

ABSTRACT

The term 'Tribe' has been defined as a group of indigenous people having common name, language, and territory tied by strong kinship bonds, having distinct customs, rituals and believes. The present popular term 'Tribe' or 'Scheduled Tribe' in India refers to a category of people included in the list of Indian Constitution for their socio-economic promotion. The Study region, Mal subdivision of Jalpaiguri district, shares about 40% tribal population to the total population as per 2011 census. The subdivision is situated between 26°36' and 27° 0' North latitudes, and 88°14' and 88°40' East longitudes. Presently, Mal subdivision consists of Mal municipality and three community development blocks, namely, Mal, Matiali and Nagrakata consisting of 22 gram panchayats (GPs). The subdivision spreads over the foothill regions of the Himalayas so the relief is undulating to plain bounded by 300 meter and 66 meter contour lines in north and south respectively. The climate is characterised by tropical monsoon.

Over the years, population has been increased in the subdivision. Tribal population presently living in the subdivision belongs to two broad ethnic groups, namely, the Mongoloid who are indigenous tribal people of the Dooars region like Limbu, Garo and Mech; and the Dravidian groups who are migrated from the Chhotonagpur plateau region after the introduction of tea plantation in the second half of 19th century as workers. Ten major tribal groups have been identified in Mal subdivision. They are arranged as per descending numeric strength: Oraon, Munda, Santal, Lohar, Mahali, Kharia, Tamang, Limbu, Malpaharia, and Mech. Oraon is the largest tribal community in the subdivision followed by Munda, Santal and Lohars. The Oraons are mainly tea garden workers; hence they are in absolute majority in tea garden based GP areas. Maximum concentration of Munda people occurs at GPs of Champaguri, Rangamatee and Odlabari. The Santals are admirer of nature, and never fell down any useful or ornamental tree. In non-tea garden based GP areas, Santals' concentrations are remarkable such as Chapadanga (64%), Moulani (51%) and Kranti (36%). The Santals usually have large family to accommodate in a house. They are not only dependent on tea gardens for earnings. Rather, a considerable amount of Santal people are now engaged in agriculture, and different secondary economic activities. The Lohar tribes are at present forced to leave their traditional occupation of ironsmith and some of them have migrated to nearby towns in the house building activities, and grill factories. They are skilled in making and repairing agricultural implements. Majority of the Lohars are now engaged in tea garden in the study area. In the GPs of Sulkapara (22%), Angrabhasa-II (22%) and Looksan (19%) -the Lohars are major tribal communities. The economy of the Mahali people

is based on basketry, collection of forest produces, agriculture and tea garden. Maximum concentrations of Mahalis in respect of total tribal households are found in Tesimla (14%), Changmari (12%), and Matiali-Batabari-I (11%) GPs. The other tribal communities like Kharia, Tamang, Limbu, Malpaharia, and Mech are concentrated in some specific places of Mal subdivision. The Mech and the Limbu people are the indigenous tribal communities but with the arrival of other tribal communities from the Jharkhand region, they moved eastwards. Now they are mainly living in Alipurduar district as well as in the Dhupguri block of Jalpaiguri district. Among the ten major tribal communities, on the basis of HDI scores, Mundas occupy top most rank followed by Santals, Meches, and Limbus. The Mundas are the most educated among the above tribal groups and many of them are now engaged in different govt. jobs as well as secondary and tertiary economic activities. The Santals mostly depend on agriculture of their own land, hence their income is noteworthy. The Kharias, Oraons and Lohars are at the bottom of the HDI list.

The tribal people are unique in respect of customs, traditions, believes, and other social dimensions. There is no system of dowry, no caste division, even divorcee and widow remarriages are socially accepted among them. The tribal sex ratio in Mal subdivision is very high (1004 female against 1000 male), compared to the non-tribal sex ratio (954) as per 2011 census. The tribal sex ratio is very high in GPs of Looksan (1058), Indong Matiali (1045), Damdim (1041) and Matiali Hat (1036). Early age of marriage is very common among the tribes. Before attaining the prescribed age of marriage, 30% tribal people, on an average, get married. Mutual divorce system is there among the tribal people. 2% records of mutual divorce were recorded during sample field survey. There are 33% tribal people who are belonging to the age group of below 15 years, 62% tribal people has the age group of 15-59 years and only 5% are 60 years and above. Fertility rate of the tribal people in Mal subdivision is 28 per thousand people as per sample data collected from the field in 2015 which is higher than the state (16) and national (20) averages. Crude death rate of the tribal people is 10.5 per 1000 population as per primary data which is also higher than the state (6.3) and national (7.6) averages. Infant mortality (66.3 per thousand) and maternal mortality (1.17 per 1000 live births) rates are also high among the tribal people in the subdivision of Mal with compared to the state and the country. The IMR for the state and country were 48 and 33 in 2011 census respectively. Tribal male literacy rate is 65% and female literacy rate is 53% as per household survey data. Overall school dropout rate for tribal children is 40% in Mal subdivision. However, dropout rates are lower for tribal girls (28%) than the boys (46%). *Sandri* is the communicative language commonly used (61%) by the tribal communities.

Tribal people generally believe in Animism. At present a considerable amount of tribal people have been converted to Christianity but most of them think that they are Hindus. As per sample data collected during field survey among the tribes, there are 66% Hindus, 31% Christians and 3% believing in Animism in the Mal subdivision. By analysing inter regional disparities on educational and demographic indicators in GP level, it is found that tribal people living in Chapadanga, Moulani, Lataguri and Bidhannagar are in advanced positions in comparison to the others. The GPs of Changmari, Tesimla, Damdim, and Bagrakot are in weak position as regards the social development.

On an average, the crude activity rate for the tribal people in Mal subdivision is 44% and for the non-tribe it is 39.3% as per field survey. Average tribal female workforce participation rate is 33.5% while the non-tribal female workforce participation rate is 23%. This proves that both tribal men and women are more employed in economic activities than the non-tribal people. In spite of their high rate of engagement in economic activities, they are very poor due to their poor daily wage in tea garden i.e. only Rs. 128. Many of them are temporary workers who are employed during plucking period only. On an average, 30% tribal families' monthly earning is \leq Rs. 2500 per month, only 6% tribal families earning is \geq Rs. 10,000, while for the non-tribal families the share is 15%. So the tribal people are poorer than the non-tribal people in every block of the Mal subdivision. Housing conditions depicts that, on an average, 13% tribal families live in one compartment house, while the non-tribal single room families are only 4%. Three and more than three compartment houses are fewer for the tribal people (21%) compared to non-tribal families (80%). So, tribal people are in distressed condition in question of shelter compared to the non-tribal people. Similarly, household assets of the tribal people are also very much limited. On an average, there are 51% tribal houses in Mal subdivision who have separate kitchen, 50% have latrine within the premises and 46% have water facilities. But the non-tribal counter parts are in better condition.

Modern technology, modernisation and communication technology have cast their influence on the tribal economy and society. The performances of dances and songs are influenced by the modern rhythmic instruments replacing many of their age old handmade instruments. Culture of tribal people is gradually languishing due to modernisation and change of religious believes from animism to established religions. Traditional shifting cultivation has been abolished today. Use of tractors, irrigation pump sets, sprayer machines, rice hullers, rotary tillers are now found to be increasing in number. On an average, 38% tribal farmers are using such technologies along with chemical fertilisers and HYV seeds. The chi-square statistical test confirms that, there are changes in respect of impact of modern

agricultural tools with a slight fluctuation in different GPs. Pearson's product moment correlation analysis concludes that, impact of modern economic activities on the traditional livelihood pattern of tribal people is insignificant. Tribal people in the study area are also habituated by modern means of communication technology like mobile phones, televisions, refrigerators and computers. The use of such technology by the tribal people is still insignificant because the percentage share for the same for non-tribal people is more than the tribal people. Finally, it may be stated that modern technology has played a significant role to change tribal society but upon the economy it is quite insignificant.

Main social problems of the tribal people are illiteracy, problems of assimilation, erosion of their unique identity and drug addiction etc. Illiteracy and formal primary education prevails among the tribal people. The indigenous tribal people are assimilated with the in-migrated tribal people in this region. As a result, the rich self-governing culture of each community has been demolished today. Due to influx of non-tribal people and continuous mixing of different tribal communities the unique identities of each tribal community have been lost. Consumption of rice beer or *hariya* is a daily routine of the male people. In addition to that, the young and new generations are addicted to other country and foreign liquor. The main economic problems of the tribal people are poverty and exploitation, land alienation, subsistence economy, unemployment etc. Starvation and deaths are very common due to malnutrition, hunger and disease when the tea gardens remain closed for longer periods. Land of the tribal people has been ceased by the tea planters. Now, they are landless labourers. Many young people and couples are working in different provinces as masons, construction workers, boulder lifting labourers etc. Due to unemployment, driven out of home by poverty, hundreds of tribal girls mostly teenagers have gone missing. Health and hygienic conditions are below the average.

For the tribal people living in Mal subdivision, the suggestive measures adopted are: improvement of literacy rate, circulation about government schemes laid down for tribal development, assurance of job securities, eradication of drug addiction problems, and reproductive health care facilities etc. Growing awareness among the tribal people can remove many problems. It is found that, there is a strong negative relationship between literacy and drug consumption ($r=-0.77$). Assurance of job securities in the tea gardens by the government is a vital step to stop starvation and premature deaths. Alternative job opportunities can help them to earn more. In implementing the developmental and other schemes, the planers and the administration should have good will to serve the poor tribal people; otherwise, the benefits will not reach up to the grass root levels.