

P R E F A C E.

The present study is primarily concerned with an attempt to delineate the socio-economic conditions of a particular tribe of North Bengal, namely, the Meches. The study gets its initial inspiration from an examination of the report on the first full-fledged settlement operation carried on by D. Sunder in the Duars region of the Jalpaiguri District during the period 1889-95. The report mentioned the creation of a Mech colony in a particular area of the Duars. The report also mentioned the creation of two other Colonies for two other tribes of North Bengal, namely, a Garo Colony and a Santhal Colony, in some selected areas of the Duars. The creation of these Colonies for certain selected tribes in some selected areas of North Bengal had aroused interest of the present author for an enquiry into the socio-economic conditions of the tribes who had been dealt with by the Britishers in the period immediately after the British annexation of the Western Duars. But under the usual physical constraints to be confronted with by any individual researcher, the present author had no other alternative but to concentrate his labour on a single tribe. A study of the subsequent census reports and other available documents showed the gradual disappearance of the two other tribes - the Garos and the Santhals - from their respective Colonies, whereas the Meches continued to live in the areas specially created for them by Sunder, in addition to their dispersal in other areas of North Bengal and Assam. The present author, therefore, had selected the Mech tribals and especially the Meches of those areas of North Bengal where they were initially desired to be settled by Sunder after the British annexation of the Western Duars.

Having selected the tribe to be studied, the author, from his scrutiny of the "Records of Right" prepared during different land settlement operations of the Western Duars in the British regime as well as in the period immediately before the imposition of ceilings on landholdings in the 50's of the present century by the Government of West Bengal, had observed that there was vast inequality in the distribution of landholding of the Meches. This inequality in distribution was also marked in the areas where land was exclusively settled for the Meches. The fact of inequality inspired the present author to investigate the socio-economic conditions of the tribe in a historical perspective. The author, especially, tried to link up the present socio-economic conditions of the Meches with the past and yester years. To do this, the author tried to categorise the present members of the Mech community in respect of the economic status enjoyed by them in the past. To specify 'the past economic status', the landholding of the present households in the period immediately before the imposition of ceiling on land was taken under the assumption that landholding in the rural Mech community was a better index of describing one's economic status and that inequality in the distribution of landholding would have been greater in the period when no restriction was imposed by the government on the holding of a particular land-owner. The choice of the period immediately before the imposition of ceiling was made on the ground that the present households in most of the cases could be categorised in respect of pre-ceiling landholding through a simultaneous comparison of the pre-ceiling 'Records of Right' with the lists of landowners as shown in the "Assessment lists" of the 'Anchal Panchayats' (Village Councils) as well as in the "Big Intermediary Registers" of the Settlement offices. The comparison of the said Lists as ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~

well as the 'Registers' with the 'Records of Right' prepared in other settlement operations of the Western Duars during the British regime, was not possible due to non-availability of comparable data.

The author, has explained in his dissertation the reason for his selection of the area of investigation in his introductory chapter. He has described in Chapter 1, the Mech community as a whole in order to point out some of the characteristics of the tribe under study. In Chapter 2, he has analysed the infiltration of the members of the other communities in the Duars region as well as in the area of his investigation, and the consequent effect on the distribution of landholding in different settlement operations. Chapter 3 is concerned with the present pattern of the distribution of the landholding of the Meches with an attempt to identify the present landoperators in respect of the economic status enjoyed by them in the past. Chapter 4 is devoted to case-studies of some of the Mech households specially selected in order to state their present economic position in the light of the economic status enjoyed by them previously (on the basis of their pre-ceiling landholding). Chapter 5 examines the occupational mobility of the present Meches and attempts to examine their mobility in the background of the past economic status of the present households. In Chapter 6, an attempt has been made to examine the connection between economic condition of the past as well as present and the attitude of the ^{tribal} ~~tribal~~ under study towards education.

Chapter 7 describes the agrarian and allied activities of the Meches with an emphasis on the adoption behaviour of the Meches in respect of improved farm techniques. Chapter 8 examines the food habits of the Meches together with an analysis of the poverty of the Meches. Moreover, this chapter has attempted to analyse the distribution of income within the Mech community and has further attempted to measure poverty. Chapter 9 describes the non-homogeneous character of the Mech Community.

A part of the Chapter 6 has been published in 'The Economic Studies', a monthly journal published from Calcutta, under the title "Paradox of Free Education" in the issue of December, 1977.

It should be noted that the author has retained the spellings of some words while quoting from the relevant authorities as they have been found to be used in the original text. However, for his own text, he has used the usual spellings as used generally in the current publications.

The present dissertation also carries with it some appendices both at the end of some of the chapters as well as at the end of the thesis. The appendices are concerned with the method of computation of certain tables given in different chapters, the statistical tables, the description and meanings of some of the words and terms used, a note on the land laws of the Western Duars, a note on some of the old customs and practices of the Meches, a note on the Western Duars and the names of the landowner with the amount of land held (Statements 1 to 4) as collected from "Records of/^{Right.}"

The meaning as well as the definition of some of the terms used by the author has been given in the foot-notes of each chapter, wherever required.

The author has also inserted three maps at the beginning of the present dissertation, showing the area of investigation, the area of the Western Duars and the area of influence.

In addition, some photographs taken in author's camera have been attached to the present dissertation to convey some ideas about the way of living of the Meches.

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National Library, the Cultural Research Institute, Government of West Bengal, the West Bengal Central Secretariat Library, the Divisional Commissioner's Library of Jalpaiguri, the Asiatic Society Library, Calcutta, the Library of the Deputy Commissioner's office of Jalpaiguri, the District Library of Jalpaiguri, the Central Library of the Calcutta University and the North Bengal University Library, respectively. He is also thankful to Sri N. C. Chowdhury, a prominent citizen of Jalpaiguri, for allowing him to use his personal library. His thanks are due to some of his students who have accompanied him during the time of his investigation in different Mech villages. The author is also very much grateful to the Special Officer, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Welfare Department, Jalpaiguri, the Anchal Prodhans of Satali Mondolpara and Paschim Satali, and to all the Government Officials, who have supplied the required information pertaining to the present study. The author gratefully acknowledges the co-operation of the villagers received during his investigation. It is needless to say that without their co-operation and assistance, it would not have been possible to complete the present dissertation. He is, moreover, indebted to the University Grants Commission for granting him financial help for undertaking his investigation in the Mech villages.
