

CHAPTER - IVPLANTATION SECTOR : ITS IMPACT ON THE SUBSISTENCE  
SECTOR OF THE WESTERN DUARSSECTION 1 : INTRODUCTION

IV.1.1 Tea plantation had its beginning in the district from the year 1874. Thereafter, the growth of the plantation industry was very rapid. It showed a very large investments of capital in the contemporary times<sup>1</sup>. A rough estimate of the total capital invested in this industry made on the basis of a per-acre investment requirement of Rs. 400 to Rs. 500 for clearing, planting and bringing to bearing stage a tea estate in the early days gives the following figures<sup>2</sup>. In 1881, the total area under tea was 35,683 acres and the amount of capital invested was between Rs. 1.42 crores to Rs. 1.78 crores. Area under tea rose to 76,158 acres in 1891, showing a corresponding rise in investment within Rs. 3.04 crores to Rs. 3.8 crores. In 1911, the tea acreage in the Western Duars went up to 88,000 acres while the total investment on tea increased and remained within the limit of Rs. 3.52 crores to Rs. 4.4 crores<sup>3</sup>.

IV.1.2 Thus, this region experienced the penetration of the British capital in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But, curiously enough, the area which received investment on such a large scale, had a stagnant social formation because of its semi-feudal production relations, archaic technique of agricultural production and the corresponding low level of productivity<sup>4</sup>. It will, therefore, be interesting

to study the way in which these substantial investments made by the English merchant capitalists <sup>helped</sup> in transforming the underdeveloped socio-economic formation as found in this region. It is also interesting to study the impact of the plantation sector on the growth and development of the traditional subsistence sector. But a proper study of these aspects requires initially a study on the history of the development of tea cultivation in the Western Duars along with an analysis of the pattern of plantation and agrarian social structure as found in the plantation vis-a-vis agrarian sectors.

SECTION 2 : THE DEVELOPMENT OF TEA CULTIVATION  
IN THE WESTERN DUARS

IV.2.1 Plantation industry was started in this area by the British merchant capitalists, followed latter by the Bengalee planters settled in Jalpaiguri town. The local peasantry in the Duars did not participate in the growing of tea. Tea gardens were started by the British planters on "culturable waste land" taken in lease directly from the colonial government. In the Darjeeling hills, tea plantations began in 1856. When no more land was available in the Darjeeling hills, the submontane tract of the Western Duars attracted the attention of the planters. The first tea garden in the Western Duars was set up in 1874 by Mr. Brougham. The second garden was opened at Fulbari and owned by Colonel Edward Money. Colonel Money was an enthusiastic entrepreneur. Writing in the tea Encyclopaedia in 1881 he declared, "I thought years ago, when I first began work there and the place was a howling wilderness, that the said Western Duars would eventually prove the best tea district in India".

IV.2.2 The early British planters started tea plantations on an extensive scale, as there was an abundant supply of culturable waste land in the Duars in those days. Grant of land for tea cultivation was liberally made to the intending planters at nominal rents and, therefore, allotments were taken in extensive blocks. It can be known from the Census Report of 1911 that "Almost all the available land suited for tea cultivation in this district has now been taken up and further expansion of tea cultivation can not be very great"<sup>6</sup>.

IV.2.3 The first indigenous entrepreneur was Mr. Rahim Bux, the peskar to the Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri. He took a lease of 728 acres of land for the purpose of tea cultivation in 1877. Between 1879 and 1910, the Jalpaiguri capitalists floated eleven tea companies having a total capital of Rs. 11.25 lakhs<sup>7</sup>. But compared to the British entrepreneurship, the Indian entrepreneurship grew very slowly during the 19th century. Activity of the latter gathered momentum from the second decade of the twentieth century. The reasons for the late advent of the Jalpaiguri Indians in tea plantations have been enumerated to be four — (i) lack of confidence of the Indians in their own ability to carry out successfully the projects demanding comparatively large investments, (ii) non-availability of land, (iii) depression in the industry and (iv) the lack of access of the Indian community to the organised money market in Calcutta or elsewhere. All these problems were of a temporary nature and the Indian entrepreneurs could overcome them within a short time<sup>8</sup>.

IV.2.4 Between 1912 and 1919, the Bengalee entrepreneurs of Jalpaiguri town entered the tea industry in the Duars in large numbers. But, by then most of the good tea growing land was already in the possession of the English planters. Hence, many of the latecomers had to convert "jote" lands (ordinary cultivable lands) into tea plantations. These lands were settled as "jote" lands under the settlement operations conducted between 1889 and 1895 by Mr. D.H.E. Sunder, the then Settlement Officer of Western Duars. But the conversion of jote lands into tea lands was banned by the Government in 1914. This was done perhaps under the pressure from the British planters, who did not favour the penetration of indigenous entrepreneurs into the plantation industry. Whatever might be the reason, it could at best be said that it was indeed a belated attempt on the part of the Govt. to stop transfer of land in Western Duars, from small resident cultivators to non-resident non-cultivators<sup>9</sup>. However, the governmental policy checked temporarily the penetration of indigenous entrepreneurs into tea plantation. They had to wait till 1924 for the further expansion of their activities when a decision to lift the ban was taken following a visit to Jalpaiguri of the then Governor of Bengal in 1921. Nevertheless, the share of the Bengalee entrepreneurs in the industry was necessarily small both in terms of capital invested and acreage. This would be evident from table IV.1 below.

IV.2.5 The table shows at a glance the ownership pattern of tea companies in Jalpaiguri district as on March 31, 1933. The overwhelming dominance of Europeans in the tea industry is quite apparent.

They owned and controlled 82 percent of the total area under tea in the district.

TABLE IV.1 - OWNERSHIP PATTERN OF TEA COMPANIES IN JALPAIGURI DISTRICT AS ON 31.3.1933

Type of ownership	Area under tea (hectates)	Percentage of total area under tea
A. Public Ltd. Co.		
i) Sterling	26,198.67	48
ii) European Rupee	17,336.87	30
iii) Indian Rupee	11,308.69	19
B. Private Ltd. Cos.		
i) European	1,016.09	2
ii) Indian	583.36	1
C. Proprietorship Estates		
i) Europeans	1,005.49	2
ii) Indians	1,069.97	2

Source : Mukherjee, S., Emergence of Bengalee Entrepreneurship in Tea Plantations of Jalpaiguri District (1879-1933), unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Bengal, 1978, p. 197.

### SECTION 3 : PATTERN OF PLANTATION AND AGRARIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

IV.3.1 The capitalistic mode of production was brought along with the emergence of large scale British capital investment in the tea plantation estates of the Western Duars. The class structure that

emerged was analogous to that of the modern industrial sector. The new class structure comprised of the small number of managers with their assistants and the large chunk of plantation labourers who formed the top and bottom section respectively of the plantation class structure. In between these categories, there was the intermediate class of white collar employees in tea estates known as babus who were the clerical staff. The class differences were often coupled with ethnic differences. The first group of people mentioned above were mostly Europeans and Anglo-Indians. The intermediate class consisted of mainly Bengalees, and the plantation labourers were invariably tribals comprising different ethnic groups with their own languages, culture and customs. The class differentiation along such ethnic lines brought about ethnic and class solidarity among the managerial and intermediate class<sup>10</sup>.

IV.3.2 While the above was the condition in the northern part of Western Duars, the southern part was steadily being brought under cultivation. Agriculture in the southern part, as already discussed in Chapter - III, was based on the ownership of tenures large or small by the jotedars, who rather than organising production on the basis of hired labourers, preferred to lease out some parts on various tenurial arrangements for the purpose of actual cultivation. Such arrangement eventually resulted in the widespread practice of infeudation and sub-infeudation of the same plot of land, in view of the relative shortage of land with the growth of population together with the absence of an alternative source of earning in the rural front<sup>11</sup>.

IV.3.3 Thus, the agrarian structure that developed consisted of a small number of landlords (jotedars) and other intermediaries and a huge mass of peasant population with a differential tenurial rights over small holdings. Agricultural production was largely subsistence-oriented. Production for the market formed a small portion of land under cultivation<sup>12</sup>. But the striking point to note is that such a subsistence economy with many features of pre-capitalist relations of production became all the more entrenched, even though there was a phenomenal growth of the plantation industry which was capitalistic in character. This pattern of development has led many scholars to treat these societies as having a dual social structure. A persistence of two different modes of production relations and levels of productivity, had separated the small peasant economy of the Western Duars from the more prosperous plantation enclaves, giving birth to a dualism in the economy where a capitalistic nucleus co-existed with an archaic structure<sup>13</sup>.

#### SECTION 4 : IMPACT OF THE PLANTATION INDUSTRY ON THE WESTERN DUARS ECONOMY

IV.4.1 With the above background, let us now explore the impact of the plantation sector on the subsistence sector. Broadly speaking, there could have been four types of conducive effects - (i) absorption of surplus population of the subsistence sector by the plantation sector, (ii) growth of markets of local agricultural products needed by the

plantation population, (iii) diversification of the traditional economy by helping the growth of agro-based small industries and industries for supplying various inputs needed by the tea industry and (iv) investment of a part of the surplus generated in the plantation sector for the development of the subsistence sector. In the following paragraphs, we have made a detailed discussion of each of these effects in seriatim under different sub-heads.

(i) Absorption of surplus population of agricultural sector

IV.4.2 The pressure of population on land was increasing gradually due to the declining quantum of culturable waste land and influx of population from the neighbouring areas<sup>13</sup>. A detailed discussion of this has been made in Chapter III. Therefore, it would have been a boon to the agrarian economy if a part of the surplus population could be siphoned off from the subsistence sector to the fast growing plantation sector. This could, on the one hand, lessen the extra burden of population from agriculture, thereby making an outlet for gainful employment, and on the other, raise the per capita income of the remaining population and also reducing the burden of rent that was imposed on them. But, this did not and could not happen as most of the labourers were recruited from Chotanagpur plateau of Madhya Pradesh and Santhal Parganas of Bihar<sup>14</sup>.

IV.4.3 For several reasons labourers were not recruited from the Duars and the neighbouring areas. Firstly, the planters might think that the locally recruited labour force would not only be unsteady but

also would demand higher wages than the labourers recruited from outside the State. About the lower wages for emigrant labourers in tea gardens and higher wages in the agricultural sector, the sub-divisional officer of Karimganj (Assam) reported in 1883 : "... the rate of wages of (Emigration) Act labourers (was) less than rupees three per month during the last season. Bengalees in the adjoining villages earned without difficulty rupees seven per month"<sup>15</sup>. The wages for day labourers or agricultural labourers in Jalpaiguri district were three annas to four annas per day, i.e., around rupees seven per month<sup>16</sup>. This is why inspite of incurrence of a high initial expenses in recruitment, preference was for recruitment from outside the State. Secondly, the local people like the Rajbanshis, Muhammadans and the tribal people of the Duars such as the Ravas, Meches and Totos were not available for work in tea gardens. They were unwilling to work in tea gardens, perhaps due to the unhealthy climate and more importantly on account of their age-old affinity to agricultural pursuits. The areas most suited for tea cultivation were covered with thick unhealthy forests which had to be cleared. Thus, the low wages, hazardous conditions of work and unwillingness to give up independent agricultural pursuits provided strong disincentives for the local population. Thirdly, the recruitment of labourers for plantation estates in north-east India from the tribal belt in Chotonagpur and Santhal Pargana had become a wide practice. It was easy to recruit labourers from the said zones on account of the abject poverty of these labourers<sup>17</sup>. These unfortunate tribal peoples were alienated from their lands and their traditional rights due to the disastrous effects of

permanent settlement, viz., rack-renting, resumption, subletting and increased indebtedness<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, since 1859, famines, floods and occasional scarcities played havoc in their economic life<sup>19</sup>. Employment of these poverty-stricken tribal labourers at low wages, in fact, entailed the highest possible profit to the planters. Finally, local labourers used to be employed earlier in indigo cultivation. But the experience was uncomfortable because employment of such labourers resulted in the mutiny of 1859. Memory of this mutiny was still fresh in the minds of the British capitalists at the beginning of tea plantation in this area.

IV.4.4 That almost all the tea garden labourers were recruited from outside in the tea gardens of the Western Duars is not an isolated event. This pattern of recruitment from outside the local area was more or less a rule rather than an exception in most cases of plantation in other parts of the world.

IV.4.5 Prof. Myrdal has paid a considerable attention to this problem. He points out in his celebrated book "Asian Drama" : "As in mercantilist times, in Europe 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 accept conditions of steady, disciplined work. It was also cheaper and simpler to seek out labour - usually from a 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 only plainly demonstrated. In Burma, where new land for cultivation was readily available, the local peoples could not be persuaded to work at low wage rates which imported Indians would accept. On this point a Mercantilist way of reasoning was most cheaply apparent, for the Government subsidised the importation of Indian coolies with a view to bringing down the rate of wages"<sup>20</sup>.

"The picture was less clear-cut on the Indian sub-continent. 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 plantations or in the 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 were herded together and made to work under strict supervision at low rates of pay"<sup>21</sup>.

IV.4.6 The result of this policy of the planters was that there were unprecedented inflow of "immigrants" to the Western Duars as well as in the whole district of Jalpaiguri. The rapid increase in the number of people in Jalpaiguri district between the period 1891 to 1941 is shown below in Table IV.2.

TABLE IV.2 - IMMIGRATION TO JALPAIGURI (1891-1941)

Year	Actual population	Immigrants
1891	433,334	44,329(10.23)
1901	544,906	95,899(17.60)
1911	661,282	152,174(23.01)
1921	694,054	163,024(23.49)
1931	739,160	158,757(21.48)
1941	845,702	156,765(18.54)

Source : Mitra, A., Census of India, 1951, Vol. VI, Part IA,  
Calcutta, 1953, p. 264, Statement 1.91.

IV.4.7 For the reasons enumerated above, the Duars and its neighbouring areas were left out of the purview of the labour recruiting zone for the plantation estates. This trend of recruitment that was set at the beginning of the plantation industry continued for the later period also. As a result, the surplus agricultural labour force that was evident from the growing practice of infeudation and sub-infeudation in the later years of the British rule<sup>22</sup> did not find gainful employment in the plantation sector. It may be noted here that culturable waste land was not scarce but the fact was that such lands were not available for ordinary cultivation. Firstly, because from the beginning of the British survey and settlement, an attempt was made by the Government to earmark lands either for ordinary or for special cultivation. Such a restrictive policy kept the local peasantry not only out of the advantages

of expansion of cultivation but also left a large tract of land at the possession of the plantation estates. Moreover, since 1914, many tea estates had taken leases of jote lands, i.e., lands which were originally earmarked for ordinary cultivation<sup>23</sup>. However, of the total area leased in by the tea estates, only about one half was generally brought under actual cultivation of tea. The rest was used for ancillary activities like reserve for fuel, free grant of land for personal cultivation of labour households, settlement of labourers in the estate and other related activities<sup>24</sup>. A portion of the leased in land was also kept for future expansion. Secondly, a considerable part of the waste lands was declared as "reserved forest" by the Government. This sharply reduced the amount of land that could have been made available to the land hungry tenantry of the area<sup>25</sup>. Besides, the growing population did not find employment elsewhere in other sectors which remained almost underdeveloped. For example, in 1921, industrial establishments other than plantations, as shown in Table IV.3 below, employed a total number of 536 skilled workers of whom 36 were women. The predominantly rural character of the district of Jalpaiguri<sup>26</sup> is obvious from the fact that only 315 unskilled workers including 85 women were engaged in non-farm jobs outside plantation. Even the growth of employment in the plantation industry was already slowing down. But the population in the tract was increasing gradually.

IV.4.8 The result was that an ever increasing population seeking employment continued to fall back upon traditional agriculture to eke out a living rather than moving out to plantation estates, which in view

of the enormous growth of the latter could have surely relieve the subsistence sector of the growing labour force. This fact of non-absorption of surplus labour force of the traditional sector left its deep mark on the underdeveloped structure of the region.

(ii) Growth of markets for local agricultural products

IV.4.9 Impact of the growth of the tea industry was also minimal in this respect, though not altogether nil. Whatever positive impact was left that happened without any conscious or well-intended motive of this sector; rather it was inflicted in the process of developing and maintaining itself. This happened due to the very nature of the plantation population and the mode of management of the estates.

IV.4.10 Transport and communication had developed in this region for meeting the needs of the plantation sector in the matter of transportation of processing and manufacturing machineries, building materials, coal etc. and also for exporting its product, i.e., tea. Extension and development of the communication system in addition to serving its above mentioned needs also opened up the need for the growth of towns and markets. At this time, most of the towns and markets of the Duars grew at various points along the railway lines. Besides these, weekly markets (hats) were also held in most of the tea estates in the region. These markets became the regular meeting points of the peasant and plantation population. Labourers of the tea estates constituted the majority of the consumers in these markets and collected their essentials and luxuries from them. It opened up an outlet for the peasants in the

TABLE IV.3 - INDUSTRIAL ESTABLISHMENTS (OTHER THAN PLANTATIONS) IN JALPAIGURI DISTRICT IN 1921.

Description of establishment	No. of establishments	Total No. of persons employed		Manager		Supervisory and technical staff		Clerical staff		Skilled workmen (Indian)		Unskilled workmen* (Indian)	
		M	F	Euro-peans or Anglo-Indians	Indian	Euro-peans or Anglo-Indians	Indian	Euro-peans & Anglo-Indians	Indians	M	F	M	F
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
Jute presses	3	103	3	1	2	1	-	-	9	74	8	-	-
Tea-chest and three-ply wood factories	1	259	69	1	-	9	1	-	19	84	-	137	66
Land rolling mills	1	44	-	1	-	2	-	-	2	1	-	38	-
Brick, tile and fire-brick factories	6	344	58	-	6	-	7	-	11	210	28	98	19
Railway workshop	1	175	-	1	-	-	-	-	3	118	-	53	-
Printing presses	2	40	-	-	2	-	16	-	1	13	-	4	-

\*Figures refer to workmen aged over 14 years. Brick and tile factories engaged 23. Workmen below 14 years of whom 11 were females. Printing presses engaged 4 workmen below 14 years.

Source: Bengal District Gazetteer, B Volume, Jalpaiguri District, Calcutta, 1923, Table XXX.

Note: M - Male  
F - Female

subsistence sector to dispose of their commodities like rice, pulses, fish, oil, vegetables and other goods<sup>27</sup>.

IV.4.11 In this way, a constant interaction took place between the plantation sector and the peasant sector. Nevertheless, the plantation estates and the emerging market centres and townships could not create sufficient demand so as to place the subsistence sector to the take off stage. There were several reasons for such a state of affair. First, the wage rates of labourers on the one hand were very low and stagnant, on the other the prices of food grains and other goods were rising steadily which resulted in the low purchasing power and hence low demand for agricultural goods<sup>28</sup>. Secondly, there was the system of supplying consumer goods at a subsidised rate to the plantation labourers. Labourers and other employees were supplied with food grains, mustard and kerosene oil, salt, sugar, gur etc. and also some clothings<sup>29</sup>. Supply of these goods lessened the dependence of a good number of consumers on the local market. At the same time the bulk purchase of these goods to supply them to the labourers was not made from the district or its neighbourhood but from the big trading companies, who procured these articles mainly from the southern part of Bengal and sometimes from other provinces<sup>30</sup>. Thirdly, a part of the land not actually brought under tea cultivation used to be parcelled out into small plots and distributed to the labourers as free grant for personal cultivation of subsistence crops<sup>31</sup>. Production of food crops, vegetables etc. on such lands met some portion of the demand of these goods. The total market demand for the produces of the subsistence sector could not rise much for this

reason also. Lastly, the growth of the local market was also retarded by the very nature of the tribal labourers, who were accustomed to simple and bare living. It had a dampening effect on the demand in the local market. All the same, the big trading companies could not cater to all the requirements of the plantation estates. The left-over demands of the plantation estate stimulated the growth of the towns and market centres. Suppliers, shop-keepers, merchants and money lenders could do substantial business at these places<sup>32</sup>.

IV.4.12 : Thus, the low level of wages, relative preponderance of payment in kind and a link with the vestiges of the peasant economy as found to have retained by the plantation labourers ruled out a rapid expansion of the rural market of food grains. So, the benefits of the plantation economy reached the peasants in the subsistence sector only to the limited extent. Nevertheless, "... the plantations could contribute, at least indirectly, to the growth of the hinterland area. The chief economic advantage of the plantation industry lies in its ability to secure a high return by employing a large number of unskilled labourers. The only skill that is required of the plantation workers is the ability to obey orders. Had wages of plantation workers been higher than the requirements of a narrowly defined subsistence minimum, production in local agriculture and small-scale manufacturing sector dominated by potters, weavers, blacksmiths, cobblers etc. would certainly have been stimulated by an increased demand for food and simple manufactures, from the workers. In this way the tea plantations here could

indirectly pass a part of their output to the population in the hinterland and thereby increase their income. But ... due to their low income and consequent low standard of living, agriculture and local manufacture in the area did not receive the necessary demand-pull for development from the tea garden workers"<sup>33</sup>.

(iii) Diversification of the traditional subsistence economy through the growth of agro-based and plantation related industries.

IV.4.13 The expected conducive impact of the plantation sector in this respect was, in fact, nil. There were two causes for this. The soil of the Duars was suitable for cultivating various types of fruits and vegetables. The government officials found potentialities of producing such crops<sup>34</sup>. But, no effective measures were taken to demonstrate and explore the possibilities. There was also no initiative on the part of the farmers as these garden-produces brought for sale in the market did not bring adequate prices for the reasons enumerated earlier. These facts acted as disincentive on the propensity of the peasants to take the risks involved in commercial agriculture, and caused the agrarian sector to remain mainly subsistence-oriented. However, plantation industry created a market for itself. It was dependent on other means of production like machines, tools, farm implements and other inputs. Again, the tea estates also needed a large quantity of fertilisers such as phosphate, ammonium sulphate, potash and others. They gave a strong support to the fertiliser industry. Tea was also the mainstay of the plywood industry as tea chests in large quantity were required for despatch of tea to various sale centres in India and abroad. Yet, neither

the fertiliser nor the plywood industry could emerge and flourish in the region, as all these were imported from outside and no steps were taken by any one to set up these industries. Tea industry also required different types of agricultural implements like the pruning knives, rakes, spades etc. But upto 1920, these articles were mainly imported from outside India by the tea estate owners. When the supply was stopped from England, the tea estates procured these items from organised and mechanised units outside the region<sup>35</sup>. The task of indigenous and local blacksmiths or units was reduced only to the reconditioning of these implements. Thus the need of the plantation sector for many of its inputs could not help in developing the small scale industries producing plantation related inputs.

IV.4.14 If it had not been so, not only would it have diversified the regional economy but it would have further generated demand for articles of consumption in addition to already existing demands generated by the mass of the immigrant plantation population. This definitely could have a significant bearing on the peasant economy in diversifying its activities.

IV.4.15 The reasons for such an undesirable state of affair appears to us to be two, namely, procurement of the said articles from outside the region and the non-emergence of a class of dynamic entrepreneurs either from the plantation or the subsistence sector to set up such industries. If enterprising men with sufficient foresight would have emerged or immigrated to this region they could blaze the trail in this

regard. But, unfortunately this kind of men were not there. Thus, the possibilities of diversification of the subsistence sector through the establishment of agro-based or plantation related industries were throttled and hence capitalism in the form of plantation agriculture failed to bring about dynamic changes in the existing agrarian relations.

(iv) Investment of a part of surplus generated in the plantation sector for the development of the subsistence sector.

IV.4.16 [It is evident from the analysis above that generation of surplus and capital formation outside the class of the owners of tea estate and their managers was very limited. Nevertheless, the Marwaris through their supply business in tea gardens and money lending pursuits in the subsistence sector and Bengalee "babus" through their earning from employment in tea estates did a substantial saving. This saving was invested either in purchase of land or in the opening up of new business and expansion of the old ones in the neighbouring or district towns,] but in no way, these savings went into the improvement of agriculture. The plantation labourers also did some saving ~~in~~ spite of the low and stagnant wage rates, through overwork and by engaging their family labour for the maximum possible limit. A part of this saving was used for purchasing land in the subsistence sector but the major part was taken away to their native place for repayment of loans and spent on other agricultural requirements<sup>36</sup>.

IV.4.17 The managers and their assistants earned a lot through high salaries, commissions and other benefits paid to the managerial staff

by the tea companies<sup>37</sup>. So, the saving propensity was invariably high among the managerial staff. These high salaried managerial staff in the plantations were mostly Englishmen accustomed to high standard of living. But their number was small and most of their consumption needs were satisfied through supplies from their home<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, the consumption expenditure of this class did not help in flourishing the indigenous manufactures. As the investors and managerial staff were predominantly foreigners, the surplus and profits earned by the plantation estates were siphoned off elsewhere for investment<sup>39</sup>. "The appropriation of indigenously produced economic surplus by foreign capitalists for their own external use thus prevented its investment to meet indigenous needs. Had this not been so, there would have been greater potential for economic development in the peripheral social formation"<sup>40</sup>.

IV.4.18 The Indian planters, in most of the occasions, also followed their British counterparts. The surplus earned by them was not invested in the district for promoting development activities there. Perhaps a greater part of the surplus was channelised to business in other places. However, no record or study is available in this regard. Of course, a part of the surplus was spent in the district but that was confined either to procuring of new leases, expansion of the existing estates, modernisation of processing plants or improvements of tea cultivation in the estates<sup>41</sup>. Thus it is observed that "if the foreign owners of the tea plantations were withdrawing the surplus from the area where it was generated for the purpose of investment in their home, the Indian owners of the Dooars tea plantations, mostly from Jalpaiguri town,

did not behave any differently in this matter. The latter also did not show much interest in the reinvestment of the surplus generated in the tea plantations, either for the expansion or development of the industry itself or for setting up other industries in the hinterland area. The rates of dividend were pretty high in the Indian tea companies although the divisible pool of surplus was smaller. Surplus from the plantations owned by Indians were also regularly drawn. It went on land, trading, speculation, real estate in the metropolitan city of Calcutta or simply financed luxury consumption, perhaps some charities. Hence in the matter of capital transfer to the non-agricultural sector of the plantation economy the foreign and Indian planters behaved similarly, albeit for different reasons"<sup>42</sup>. Thus, we see that the surplus generated in the plantation sector at the hands of the labourers, middle class employees as well as both Indian and foreign planters did not even partially come into circulation to initiate the developmental process in the traditional sector.

IV.4.19 There are two contrary views regarding the type of impact that the plantation industry produced on the social, economic and cultural development of Jalpaiguri district. One line of thought indicated that "the common people of Jalpaiguri derived some income from the tea companies and tea estates either as share-holders or suppliers, contractors, etc. The industry employed many educated persons and a host of labourers. All this resulted in the general prosperity of the people. So the cost of living in this district was much higher than that of many other districts of Bengal. As for cultural development, the numerous schools

including the defunct Jackson Medical School, colleges of various descriptions, which grew up in this town and district had the primary funds collected by the tea industry. The opera houses, play grounds, clubs and libraries drew their sustenance from the funds of tea industry. Medical, literary, political, musical and other cultural conferences held in this district, were mainly patronized by the tea industry. In fact, true urbanization with all facilities in the town and sub-division were mainly the product of money and men of tea industry"<sup>43</sup>.

IV.4.20 The second line of thought indicated that "tea is an important industry which contributes substantially to betterment of economic life of this district and that in forest there is a vast exploitable resource which can be expected to contribute towards the general development of this district. Unfortunately, these two sizeable income and wealth generating sectors remain almost as enclaves and do not have either interdependence or complementarity with the agricultural or agro-industrial sector which is the primary field of economic activity of the major part of population. It can, therefore, be possibly stated without much error that economic life in the district depends on agriculture which is its primary and sole source of activity"<sup>44</sup>.

IV.4.21 It can be seen that the first view has mainly emphasised the cultural and educational development of the urban centres of the district due to the growth of the tea industry. A critic of the first view observed that "Apart from making the obvious mistake of measuring the general prosperity of the district by the high cost of living the first

view on the matter has conveniently equated "people" with a minority of town-dwellers who certainly benefitted from direct or indirect connections with tea industry. It is true that educational, literary or cultural activities in the urban areas of the district received patronage from the tea planters but the poor and illiterate coolies employed in large numbers in the plantations or the small peasants or adhiars equally poor and illiterate, living on the fringes of the tea estates failed to derive any benefit from such patronage"<sup>45</sup>. It would, therefore, be reasonable to presume that the said developments in the urban centres had only widened the economic and cultural gap and disparity between the urban and rural areas.

IV.4.22 However, from further evidence of facts, the second line of thought seems to be more realistic than the first one. Regarding the state of agriculture it has been observed that the "existing agricultural practices born of years are mostly traditional and agriculture in this district is strikingly characterized by low cost, low efforts, low return and low economy"<sup>46</sup>. The settlement officer of Jalpaiguri district wrote in 1919 about the state of agricultural activities in this district as follows : "The backwardness of agriculture throughout the district is remarkable, the more so as the climate is so favourable. Not only is the variety and in some cases the quality of the crops grown exceedingly meagre, but the implements of agriculture are absolutely primitive and agricultural livestock are of the poorest quality. No attempt is made to exploit the possibilities which the soil and

climate hold out, but the cultivators go on doggedly growing rice and jute, rice and jute and again rice and jute"<sup>47</sup>. The backwardness of agricultural development of the district points to the fact that under the colonial rule, the investment by merchant capital in plantations in a backward peasant economy tend to perpetuate its underdevelopment.

IV.4.23 Apart from its impact on the economic development of the region, the growth of tea plantation in the Duars had also its impact on the landholding pattern of the "sons of the soil" and other immigrant population. In this section we shall study the important question as to whether the expansion of the plantation industry led to the uprooting of the original inhabitants of the region, and if so, with what consequences. But let us first see who were the sons of the soil.

IV.4.24 The country of Western Duars, as noted earlier, can be subdivided into two parts having distinct topographies, viz., the northern and the southern parts. The northern part is a submontane tract of about ten to fifteen miles in width from the Bhutan Hills. The southern part of the country is a plain area which is further down to the northern border of Rangpur, Dinajpur (both now in Bangladesh) and the feudatory state of Cooch Behar. The northern part of Western Duars was covered with thick jungles and criss-crossed by numerous streams and rivulets. The climate was very unhealthy. Only the Meches could live there. They were a wandering tribe at that time and practised shifting cultivation. The special census of 1871 estimated that roughly 28% of the total population of Western Duars were the Meches who lived in this area<sup>48</sup>.

They developed a tribal economy based on subsistence. The lower plains were comparatively habitable. A settled population lived there consisting of the Rajbanshis (65.9%) and the Muslims (12.3%)<sup>49</sup>. As the plain area was suitable for ordinary cultivation, it attracted a large number of cultivators. However, settlement was mainly concentrated in the areas adjacent to the districts of British Bengal and the feudatory state of Cooch Behar. The settled population were by and large the immigrants from the neighbouring districts. "The upper belt was the virtual kingdom of Meches"<sup>50</sup>. The Rajbanshis and the Muslims were immigrants. But they began to settle down long before the annexation of Duars took place. In the pre-annexation period, south Mainaguri was a part of Baikunthapur Zemindari. The Raikots, i.e., the Zemindars of Baikunthapur, settled these lands with the residents of Jalpaiguri. The Raikots being non-resident jotedars, encouraged the Rajbanshis and Koches to settle there as under-tenants. For some other reasons also early settlements were made in this area. But, in so far as Western Duars was concerned the Meches were, truly speaking, the sons of the soil.

IV.4.25... In the years 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1941 the number of Meches in Jalpaiguri district was 22,350, 19,893, 10,777, 9,510 and 6,386 respectively<sup>51</sup>. There had been a net exodus of the Mech people from Jalpaiguri to Assam<sup>52</sup>. Though the real cause of exodus is not known it may be suggested that the establishment of tea gardens in the Duars might have prompted them to move eastward. One of the reasons is that tea gardens were established by converting the jungles and bushes where

the Meches used to practise their shifting cultivation. Eviction from their original places of habitat led the Meches to leave the place. Let us look at the location of tea gardens vis-a-vis the concentration of Mech population in the Western Duars.

IV.4.26 The major tea producing areas of Jalpaiguri district were Mal, Matiali, Nagrakata, Dhupguri, Madarihat and Kalchini. Among these police stations Mal, Matiali and Nagrakata have the highest concentration of tea estates. The spread of tea gardens gradually became thinner as one proceeded from western to eastern police stations of Jalpaiguri district. The following table would show this.

TABLE IV.4 - TOTAL AREA UNDER PLANTATIONS IN DIFFERENT POLICE STATIONS IN JALPAIGURI DISTRICT IN 1906-07

Name of Police station	River boundary	Total number of estates	Total area under plantation (in acres)
Jalpaiguri Sadar		3	3824.87
Rajganj		2	2188.46
Mal	Tista-Jaldhaka	43	45924.79
Matiali		16	24444.88
Nagrakata		21	27801.04
Dhupguri		26	44757.60
Mainaguri		3	3568.65
Falakata		6	9136.71
Madarihat	Torsa-Raidak	13	29187.55
Kalchini		19	104368.61
Kumargram		1	20454.46
Birpara	Raidak-Sankosh	1	2549.61
Alipurduar		5	6783.98

Source: Mukherjee, S. - Emergence of Bengalee Entrepreneurship in Tea Plantations of Jalpaiguri District (1879-1933), unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Bengal, 1978, p. 194.

IV.4.27 It can be seen from the table that in the Sadar sub-division of Jalpaiguri district (comprising the police stations Jalpaiguri and Rajganj) only about six thousand acres (i.e., about 2% of the total area) were taken up for tea cultivation in the given period. Except this small area, the tea planting areas of Jalpaiguri situate in the Western Duars part of the district. It is in this latter part and more particularly in Kalchini, Mal and Madarihat police stations, where both acreage and the number of estates were large, that the Mech population was concentrated<sup>53</sup>.

IV.4.28 From Table IV.4 it is evident that most of the tea gardens in the Duars were set up in the areas between the river Tista and Jaldhaka, Torsa and Raidak, and Raidak and Sankosh<sup>54</sup>. Comparing the location of the tea gardens with the areas where Meches were reported by D.H.E. Sunder in his settlement report (1889-95) to cultivate lands<sup>53</sup>, it can be found that almost all the tea gardens were established in those areas where there had been large concentration of the Meches. For instance, Atiabari Tea Co. which was established in 1904, was reported by Mr. Sunder to be inhabited by the Meches who cultivated land by payment of Dao-tax. The establishment of this tea estate completely ousted the Meches who used to cultivate land in that area. In the same way, Bhatkhawa tea estate and Rajabhat tea estate which were established in 1903 and 1910 respectively, had perhaps taken away the opportunity of the Meches to cultivate in those lands. To add another example, the opening up of tea estates between Borojhar and the Buxa forests<sup>56</sup> which were reported by Mr. Sunder to be inhabited by the Meches<sup>57</sup>, had thrown

the Meches out of cultivation from those areas. Examples of the conversion of land once cultivated and inhabited by the Meches into tea plantations can be multiplied.

IV.4.29 In fact, the progress of tea cultivation depended on the speedy settlement policy in the "waste" land. It has been mentioned that one of the major constraints of the expansion of tea cultivation in the first decade of the twentieth century was the scarcity of land. By 1907-08, no more waste lands were available. It compelled the Indian entrepreneurs to search for arable jote lands suitable for tea cultivation<sup>58</sup>. Thus slowly but steadily jote lands were taken up by the Indian entrepreneurs in the Western Duars. This is evident from the Table IV.5 below.

TABLE IV.5 - NUMBER OF COMPANIES RAISED BY THE JALPAIGURI BENGALLEES BETWEEN 1912 & 1919 WITHIN THEIR ESTATES IN JOTE AND KHAS LANDS

Year	Number of companies	Area where their estates situated in	
		Jote	Khas
1912	8	6	2*
1913	5	5	-
1914	2	1	1
1915	-	-	-
1916	-	-	-
1917	6	6	-
1918	-	-	-
1919	8	8	-
Total	29	26	3

Source : Mukherjee, S. - op. cit., p. 200.

\*The two entries in Jalpaiguri khas lands were virtually old estates, Gazuldoha and Kalabari. Khas lands and wate lands are the same.

IV.4.30 The above table reveals that between 1912 and 1914, of the 15 companies raised by the Bengalee entrepreneurs of Jalpaiguri, 11 companies happened to be situated in jote lands of Jalpaiguri district. In spite of the imposition of the ban, it can be found that 14 companies were raised in jote lands in Jalpaiguri district within the period under ban. As is mentioned earlier, the conversion of jote land into tea gardens came to a temporary halt in 1914, following a ban on such conversion by the Government. However, the ban was lifted in 1921 after which the expansion of the plantation mainly took place by converting jote lands into tea gardens<sup>59</sup>. "The conversion of jote lands into tea estate was permitted by Board of Revenue and Government of Bengal [ after the lifting of the ban ]<sup>and</sup> most of the estates were situated on jote land in the Jalpaiguri district areas"<sup>59A</sup>.

IV.4.31 The settlement of waste land in a quicker pace and the gradual conversion of jote lands into tea estates resulted in uprooting of the Meches from their traditional places of habitat and perhaps led them to move further east, where land was still plenty. In this context Mr. Mukherjee observed : "Their eventual decline in this area can be explained in the following manner : the northern belt of Western Duars was gradually brought under tea cultivation after annexation. The Meches lived in this belt and having no proprietary right on land, were easily displaced. They migrated to east. Some of them settled in the easterly thanas (police stations) of Western Duars, i.e., Kalchini and Kumargram, but the rest migrated to Goalpara district of Assam"<sup>60</sup>.

IV.4.32 It may be noted that there was a considerable increase of Mech population in the Goalpara district of Assam between the periods 1881 to 1901. In 1881, Mech population was 57,390, which rose to 73,760 in 1901. But there had been a considerable fall in the number of Mech population in the next two decades. Their number was 68,900 in 1911 and only 8,292 in 1931<sup>61</sup>. According to C.C. Sanyal, "the fall in the number [of Mech people] in later years 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"<sup>62</sup>. 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<sup>63</sup>.

IV.4.33 However, if we accept Hodgson's contention<sup>64</sup> 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 observation<sup>65</sup> that the term Mech is, at present day, confined to the speakers of plain Kachari or Boro 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 had fallen continuously in Jalpaiguri whereas the number had increased steadily in Goalpara over the periods from 1891 to 1931. C.C. Sanyal noted, "Analysing the figures of the Census Reports it appear that there was a large exodus of the Mech from Bengal towards

Assam and then further eastwards"<sup>66</sup>.

IV.4.34 Mr. B.B. Mukherjee in his settlement report of Jalpaiguri district in 1935 pointed out that in competition the Meches would not stand the greater intelligence of the Rajbanshis and the Mahammadans to whom they sold their land in the more developed area and moved eastwards towards the less developed tracts, and most of them had crossed over to Assam<sup>67</sup>.

IV.4.35 From the facts and figures cited above it appears that though social and psychological reasons might led the Meches in planning to leave Western Duars, the most important reason was that the establishment of tea gardens in the Duars might have promoted them to move eastward. It has already been shown above from various evidences that tea plantations were established by converting jungles and bushes, where the Meches used to practise their shifting cultivation, into plantations. Maulavi Wajih Uddin Ahmed, the settlement officer to the Deputy Commissioner, Jalpaiguri, in his report (1895) expressed concern for the Meches in the following words : "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"<sup>68</sup>. It is this apprehension of Mr. Ahmed which came to be true in practice and led many of the Meches, the "sons of the soil", to be evicted from land and ultimately led them

to leave Western Duars.

IV.4.36 But the Meches so evicted were not properly rehabilitated by the Government. They did not find employment in tea estates as most of the labourers were imported from outside the State for various reasons as stated earlier. It <sup>been</sup> has observed that "With the beginning of tea gardens, in the 'waste lands' some Meches were reduced to the status of 'illegal squatters'. Some of them were, of course 'resettled', but not all of them. The 'resettlement' occurred also after a considerable 'time lag' (10 to 15 years). Meches were not given jobs in 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' "69. Thus, the development of tea gardens did not confer any real benefit to the Meches; rather it simply drove them to the state of landlessness. The remaining Meches turned to settled cultivators and the large part of agricultural land gradually came to be held by the "immigrant" peoples.

IV.4.37 Thus we see that the overall impact of development of the plantation industry on the economy of Duars region was on no count very much favourable on the development of the agrarian sector. The industry received a considerable amount of investment judging from the standpoint of the level of investment in other industries in contemporary times. Surplus that was generated in the plantation sector was also

substantial. But very negligible part of it was transferred to the subsistence sector for its development. From all evidences it becomes clear that most part of the surplus was spent in financing the conspicuous consumption expenditure of peoples at the upper eschelons of the plantation social structure, some part of it was spent for financing investment in trade or real estate building elsewhere other than the district. Still another part was reinvested for the improvement and expansion of cultivation in the estates. Savings of the plantation labourers also did not come to be invested or circulated in the agricultural sector in a big way for various reasons. Nevertheless, a part of the savings of the tea garden labourers was expended in purchasing land in the fringe areas of tea estates, but was never invested for the improvement of agriculture.

IV.4.38 However, a commercial interaction constantly took place between the population in the plantation sector and that in the agrarian sector, though not to the extent as one could expect due to some built-in-characteristics of the plantation sector. Whatever little impact the plantation sector did exert on the subsistence sector was effected through this commercial interaction. A part of the procurement of many necessities of life of the plantation population was made from the surplus produces of the agrarian rural population. In the process, farmers could sale some of their products. But their demand could not rise much as most of the supplies of these articles were ensured from the sources outside the district and for other reasons. As regards the supply of requirements of the industry, it could be found that the entire

supply used to come from abroad. But it is easily discernible that there was a great potentiality of development of the industries supplying plantation related inputs and implements.

IV.4.39 Plantation industry did not attract and provide employment to the local people. The recruitment policy of the planters was largely responsible for this. Employment of labourers from outside the state at low rates of wages gave rise to a very high rate of profit and ensured a better discipline of the labour folk. The local people, perhaps, were not much interested to work in tea gardens due to low wage rates, their age-old affinity to agricultural pursuits, and since employment in land was still not much scarce and finally due to the unhealthiness of the working place. But population was growing at a very fast rate in agrarian sector due to emigration from the neighbouring districts. As a result, the excess population had no alternative but to choose agriculture as the mainstay of economic life. The cultivable land was limited, all waste lands were gradually brought under cultivation. Tea estates occupied a large amount of land, a significant part of which was kept idle. Moreover, some amount of ordinary cultivable land (jote land ) was also used for expansion of cultivation. The pressure of population on land consequently got intensified, giving rise to higher degrees of sub-infeudation and fragmentation of holdings. Besides, the worse consequence that followed was an enormous growth of the adhiari (share cropping) system with a very large number of adhiars clinging on land without having any right or protection and carrying on agriculture on a bare subsistence basis. Thus the structure of land holding pattern

undergone a change in the form of inequality in land holding without, however, any change in the agrarian social structure and in the mode of cultivation.

IV.4.40 The worst effect that followed was that the development of tea industry alienated a large number of people from their lands who were the sons of the soil. Some of these people evicted from land, perhaps turned to adhiars and agricultural labourers and many of them left the place and became victims of development of the tea industry.

IV.4.41 The urban centres and the peoples therein derived some benefit from the development of the plantation sector but neither the subsistence sector nor the agrarian population derived any tangible boon and remained backward. The tea plantation have, in fact, created a dualism in the economy of the Duars region where "a capitalistic nucleus exists in symbiosis with an archaic structure. The capitalistic nucleus has failed to modify the pre-existing structural conditions . . . With large investments once made in the plantation have failed to stimulate agricultural modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation in this area"<sup>70</sup>.

IV.4.42 Thus, it appears on all counts that, inspite of ample potentialities, the plantation sector did not exert enough tangible and conducive impact on the development of the agrarian economy of the Duars region.

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26. Similar observation has been made by Chaudhuri, op. cit., p. 106.
27. Ghosh, B.C., op. cit., pp. 47-50.  
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28. The wage structure introduced around 1891 had remained in tact till almost upto independence when the basic wage was raised from 4 to 6 annas per day for male and 3 to 5 annas per day for female workers.  
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