what it would become when production for sale gained in

* Please see chapter 3.

importance. In a subsistence economy, the money lender's activities were restricted to supplying the peasant with money to live on, when he was in trouble because of crop failure or because of extra-ordinary expenditure on such family events as wedding and funerals. Most loans of this type were paid or repaid in kind at very high rates of interests.

When commercial farming began to develop in North Bengal, some part of the crop was sold, the money lender took on a role of wider economic significance. Money outlays for seeds, fertilisers and other agricultural inputs became necessary for the successful cultivation of most commercial crops and if the peasant was obliged to reduce his output of food crops, he also needed cash to cover part of his food requirements. His cash needs thus become greater than ever. And since his land when transferable, was now a valuable collateral for loans, the money lender was willing to advance larger sums than before.

In this area of North Bengal, we have noticed a new dimension of the money lender's role. As land values increase, the money lender discovers that he may have a positive interest in the default of his debtor. Previously he might have been cautious about advancing more than the peasant could manage to repay. But when the money lender sees that he can benefit from a necessary evil for the default of a debtor, he becomes ~~an~~ ~~an~~ ~~an~~ ~~an~~ ~~an~~ the tribal rural

village economy. His concern is no longer limited to acquiring profits as a financial intermediary, but is directed increasingly to the acquisition of and speculation in land. By charging exorbitant interest rates or by inducing the peasant to accept larger credits than he can manage, the money lenders can hasten the process by which the peasant is dispossessed. This has happened in the Mech community. J.F. Gruning reported in 1911, "During 1904-05, the tahsildar of Falakata gave a list of 71 jots, covering 1,882 acres which had been sold to known money-lenders, the settlers being chiefly Meches."³⁷ The rate of interest charged by the money-lenders in Alipur tahsil varied between 18% to 37½%.³⁸

The exact mechanism of transfer of land from tribals like Mech to non-Mech, non-tribals or upper Caste Hindus cannot be constructed now. But we can easily develop a hypothesis that the Meches lost their "traditional" land to Non-Mech peasants and others due to a complex operation of supply and demand factors in the credit market.

In a Report published on Jalpaiguri District by S.P.O. ⁱⁿ 1976, it has been observed that "land alienation is a regular feature of tribal economy."³⁹ The laws have not been helpful in this regard because they are subject to various forms of exploitation like illegal transfer of the possession of lands, indebtedness,

exploitation in exchange etc. As a result, the land owned by the tribals has diminished. In the place of our enquiry, this has resulted, for instance, ⁱⁿ a continuous diminution in the land-holding of the Meches. This we present in Table 2:6 below:-

Table - 2:6

Percentage distribution of land among Meches and other communities in Satali Villages 1895 - 1973.

Year	% of land owned by the Meches	% of land owned by the Non-Meches.
1895	100.00	Nil
1906	98.06	1.94
1916	66.63	33.37
1935	45.26	54.74
1953	40.78	59.22
1973	32.99	67.01

*Source : Records of Rights and Assessment Lists.

* Please see Statements 1 to 4 for the amount of land held by the Meches in the Satali villages. The distribution of land presented in Table 2:6 above has considered only the amount of land owned by Satali Meches and non-Meches as well as the amount held by the Non-Satali-Meches ~~at Satali~~ at Satali.

From the above Table it is quite clear that in the Satali group of villages, which was once "reserved" for the Meches by Sanders in 1895 - 98, there has been a slow but steady erosion of land holdings by the Meches. In this predominantly Mech Area, they have become minorities in respect to land holdings. In a Mech-

concentrated area like our place of enquiry, however, they hold only nearly 33% of the total cultivable lands.

But the situation in Mynaguri-Dhupguri is much more disturbing. Sunder, in his settlement, conferred jotes to Meches amounting to approximately 5751.00 acres,⁴⁰ but in 1973, the Mech holdings of land is either insignificant or unimportant. Nearly the whole land had been transferred to non-Meches. In 1895 Meches used to hold nearly 9759.36 acres of land in Falakata area.⁴¹ The proportion of Mech holdings has steadily declined and in the seventies it is less than 10% (i.e. approximately 900 acres).

Thus, the circle is complete. The Meches who used to own substantial land in different areas in the early 20th century or late nineteenth centuries of North Bengal do own now a fraction of that total land. The so-called "Sons of Soil" like Meches have lost their land to different persons and ethnic groups like Caste Hindus, Muslims and even to scheduled Castes and Tribes like Rajbansis, Oroans, Mundas, etc. Mynaguri, which once was considered to be a Mech concentrated area in 1895 had no Mech population according to 1961 Census;⁴² Dhupguri had only 187 Meches in 1961.⁴³ In 1951, Dhupguri and Mynaguri together had only 58 Meches where all were males.⁴⁴

A parallel situation may be found in Darjeeling

Hill area. In Darjeeling Hill area before the coming of Nepalis, the Lepchas were the original inhabitants in Kalimpong area of the hill area.

The most significant feature in the hill region was that government was the proprietor of the land and there was no private landlord or tenure holder between Government and Ryot who was usually the tiller of the soil. Lepchas used to hold a large proportion of this land in the early period of 1870. The Nepali holdings were insignificant.

But Philpot's settlement Report of 1919-21 as mentioned by A.J. Dash in the 'Gazetteer of Darjeeling District' showed that within 50 years the Lepcha holdings had reduced to only 20.7 per cent.⁴⁴ The following account of holdings of Nepalis, Lepchas and Bhotias in 1921 was computed by A.J. Dash from the above mentioned 'Report.'⁴⁵

Nepali holdings	...	71.3 p.c.
Lepcha holdings	...	20.7 p.c.
Bhotia holdings	...	8.0 p.c.

Nepalis were the immigrants to Hill districts and they came to Darjeeling - Kurseong - Kalimpong area only in the later half of the nineteenth century. The British prohibited the transfer of holdings from Lepcha to Bhotia^{or} to Nepalis or to plainmen. But inspite of all the "prohibitions", land was transferred from Lepchas^{to} Bhotias^{and} to

Nepalis.

In Darjeeling hill areas there was explicit prohibition. But in the Duars there was no such explicit prohibition and the idea of Sunder was perhaps to reserve certain areas for the Meches. But the "reservation" had ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ **its significance** when the operation of market economy was such that the Meches or tribals "lost" their "reserved" holdings.

It is not to suggest that the Meches or tribals have "sold" away their lands to the Hindu immigrants only who came to Jalpaiguri along with the British. The Meches also lost their land to other tribals and scheduled castes like Rajbansis. It is a moot point in Social science whether they have lost their land more to Hindu immigrants, or Muslim immigrants, Rajbansis or to other tribal groups. In fact they have lost to all other groups.

Mr. Sunder's settlement was made in 1889-95 in the 'Western Duars'. In his settlement, he had allotted 20,593.66 acres of land to the Meches of the Western Duars.⁴⁶ It can be seen from his settlement report that a block of 2,343.80 acres of land was kept "reserved" for the Meches of the place of our enquiry.* It is further evident from his report that during the time of his settlement only Meches frequented those areas, but a vast portion of land was covered under jungles.⁴⁷ Mr. Sunder's settlement could, however, touch only a fringe of Meches of the Western Duars; a majority of them were still leading a nomadic life. This is

*Computed from Sunder's settlement report.

evident from his description of the different places of the Western Duars.⁴⁸ For instance, while describing Nimti Domohoni, Sunder writes, "The lands are cultivated by Meches who pay capitation tax." Similarly, he points out that Satali Mendabari "is under jungle. Meches cultivate some land and pay capitation tax." Barojhar Maigani has been called "the centre taluk within heavy jungle. Only Meches reside here, "and the land of Barojhar Satali "is under jungle with some cultivation by Meches who pay capitation tax." Similarly, Atiabari is "now inhabited only by Meches who cultivate land by payment of Dao tax." Thus, it is clearly evident from Sunder's description of the places that Meches were leading a nomadic life, for "capitation" or "Dao" tax was paid only by the nomadic section of the tribal population of the Western Duars. As a large portion of the Meches were leading a nomadic life, Sunder, with a view to settling them permanently on land, had reserved some lands for them.

But in Sunder's settlement no precautions were taken to prevent transfer and sub-infeudation to "outsiders". Thus, although, with a view to dealing with at least a section of the nomadic Meches, Sunder had created Mech jotes, the Meches soon were ousted from their lands due to infiltration of non-Meches. The immigrants not only got new settlements of land, but also could purchase lands from the Meches who were settled by Sunder. Thus, the Meches of the place of enquiry which was kept reserved for the Meches only, lost lands either due to sale of lands or due to infiltration of the non-Meches in the land by a process hypotheticalised by us

previously.

We present in Table 2:7 (P.77) the amount of land tenanted by the Meches of Satali Villages in different periods.*

An examination of the Table 2:7 shows that the amount of tenanted lands of the Satali-Meches had decreased from 4,920.71 acres in 1906 to 3,811.17 acres in 1916, but again increased to 4,072.10 acres in 1935, but decreased again over the period 1935-53 and stood at 3,867.05 in 1953. On the otherhand, it is seen from the Records of right that the amount of land tenanted by the Meches in the Satali villages ^{**} had increased from 3,230.14 acres in 1916 to 3,525.17 acres in 1935, to 3,778.77 in 1953. However, the amount of land tenanted by the Meches in the Satali villages fell from 4,107.14 acres in 1906 to 3,230.14 acres in 1916, but increased from 2,343.80 acres in 1895 to 4,107.14 acres in 1906. But the Table 2:6 above shows that the share of the Meches in the total tenanted land of the Satali Villages fell

*For ascertaining the tenanted land of the Meches of Satali villages in different periods, we have taken into account of the amount of land tenanted at Satali villages as well as outside Satali villages (as far as could be traced from the records of right of the landowners of the adjacent areas) by the Satali-Meches. The amount of land held by the non-Satali-Meches at Satali villages, has, however, been deducted from the total amount of land held by the Meches at Satali villages.

** For ascertaining the tenanted land of the Meches in the Satali villages, we have deducted the land held by the Satali Meches outside Satali (but have included the amount of land held by the non-Satali Meches at Satali) from the total amount of land as shown in Statements 1 to 4 in pages 5-1 to 5-19.

continuously from 100% in 1895 to 98.06% in 1906, to 66.63% in 1916, to 45.26% in 1935, to 40.78% in 1953.

Thus, with the addition of land for settlement* in the place of our enquiry, the non-Meches had started sharing an increasing portion of the land in the Satali villages, although the amount of land tenanted by the Meches increased over the period 1916-53. The record further reveals the fact that over the period 1895-1935, more than 1,000 acres of lands of the Satali-Meches were converted into Tea gardens. But, it would also be noted that the record with regard to conversion of Mech-lands into Tea gardens is incomplete and in all likelihood the conversion is much larger. For instance, the surrounding Tea gardens in the place of our enquiry like the Madhu Tea garden with 1,052.32 acres of land, of the Satali Tea garden with 1,311.31 acres of land, like Atiabari which was reported by Sunder to be inhabited by the Meches solely but was fully converted into Tea garden by 1906, had certainly usurped

* This explains as to why the amount of tenanted lands in the Satali villages varied from one period to another. In fact, the records show that the amount of tenanted land in the Satali villages increased continuously over the period 1895-1953. In the year of our investigation, the amount of land, however, decreased due to non-availability of the entire land of Uttar Satali, a part of the land of Satalimondalpara for cultivation and the acquisition of a certain portion of the Satali villages by the government for the construction and development of roads. Although a part of the land of Uttar Satali was acquired by the government during the Second World War for the establishment of Airfield, the amount of tenanted land increased due to reclamation of waste lands for cultivation purpose.

the opportunity of the Meches of the place of our enquiry to have lands for their cultivation. But the Meches together with the non-Meches lost an area of about 900 acres of land of Uttar Satali due to setting up of an Air field after the World War II, and had to surrender nearly 165 acres of land of Satalimondolpara to the Air field during 1962. Again, nearly 64 acres of land of the Meches as well as of the non-Meches had to be given up for the construction and development of roads, etc. The record further shows that during the period 1906-16, out of the total amount of land of 1,617.66 acres tenanted by the non-Meches of the Satali villages, about 1369.60 acres of land were transferred from the Meches to the non-Meches. Moreover, there was an intra-transfer of land of 727.50 acres within the Meches over the period 1906-16, but no land was transferred from the non-Meches to the Meches within that period. On the otherhand, the record shows that over the period 1916-35, there was a transfer of 500.68 acres of land from the non-Meches to the Meches of the Satali villages and an intra-transfer of land of 246.38 acres within the Meches. It is also seen from the record that about 498.70 acres of land have been transferred from the Satali Meches to the non-Meches over the period 1916-35. Similarly, from the record we have ascertained that about 520.91 acres of land of the Satali Meches have been transferred to the non-Meches during the period 1935 to 1953. There has also been an intra-transfer of land of 296.17 acres during the period 1935-53.

Moreover, it is seen from the records that in 1906, the Satali-Meches were also holding lands outside of Satali to the extent of about 813.80 acres; in 1916, 607.42 acres; in 1935, 591.85 acres and in 1953, 157.23 acres. Similarly, some of the Meches, living outside the Satali villages, were also seen in the records to hold land in the Satali villages. Thus, in 1906, 0.23 acres of land; in 1916, 26.39 acres; in 1935, 44.92 acres; and in 1953, 68.95 acres of Satali-land were held by the non-Satali Meches in the place of our enquiry.

It is, thus, evident that the amount of land tenanted by the Satali Meches had been affected by the transfer of land from the Meches to the non-Meches, by the transfer of land from the non-Meches to the Meches, by the intra-transfer of land among the Meches, by the conversion of Mech land into Tea gardens and also due to transfer of a part of the Mech-land to the Government for the building up of the Air field or for the construction and development of road, etc. All these factors are responsible for the decreasing share of the Satali Meches in the total amount of land tenanted over the period 1906-53 in the Satali villages. The share of the Meches in the total tenanted land further decreased from 39.29% in 1953 to 32.99% in 1973. Although the record shows that the amount of land tenanted by the non-Meches as well as by the Meches fell from 5,486.64 acres to 4,807.73 acres and from 3,778.77 acres to 2,367.65 acres respectively from 1953 to 1973, the share of the non-Meches increased from 59.22% in 1953 to 67.01% in 1973.

It is thus evident that the Meches of the 'reserved' area had to accommodate the new developments in respect of land holding with the passage of time. Their share in the total amount of land of the Satali villages decreased. It may be, therefore, necessary to enquire the nature of changes, if any, of land holdings that had occurred within the Mech community. To this, we now turn to the next chapter.

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