

The Transformation of the Demographic Structure of the Tribal Population in the Terai Region of Darjeeling District (1850-1947)

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The plain of Darjeeling District is popularly known as the Darjeeling Terai, extending from the foot of the mountainous tract of the northern border of the Purnea District. It lies between 26°36'48" and 26°49'45" north latitude and between 88°8'51" and 88°29' east longitude. It forms a trapezoid with a length from north to south of 8 miles and breadth east to west of 10 miles, covering a total area of 229.95 square miles or 147, 170.19 acres, excluding forest lands. It is bounded on the north by hill portion of the district, south of Purnea District, east by Jalpaiguri district, and west by the independent state of Nepal.¹ The article leads particularly with three police stations of modern Siliguri sub-division namely Siliguri, Phansidewa and Khoribari. Though it was the administrative set-up during the colonial rule, but after independence, the number of police stations had increased to six. The three new police stations are Naxalbari, Matigara and Bagdogra. In my article I have mentioned it as 'Darjeeling Terai' because Terai is used both in Uttar Pradesh and Nepal region. One of the eminent naturalist J.D. Hooker had pointed out that the region from the Sutlej of Punjab to Brahmaputra valley of Assam has been identified as Terai region.² On the other hand, the Nepal Terai consisting of sixteen districts namely Jhapa, Morang, Elam etc, which is better known as South Nepal.³

This paper proposes to study the major tribal (Dhimal, Mech, Oraon, Munda, Santal) demographic structure and its transformations from 1850-1947 in the Darjeeling terains. This is the first analytical attempt from historical point of view, though few works have been done in sociology and social anthropology.

The historians and the anthropologists are not successful to identify the original inhabitants of this region. This failure is mainly due to the influx of the migrant population and its assimilation which makes it difficult to trace the original race of this region. Secondly, none of the migrant population have left any sources of its migration and settlement.⁴ The chronological history of the Terai region is in un-written form. The dearth of the sources could be the prime reason for the unavailability of the history of this region. During the Pala-Senas rule the Terai region was a part of the empire of the Sultans of Gour. This was located in the border areas of the empire of Gour. This can be corroborated with the fact that archeological evidences in the form of two black stone sculpture have been excavated from Ghoshpukur area near Bagdogra thana. Both of these stone images were styled in Eastern School of Sculpture of the Palas rule. Further, the names of the places like Bhimghat, Bhimbhar etc can be connected with the Bhim, the leader of the famous Kaibarta Rebellion during the rule of the Palas. But after the rule of the Palas the history of the terrain took a turn and flowed in two different directions.⁵ Broadly speaking the history of present Siliguri can be studied in two different angles. The present Siliguri (Siliguri Town area) as known to

us is situated in the southern-bank of the Mahananda river. The history of this area between the Mahananda and Karotoya are still in dark. It is known from the local folktale or local historical tale that the Western border of the Kamrupa kingdom was extended upto river Korotoya. Before the advent of the Muslims the Situation remained the same. But during the period of Pathan Shah in Bengal, this area (between Mahananda and Karotaya river) went under the Muslim rule. After the death of Hussain Shah, the Koch King Bishu Singha and Shisu Singha taking advantage of the internal problems between successors of Hussain Shah, had occupied the area of the Western banks of Korotoya upto southern-bank of the Mahananda river. In and around 1540 A.D, the area in the Eastern part of Tista river and the area between Tista-Korotoya came to be known as Baikanthapur. The capital of Baikanthapur was Siliguri or Silikhaguri. On the other hand the Northern bank of the river Mahananda was invaded and annexed by different times. After the establishment of the Gurkha rule in Nepal, the Gurkha invaders had come to Nepal-Mahananda region to the Baikunthapur regularly. The East India Company had sent Gen. Duncun to solve the problems. As a result of 1814-16 Anglo-Nepal war the treaty of Sagauli was signed between the East India Company and Nepal. According to the provisions of the treaty Nepal had to give up the claims over the Mechi-Mahananda area. By the treaty of Titalia the East India Company gave the Sikkim Kingdom to the area of Mechi-Mahananda. In 1835 the British Government had received Darjeeling as a gift from the king of Sikkim. To access Darjeeling it was necessary to cross the Sikkim kingdom. The British had decided not to cross the kingdom of Sikkim while going to Darjeeling and therefore, they occupied 640 sq. miles of area (including forest area) of Terai in 1850. Baikunthapur was already under the British Government and by this way, the banks of the river Mahananda, both Northern and Southern came under the British rule. But the administrative Structure were different from each other, the Southern bank was under the Zamindars of Baikunthapur and Northern part was under Purnia district of Bhagalpur Sub-division. But apprehending the dissatisfaction expressed by the locals, the area was joined with Darjeeling district. The administration of the area of hills and Terai region was placed under a Superintendent. But in 1864-65 due to the Anglo-Bhutanese wars the administration of Darjeeling hills and Terai was restructured. After Kalimpong had been brought under British administration the District was divided into two Sub-division with an area of 960 sq. miles including all the hills on both sides of the river Tista and Terai Sub-division with an area of 274 sq. miles which included the whole of the area at the foot of the hills. The head quarters of the Terai Sub-division were established at Hanskhawa near Phansidewa (1864-1880). On the other hand, in 1869 with the establishment of the Jalpaiguri district the Titaliya Sub-division was joined with Jalpaiguri. As a result Siliguri or Sannyasikata was joined with Jalpaiguri. In December, 1881 Siliguri was joined with Darjeeling from Jalpaiguri. The Terai administrative Sub-divisional office was transferred from Hanskhowa of Phansidewa to Siliguri. Thus in this way, the Northern and Southern banks of the Mahananda river were joined and gave birth to the present days modern Siliguri or Terai Mahakuma before Independence.⁶

The Geographical and religious structure of the Terai region with its multi-racial and multi-lingual character reminds us of the Indian diversity in races, culture and languages. This feature has, therefore, provoked many of the scholars to refer North Bengal as little

India. Prior to the colonial period the regions of North Bengal covered with dense forests and it was an area of Kala-Azar, Malaria and furious animals. But from the various sources it can be traced that there was the practice of agriculture and inhabitation of people in this region. The report of 1839 states of the inhabitation of few mech population in the Darjeeling Terai when the British received Darjeeling in 1835 as a gift from the Sikkim Raja.⁷ According to L.S.S.O Malley, there is, however, one race which inhabits this sticky region are the aboriginal Meches.⁸ It is very difficult to state the actual number of people residing in the Terai region of Darjeeling in the pre-colonial period. But we come to know from L.S.S.O' Malley that in 1850 when the British occupied this region the total number of population was approximately 5000.⁹ According to the first census of 1872 the total number of population in 274 sq. mile of the Terai was 47,985 and the total number of villages was 19 in this region. Each Sq. mile had 41 houses and number of population was 175. According to this census though the Rajbansis were the majority of the population but the number of Mech and Dhimal were 893 and 873 respectively.¹⁰ According to W.W. hunter this place was chiefly inhabited by the Meches and Dhimals, the two tribes who are said not to suffer from the unhealthy nature and climate.¹¹ Among the other races the Oraons formed 1648, who were migrated from the Chotanagpur region to the tea gardens areas as labourer.¹²

During the early half of 19th century the settlement of people was very less because of the heavy rainfall and severe cold in this region. But during the last decade of the 2nd half of the 19th century there were areas of few settlements mainly due to three reasons. They were in the **first** place, the colonial Government started the system of the distribution of land through various acts and legislatures.¹³ For this reason L.S.S.O' Malley said in his Bengal District Gazetteers Darjeeling, that this phenomenal growth of the population since 1872 due to two main causes, the development of the tea industry and the influx of settlers to exploit the waste lands of the district.¹⁴ **Secondly**, the population grew due to the establishment of plantation industries. Though the first experimental tea gardens were established in 1860, but it was in the year of 1862 commercial tea garden named Newchampta at Khaprail was established by an Englishman James White. During the next three decades the number of tea gardens had increased abruptly. The most important factor which contributed for the growth of population was the employment of Santals, Oraon, Munda from Chotanagpur, Santal Pargana as labourers in tea gardens.¹⁵ **Thirdly**, with the growth of the tea gardens the colonial Government paid attention to the development of the roads and communication because the transportation system from the tea gardens to the port was very poor. Therefore, they paid their attention for the improvement of not only the roads but also the railways, so that the tea leaves could reach the port for trade without any difficulties. Though the development of railways in Siliguri had started much earlier than any other regions in Northern part of Bengal. This is mainly due to the fact that most of the tea gardens were established within the period of 1890 (except which were established by the Indian tea planters).¹⁶ This is because of the development of modern Siliguri and the entire Terai region owes to the growth of railways.

The labourers in the tea gardens of Terai were basically the migrant from Madhya Pradesh, Chotanagpur, Santal Pargana etc areas. The most interesting fact is that the British did not use the local population and the probable reasons behind this was as follows.

Firstly, the local population like Mech, Dhimal, Rajbanshis were very few in numbers and therefore, they could not be recruited as labourers in the tea gardens. **Secondly**, the local population who have been uprooted from their lands for the establishment of tea gardens were not interested as labourers. Further, the local population was attracted towards the natural vegetation and took agriculture as their livelihood than working as labours. **Thirdly**, the earning from agriculture was much higher than as tea labourers. **Fourthly**, the colonial government kept in mind that the labour of the local population could not be exploited as the slaves. There could have been fear of a local revolt.¹⁷

It was primarily due to the establishment of the tea gardens there was a rapid increase in the population of the area. The eminent writers like L.S.S.O' Malley, A.J. Dash, J. H. Gunning, Barun De and others have explained the changes of the demographic patterns in the context of the growth and development of the tea gardens. This can be studied from the following tables as given below:-

Table - 1

Tea Industry's Impact On Population Growth of Darjeeling District : 1861-1941

Year	Number Tea Estate	Total area in Hect. under tea	Total No. of all kinds of tea workers	Total of working force	Percentage
1861	22	1317	2534	-	-
1871	56	-	8000	94714 (1872)	8.45
1881	155	11,489	-	1,55,179	-
1891	177	18,462	-	1,55,207	-
1901	170	20,948	40,451	1,55,235	26.06
1911	156	20,853	39,561	1,51,604	26.09
1921	168	23,897	48,710	1,74,167	2.97
1931	169	24,777	63,665	1,29,070	43.33
1941	136	25,585	69,699	1,33,306	52.28

Source : West Bengal District Gazzeters Darjeeling, Barun De and others (ed), Superintendent of printing, Government of West Bengal, calcutta, 1980, page : 100

Therefore, the population of the Terai region centered round the economic development of the tea gardens. It is mentioned in the Centenary volume of Jalpaiguri district that with the establishment of the tea gardens the tribals from the places like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Madras, Santal Pargana, Nepal etc had migrated into this region. Now, the question arises that how did the large number of people migrated from the other region into this area because there were no proper land transport as well as no water transport. Railway lines were established much later. Most of the tea garden labourers had come into this region by crossing the distant road on foot, which was not only painful but also impossible. There are no written documents on this historical event and therefore we can not provide the exact fact that had occurred.¹⁸

Table – 2

Majour Tribal Population of Darjeeling Terai (1881-1931)

Census Year	Total population of Darjeeling teral	Mech	Dhimal	Oraon	Munda	Santal
1881	63,241 Persons	-	632	-	-	-
1891	72, 997 Persons	267	631	5323	1283	999
1901	70,466 Persons	343	607	8042	3984	1859
1911	72,246 Persons	201	749	7543	2437	2246
1921	75,787 Persons	-	-	10,952	5322	3607
1931	80,258 Persons	379	375	12,412	5062	4299

Sources : Cesus 1951, West Bengal District Hand books : Darjeeling, A. Mitra, West Bengal Government press, Alipore, Kolkata, 1954, p : XXX I XXXV, Census 1951, West Bengal, The Tribes and castes of West Bengal, A. Mitra, West Bengal Government press, Alipore, Kolkata, 1953, p. 113-118, Bengal District Gazetters : Darjeeling, A. J. Dash, Government press, Alipore, Calcutta, 1947. p. 66-71.

The geographical importance of Siliguri was felt by the British from the early half the 20th century. In 1907 the Sub-division head-quarter was established in Siliguri. The people from different parts of the Sub-continent had centered around Siliguri particularly due to tea, tourism, timber and transport. The attraction of the business prospect removed the fear of Malaria from the hearts of business loving people. Besides tea and timber companies like, Mark Mayer, Landen Cleark, Railey Brothers etc. related with jute business were established in this region. In this way the northern bank of the river Mahananda developed due to the growth of tea industry and the Southern bank developed due to the expansion of commerce. There were also an increase of population in both the sides due to the above mentioned reason. According to the census of 1941, the total number of population of Darjeeling Terai was 90,014. Among this population a large part of it consisted of Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribes. Out of this total population the number of Meches were 272, Oraon 12,433, Munda 4993 and Santal 4045. The majority portion of above mentioned population dwelled in the plains of Darjeeling District or Terai region. It must be referred in this connection that total population of Siliguri town in the same year was 10504, out of which the total number of Schedule Caste and schedule tribe population was 839 (excluding Nepali tribes). Out of this 839, the distribution of the tribal population were Santal (14), Munda (05) and Oraon (02) in Siliguri town area. Nepali speaking tribal population consisted 306 souls, out of them Manger (05), Newar (39), Tamang (34), Gurung (49) Sunawar (54) were prominent.¹⁹ It is to be noted that the number of Rajbansis in 1941 as recorded in the census has decreased by 9000 in total from 1931. A. J. Dash describe it as, faulty declaration of census slips. Probably, for this reason the Dhimals were not traceable in the 1941 census.²⁰ Thus it can be mentioned if the Dhimals were recorded in the 1941 census, probably in the post independent period they could have been recorded as Schedule Tribe in the census. This is very significant and historically unfortunate, as for the negligence of the census enumerators the primitive community of Darjeeling Terai region had been deprived of the facilities provided by the

both the State and Central Government of India. According to the census of 1951 the total number of population of Terai region were 1,16,476. Out of above mentioned population the Schedule Caste population consisted 24,418 (M-13,712 and F-10,706) and Schedule Tribe population consisted 25,613 (M-13,514 and F-12,099). Among these tribal population the number of Meches were 224, Oraon 17,217, Munda 5752 and Santal 3481. It is to be noted that at the same time the total number of population in Siliguri urban area were 32480, out of this the tribals were consisted 233 (Oraon 108, Munda 63 and Santal 55).²¹

During 1870's the Deputy commissioner of Darjeeling has mentioned in his Report regarding the Mech population that they are disappearing almost dying out faster than any race of which he had known or read. The reason is, no doubt, that distinctive cultivation is by Jhum, which is barred by Government forest conservancy and the spread of settled plough cultivation from South.²² Another reason is that in order to facilitate tea gardens, a large tract mainly inhabited by the Meches were declared as 'waste land' and was converted into tea gardens. The Meches were migratory and used to practice shifting cultivation in the Terai area. But with the growth of the tea gardens, they were displaced as they had not been conferred the proprietary right. They migrated to the East and mainly to Assam. However, the British tried to settle them in some pockets.²³ This theory is also supported by eminent scholar Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal when he was moving in the Terai area.²⁴

On the other hand unlike the other settlers of Bengal the tribes of this area like the Dhimal and the Mech depended upon shifting cultivation (Jhum) rather than systematic agricultural system. Therefore, when the forest conservancy act was passed in the year 1865, these aboriginal tribal community were largely affected. The Dhimals now started to survive upon hunting and food gathering and mostly on fishing in the rivers of Terai. Gradually they migrated to the Terai of Nepal. Therefore, when the structural change of Terains took place from inhospitable, no mans land and Malaria belt to T (Tea), T (trade), and T (Transport) and prospect for the job-seeking migratory tribals like Oraons, Munda and Santals but the silent cries of Dhimals and Mech could also be heard because of there displacement. Infact they became migrants from their own lands particularly during the colonial period. To conclude, it would be better to mention that it was a historical fiasco or irony on the part of Cleo, the god of history, that the migrants became the major inhabitants of this area while the original tribes were displaced from their own lands.

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