

CHAPTER IV

TRIBAL WOMEN POPULATION AND NORTH BENGAL SCENARIO: DEMOGRAPHIC SETTLEMENT AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC SETTING- A REGION SPECIFIC ANALYSIS

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF NORTH BENGAL TRIBES

Primarily the tribal population in North Bengal comprise of tea garden workers. This large population of tribals owe their origins in North Bengal to the large influx of tribal population brought about by the British, primarily aimed at manning the tea gardens. Diverse tribal communities thereby conglomerated principally into the northern part of West Bengal, predominately as tea garden workers. However, it does goes to suffice that not all tribals residing in North Bengal were brought in as tea garden workers. Quite a majority of the tribes migrated in search for better avenues for livelihood. Not all of these tribal groups got incorporated into the tea industry. They thus had to eke out their own means for sustenance. Many of these tribal groups who migrated from place like Chota Nagpur and Madhya Pradesh have over the course of time managed to sustain themselves based on having a livelihood which is divergent to the tea garden tribal working populace.

The northern part of West Bengal, popularly known as North Bengal, consists of six districts, namely Malda, South Dinajpur, North Dinajpur, Darjeeling Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. The region connects rest of India with the North-East and has a long international border with Bhutan, Tibet, Nepal and Bangladesh. Agriculture, agro-based industries, tea, timber, commerce and tourism constitute the backbone of the region's economy. The region has drawn a large number of tribes from Central India, popularly known as Chotanagpur, and North-East India in different historical periods. The expanding *zamindari* and *rayatwari* estates, the vast fallow lands, and the sprawling tea industries had drawn tribal populations from various parts in various parts of the last century. The tribes of North Bengal are predominantly engaged in agriculture and tea gardens and their economy could largely be termed as subsistence economy. The subsistence economy forces the tribal women into manual work and they predominantly work as agricultural labourers and tea workers.

The maximum population amongst the districts of West Bengal resides in North 24 Paragana (which accounts for 11.04 percentage of the total West Bengal population). South 24 Pargana and Burdwan districts take the next lion's share of the total residential

population of West Bengal i.e. 8.93 and 8.46 respectively. If we see the six districts of North Bengal the most populous districts are Maldah (4.38%) and Jalpaiguri (4.24%). Among the six districts of North Bengal which is less populous amongst all is Dakshin Dinajpur 1.83%. Darjeeling district (which falls under my jurisdiction of studies) accounts for 2.02 percentage of West Bengal population. Another district with which I have dealt with during the course of my study is Jalpaiguri which accounts for 4.24 percentage of the West Bengal population. The subsequent table brings forth the population distribution amongst various districts of West Bengal.(see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 : West Bengal Population and District wise Population 2011

Sl No.	District	Population 2011	% share in total population of the state 2011
Total	West Bengal	9,13,47,736	100
1.	Burdwan	77,23,663	8.46
2.	Birbhum	35,02,387	3.83
3.	Bankura	35,96,292	3.94
4.	PurbaMedinipur	50,94,238	5.58
5.	PaschimMedinipur	59,43,300	6.51
6.	Hooghly	55,20,389	6.04
7.	Purulia	29,27,965	3.21
8.	North 24 Parganas	1,00,82,852	11.04
9.	South 24Parganas	81,53,176	8.93
10.	Howrah	48,41,638	5.30
11.	Nadia	51,68,488	5.66
12.	Murshidabad	71,02,430	7.78
13.	Darjeeling	18,42,034	2.02
14.	Jalpaiguri	38,69,675	4.24
15.	Coochbehar	28,22,780	3.09
16.	Uttar Dinajpur	30,00,849	3.29
17.	DakshinDinajpur	16,70,931	1.83
18.	Maldah	39,97,970	4.38
19.	Kolkata	44,86,679	4.91

Source: Census of India, 2011

A statistical analysis in context of the wider Indian population has been made in this table which has attempted to break-down the population broadly under the sub-headings of gender predominance, neo-natal percentage, educational and social background. In Indian context the population still at large has a male preponderance, which is reflected in heavily prejudiced percentage towards the male population. Though the state of west Bengal lags behind marginally vis-a-vis the national al literacy percentage, the two districts namely Darjeeling and Jalpiguri which constitute the field of my study can boast

of substantially higher literacy standards when compared with other districts of West Bengal. The gender ratio stacks up quite favourably for the women population, when compared with national and state level statistics. (see table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Total Population of India, West Bengal and Six districts of North Bengal-2011

	Population	Males	Females	Child (0-6)	Literacy	Sex Ratio
India	104,545,716	52,547,215	51,998,501	16.01%	58.95%	990
West Bengal	5,296,953	2,649,974	2,646,979	13.17%	57.93%	999
Darjeeling	1,846,823	937,259	900,564	953	79.56	970
Jalpaiguri	3,872,846	1,983,064	1,889,782	955	73.25	953
Cooch behar	2,819,086	1,451,542	1,367,544	953	74.78	970
Uttar Dinajppur	3,007,134	1,551,066	1,456,068	953	59.07	939
DakshinDinajpur	1,676,276	857,199	819,077	957	72.82	956
Malda	3,988,845	2,051,541	1,937,304	944	61.73	950

Source: Census of India, 2011.

In West Bengal, according to 2001 Census, tribal population is more than 44 lakh which increased to 52 lakh in 2011 Census of which 2,649,974 are males and 2,646,979 are females. Percentage of ST population in West Bengal is 5.8. Total tribal population is 5,296,953 of which 4,855,115 lives in rural area whereas 441,838 reside in urban area. Child (0-6) is 13.17% according to 2011 Census and sex – ratio for the same year is 999. Scheduled Tribe literacy rate is 57.93%. the number of households is 1,160,069. The state has registered 15.7 per cent decadal growth of ST population in 1991-2001 and 20.2 per cent in 2001-2011. In North Bengal, the tribal population is more than 14.5 lakh, of which 49.6 per cent are women. Tribal population in six North Bengal districts constitutes 33 per cent of the total tribal population in the State. Among the North Bengal districts tribal population in Cooch Behar is 14246, which is the smallest in a single district, whereas Jalpaiguri has the largest size of tribal population at 64,1688. Tribal population in Cooch Behar constitutes only 0.32 per cent of the total population in the district, but in Jalpaiguri district the percentage share of tribal population to total population is 14.56. Among other districts the percentage share of tribal population to total population is 5.51 in South Dinajpur, 5.15 in Malda, 4.60 in Darjeeling, and 2.84 in North Dinajpur. Sex ratio in the tribal population is much higher compared to that of the total population. According to

2001 census whereas the sex ratio for the total population in West Bengal is 934, for the tribal population it is 982. In the districts where the concentration of tribal population is high, i.e., in Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, South Dinajpur and Malda sex ratio is always more than 980. Whereas the sex ratio for the total population is falling in almost all parts of the country the tribal population in North Bengal do not show any such trend at least in 2001 census (see Tables 1, 2 & 3).

Table 4.3.- Area, Population, Decennial Growth Rate and Density for 2001 and 2011 at a glance for West Bengal and the Districts of North Bengal

Sl. No.	District	Area	Population 2001			Population 2011			Decennial growth rate %		Population density per sq km.	
			P	M	F	P	M	F	1991-2001	2001-2011	2001	2011
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
	West Bengal	88,752	8017619	4146598	3871021	9134773	4692738	4442034	17.77	13.93	903	1029
1	Darjiling	3,149	1609172	830644	778528	1842034	934796	907238	23.79	14.47	511	585
2	Jalpaiguri	6,227	3401173	1751145	1650028	3869675	1980068	1889607	21.45	13.77	546	621
3	Koch Bihar	3,387	2479155	1272094	1207061	2822780	1453590	1369190	14.19	13.86	732	833
4	Uttar Dinajpur	3,140	2441794	1259737	1182057	3000849	1550219	1450630	28.72	22.90	778	956
5	Dakshin Dinajpur	2,219	1503178	770335	732843	1670931	855104	815827	22.15	11.16	677	753
6	Maldah	3,733	3290468	1689406	1601062	3997970	2061593	1936377	24.78	21.50	881	1071

Source: Census of India, 2001 & 2011.

Table 4.4: District-wise population growth of North Bengal

	Population		Male		Female		Population Growth	
	2011	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001
Darjeeling	1846823	1609172	937259	830644	909564	778528	14.77%	23.79%
Jalpaiguri	3872846	3401173	1983064	1751145	1889782	1650028	13.87%	21.45%
Coochbehar	2819086	2479155	1451542	1272094	1367544	1207061	13.71%	14.19%
Uttar Dinajpur	3007134	2441794	1551066	1259737	1456068	1182057	23.15%	28.72%
Dakshin Dinajpur	1676276	1503178	857199	770335	819077	732843	11.52%	22.15%
Maldah	3988845	3290468	2051541	1689406	1937304	1601062	21.22%	24.78%

Source: Census of India, 2011

Table 4.5: Population Growth of Six Districts of North Bengal

Population Growth of six districts of North Bengal		
District	2011(%)	2001(%)
Darjeeling	14.77	23.79
Jalpaiguri	13.87	21.45
Cooch behar	13.71	14.19
Uttar Dinajppur	23.15	28.72
DakshinDinajpur	11.52	22.15
Malda	21.22	24.78

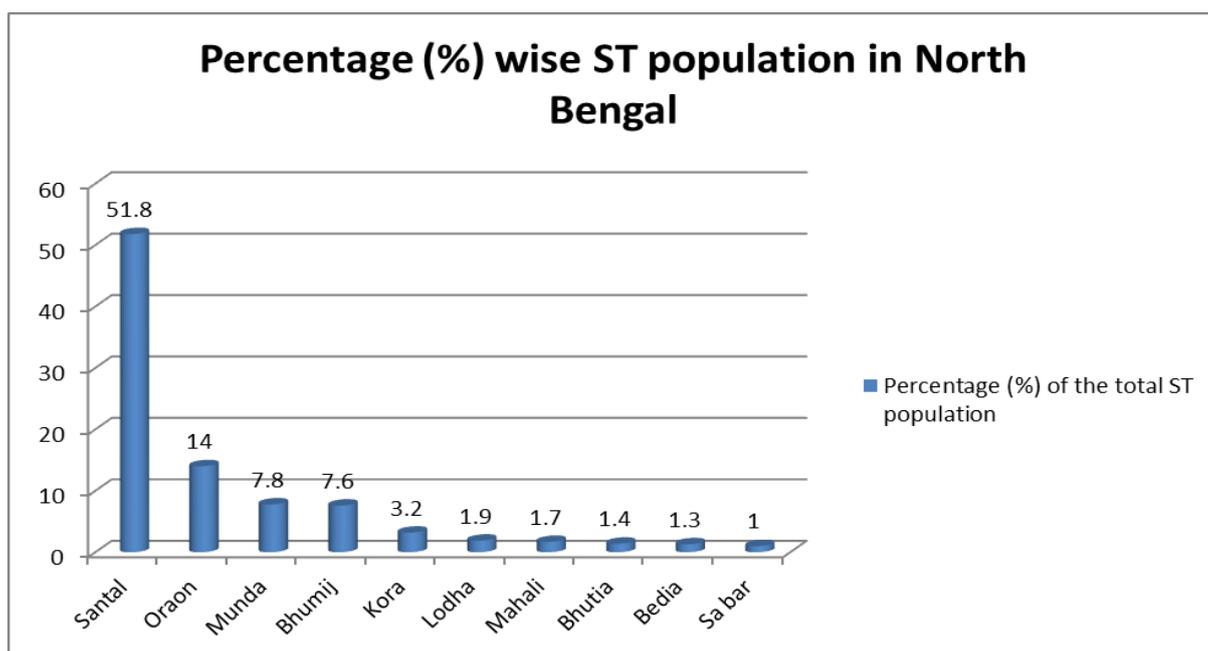
Source: Census of India, 2001, 2011.

Table 4.6: Percent wise ST population in West Bengal

Sl.no.	Scheduled Tribe	Population	Percentage (%) of the total ST population
1.	Santal	2,280, 540	51.8
2.	Oraon	617,138	14.0
3.	Munda	341,542	7.8
4.	Bhumij	336,436	7.6
5.	Kora	142,789	3.2
6.	Lodha	84,966	1.9
7.	Mahali	76,102	1.7
8.	Bhutia	60,091	1.4
9.	Bedia	55,979	1.3
10.	Sa bar	43,599	1
	Total	40,39,192	100.00%

Source: Census of India, 2001

Chart No.3- Showing Percentage of ST population in North Bengal, 2001



From the above table, it is clearly shown that Santal, Oraon, Munda, Bhumij, Kora, Lodha, Mahalli, Bhutia, Bedia and Sabar concentration in the state of West Bengal are 51.8 per cent, 14.0 per cent, 7.8 per cent, 7.6 per cent, 3.2 per cent, 1.9 per cent, 1.7 per cent, 1.4 per cent, 1.3 per cent and 1 per cent respectively. The over all sex ratio of the ST population in West Bengal is 982 which is higher than their national average of 987. The child sex ratio among them is 981 and this is much 111 better (0 - 6 years) as compared to the national average of 973 among the STs according to 2001 Census. (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.7: Tribal population in West Bengal and North Bengal in 2001 and 2011

	2001			2011		
	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female
West Bengal %	440,679 4	222392 4 50.47%	218287 0 49.53%	5,296,95 3	2,649,97 4	2,646,97 9
North Bengal %	145,433 0	733064 50.40%	721266 49.60%	731,733	365,239	366,494
Percentage of NB ST pop. to State ST pop.	33.00%	32.96%	33.04%	13.81%	13.78%	13.84%

Source: Census of India, 2001, 2011

The above table (4.7) shows that the tribal population according the Census 2011, comprise of 13.81 per cent of the total West Bengal population. Substantial part of this resides in North Bengal primarily employed as tea garden workers and in various agricultural activities. Since my area of work is in North Bengal, it provides a huge scope for the effect of various government initiatives to enhance this tribal population which are potential beneficiaries of all government schemes. Percentage of ST population is substantially higher in Jalpaiguri district when compared with other districts. This is largely because of the various tea gardens which are scattered across the district, which primarily boast of tribal population as the predominant working force (see Table 4.8) north Bengal thus provides for the fertile ground for the analysis of impact of socio-political measures primarily aimed towards empowerment of tribal population.

Table 4.8: Tribal population in North Bengal districts according to 2001 and 2011 Census

State/ District	ST Population						% of ST Population to District total pop.		
	2001			2011					
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Cooch Behar	14246	7425	6821	4,654	2,585	2,069	0.32	0.33	0.31
Jalpaiguri	641688	324250	317438	5,740	2,902	2,838	14.56	14.58	14.54
Darjeeling	204167	102287	101880	397,389	197,251	200,138	4.63	4.60	4.67
Uttar Dinajpur	124865	63123	61742	3,441	1,736	1,705	2.83	2.84	2.83
DakshinDinajpur	242317	122442	119875	6,525	3,237	3,288	5.50	5.51	5.49
Malda	227047	113537	113510	3,13,984	1,57,528	1,56,456	5.15	5.11	5.20

Source: Census of India, 2001& 2011.

Table 4.9: Sex Ratio: Tribe and Non-Tribe Compared (2001, 2011)

State / District	Total Population				Tribal Population	
	Total		0-6 group		Total	0-6 group
	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2001
India	933	943	927	919	978	973
West Bengal	934	950	960	956	982	981
Darjeeling	937	970	962	953	996	1001
Jalpaiguri	942	953	969	955	979	991
Kooch Behar	949	942	964	948	919	898
U. Dinajpur	938	939	965	953	978	973
D. Dinajpur	951	956	966	957	979	981
Malda	948	944	964	950	1000	985

Source: Census of India, 2001, 2011

Table 4.10: Literacy by Sex and Gender Gap in Literacy Rate in North Bengal for Total Pop and Tribal Pop 2001.

	Total population				Tribal population				
	Person	Male	Female	Gender gap	Person	Male	Female	Gender gap	Gender gap b/w total and tribal pop.
West Bengal	68.6	77.0	59.6	17.4	55.30	66.38	43.30	23.08	8.00
Cooch Behar	63.3	75.9	56.1	19.8	42.58	54.23	30.33	23.57	20.32
Jalpaiguri	62.9	72.8	52.2	20.6	55.48	65.06	45.85	19.21	16.32
Darjeeling	71.8	80.1	62.9	17.1	28.68	39.51	17.62	21.89	19.22
Uttar Dinajpur	47.9	58.5	36.5	22.0	42.81	55.14	30.22	24.92	20.79
DakshinDinajpur	63.6	72.4	54.3	18.1	32.15	44.72	19.63	25.09	18.15
Malda	50.3	58.8	41.3	17.5		44.7	19.6	25.1	

Source: Census of India, 2001

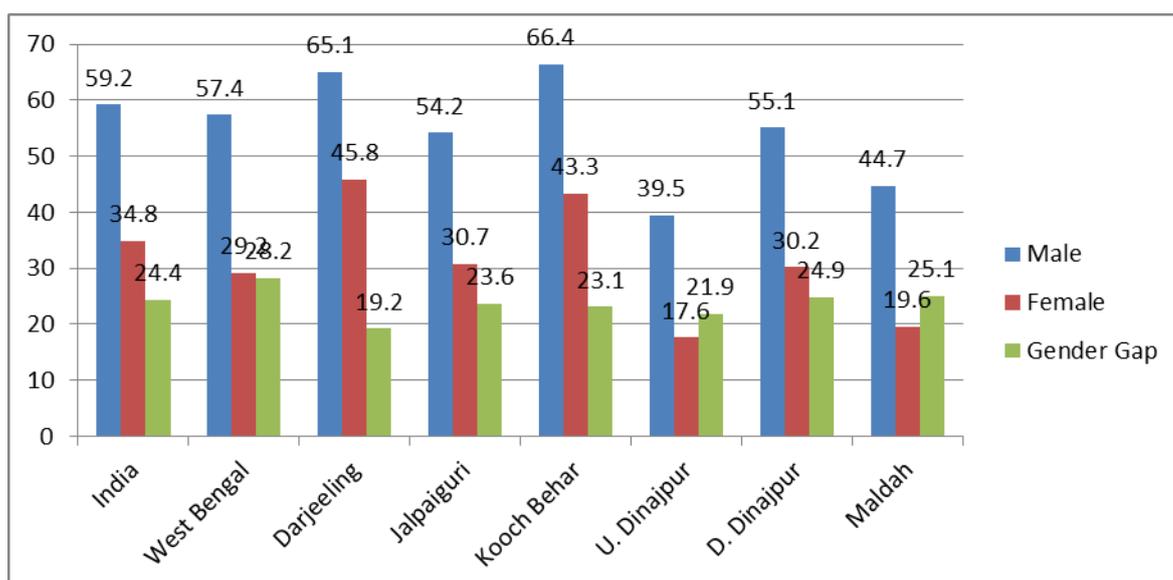
According to the Census of 2011 the tribal male literacy is 68.5 and the female literacy rate is 49.4 per cent and the tribal gender gap for India is 19.1 per cent. Despite government efforts to promote education among the Scheduled Tribes (STs), their literacy rates as compared to the national average have remained low. The literacy rate as per Census 2011 is 73 percent but for STs is 59 percent only. The overall literacy gap amongst the various groups and STs has come down from 19.77 percent in 1961 to 14.03 percent in 2011, a scrutiny of state-wise literacy data reveals that in most of the north eastern states like Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, STs are at par with the general population. Although still lags way behind the general population, the tribal population in India, West Bengal and even in North Bengal has made some significant progress in the field of education. Among the tribal male population the literacy rate is 59.2 per cent in India and in West Bengal the literacy is 57.4 per cent. The female literacy in the tribal population in India is only 34.8 per cent and in West Bengal it is 29.2 per cent. In Jalpaiguri, South Dinajpur and Malda districts the female literacy is 30.7, 30.2 and 19.6 per cent respectively. In all the districts the gender gap in literacy ranges between 19.2 per cent in Darjeeling district and 25.1 per cent in Malda district. The gender gap in literacy in North Bengal districts, however, is much less than the West Bengal figure of 28.2 (for details see Table 4.10, 4.11 and 4.12).

Table 4.11: Tribal Literacy Rate (2001)

	Male	Female	Gender Gap
India	59.2	34.8	24.4
West Bengal	57.4	29.2	28.2
Darjeeling	65.1	45.8	19.2
Jalpaiguri	54.2	30.7	23.6
Kooch Behar	66.4	43.3	23.1
U. Dinajpur	39.5	17.6	21.9
D. Dinajpur	55.1	30.2	24.9
Maldah	44.7	19.6	25.1

Source: Census of India, 2001

Chart No.4- Showing Tribal Literacy Rate in 2001



Since the tribal population largely lives in subsistence economy the work participation rate among them is generally high, compared to the general population. According to 2001 census, the work participation rate in India is 49.1 and in West Bengal it is marginally less at 48.8 per cent. While among the tribal males in West Bengal the participation rate is 53.8 among the females it is 43.7 – a gap of more than 10 per cent. The gender gap in work participation rate in the districts of North Bengal is equally wide. Among the districts of North Bengal the work participation rate is relatively high, around 50 per cent, in Malda, North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur districts while the rate is much lower, close to 41 per cent, in Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts.

Table 4.12: Tribal Literacy Rate compared with Total Literacy Rate (2001& 2011)

	Total Male		Total Female		Tribal Male	Tribal Female	Total Gender Gap	Tribal gender gap
	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2001		
India	75.26	82.14	53.67	65.46	59.2	34.8	16.68	24.4
West Bengal	77.02	82.7	59.61	71.2	57.4	29.2	11.5	28.2
Darjeeling	80.1	85.61	62.94	73.33	65.1	45.8	17.2	19.2
Jalpaiguri	72.8	80.52	52.21	66.73	54.2	30.7	20.6	23.6
Kooch Behar	75.9	80.71	56.12	68.49	66.4	43.3	19.8	23.1
U. Dinajpur	58.8	65.52	36.5	52.17	39.5	17.6	22.3	21.9
D. Dinajpur	72.4	78.37	54.3	67.01	55.1	30.2	18.1	24.9
Maldah	58.8	66.24	41.1	56.96	44.7	19.6	17.7	25.1

Source: Census of India, 2001, 2011

The female work participation rate in the latter three districts is also much less, almost by 10 per cent, than in the former three districts. A look at the sector-wise distribution of tribal workforce reveals that women are predominantly engaged as agricultural labourers. In West Bengal 70.4 percent of the tribal women workers are engaged as agricultural labourers against the all-India figure of 35 per cent. Tribal women outnumber the male workforce in this sector by more than 5 per cent in West Bengal. In the districts of North Bengal one can notice a contrasting picture; in the tea garden dominated districts like Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling the women engaged as agricultural labourers constitute 24.4 and 32 per cent of the women workforce but in agriculture-based districts namely North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Malda, and Cooch Behar the percentages of agricultural labourers are 83.4, 86.0, 83.5 and 51.7 respectively. In the non-agricultural occupations, the male workers outnumber the female workers quite significantly (see Tables 4.14 & 4.16).

Table 4.13: Tribal Work Participation Rate (2001)

	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female
India	49.1	53.2	44.8	50.4	53.8	46.9	34.6	46.8	21.6
W.Bengal	48.8	53.8	43.7	49.6	54.1	45.1	35.5	48.6	21.6
Darjeeling	40.9	48.2	33.5	42.2	49.0	35.4	31.0	42.2	19.9
Jalpaiguri	41.6	46.9	36.3	41.9	46.9	36.7	33.5	45.6	20.6
K. Behar	42.4	53.5	30.4	43.4	54.0	31.7	31.2	46.8	14.6
U. Dinaj	49.5	54.9	44.0	49.8	55.1	44.5	35.4	48.2	19.9
D. Dinaj	53.1	57.7	48.4	53.7	58.2	49.0	31.1	38.1	23.7
Malda	50.7	56.6	44.8	50.9	56.7	45.0	34.5	48.8	19.1

Source: Census of India, 2001.

Table 4.14: Tribal Work Participation as Agricultural Labourers and Other Workers (2001)

	Agricultural Labourers			Other Workers		
	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female
India	28.4	24.9	35.0	18.9	21.8	13.4
W.Bengal	68.7	65.6	70.4	15.1	19.2	12.8
Darjeeling	31.9	31.6	32.0	41.4	44.7	39.0
Jalpaiguri	23.4	21.6	24.4	61.5	66.2	58.5
K. Behar	49.0	42.3	51.7	23.9	30.8	21.1
U Dinaj	81.6	76.7	83.4	5.6	7.9	4.8
D. Dinaj	84.2	78.6	86.0	4.9	7.5	4.0
Maldah	81.6	76.8	83.5	6.0	9.1	4.7

Source: Census of India, 2001

Table 4. 15: Number of Workers and Work Participation Rate by Sex-2001

		Work participation rate(Main + Marginal)		
State/ District	Area	Person	Male	Female
West Bengal	Total	48.8	53.8	43.7
	Rural	49.6	54.1	45.1
	Urban	35.5	48.6	21.6
Darjeeling	Total	40.9	48.2	33.5
	Rural	42.2	49.0	35.4
	Urban	31.0	42.2	19.9
Jalpaiguri	Total	41.6	46.9	36.3
	Rural	41.9	46.9	36.7
	Urban	33.5	45.6	20.6
State/ District	Area	Person	Male	Female
Kooch Behar	Total	42.4	53.5	30.4
	Rural	43.4	54.0	31.7
	Urban	31.2	46.8	14.6
Uttar Dinajpur	Total	49.5	54.9	44.0
	Rural	49.8	55.1	44.5
	Urban	35.4	48.2	19.9
DakshinDinajpur	Total	53.1	57.7	48.4
	Rural	53.7	58.2	49.0
	Urban	31.1	38.1	23.7
Maldah	Total	50.7	56.6	44.8
	Rural	50.9	56.7	45.0
	Urban	34.5	48.8	19.1

Table 4. 16: Percentage Distribution of Total Workers by Main and Marginal Category

State/ District	Area	Main Worker (%)			Marginal Worker (%)		
		Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female
West Bengal	Total	32.0	42.1	21.8	16.7	11.7	21.9
	Rural	32.3	42.2	22.3	17.3	11.9	22.8
	Urban	27.7	40.4	14.4	7.7	8.2	7.2
Darjeeling	Total	32.5	41.1	23.8	8.4	7.1	9.7
	Rural	33.0	41.3	24.7	9.2	7.7	10.8
	Urban	28.8	39.6	18.1	2.2	2.6	1.9
Jalpaiguri	Total	30.9	38.8	22.9	10.7	8.1	13.4
	Rural	31.0	38.7	23.1	10.9	8.2	13.5
	Urban	28.0	41.2	13.8	5.5	4.4	6.8
	Total	31.9	47.7	14.6	10.5	5.7	15.7
	Rural	32.3	48.2	14.8	11.1	5.8	16.9

Kooch Behar	Urban	27.5	41.8	12.4	3.7	5.1	2.2
Uttar Dinajpur	Total	37.2	48.5	25.7	12.3	6.4	18.4
	Rural	37.3	48.6	25.9	12.5	6.5	18.7
	Urban	32.6	46.3	15.7	2.9	1.8	4.1
DakshinDinajpur	Total	37.4	50.4	24.1	15.7	7.3	24.3
	Rural	37.7	50.8	24.4	15.9	7.4	24.7
	Urban	25.1	35.7	13.9	6.0	2.4	9.8
Malda	Total	32.8	46.3	19.2	17.9	10.3	25.6
	Rural	32.8	46.3	19.3	18.1	10.4	25.7
	Urban	29.2	45.4	11.7	5.3	3.4	7.4

In the agricultural sector the tribal population mostly constitutes the landless, small- and marginal farmers. Thus it is rather difficult for them to take the advantage of agricultural development that has taken place in the districts of North Bengal over the years. When the tribal population grows and there is growing pressure on land a section of tribal labour force is forced to move out of the region. Being in subsistence economy the tribal population of North Bengal cannot save money to explore income opportunities in the expanding rural and semi urban markets of the region. Similarly, the tea gardens, which have provided subsistence to most of the tribes in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts, are facing either stagnation or gradual decline in recent years. Casualization of labour force and downsizing of labour force, seasonal closure of gardens have added to the hardship of the tribal labour force that have depended on the gardens over the generations and have not equipped themselves to face such a sudden crisis. As a means to fight this crisis a large section of tribal men and women are leaving the tea garden bases in Terai and Dooars and this has been reflected in the declining tribal population in some parts of North Bengal in the 2001 census. The intensifying economic crisis in tribal life in the region has shaken their life and it would therefore be interesting to examine how the tribal men and women use political participation to sort out the economic and other problems of their life.

BRIEF HISTORY OF TEA GARDEN IN NORTH BENGAL

The history of tea industry in India goes back to the middle of the 19th century when the colonial capitalist were busy developing tea plantation in Assam. Gradually West Bengal was found suitable for tea cultivation and experimentally tea plantation were established. The tea producing areas in West Bengal are Darjeeling, Dooars and Terai regions. In

Darjeeling district the Kurseong and Darjeeling tea company opened the first tea garden known as Alubari in 1856 and in Jalpaiguri district Gazelduba garden was started in Dooars in 1874. (Bhadra,1992:52). Within two years thirteen gardens sprung up in this area, Phulbari (now known as Leesh River tea garden) and Bagrakot, being the first two. (Bhowmik, 1998:52).

After five years of first tea garden, which was started by the British planters, a few Bengali lawyers and clerks of Jalpaiguri formed the first Indian tea company called the Jalpaiguri Tea Company with one garden called Mugulkata. Since then many Indian-owned gardens sprung up in the district. (Bhowmik, 1981:53).

A large area for cultivation and a large labour force are the two basic requisite for the development of tea plantations. The tea regions of West Bengal were either sparsely populated or the local people rarely worked on plantation because of the low wages offered by the planters. Since local labourers were not willing to work on plantation, the planters had to look elsewhere for the supply of cheap and hardworking labourers.

In West Bengal the Chota Nagpur tribals were recruited to the tea garden in Jalpaiguri district. This area is known as Dooars. The majority of the workers were “drawn from the Oroan, Munda, Kharia and Santhal races”. But there was also a sprinkling of the semi-Hinduised castes of Chotanagpur, such as Lohas, Baraiks, Bhogtas and so on. (Bhowmik, 1981:55). The tea industry was started here in 1874. The tea industry in Jalpaiguri developed rapidly from 1885 onwards. Demand for labour increased consequently, there was an increase in migration to district. The most tempting target was the helpless Adivasis who, due to alienation from land and natural calamities, had become a sturdy, hardworking (and submissive) person and who was able to live at a sub-human level of existence.

In the middle of the 19th century the colonial capitalist were busy developing tea plantation in Assam. They had already tried and failed to recruit local labour to work on the plantations. The planters then turned to tribal labour from Chota Nagpur. The tribals were recruited through *arkatis* and *sardari* system. The *arkatis*, were professional recruiters and maintained no contact with the labour after recruitment. A *sardar* is a plantation labourer who is sent back to his own area to help recruit additional labour for the plantations. The *sardar* is in a position to win the confidence of the native labour

because of his social contacts. He maintains contact with the labour recruited by him even in the plantation; because of this the new recruits join the plantation with a greater sense of security.

Tea gardens started being set up in large scale in Darjeeling since 1856 and in Dooars since 1872. The area was sparsely populated and with British patronage the planters had little difficulty in procuring land. They however had difficulty in drawing the labour force from the local population. While plantations in Darjeeling drew labour from Nepali immigrants the gardens in Dooars and Terai had both Nepali and tribal labour from central India. The plantations in Assam, started in 1958, also drew tribal labour from central India. There was labour shortage in the gardens in Terai and Dooars until mid-1940s as the industry was expanding until then. In Dooars, between 1901 and 1941 the area under tea doubled and the labour force grew three-fold. In Darjeeling the area under tea increased during the same period by 20 per cent and the labour force increased by 50 per cent.

There was a mood of expansion and stability in tea gardens between 1930 and 1950 and more and more workers were taken in as permanent workers which contributed to a sharp fall in the temporary workers (Sharit Kr. Bhowmik, "Tea Plantations in West Bengal" in Sarath Davala (ed.) *Employment and Unionization in Indian Industry*, New Delhi: Fredrich Ebert Stiftung, 1992: 11-40; Ashok Mitra, *Census of India 1951, Vol. VI, Part 1A (West Bengal) Sikkim and Chandernagore, Report*, Government of India, Calcutta, 1953, p. 264).

Table 4.17: Tea industry in North Bengal, 1941-1989

Place	1941			1989		
	No. of gardens	Area under tea (hectare)	No. of permanent labour	No. of gardens	Area under tea (hectare)	No. of permanent labour
Darjeeling and Terai	136	25565	67838	171	33412	83884
Dooars	189	53325	136491	159	67622	157316
Total	325	78800	204329	330	101034	241200

Source: Amal Dutta, 'North Bengal-A Brief Profile', *Human Migration-A Social Phenomenon*, New Delhi, Mittal Publication, 2003, pp.79.

Nature of work which the labourers have to perform in the tea garden

The plantation workers in the Dooars perform hard manual labour under condition which are primitive, if not savage. The worker wakes up around 4.30 am, cooks and eats his meal and has to report for the duty by 6.30 am. The plucking season, which stretches from February to mid-December, passes through the varieties of nature. These include hot, humid weather along with heavy rains, from June to October. During this time the weather alternates from brazen heat to heavy showers. Towards the middle of November, when the cold weather sets in, the routine of work remains the same. One can see workers plucking leaves relentlessly, irrespective of the change in the climate and the effect it has on their bodies. During the monsoons, the skin of their fingers peels off due to excessive contact with water. But this does not slacken their pace. Quite often one can see female workers plucking away in heavy rains with an infant strapped on to umbrella, which provides barely adequate protection. In winter their fingers are numbed with contact of dew-covered leaves, but they continue plucking at the same pace. (Bhowmik, 1981:242)

Migration of Chota Nagpur Tribes to North Bengal

Migration, according to M.S.A. Rao is an area of study which permits multi-disciplinary approach in social science, including it does, social demography, sociology, social and cultural anthropology, economic, history and psychology. Migration is a major factor in economic development and manpower planning. It is necessary to consider migration and settlement as interrelated aspects of social and cultural life of the people (Rao, 1986:19). Migration is defined as a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence. It is a shift in the place of residence for some length of time.

Ayan Mukhopadhyay in his studies on Munda tribes of Sundaban deals with the important fact about the subsistence strategies adopted by the Mundas of this village is out-migration in search of livelihood. The reasons for such out-migration according to their field study 'were mainly landlessness, lack of economic opportunities in and around the village and reluctance to undertake the risks involved in forest product collection'. In this context it may be mentioned that all-India level governmental demographic data on the scheduled tribes reported that overall internal migration rate has decreased over time. (Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India, 2013:53-63).

For over hundred years, the tribals of Chota Nagpur and Santal Parganas region of Bihar have been steadily migrating out of their homeland in search of new places of residence.

A large section of them have poured into West Bengal. (Choudhury&Bhaumik, 1986:321)

Tribal migration, which was another significant consequence, again has to be seen within the political economy framework. On the one hand the tribals were forced out their homeland, by the colonial policy; on the other hand they were encouraged to join the labour force in plantation, mines and to some extent factories, as tribal labour was not only cheap but was committed. Hence migration was the result of the double-edged colonial policy of land alienation and labour recruitment.

Table 4.18: Immigration to Jalpaiguri District from outside West Bengal 1891-1941

Year	Actual Population	Immigrants
1891	433,334	44,329
1901	544,906	95,899
1911	661,282	152,174
1921	694,054	163,024
1931	739,166	158,757
1941	854,702	156,765

Source: Sharit Bhoumik, *Class Formation in the Plantation System*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1981, pp.42.

Table 4.19: Major tribes in North Bengal (1971 & 2001 Census)

Tribe	1971	2001	Increase	% increase
Oraon	2,30,595	501,188	270593	117.34
Munda	1,04,650	137,579	32929	31.46
Santal	3,05,512	443,681	138169	45.22
Ho	193	992	799	413.99
Mahli	32,605	24980	- 7625	- 23.38
Lodha/ Kharia	17,679	32317	14638	82.79
Mal Paharia	24,037	11813	- 1224	- 50.85
Bhumij	7,039	2531	- 4508	- 64.04
ChikBaraik	1627	15,370	13743	844.68
Kherwar	134	11,164	11030	8231.34
Kora	11,283	11,933	650	5.76
Nagesia	2385	7153	4768	200.00
Kaamali	754	179	- 575	-76.25
Lepcha	22,786	32116	9330	41.00
Bhutia	33,733	59,117	25384	75.24
Chakma	2887	136	- 2751	-95.28
Rabha	2235	14534	12299	550.29
Mech	10,718	35296	24578	229.31
Garro	1641	1473	- 168	-10.23
Magh	243	1652	1409	579.83
Hajang	134	362	228	170.14
Others	93,993	108764	14771	15.71
Total	8,99,824	1454330	554506	61.62

Source: Census of India, 1971 & 2001

Oraon, Santal and Munda, the tribes of Chotanagpur origin, are the most populous tribes in the region as they figure on top of the list of most populous tribes in most of the districts (see Table 4.19). The other major tribes of Chotanagpur origin found in North Bengal districts are the Chick Baraik, Mahali and Mal Paharia. The tribes like Bhutia, Lepcha, Mech and Lodha are concentrated mostly in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts, while the Rabhas are found in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts. In two Dinajpurs and Malda districts the major tribes in terms of population size are the Santal, Munda, Oraon, Malpaharia, Mahli and Kora. The Bedia are found mostly in North and South Dinajpur districts and the Kora are found in two Dinajpurs and Malda districts. In Jalpaiguri district we can see the heavy concentration of all the major Chotanagpur tribes, the Hill tribes, and many other tribes like the Mech, Toto, Rabha, Nagesia and some presence of the Garo, Magh, and Hajang. The later mentioned tribes in Jalpaiguri district are the ones which are usually found in the States in North East India. Cooch Behar district has the distinction of accommodating the least number of tribes. Yet, tribes with larger population in the district are the Santal, Munda, Rabha and the Garo. Thus, there is not much penetration of tribes of North-Eastern origin (like Mech, Toto, Rabha, Magh, Hajong, Garo, etc.) into the districts beyond Cooch Behar and Jalpaugiri.

Data presented in Table 4.19 suggest that while some of the tribes are growing in terms of population size some others are dwindling. The reason could be that the economy of the region does not offer many opportunities for the younger generation among the tribals and that many of them move out of the region in search of income opportunities. The tribes, which have shrunk in terms of population size in 30 years, between 1971 and 2001, are the Mahali, Mal Paharia, Bhumij, Kaamali, Chakma and Garo. The size of the Chakma has declined by 95 per cent, followed by Kaamali (76 per cent), Bhumij (64 per cent), Mal Paharia (51 per cent) Mahali (23 per cent) and Garo (10 per cent). On the other hand, the Oraon, ChikBaraik, Mech, Magh, Kharwar, Nagesia, Rabha are some the tribes which have grown significantly in the region in this 30-year period. These contradictory tendencies would suggest that the tribes in the region are living in diverse material conditions and the levels of their adaptation are not the same. While some of these tribes appear well settled some others, unable to adjust themselves well, are leaving the region in a significant scale. Some of these tribes might be moving out to evade the process of marginalization they have been subjected to in the region. Our firsthand observations that

we have drawn from our recent trips to the villages confirm that many among the younger generation have migrated to developed states like Punjab, Delhi, Haryana, Karnataka and Maharashtra in search of employment opportunities.

Historical Context of Migration

Land Alienation

The history of land alienation in Chota Nagpur and Santal Parganas is a well-documented and well-established fact. After moving around for centuries in the plains of North India, the tribes of this region finally settled down in Chota Nagpur and Santal Parganas. (Badgaiyan, 1986:293). Hinduisation firstly, alienated the tribal raja and his kinsfolk from the rest of the people. Secondly, it brought in an infiltration of non-tribal into this region. These people were known as *dikus* (aliens) by the local tribal population. These *dikus* or non-tribal were encouraged to settle in Chota Nagpur by the members of princely family. As these people (*dikus*) were literate the princely family encouraged them to take up administrative posts.

All these non-tribals were rewarded with land and in order to reward them with land, the tribal owners were dispossessed of the land they had owned for generation (Badgaiyan, 1986:295). This practice of rewarding land dealt a severe blow to the traditional agrarian structure. It increasingly alienated the tribals from their land and a class of non-tribals became firmly entrenched, prospering and multiplying at their expense. While the tribals were struggling with the unhappy effects of Hinduisation, came the British penetration into the area. Both these elements, i.e. Hinduisation and British rule, thrust alien people and alien ideas on the tribals. (Choudhury&Bhoumik, 1986:323)

Tribal Unrest

The entire 19th century is dotted with tribal uprisings-1795-1800, 1811, 1820, 1831, 1885 and 1899. The unrest of 1831 was the first major revolt against the *dikus* and the British. All cultivating tribes- Munda, Kharia, Oraon, Ho, etc. joined hands to fight their enemies. The Mundas had been in the forefront during this whole period of insurrection. They rose in revolt in the last decade of the 18th century and in the first decade of the 19th century. They joined other tribes in 1820 and 1831. Through out the latter half of the 19th century, they carried on a litigational war which has been called *sardarlarai* and finally, under the leadership of BirsaMunda, they had a violent struggle in 1899. The Hos and Cheros joined other tribes in armed insurrection in 1831, which is better known as ‘Kol

insurrection'. The Santals rose in revolt in 1855-57. The Bhumij took to armed uprising in 1832, soon after the suppression of the Kol insurrection. (Badgaiyan, 1986:300)

All these violent uprising were short-lived. The tribals on each occasion gained initial success but were soon crushed with all the might of the colonial power. Their dream of driving away the *dikus* remained unrealized; their faith in their traditional spirits and deities also failed them. The crushing defeat must have left them dejected and demoralized. They came to be treated as outlaws in their own territory by outsiders who came and disposed them of their traditional rights on land and forest.

Natural Calamities

In addition to the turmoil, which alienated tribals from their lands and their traditional rights, the forces of nature also played havoc with their lives. Famines and flood plagued the area. Prior to 1897, there was no information of famines. The severest famine took place in the year 1897 when the death rate rose to 36.40 per mille. As a result of the above factors, there was a steady exodus of tribals to other places in search of land or work. (Choudhury & Bhoumik, 1986:326)

Thus in the later half of the 19th century the tribals in Chota Nagpur and Santal Parganas stood alienated and ejected from the ownership of their land. Many might have even lost the right to stand on the land their ancestors had cleared and which they had nourished with their sweat and blood for generations. They had fought with all their might, with all their ferocity, to restore to themselves their own land. At the end of all these efforts, they stood alienated and defeated, despised and demoralized. The painful decision to leave their ancestral land and resettle themselves in new lands for some might have appeared to be the only alternative, those who did so were not doing this for the first time, they were only following the precedents they had learnt in their tradition of migration. (Badgaiyan, 1986:300).

For the Mundas of Sundarbans the main activity of subsistence survival is collection of crabs, prawns and fishes from the river. Another is collection of honey from the forest land and thirdly, collection of fuel wood. All these activities involved various kinds of risks and dangers which came from nature, wild animals and governmental laws and restrictions. The economic life of the Mundas in this village, like the other tribal groups who were settled in Sundarban began with the clearing of forests for agriculture.

Agriculture was the main foundation of their economy and they still depended on agriculture, although a substantial number households in Sardarpara did not own land. This is one of the major reasons behind the search for non-agricultural economic pursuits by the Mundas of this village. Last but not the least, is the emergence of temporary non-seasonal out-migration as a subsistence strategy adopted by the Mundas of this village. (Bandopadyay and Guha, 2016).

For the alienated tribals of Chota Nagpur the possibility of outside employment must have come as a good opportunity. Centuries of economic, political and social dispossession, exploitation and repression might have already prepared them psychologically to leave. There are three reasons on deciding in favour of large-scale exploitation of the new opportunities of employment. Firstly, the plantation was recruiting not individually but whole families. Tea plantation needs the service of both men and women. In fact the women have the reputation of being better tea-leaf pluckers. This family recruitment made it possible for every member of the family to earn, besides making it possible for the entire family to live together. Secondly, this would allow and help them live communities on the plantation. Hence, it was possible not only for the whole families to live together but whole lineage; clans and tribal groups could live together. And indeed in the labour lines of the tea plantations one does find many tribal groups living as communities rather than as individual tribal workers. Living as communities has made it possible not only to enjoy a greater sense of solidarity and security but has also helped them recreate their society and culture in an alien environment, hundreds of mile away from their native area. Finally, in addition to industrial employment, there was also the possibility of getting land for cultivation, not only after contract has expired but also, in many case, even before that. For the agricultural tribal community deprived of its ancestral land, the attraction of this opportunity can well be imagined. (Badgaiyan, 1986:302-303).

In course of my interaction with the tribal population residing in North Bengal fascinating stories of these tribal groups trying to establish a meaningful foothold into the society, have come to fore. The backgrounds of independent tribal population who migrated to West Bengal from various parts of the country in search of better avenues of livelihood are divergent. While the majority of these populations got incorporated into the tea industry, thereby professing their lives and those of the future generations as tea garden

labourers, there remain quite a substantial percentage of this population who tried earnestly to charter out a life which give them a right of self-determination.

Case Study 1- Sabina Beck (90yrs)

This tribal lady residing presently in SaldangiBasti village, of Phansiedewa Block has her own fascinating story to narrate. She originally belongs to the present day state of Chattisgarh, most specifically to the village of Jashpur, Gholeng. Their whole family, driven by poverty migrated to North Bengal in search of better avenues of livelihood during the British era, the job as a tea garden worker was a lucrative enough perspective for the genre of tribal population during that era. Hence the all family migrated to North Bengal in search of better avenues of livelihoods. She and her eligible members of the family were employed as tea garden workers in Shahbad Tea Estate. It was during this period of time that she came in contact with one Mr. Pascal Beck who was at that time a resident of one of the many tribal communities who had at that time set up their own vibrant communities. These were not essentially tribal communities' dependents on tea gardens as their whole and soul income avenues.

Mr. Beck and his family had migrated from the present day Chota Nagpur area with the equivocal hope of a better means of sustenance. Religion (mainly Christians) had a major influence amongst this migrant tribal population. Part of this migrant population having even an iota of educational capabilities were romped in by the Christian missionaries. Mr. Pascal Beck, who was, by the educational standards of that era, was a so-called "jewel in the crown" was promptly spotted and nurtured by the Christian missionary society. He was there by groomed and projected as one of the leading face in his community. It was however, the age-old tradition of families fixing marriages of their progeny that Sabina Beck was ultimately bequeathed to Mr. Pascal Beck. Being amongst a better educated populace of this migrant tribal population the Christian missionaries projected Pascal Beck as an example and pioneering individual towards promulgation of their faith. Pascal Beck, however, migrated to the nearby town of Siliguri where he was successfully able to have meaningful sustenance. The missionaries, seeing his potential, brought him back into their fold. He subsequently served as an active member towards furthering of their agenda. Upon setting of a medical facility aimed towards serving the needs of tribal population Pascal Beck was employed as a health worker. In course of his employment as health worker he uplifted his financial status to such an extent whereby he was able to

procure enough agricultural lands for providing comfortable livelihood for progenies to come. It was during this period of time that Sabina Beck was married to Pascal Beck. Despite being married to a family of substantial repute amongst this closed tribal community, life was not always an easy walk way for Sabina.

After being married to Pascal Beck though life was much easier for her as compared to other tribals employed as tea garden workers, she still had her fair bit of struggle during the initial period of her marriage, owing to financial constrains she herself worked as a tea garden employee for the initial period of her conjugal life. She subsequently gave birth to ten children. Most of the surviving children are well established within their own realms, many of them having little need to fall back upon their tribal identity to further their livelihood. It is thus an excellent and noteworthy example of a tribal family struggling to numerous handicaps during their initial years so that the progenies there after could have the means to establish themselves.

A life bequeathed as a tea garden worker will surely not yield such a transformations amongst the generations to come in such a short span of time. It thereby goes to suffice that the migrant tribal population who were bold enough to charter their own course of life bereft of the traditional life as tea garden workers, have truly integrated amongst the general population of the country. Though this migrant population has over the course of time lost their roots from the lands of their origin, they still have definitely, by their perseverance, have managed to generate a substantially impactful life for their progenies.

Sabina Beck, though widowed years back, has managed to bring up her children in such a manner that majority of them have established themselves in the social fabric. Influence of her late husband, as she profoundly admits, has been a major source of inspiration for her. At an age nearly touching 90 she proudly looks back at the substantial improvement that she along with her husband has been able to generate amongst her children and the generations thereafter. Even at this date she proudly recalls those incidents and moments where her husband was akin to a medical professional when her husband was the sole source of qualified medical health amongst her society.

Case Study 2- Clara Lakra (85)

She has a story very much similar to Sabina Beck of her neighbouring village, her family also migrated from Chattisgarh in search of better avenues of livelihood. Her husband popularly known as Louis master amongst the tribal community, having migrated from Chotanagpur area, where already established. His family was amongst the pioneers for establishing the DanagacchBasti. In accordance with the set trends of those time Clara Lakra got married to Louis Lakra due cognence of both the families. Mr. Louis Lakra, being educated, was absorbed as an academician in educational institution set up by the Christian missionaries, aimed principally at providing education to nearby tribal communities. Late Mr. Louis Lakra ordained himself as an educationalist, mainly attached with St. Peter's School, Gayaganga. He was and is still remembered as 'Louis Master' by the tribal population in vicinity. Clara and Louis Lakra had ten children, the majority of whom have managed to eke out a living for themselves, which are away from livelihood based on tea gardens.

This episode is testimony to numerous such tribal populations who have withered and successfully overcome all odds and managed to further their family structure.

Case Study 3- EmeldaTigga (57)

EmeldaTigga of Gumla Tea Estate is a garden worker in the same garden. She is 57 years old. Her father had migrated from Chippatala village which is under Semdega district of Ranchi. He was brought to this garden by the *sardars*. Later he married MargragteLakra of the nearby village. They had four children. Emelda is the third child of their parents. Emelda got married when she was fourteen years old to a man name FancisTigga. He was a permanent worker in the same garden. He died at the age of 42. Emelda has four children with her husband (two boys and two girls). The elder son named AmardeepTigga (40) is a garden worker. He married a girl from Trihana Tea Garden, Bagdogra. He studied up to class seven. He has two children aged 8 and 6 respectively. The second son of Emelda is AmitTigga. He worked in Kerala as a cook for some years but returned back home. Now he is also a garden worker in the same garden. Married a girl from the same garden and has two children of 6 and 4 years respectively. Emelda's two daughters Kriti and Aruna are married to different places and are well settled.

Emelda has good contact with her native place. She has travelled many a times to place of her origin with her husband. When asked if she likes to go back and settled down in her native place. Her reply is no and one of the reason she says is the poverty there. Also because she now is happy here, has got many relatives and this place has given her so much.

Case Study 4- Selbester Ekka (56)

He is presently employed as a garden worker at Kamla Tea Estate of GhoshPukur gram *panchayat*. His parents migrated from Kurdeg, Chotanagpur, Parkel. The reason for this migration was predominantly driven by poverty. Working in tea gardens was a lucrative avenue, at least ensuring a meaningful means of sustenance for his family. Mr.Selbester Ekka's father subsequently had six children, Selbester being the youngest of the lot. Despite having migrated from his ancestral land, as Mr.Selbester recalls his father was not able to cut off all relations with his land of origin. He had thus, during his very early years of settlement in West Bengal sent his eldest son to Chotanagpur with the purpose of guarding his lands that he had inherited owing to his ancestral lineage.

His endeavour was however short lived and unsuccessful as his eldest son did not find it lucrative and feasible to base his livelihood upon this ancestral property. He thus returned back to West Bengal. Mr.Selbester Ekka's whole family has since resided under the premises of Kamala Tea Garden. However, having been employed as workers in a tea garden, the avenues for upliftment of the family as a whole were restricted. His family thus could not emerge out of the socio-economic constrains of a tea garden worker.

Selbester Ekka has six children. Majority of his children have subsequently chosen a life being employed at the tea garden, since they were primarily school dropouts, thereby not having any means to explore other avenues of livelihood. It here needs to be brought to the fore that some of SelbesterEkka's own siblings who chose to harbour a profession away from that of tea gardens, have subsequently not only managed to have a meaningful life of repute, but also they have managed to alleviate the educational standard of their progeny.

Thus their remains a very stark difference amongst this tribal population, mainly based on the choices of the first migrant population vis-à-vis getting absorbed as tea garden

labourers or having the wherewithal to successfully pursue a livelihood away from the tea gardens. Repeated encounters with this migrant tribal population, covering both these spectra's of possibilities, has led me to firmly summarise that in majority of the cases the migrant tribal population which chose to charter their own course of livelihood have managed to have a much more robust, vibrant and successful progenies. And those percentage of the tribal population which chose to get absorbed as tea garden workers have definitely a much more dismal and regressive stories to tell.

Case Study 5- Shanta Kerketta (30)

Her father has worked as a tea garden employee at Suhasini Tea Garden, Hasimara. The immediate ancestors of her father had migrated from a place at present day Chattisgarh. The reasons for migration were again mainly driven by poverty. Her father has five children, all of them are daughters. Shanta is the youngest amongst her sibling. Despite being employed at a tea garden her father invested strongly towards the education of his daughters. All of Shanta's siblings and she herself were thus educated in institutions away from the tea garden, most of them thereby having to reside in hostels. Three of her siblings have completed their graduation while Shanta and another of her sibling have gone on to successfully complete their post graduate curriculum. Shanta is presently pursuing her Ph.D, having successfully completed her M.Phil.

Driven by a strongly motivated tribal person, employed in a tea garden, as her father is, the whole socio-economic outlook of her family has under gone a drastic positive make over during the course of a single generation. Examples such as these were a tribal tea garden worker has through single minded dedication aimed towards upliftment of his family, make an inspirational case study. Though, it goes to suffice that a vast majority of the migrant tribal population absorbed in the tea garden industry as labourers, have at large had a very poor drive to get their families out of the quagmire of tea garden ruckus.

Case Study 6- Mr. Srinieus Kerketta

He is presently employed in Union Bank of India. His ancestor origin is from Toli, Jharkhand. Maternal grandparents of his had migrated to North Bengal, principally centred around Alipurduar. Leaving his parents and other siblings he chose to join his maternal grandparents upon their migration to North Bengal. His maternal grandfather , having worked in numerous tea garden plantations like Fagu Tea Garden, Damanpur Tea Garden and many gardens, ultimately found an employment to his liking as principally of peon

with additionally responsibility of cook at St. Joseph's School, Alipurduar. Mr.Srinius was inducted into St. Joseph's School, Alipurduar by his maternal grandfather. He subsequently successfully completed his school curriculum up to the high school level in the same school.

Through his personal endeavours, he managed to thereby, get absorbed as an employee under the aegis of Union Bank of India. Considering the era in which he, as a young child migrated to North Bengal, his subsequent achieving in the educational field held him in good steps, whereby he was able to raise himself socio-economically from his clan. He subsequently married to Nirmala Kerketta from Damanpur Tea Garden. His wife works as a nursing staff with the Madhu Tea Garden. He has two children both of whom are daughters. Both of his daughters have successfully furthered their educational accomplishment of their father, the elder one on the verge of completing her graduation as an English honours student and the younger one being a class twelve student at Kendriya Vidyalaya. It goes without saying that Mr.Srinius Kerketta and his wife have had a very positive and meaningful influence on their children, thereby being an active party towards furthering the educational status of his daughters.

After having married Nirmala he principally set his dwellings at Madhu Tea Garden, where his wife was entitled to have a residential quarter in lieu of being employed as a nursing staff of the garden hospital. Madhu Tea Garden has faced lockout for the last two years. Mr. Srinius Kerketta has managed to build his own residential dwelling at Alipurduar. His wife was being forced to quit her job as a nursing staff at Madhu Tea Garden. They have hence managed to successfully built an identity bereft of tea garden

A noteworthy fact here is of the fact that Mr. Srinius Kerketta has successfully invested his endeavours towards providing worthwhile education to his daughters, thereby providing them with a freedom, based on which they are in a position to have a successful economic platform. Mr.Srinius Kerketta has over the course of years visited his ancestral place quite a several number of times. Upon asked, he definitely does not possess a desire to migrate back to his ancestral place in Jharkhand. Though he admits that there is definitely not huge gulf in educational achievements through all these generations, within his ancestral areas in Jharkhand vis-à-vis North Bengal, he opines that economic avenues in North Bengal are far more substantial and superior. He therefore has no desire to

pursue his livelihood in Jharkhand. Having built his own accommodation at Alipurduar, he basks in the educational achievements of his daughters.

His story epitomises the successful endeavours of many a migrant tribal population who have been successful in uplifting their family socio-economically within a very short time span.

Case Study 7- Manju Toppo (38)

Manju's father migrated from Chargai Padda of Chotanagpur along with his family. He initially worked in a few tea gardens of North Bengal. He got married to Kishori Clara Toppo. He subsequently had five children, one son and four daughters. Though his intention was to get all his children well educated, it was Manju and her elder brother who could have a meaningful conglomeration of the education that was bestowed upon all her siblings. Having successfully completed her school curriculum, she subsequently got herself enrolled as a graduate student under North Bengal University, thereby completing her graduation from Malbazar College.

She moved to Siliguri and completed her post graduate studies from North Bengal University. Having successfully competed in the in the selection procedure for getting absorbed as State Government employee, she was absorbed under the department of *gram panchayats*, at Patharghata. Having reason thus far she still endeavours to accomplish something even better. Thus she quit her job within the *gramin panchayat* system, at present working hard and competing to get a placement which will guarantee her a more secure and economically profitable job with the central government.

Manju's father, though having not been able to pursue his own academics after having clear his standard six exams in schools should definitely be commemorated for having successfully instilled the value of education amongst his children. In those bygone years he still had managed to land himself a reasonable employment with the forest department, despite his educational handicap. The fervent zeal with which he pursued the goal of providing education to his children is commendable. Manju's elder brother has also managed to scale substantial socio-economic heights, having been presently employed with the State Bank of India, working as DGM.

The utmost and dedicated endeavour of socio-economically deprived and migrant tribal individuals towards betterment of their future clan is praiseworthy, Manju's father being a shining example. His whole future progeny has leap-frogged from being in a state of socio-economically compromised into a state where they are very well established and absorbed into the main social stream. What is even more commendable is the constant struggle for striving to have even more higher success by second generation tribal girls like Manju who are not ready to sit on already achieved laurels.

Case Study 8- Rakhi Munda (32)

Rakhi Munda aged 32, a third generation migrant tribal population has through her three generation being employed as tea garden workers with Chalsa tea garden under the Goodricke Group. My extensive studies spanning across numerous tea gardens in the Dooars and Terai regions of North Bengal has led me to conclude that tea gardens manned by the Goodricke Group are definitely amongst the better administered gardens in the area. The story of Rakhi Munda still remains an episode of failure to overcome the socio-economic constraints of having been born into a migrant tribal population.

Through generations this migrant tribal family did precious little to absolve their future generation from the clutches of tea garden employment. Being bestowed with social skills that were superior to her siblings, Rakhi constantly found herself as a favourable employee, fit to be deployed within the managerial staffs of the tea garden. It however has definitely to be emphasised that the lack of a proper and meaningful guidance from her family, never allowed Rakhi to harbour the dream of her life beyond the tea garden premises. This notable lack of a support element from her family hindered her vision, thereby laying herself vulnerable and devoid of any growth transcending the tea gardens. Having had constantly worked with the highest managerial staff of the tea garden, she was exposed to a plethora of avenues aimed at betterment of her socio-economic strata she, however, got herself entangled within the economic agenda of the socio-economic goals of the Indian government.

As with the majority of young female garden workers, she got herself married to a tea garden worker from her own garden, this was despite the constructive advises of the highest echelons of power in her tea garden. Her tryst with the age old social tradition of her society got entangled with the social strata of the powers that be, in the tea garden.

The prospect of a meaningful and strong contribution towards bringing up of a positive society was reduced and subsequently it withered away. Had she been born in a society away from the nuances of a tea garden life, she definitely would have managed to rationalise her life.

Upon my interaction with Rakhi, I have this strong impression that she regrets the lack of a strong familial support that would have propelled her towards pursuance of a livelihood away from the tea gardens. She admits that there was little positive impact from her family and her closest of society aimed towards having a more meaningful and positive life. As is the traditions amongst the vast majority of the tea garden workers, she got married at a very young age, thereby closing out all opportunities for the furthestmost of her life. Presently having already given birth to two children, she regrets about the possibilities of what might have been, had she not succumbed to the traditions and the pressures of her family and her immediate neighbourhood.

It is a sad story of how a whole future progeny has been kept entangled within the tea gardens, despite an individual having acumen to get herself out of the regressive life of a tea garden worker. A strong, government driven educational programme, aimed primarily at the female population of this strata of the society will definitely go a long way towards arresting such trends. While many government social schemes do claim to be in place, the story of Rakhi is a strong pointer towards the incapability of these schemes to permeate up to the levels of the most needy.

A strong drive from the government is a must so as to minimise episodes such as that of Rakhi, who despite having the capacity to overcome the social hurdles, ultimately succumbed to their socio-economic environment, primarily due to lack of meaningful external support.

Case Study 9- Chaitu Baraik (48)

Chaitu Baraik aged 48, a garden worker employed in Chusla Tea Garden in the Goodricke Group of Companies. His father had migrated from Chotanagpur area in his early 20s in search of a better living condition and earning a meaningful livelihood. Though his other siblings and parents stayed put in their ancestral land, he, upon his arrival to North Bengal, managed to land himself a job as tea garden worker in Chusla

Tea Garden. He subsequently married Chaitu's mother from a neighbouring tea garden of Indong. Chaitu being, the eldest amongst his four siblings inherited his father's employment upon his retirement.

He was specifically given the responsibility of maintaining the water supplies within the garden premises. He subsequently married a girl within his own tea garden and had three children. Though the opportunities to pursue education were not totally non-existence, Chaitu is a school dropout, even before the completion of his primary school studies. Having being exposed to the prevalent tea garden worker culture where the eldest of the siblings is guaranteed an employment within the tea garden upon retirement of parents, the zeal to improve on his socio-economic status by availing of educational opportunities was missing in Chaitu. This holds true for many generations of tea garden workers where they, having had the assurance of employment within the tea garden, the desire to look for other avenues for upliftment of their living standards is lost.

My interaction with various sections of management and workers alike has always yielded a positive outlook towards the working expertise of Chaitu. He was projected as an efficient worker. However, the most prevalent vice amongst the tea garden workers of rampant alcoholism is very much a part of Chaitu's life. Chaitu himself lays down these negative elements against life to utter despondency from where he cannot think of a better future for himself and his progeny.

Chulsa Tea Garden is segregated from a forest range by a tributary of Murti River. The economic constrains faced by the tea garden labourers often lead them to wincher out into the forest areas in search of firewood, required not only to supplement their own household requirement but also as an avenue to earn extra money by selling off these illegally procured firewood. Chaitu narrates an incident where a foray into the forest with his friends in search of firewood led to the death of a co-worker of his, named Kancha Lama, having been trampled by an elephant in the forest. This incident, he reiterates is not an isolated incident. There have been scores of such deaths amongst the tea garden labourers entering the forest searching for means to maximise their economic condition.

Such sojourns into the forest are not only least with the dangers of encounters with wild animals, but also bear the risk of being caught by the forest officials. The economic

depravity of tea garden workers can be gorged from the fact that even after fully in knowledge of the risks involved with such activity, this still remains a prevalent activity amongst majority of tea garden workers. Chaitu still continues to visit the forests in company with his co-workers in pursuit of economic gains. It is hard to conclude whether the decision of Chaitu's grandfather to migrate from his ancestral place of Chotanagpur has really been fruitful for himself and his generations to come. A better living condition, whereby the tea garden management is forced to deal out the legitimate needs for sustenance of workers would definitely have provided for betterment these tea garden labourers to have a life much more positive, meaningful and worth looking up to. But the present ground reality is such that it is an extremely cumbersome task for a tea garden worker to break free from so much of negativity to which he is exposed. Chaitu is a prime example of where an individual has not been able to break free from the negative constrains surrounding a tea garden worker.

Case Study 10- Telesphore Toppo (58yrs)

Telesphore Toppo is presently employed as a staff in North Bengal University. His grandfather had migrated from Nawadighi, Gumla presently under Jharkhand. The land that is grandfather's father held in is an ancestral property was insufficient to work out a meaningful means of sustenance. Telesphore Toppo's grandfather thus migrated to North Bengal. He was initially employed as garden worker as Motidhar Tea Estate. The tea garden environment however, was not conducive for him. He thereby started to look for employment separate from tea gardens. He got himself employed as an agricultural worker under the *jamindars* of those areas.

During the era of 1970s owing to large scale land reforms by the then CPI (M) government, his grandfather managed to have agricultural lands under his own prowess he thus diligently got himself absorbed into this socio-economic improvement whereby managing to do away with the hard and insufficiently compromised life of tea garden workers. Telesphore Toppo's grandfather along with his children did manage to successfully cultivate the agricultural land that was bestowed on them as owners of agricultural land following land reforms by the initial Left Front government. All of Telesphore Toppo's siblings managed to have some amount of successful imprints in the educational field, thereby successfully managing to get into even higher education. Telesphore Toppo having successfully completed the post graduate curriculum was duly

absorbed as a staff within the North Bengal University. Another of his siblings had got employed with the State Government machinery. His life however got curtailed by his premature demise.

The educational empowerment as envisaged as Telesphore Toppo's grandfather still helps to further the socio-economic life of his progeny. Toppo did not sit back upon his achievement but furthered the cause of providing employment for his own children. This commitment has borne fruits as one of his children, despite numerous problems has managed to procure a post graduate degree for himself in physical education from Gwalior. His daughter is pursuing the curriculum aimed at graduation.

The numerous obstacles which surely were a part of this new migrant population did manage to propel the future generation towards establishing themselves amongst the mainstream population.

My numerous studies spanning across this migrants population lays bare the fact that individuals amongst this population, through their own zeal and mission, have successfully managed to uplift their future generation. Another hearting fact to note here is that once a particular generation, has got themselves established socio-economically, they have invariably tried to push the generations to come for better employment avenues, principally dependent on providing meaningful employment away from the tea gardens. Thus Telesphore Toppo himself being a post-graduate has successfully furthered the educational status of children thereby establishing the firm socio-economic foothold for his generations to come. There is a wide plethora of difference between these migrant tribal population, many of whom being content of their life as tea garden worker vis-à-vis many of the others trying their utmost to raise their educational standards thereby exposing their progeny towards dreaming of a life, much more economically viable than that of a tea garden worker. TelesphoreToppo's story is one such prime example where these first to second generation migrant population have managed to successfully rise up the social radar.

Crisis due to closure of the Tea Gardens

Starvation deaths and death due to acute and prolonged malnutrition are increasing in these gardens. The health centre sources in the garden think that the average worker does

not get even 1500 calories a day, whereas the minimum should be more than 2200 calories per head per day. The average calorie intake is less among females. During our field visit we could easily notice the malnutrition of workers.

The health centre sources say that diseases related to prolonged and acute malnutrition have increased and the death rate of children has risen significantly. The two gardens we have visited did not have any cases of suicide. The workers, however, informed us that the number of premature deaths and physical impairments have increased in recent times. Some case studies of the female-headed families suggest that the men are laid off because they are ailing seriously and are not in condition to continue with work. In their place their wives have been taken as permanent labour. The breakdown of health services after the closure of both gardens have made the workers more vulnerable.

The incidence of water-borne diseases has increased as the regular supply of water has suffered greatly. With the increase of pressure on existing water sources for washing, bathing and drinking, the quality of water has suffered. Existing wells are not maintained properly.

With the breakdown of health services in the gardens the incidences of malaria and malaria related deaths have increased in recent months.

With the deterioration of the economic condition of the workers' families the drop-out rate at the primary and secondary level has increased significantly. By withdrawing children from schools parents save family expenses and engage children in odd jobs for some income; they are sent to the local markets to work in shops, hotels and in buses and small cars as helpers while the girls are being sent to work as domestic help in the middle class families. The workers we have interviewed have informed us that the incidence of child labour has substantially gone up despite the recent ban by the government.

Because of the closure, the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS aims at preparing children below 3 years of age for school) programme and the Government drive for primary education and child health have been adversely affected. DOT, Pulse-Polio, and other health programmes of the government could not advance in these gardens because of the lack of any health infrastructure.

Women workers are not getting maternity allowance and maternity leave in closed gardens. This is making workers scared of pregnancies. In the event of pregnancy, women go without earning although they need extra money to take care of themselves, particularly for medicines and nutrition. Women workers are not even getting 1,500 calories against the standard of 2,250 calories a day.

According to a senior trade unionist, the trade union leader, the management of other running gardens is taking advantages of the huge number of unemployed workers and is engaging them at very poor wages and with an inhuman workload. In this fashion, planters of the state are trying their best to dismantle established wage-structure as well as work schedules.

Taking advantage of the state of complete disorder and absolute lawlessness, traders of green leaf and owners of Bought Leaf Factories (BLFs) and established manufacturers are keeping the price of green leaf low. This, in turn, is seriously affecting the interests of small holders and the workforces in those gardens.

STATUS AND POSITION OF TRIBAL WOMEN

In order to have a square view of the elements of gender discrimination and the patterns of subjugation of women one has to explore the familial and social fields. The ideology of patriarchy runs down the social fields and family and finds its expression in the everyday life of tribal women. Also deserves attention is the pattern of cultural legitimization of the practices of domination and subjugation. Social scientists have given clues as to how family could be the immediate field of subjugation of women and how it functions as a field for reproduction of patriarchy. According Oberoi (1995: 36), for example, ‘family is also a site of exploitation and violence...’ In arguing that the family, more than the caste system, is responsible for reproducing inequalities within society, Andre Beteille observes that it works towards ‘transmitting its cultural and social capital to its younger members ...’ (Beteille 1995: 440). Certainly family plays a key role in fortifying the younger members with the elements of cultural capital but we should not overlook the fact that it is the family that institutionalizes the foundations of gender inequality and exploitation and adds credence to the ideology of patriarchy. The girl child is often discriminated against in granting share of the capital (material or otherwise) that is distributed through the family. Elaborating the point Karlekar says: ‘This inequality is embedded in oppressive structures of a family ideology committed to an age and gender hierarchy

which is worked out within a household' (Karlekar 1998: 1742). Karleker regrets that the violence against children and the aged are hardly perceived by scholars as instances of domestic violence; 'studies that would speak of discrimination against the girl child or the old grandfather in food and nutrition would view this in terms of physical impact of deprivation', she observes. Using the life cycle approach she argues that at every stage, there is discrimination and violence, particularly against girl children and later women within the household, either natal or conjugal. With age, problems are compounded with increased dependency, illness and fatigue. However, the patriarchic familial ideology may not be supremely hegemonic as 'micro studies may well point to the emergence of alternative discourses which question in many ways a dominant familial ideology' (Karlekar, 1998: 1742-43).

Going beyond the family, one can look for strings of patriarchy in the social field. Some such areas could be education (early dropout for women and feminization of some branches of education), land rights (denial of land right to women), employment (feminization of low paid unskilled jobs), political leadership (absence of women), and social functions (held under male leadership), and so on. One could also look for subjugation of women in practices like killing of female foetus, continued preference for male child, female infanticide, witch hunting (among the tribal communities), practice of polygyny, and so on. Such institutions and practices are reproduced in the social field as they are culturally legitimized and flow from the overpowering patriarchic social order. In India, and in other South Asian countries, 'it is socially and culturally accepted for women to be "possessed" by malevolent spirits; elaborate procedures for exorcism – which are often violent in nature – bring into focus the woman or girl who as a victim of this particular affliction is entitled to behave in ways which violate conventional norms of appropriate conduct (see Kakar 1983; Karlekar 1998: 1741). The other areas of subjugation could be over-exploitation of women labour, treatment of women as objects of sex, commodification of women by the market forces, marginalization of women in decision making, subjection of woman to disrespect and mal-treatment in everyday life in the family and in social space.

And then there is a social arrangement to reproduce the subjugated self in the shape of rules, prescription, values, customs and social expectations. The subjugation of women in everyday life, which automatically means loss of freedom for women, and its legitimation

in cultural terms and in the name of collective good could find illustration in *talibanism*, Islamic as well as Hindu versions, or in justification of practices of early marriage or witch killing in case of tribal communities.

Atrocities and cruelties are often institutionalized and they appear so natural that the perpetrator of cruelty and the victim are both unaware of their presence in everyday life unless enlightened otherwise. Examples: (1) even when the husband and wife have conflict-free normal relations the husband is in the habit of belittling the worth and quality of his wife. A lack of appreciation of the works of the wife is expressed in dismissive terms (words and gestures) resulting into insult of the wife. The institutionalized repetition of the same attitude and gesture permanently place the woman in a subjugated position in the family. The role expectations that follow from such a position spoil the possibility of growth of her free self. The space and freedom of the woman here is clearly encroached upon. The atrocity here may not come to the surface because neither the husband nor the wife is aware of the relation of coercion. They do not find any reason to regret or protest. At the most a sensitive wife would be upset at the undeserving treatment at the hands of the husband but she would prefer to keep her feelings within her. (2) The way the children in our society are brought up in their early formative years there is very little scope for free development of self; the career path and personality and capability (the self embodied with values) are unquestionably shaped by the patriarchy. The misconceptions and frustrations of the parent (read father) creep into the personality of the daughter/ son and thus ruin the possibility of the growth of free self. There is nothing wrong in the father playing a supportive role in the development of a free and self-reliant self of the daughter as she grows up but a dictatorial control of every movement of the girl and wrongly diagnosed career prescription can definitely hinder the free flowering of the self. The girls are brought up in such a way that they move on the terrains set for them by the society. Although there is always a possibility of a girl defying the social dictates and choosing a self-reliant path and living a life of dignity, fighting against patriarchic control. However, the girls are not often fortified with resources to change the prevailing gender relations nor they are allowed any free space to free themselves from the patriarchy and set gender relations in egalitarian terms.

Despite being in tune with the natural human tendencies and widely in practice socially polygamy and homosexuality are still to be culturally or legally legitimized and are

stigmatized, when such relations come to light. Such monolithic definition of sexuality and the associated morality straight away go against the natural tendencies and greatly impair the growth of self by way of suppression of freedom. The ideology of monogamy widely backed by the patriarchic society and legislations (the Marriage Acts, for example) tend to defy the natural tendencies and the praxis of life and prompt social deformities (social pathology, to use Durkhemian phrase). The male with his wider exposure and greater access to power is strategically better placed to subvert the moral and legal constraints and realize his polygamous or homosexual urges. His economic self reliance and patriarchic moral support motivates him greatly in this task. In the Indian social context the woman is in a disadvantageous position in comparison. Often she lacks the economic power and operates under much greater patriarchic and social constraint; often opportunities are less to express the impulses and are under closer social surveillance; more tied down to home and lack the exposure. This prepares her for withholding all her desires and passions and suppresses them under greater social and self restraints. Overall the patriarchic society offers too narrow a space to the woman to express her drives and desires. Marriage is thus taken as a life long relationship even when no love is lost between the partners. While the man can make a mockery of the institution of marriage and the associated moral codes by holding it and still satisfy the polygamous tendencies with certain degree of social tolerance (because the patriarchic arrangements is in most cases successful in making the woman reconcile with this) the woman is simply not allowed the necessary space to replicate this in her life.

In such an arrangement people tend to turn hypocritical and unfaithful to family values and the prescribed moral codes. One can thus question the holding capacity of the moral coded embedded in marriage acts and the socially defined morality enshrined in the practice of monogamy and heterosexuality. The basic question is that the pre-existing modes of 'social disciplining' are coercive, hypocritical and anti-freedom and ineffective.

The known history of the Indian tribes is a masculine history and in the literature on tribes the women are largely absent. In a nation-wide survey of tribal women the Indian Anthropological Society (1978) confirmed this observation. The survey found out that in the existing literature studies of tribal women is either absent or very sketchy. Whatever ethnographic accounts of tribal life we have could be used to have some idea about the status of women in tribal societies. The existing literature could be classified into two

broad categories in terms of their assessment of the status of tribal women. The European anthropologists working on the Indian tribes largely draw a very positive picture of tribal women. The recent studies by Indian scholars however bring out the universally patriarchic character of tribal communities.

About the observations of the European scholars we have to keep in mind that studies were made about some specific tribes and the scope for generalization was little. We have also to keep in mind that the tribal communities of today are not in the same socio-economic formation. There are wide variations in the social, economic and cultural standing of various tribes and as a result the social standing of the tribal women would vary from tribe to tribe. The life of the tribal women thus could bring out contrasting pictures, making generalization a very difficult task. Contra the views of the European scholars, relatively recent studies by Indian scholars however draw out a picture of subjugated tribal women.

Examining the impact of modernization and development on the life of tribal women Xaxa has identified two dominant trends. He argues that the state-sponsored and market induced development process has widened the internal class difference within the tribal communities. While the better sections among the tribal population have availed of the opportunities to their advantage. The women in this section have elevated their social status by following the urban ways of living and by emulating the norms and practices of the women of the dominant caste groups. Citing the example of educated Ho in white-collar jobs Sachchidananda suggests that how the preference is changing from a working wife to homebound wives (Sachchidananda 1988: 84). In this process of modernization the better off tribal women have distanced themselves from their cultural roots (Xaxa 2004: 358). The impoverished tribal women, however, remain largely immune to forces of modernization. The wretched tribal women who migrate to urban and industrial centres find them utterly marginalized in the social, economic and political fields and find them further subjugated. Punalekar (1988: 94-102) observes that in towns the women develop a strong sense of insecurity and a sense of dependence. In matters of jobs and wages they heavily depend on their husbands or fathers. Thus, not only modernization or urbanization do not bring any liberation message to the subjugated tribal women they in fact prepare the ground for further subjugation of the wretched tribal women.

Whatever may be the *de jure* situation, we generally see that tribal women hardly have any access to property; neither of husband's property nor father's property. We have documented ethnographic accounts of the traditional tribal *panchayats*, where there is not a single instance of a woman member being elected as a *panchayat* leader, not even in the matrilineal societies like the Khasi. A woman convict is not even allowed to present her version before the tribal *panchayat* court; decision making is the male prerogative. Metaphorically speaking the tribal women are often seen dancing to the male tune (in folk dance forms), the women are subjected to manual labour until they breath their last, and their body is alienated from them as they are subjected to unitary sexual exploitation in the family and outside, in adolescence and until they remain sexually capable. As they live in subsistence economy tribal women in India are universally made to double their roles as housewife and earner. Besides if we look in the treatment of women in the every day life and take into account the indices of gender discrimination it appears rather easy to discern that the exploitation of women in tribal society is more or less total and institutionalized. The set patterns of male domination find their expression in various gestures, interaction patterns and social institutions and are thus reproduced in the social and cultural spheres.

Despite such evidences of tribal patriarchy there section of social scientists who nurse a false perception that the tribal women enjoy a relatively higher status compared to their caste Hindu counterparts. They tend to draw a positive picture of the status of tribal women on the basis of some casual and surface-level observations like higher sex-ratio, absence of the practice of identification and destruction of female fetus, absence of dowry. They are unnecessarily elated at the presence of the institution of bride-price, the higher level of work participation, higher incidence of love- and intertribal marriage, their greater role in handling the money they earn, and possibly at their greater role in house-keeping.

A first time visitor to a tribal settlement would simply be fascinated to see the ease and elegance with which a tribal woman would face him/her and answer the queries, and answer even uneasy questions at times. She/he would be impressed to notice how the average tribal women remain absolutely unperturbed at being snapped or when a micro microphone is tagged in her blouse as preparation for a long interview or at being asked awkward questions concerning conjugal life, use of contraceptives or imposition of sex

on them by their husbands. A tribal woman does not feel shy in narrating how she got pregnant before marriage or how her husband made her younger sister pregnant when she had come to look after her during her pregnancy. A young tribal mother can easily ignore the presence of a stranger to feed her new born baby while being interviewed. Anthropologists with long experience of working among Hindu and Muslim communities would at once notice the distinctiveness of tribal character. However, a closer look at the micro-details of gender relations would reveal a picture that would take us to deconstruct the prevailing notion. In order to have a closer look at the gender equations in tribal communities we have, in the following section, traveled to a field situation in a tea plantation in Dooars of Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal.

‘The Santhal have different sets of village rituals for the village collective and for the family. There is complete exclusion of women from participation in worship of family spirits, just as their role in collective worship is also very limited. .. Men alone can relate to the family spirits nor participate in their worship. Married sisters and daughters are not allowed into the internal shrine (‘bhitri’). It is usually cleaned by unmarried girls. But no woman is allowed to participate in the rites. They cannot sacrifice animals or witness the sacrifice. On marriage the women leave the father’s clan, but never become full members of the husband’s clan. This is a crucial step in creating a class of persons with lower political rights. Women are also excluded from most of the village collective rituals. They cannot enter the sacred grove (jaher or saran). Women are virtually excluded from participation in worship. While women do participate in many matters of ritual, including preparation of materials for the various sacrifices, they have a definitely inferior position in this regard and are not supposed to show familiarity with the various spirits, bongas.

Tribal communities in the tea gardens of Dooars in Jalpaiguri district, which had their origin in Chotanagpur plateau, are by nature patriarchic. The elements of patriarchy are manifest in their economic, social and cultural fields, in family relations and in conjugal relation, and in political participation. The elements of gender discrimination are well entrenched in tribal conscious and they appear so “natural” to them and are therefore non-issues. It is difficult not to notice that although the tribal communities show a high degree of homogeneity in their economic and social life and show a great deal of adherence to the “collective consciousness” there are signs of differentiation and departure from the collective and the emergence of micro areas of autonomy at the

individual and family levels. This makes generalizations about gender relations difficult; there could thus be various levels and layers of gender discrimination among the tribes in a plantation situation.

Women were generally shy of talking on this issue of sex but it is understandable that there were many more cases of imposition as tribal women had little control over their body, which was captive of their husband. We found that the idea of using contraceptives by men was totally absent. Although the men are aware of various methods none uses them since they are universally guided by the perception that contraceptive use would minimize the pleasure. The obvious consequence of not using contraceptives is that the frequency of conception is high, and that the women simply do not have a say or control in matters of conception until they go for ligation. Sterilization is almost universal for the women while their husbands safely avoid operation and the associated trouble. The prevailing idea is that if there is any impotency let the women bear it. That the women are treated as objects of consumption is evident also from the incidents like conception before marriage; in three such cases one was made pregnant by her lover; one had come to the relative's place before marriage where she got pregnant by a distant relative; and one was made pregnant by her brother-in-law when she had come to take care of her pregnant sister.

In a subsistence economy it is always the choice between work and starvation. The women suffer the most as every bit of their labour is put to use in order to make best use of whatever income opportunities come by their way besides being put at the service of the men in the family and at the work place. The use value of the women possibly adds credence to the institution of bride price, which is often mistaken as the symbol of women's higher status among the tribes. The orientation of the girls is tuned in such a way that they turn out to be the objects of satisfaction of physical and material needs of the men-folk. Discriminatory treatment of the girls begins even before they attain puberty. They are withdrawn from school mostly at the primary stage as they reach 9/10 years of age, are engaged in domestic chores, engaged as casual labour in the garden, and restrictions are imposed on their movements and they are prepared for marriage, the greater phase of subjugated life. Dropout among the girls takes place earlier than among the boys. In case of many families if someone among the children has to be withdrawn from school because of poverty it would obviously be the girl and if anybody's education

is to be supported it would obviously be that of the boy. All such practices of gender discrimination are culturally and ideologically legitimated and are reproduced in the social field in the name of love, care, affection and child rearing. We did not come across any apparent grudge against the discriminatory practices in course of the fieldwork.

Because of high incidence of family break up the tribal families do not have the support system a normal joint family would have had. As a consequence, the working tribal women have to work harder in the domestic field and as an adaptation they seek support from their unmarried daughters in looking after the younger children and in sharing the other burdens of domestic chores. There is thus a set pattern of how a tribal girl would grow up and how she would be exploited as a manual labour throughout her life and, in the absence of education, the possibility of becoming someone 'better than a manual labour' is nipped in the bud.

The women in the plantation are engaged in marginal, lowest-rank jobs bearing lowest wage and lowest status; they cannot be found in office jobs even when there are qualified women; the office jobs are monopolized by the men. The total absence of diversification of women's job and total dependence on the garden for job opportunities leave the women with little option but to remain in perpetual captivity. Some women are predominantly involved in *haria* making, although they have less freedom to drinking, which is a male prerogative.

There is a crèche in the garden which is run for certain hours in the day. However, the women in the garden still prefer to carry their little kids on their back while going to the market or going for collection of firewood. They do it because they have to breast-feed the new born and also because they do not have an alternative support system to take care of the little kids. Sometimes when the mother is at work she carries the baby on her back, securely bound with a piece of cloth.

There is simply no idea of inheritance of property by the daughters. With their marriage the women lose all rights on the jobs or the retirement benefits of their parents. The grown up sons, on the other hand, inherit the jobs and properties of their retiring parents and treat them with neglect in their old age. The working mothers in the 40s and 50s are often pressurized to retire from their service in order to make room for their sons. The

working mothers thus help their sons settle down while putting their own future at risk. We can refer to the cases of Bohamuni Munda (44 years) and Budhuwari Oraon (55 years) who had to opt for VRS in favour of their sons.

The retiring women are robbed of their pension and retirement benefits by their young sons as they demand money to satisfy their craze for TV, Music System and Motor bike, thanks to the spread of consumerist culture among the garden tribes.

A woman's life is lived in the family and much of how this life would be lived would largely depend on how she is treated in her childhood in the parental family and in the later stages by the husband and grown up children. The treatment at the hands of the in-laws does not matter much as in most cases the families split into nuclear families after the marriage of the son. The high incidence of illiteracy and lack of education suggest that the parents do not take much care in developing the human resources in their daughters. As a result, they grow up with limited resource in the shape of physical labour and this adversely affects the growth of woman self. Preference for male child continues to be an expectation of the mother and father; women confirmed that they expected a boy when they conceived for the first time. They said that their expectation was in conformity with the social expectation. Interestingly, some women said that they did not have any preference but none admitted of having a preference for a girl child, at least for the first time they conceived.

Women's life moves in a narrow terrain, with not much of movement or entertainment. The negative effect of popularization of television media could be felt on the life of the women in the otherwise remote garden situation as well. Women have no scope for entertainment in life; they spend their whole life working in the garden and at home; visits to the market places are made with the purpose of shopping; entertainment trips are limited to trips to the fairs, circus, occasional film shows and to the house of some relatives at the neighbouring places. There are TV sets in most houses with cable connection and the local cable operators run popular Hindi and Bhojpuri films but the most common complaint was that the women do not find time to watch television programmes. They also complained that with the popularization of television they now visit their neighbours much less, the folk forms of dance and songs have suffered the most and with that the women have lost a very important source of entertainment.

Predominant preference for boys has already been mentioned. The discrimination receives institutional legitimation in *Chatti*, the purification ceremony arranged within a week of child birth. We noticed that the grandness of the function and expression of happiness vary depending upon whether the child is a boy or a girl. The parents usually treat the Dagrín by offering her a better package of gifts in case of a boy child.

In practicing their traditional beliefs a whole lot of restrictions are imposed on the pregnant women particularly on their movements. Their movement in the night is confined to the house for fear of a *Churin* (witch), who, it is believed, would try to make friendship with the woman to destroy her womb.

The practice of the institution of witchcraft speaks for uncivilized treatment of women in tribal communities in Dooars region. Although there has not been any incidence of witch hunting in this garden the neighbouring gardens in the region are often driven by this menace. Often the elderly women, and not the men, are identified as witches and are brutally killed; even their family members do not come forward in their defense. In our study we found that eleven women confirmed their belief in the institution and ten said that they do not believe in it, while the remaining seven did not come out with any clear cut answer. Worthwhile to mention is that those who rejected the institution of witchcraft were mostly Christian and of relatively younger age and that a voice is emerging within the tribal communities against the practice of witch hunting.

Health is one of the areas where gender discrimination is strongly felt. Early conception, unplanned conception, frequent conception, large number of children, frequent cohabitation, hard labour at the work place and at the domestic sector tells upon the health of the average women. The girls often grow up with fragile health; under sustained malnutrition and without proper health care they are often unprepared for the hard physical labour that their later life would demand of them.

The education scene the garden is characterized by: (1) wide gender gap in the literacy, (2) higher and early drop out from studies by the girls, (3) almost total absence of education beyond school level among the women, (4) in some cases boys are given preferential treatment as they are sent to privately managed English medium schools

which are considered to be the guarantee to better education, and (5) female education is not a priority or a part of the tribal culture in the garden. Girls are withdrawn before they complete primary education and are engaged in domestic chores. Some are even engaged as casual worker in the garden. Many women are not aware of financial support from the government for the education of the tribal children and they were not aware of job reservation for the educated tribal girls in the government sector. The missing link between education and job opportunity, alien medium of education, alien syllabus, high rate of failure in annual examinations, inability to pay for private tuition, early marriage, overdependence on garden for jobs are together responsible for keeping the women in the darkness of illiteracy.

Empowerment: A Distant Dream- Politically tribal women are generally dormant; they do not take much interest in trade union activities, and hardly take part in political activities. When they vote in *panchayat* and other elections they are influenced by the male members in the family, the husbands in particular. The access to political information is low and they do not believe that politics could be an effective means to better their life. The erstwhile solid and collective political existence of the tribal communities is no longer a reality as they are now politically fragmented; Unionization is cent per cent and as a result of some exposure to trade union activities the average workers are now aware of their rights as workers. After the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, which was put into effect in 1992 Panchayat election, the tea gardens were also brought under the *panchayat* system and the women and men workers had an opportunity to participate in the institutions of direct democracy. However, we have observed that the women workers are far from being active in *panchayat* politics. Incidentally trade union activism has not had much effect in transforming the women as active political agents of the decentralized democracy. They generally confine their political activism to mere voting, mostly for the party of their husband's choice; On enquiring about the nature of their political participation we found out that women were "apathetic" as they do not take any interest in politics apart from voting while "some interest" and participate in political activities mostly in the form of attending political rallies. However, out of 125 women 49 women elected members said that they came into politic 'voluntarily' and that they were "active" in politics. In order to understand the levels of political participation we have taken into account certain factors like level of information, whether she can justify her political action, whether she is influenced by her

husband in supporting a party, the details of participation in trade union and political activities like meetings, agitations and movements, and whether she is aware of the issues on which movements are launched. In the tea garden situation politics continues to be the male domain and the collective wisdom for political activism is nowhere in sight.

The way the tribal women have been located in this paper in the familial and societal contexts under the spell of patriarchy might appear misleading because the problem of tribal women could not be approached but in the context of overall social situation of the tribal people as a whole. Even the continuation of patriarchy is the outcome of the continuing social, economic and political order. Therefore, there is little scope to place the tribal women against the tribal men in finding way outs. The struggle for improvement of gender relations and the fight against patriarchy have to be a joint fight of men and women and the fight should spread to both the micro and macro areas of tribal life. One could easily notice some positive changes within the tribal communities and forces are coming up for a change. Strategies of change should be worked out to organize the pro-change forces from within and add muscle and strength to that. Any change to be effective has to be organic and from within and should not be imposed from above. The ultimate aim should be to effect a culture change, a change of perceptions by way of changing the objective conditions the tribal life at present.

Treating women as a class apart and playing them against the dominant men would not lead us anywhere in our fight for freedom for tribal women. An imagination of the 'social atom' would not be possible without any one of the dialectical forces, the men and the women. We can therefore strive for a greater space in the economic, social and political spheres for the women in order to strike a relationship based on equity, mutual respect, and partnership. Both the forces in the dialectics have to change their attitudes and approaches (to each other) to create a new social space of freedom. The men have to change more since they continue to be the dominant force in the power relations.

A change in attitudes and approaches on either side can recast the gender relations on the principles of humanity, mutual respect, equity and partnership. But a mere change in attitudes cannot take us very far in bringing about women's liberation. We need a macro and all-out approach to change the existing economic, political and social-cultural arrangements where the women would be able to roam with greater dignity and respect,

where womanhood can flourish to its full. A greater, conscious and active participation of women in the fields of education, economic activities, political institutions and movements, greater role in decision making in everyday life, sports and other fields of creative activities like arts and music, a self-defense and social defense mechanism to stop atrocities against women in their everyday life would go a long way in achieving our objectives. A change in the socialization process and priorities of the girls and women could also be very effective.

Social scientists and feminist activists are often content with addressing the expressed forms of atrocities against women such as rape, wife burning, wife beating, eve-teasing, denial of property rights to women, over exploitation of woman labour, fetus killing, female infanticide, and so on which could be captured in statistical form. The issues of gender discrimination are raised and fought in terms of reservation of seats in legislative and administrative bodies, minimization of women illiteracy, raising health status and raising work participation rate. The underlying perception is that gender equality could be achieved with governmental intervention, with legal and institutional restructuring in favour of the women. The essences of this formalist and statist approach could hardly be overstated for the simple reason that the macro statistics are indeed the indicators of the gravity of gender discrimination in a society and there is an immediate need for juridical-institutional restructuring if we aim at moving towards gender equity. At the same time we could argue that the gravity of gender discrimination could hardly be captured only in terms of statistics on expressed cruelties and that the institutional-statist approach to gender question cannot take us to a desired level of striking gender equity. We have therefore to look into the social field, the field of civil society and the micro aspects of everyday life, which often evade the attention of the activists and social scientists in their construction of gender problematic. Likewise, the battle for a free woman self has to be taken to the social field, to the micro aspects of subjugation, humiliation and marginalization of woman self.

Indian Constitutional Amendments in recent past have been directed towards empowerment of women of the underprivileged sections of the society. Various reservations for tribal women seats in local body elections right up to the highest echelons of powers are principally aimed at furthering these women of underprivileged society. Though, quite a substantial populace of women of this society has successfully tried to

further their social and political positions under these social reforms, there remain a substantial percentage of women of this class who continue to be just ornamental posts under this present domain. A principally male dominant society is a huge hindrance towards realization of true potential of women at large. A majority patriarchal society prevalent amongst the tribal population of North Bengal still is a substantial challenge towards promulgation of social reforms as envisaged in the various socio-political reforms. Women, though empowered with constitutional reforms aimed towards furtherance of their socio-political status, are still not in a social position to actually avail of the opportunities that are guaranteed for them at the grass root level. It is thus extremely hard to find women who have made true realization of the political powers that are bestowed on them through various constitutionalized programmes. Majority of them end up as just stooges in the hands of their menfolk who are least interested in political empowerment of women at large.

A vibrant social movement aimed towards gender equality is the need of the hour so that various constitutional provisions aimed towards women empowerment are brought to their meaningful social conclusion. Though the various legal means aimed towards empowerment of down-trodden women are praiseworthy, lack of meaningful social movements aimed towards actual empowerment of women remains an obstacle. Under this context, various reservations schemes continue to be meaningless. A vast majority of the tribal women still continue to be skeptical about their participation in political process. Amongst those who actually venture out in the political arena, the percentage of these women having substantial and independent and meaningful contribution towards decision-making process at the grass root level is miniscule. Majority of the them tend to be influenced and governed by the male members of their family and society at large, thereby rendering them to be nothing more but political tools in the hands of the dominant male folk.

Dismal standards of education amongst the women folk of this strata of society is a huge impediment towards meaningful social contribution. They thus lean towards the men for support for every aspect of their life. Having a powerful socio-economic contribution thus remains far from the realms of their life. Various means envisaged under constitutionalized political reforms thus have only a cosmetic value. Education of womenfolk has to be the primary driving force towards women empowerment. All other

measures although having constitutional and legal backing in form of reservations for the down trodden women, have little value unless and until supplemented by a vibrant and educated women members of this society.

Lack of education renders these women incapable of contributing meaningfully towards upliftment of their society. It is however heartening to note that many of the women folk, empowered with education have managed to have significant contributions as elected members of political bodies. Another major factor contributing towards deprivation of women is the appalling standards of health care amongst this society. Women primarily have to bear the brunt of lack of proper health care. This extends right from pre-natal health care facilities up to the pre-natal and ante-natal care of women. Abysmal levels of living standards amongst this strata of the society renders women victim to extremely poor health care standards.

Drawn between contributing financially towards economic stability of their families under (working as tea garden labourers) and looking after their households, they have precious little time for thoughts directed towards their own socio-economic upliftment. A life of a tribal woman employed as tea garden worker is extremely harsh as despite having obligations towards maintaining their families and doing their household chores, they have to adhere to the tough working conditions of a tea garden labourer. This is constrained by the constant threats of loss of their daily earnings, if they are not able to stick to the tea garden working schedule. The thought of being an influencing factors towards changing of their society and status of women as a whole does therefore not enter into their life. Majority of women amongst this class of society are extremely burdened by their own social position, thereby rendering themselves vulnerable to exploitation by the established political forces amongst the society.

It, however, has to be admitted that there has been quite a substantial progress amongst these sections of society over ages and generations. A woman having a politically important position whereby she has the capacity to have meaningful contributions was unthinkable even thirty to forty years back. It is heartening to note that some percentage of women of these society, though it may be miniscule, have come forward to lay claims to their legitimate political space. The common background of all women having made meaningful socio-political contribution is the fact that they have all an above average

educational background. Though the situation at the grass-root level is far from satisfactory, it has to be admitted that important and meaningful progress towards women empowerment has been attained. It has to be considered as a welcome and positive step forward.

The challenge in this scenario is to search out ways and means to further consolidate these gains. While reservations that are constitutionally guaranteed and aimed towards furthering of socio-political status of women of this society are a welcome step, social movements aimed at educating the under-privileged girl child are the need of the hour if we are to really bring about social and gender equality in a primarily male driven society like a India. Social awareness and demands of reservations does catapult many a woman into positions of power, but lack of education renders them to be pawns in the hands of primarily male dominated political spectrum of India. A truly benevolent state having empowerment of women as its main agenda should definitely strive towards actual empowerment of women encompassing all fields of social lives that is social, economic and political. My numerous encounters with elected political representatives amongst women of these society leaves me with lots of positivity (contributed by women representatives who have meaningful say in their society), and lots of cases which have failed to meet the required parameters for upliftment of their immediate society. It is however extremely difficult to judge whether the positives outweigh the negatives. But one thing is surely positive to know that participation of women of this underprivileged society in political decision-making has surely gone up quite a few notches.

Thus, the principal challenge is to consolidate and further the gains that have been achieved over years of social-political movements. Any society which is progressive and vibrant cannot achieve its true potential without incorporating the most under privileged and down-trodden strata of their society. Policies aimed towards making India vibrant and developed country has to definitely incorporate strategies aimed at upliftment of the weakest part of its society. A social movement is thus the need of the hour, movement that will lay primary emphasis on providing basic educational facilities to the under-privileged girls of the society. Political moves aimed towards generating equality amongst the gender and various classes of society can only have meaningful impact if it is backed up by social movements aimed towards generating educational parity amongst the various

sections of the society. While quite a substantial amount of work has been done in India, there still remain lots of lacunae.

There are quite a substantial number of female political representatives from these so called backward strata of Indian society who, by their sustained and meaningful socio-political activism, have managed to have positive social impacts. This should serve as a platform for furtherance of these socio-political movements primarily aimed at upliftment of the backward tribal women. It however, primarily hinges on provision of basic educational facilities across the society and creation of a strong and vibrant social awareness programme, so that these can supplement the political endeavors.

My study has analyzed the prevailing ground reality amongst women of tribal societies of North Bengal. A comprehensive analysis aimed towards assessing meaningful political participation of these women through interactions with these women assessment of data and comparative study between the past and present scenario is the principal goal of my study. It not only analyzed the progress achieved through years, but also to point out the lacunae that need to be addressed for further improving the condition of these tribal women.

OBSERVATIONS

Thus it is not uncommon to find large tribal group in North Bengal who, while being unattached to the tea industry, have over generation manage to have a alternative and meaningful source of sustenance. It is thus very common to find tribal groups who have principally conglomerated together into villages who collectively and personally hold substantial amounts of agricultural lands, which over the course of time have provided them with the alternative source of livelihood. It also to be noted that groups such as these have been able to hold on to their cultural and linguistic inheritance at a level which is far more indigenous, as compared with such tribal groups which have principally been employed as labourers in tea garden.

While it is so very common to find, for example tribals of Oroan clan employed in tea garden as labourers, who have been totally cut off from their primarily linguistic and social roots, the alternative tribal population who have chosen a path of self-determination in terms of procuring and cultivating agricultural lands have over the

period of time been much more successful in preserving their ancient cultural and linguistic heritage. It is thus very common to find an Oroan family working as labourer in a tea garden to be unable to even speak their language of origin. However, contrary to this a majority of the same tribal population who have chosen to struggle and cultivate vast agricultural land on their own, thereby negating the easy and secure path of guaranteed livelihood as tea garden workers, have over generations managed to uphold their linguistic and cultural heritage.

I thus found quite a majority of these population being able to speak and communicate in their original linguistic dialects, be it Oroan, Munda etc. vis-à-vis the tribal population engaged as tea garden labourers, who have principally fore gone their ancestral heritage and have amalgamated into a common cultural and linguistic platform. It is so very common to see these tribal groups, from whatever clan they may be speaking principally a common language like *Sadri* and having a cultural repertoire that is a conglomeration of all the different and varied tribal cultures, each divergent from each other. While integration of divergent cultures is always a welcome trend, perseverance of unique cultures is still of paramount importance. This amazing conflict that exists within these tribal groups of North Bengal, based primarily on their choice of ancestral livelihood, is an intriguing phenomenon.

Majority of present day tribal population in North Bengal are migrants. They migrated from the divergent areas ranging from Chotanagpur, Chattisgarh. Most of these migrant tribal population principally chose migrate to North Bengal in search for better avenues for livelihood. North Bengal has the unique advantage of conducive climate for a flourishing tea garden industry. This was mainly and initially recognised by the Britishers who had set up numerous tea gardens spanning across North Bengal. There was an extreme want of labourers for sustenance of this upcoming tea garden industry. This huge void for want of cheap tea garden labourers was filled up primarily by this migrant tribal population. Areas like Chotanagpur and Chatisgarh boasting of a substantial tribal population were not economically sustainable to support this population of these tribal persons.

Agriculture, being the sole means of livelihood in these areas, was not able to cater to this significant tribal population residing in these areas. The lure of a better livelihood as compared to the traditional agricultural means of earning a living was quite a factor in

this huge exodus of tribal population from these divergent areas into North Bengal. Though the majority of this migrant tribal population got themselves absorbed into this tea garden industry, there still remains a considerable amount of this population who have managed to charter out a livelihood which is not dependent upon this tea garden industry. This migrant tribal population was divergent in their social and linguistic character. It is however interesting to note that this varied group of tribal societies who subsequently got incorporated into the tea industry, where amalgamated into a homogenous group where by each tribe lost its distinctive cultural and linguistic identity. It is hence common to note that these varied tribal population working as labourers in tea garden have over generations even managed to come up with a common tribal language like *sadri*, which is very much the language of communication amongst the various tribal groups of tea garden. This however is in stark contrast to those groups of migrant tribals who chose to earn their livelihood, separate from the tea gardens. These individual tribal groups conglomerated together and set up their residential premises in close proximity of each other.

Thus it is very common, especially in the *terai* region of North Bengal to find villages which can claim to be the true inheritors of individual and distinct tribal groups. Over the generations to come these tribal groups have managed to outshine those tribes with have chosen to be absorbed into the tea gardens. Furthermore, it is worth a note that preservation of their cultural and linguistic identity is of paramount importance to these tribal groups which are away from the tea industry. Thus while it is very common in the areas of *Dooars* to find divergent tribal groups, who have lost their individual identity, and thus even foregoing their distinctive language to embrace a common language like *sadri*, it is still very common to find tribal groups in the *terai* area who still retain their individual and distinctive cultural and linguistic characters. There thus remains a vast difference between the tribal populations residing in *Dooars* and *terai* regions of North Bengal. Those migrant tribal populations who, over generation have been employed as tea garden labourers have still now found it extremely difficult to break away from this status as tea garden workers.

This has been a major impediment towards their socio economic progress and integration into the main stream of society. On the other hand their remains a quite a substantial tribal population in *terai* region who having chosen to live a life away from the tea gardens,

over generation, have managed to further their life, over course of generations, to enrich the life of their progeny. This is of course in furtherance of protecting their individual tribal characteristics, which are very much prevalent and noticeable amongst the present day generations of these tribes, where the present generation still communicates in their distinctive tribal language and maintains their distinctive tribal cultures and traditions.

In contemporary age while many tribal communities continue to be subjugated by their neighbors and outsiders, a majority of them refuse to submit themselves to the high handedness of the outsiders. Formation of organizations solely based on the agenda of looking after, projecting and highlighting the tribal society related issues has been a recent trend in the Indian social structure. In this context, mention must be made of the (AdivasiVikashParishad, AVP) which holds an enormous clout amongst the tribal populations of specially the North Bengal area. There have been many instances in the recent past when this organization has forced the administration to come to the discussion table regarding the various issues concerning the tribal societies of this area. The political force that is the organization such as these wields stems out of the fact that the tribal population in general is becoming increasingly more assertive towards protection and furthering of their cause.

To summarize, over a span of generations, the part of migrant tribal population who chose not to be absorbed into a tea garden industry have over generations, managed to definitely have a distinctive edge over their brethren who chose to work as tea garden labourers. It definitely is an interesting phenomena which goes on to prove that individual human groups which are left to fend for themselves under inhospitable circumstance do manage to, through their ingenuity, curve out a meaningful means of sustenance for generations to come.