

Economic Alterations of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis of North Bengal in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract: *This writing explores the economic profile of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis of North Bengal in the twentieth century. The majority of people of this community inhabited villages and basically, they are agriculturists. So, agriculture is their main source of income. Except for agriculture they engaged in small-scale industries like Dhokra Industry which is made of Jute that is also part of agriculture. Due to available of jute they encouraged into Dhokra Industry. Trade and commerce are not so effective in their economic development but some of them engage similarly. Labouring is their second-highest source of income. The majority of people in this community earn money from labouring. But the present scenario is different from the past. Their source of income transforms into different sectors, agricultural labour transforms into various sectors like Masonry, Carpentry, Tea Garden labour, urban day labourer, etc., and at present their economic life is better than the past.*

Keywords: *Surjapuri, Dhokra, Dhawa, Aadhi, Gochhadars, Dheki.*

Economic Structure of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis: The present Surjapuri Rajbanshis of North Bengal belong to the Surjapur Pargana which was a part of Purnea District of Bihar. So, their economic structure is associated with Purnea District. They are ordinary farmers and day laborers. These day laborers and rest of the people involved in different professions used to meet the different needs of society. The working class was in dire straits at that time. The supply of jobs in society was not like that. Although they were in demand during *Aman* cultivation and jute cultivation, at other times they became unemployed. So many workers had to work with advance money. Paddy was planted in the months of *Ashar* and *Shravan* (July and August). In the month of *Baishakh* and *Jyastha* (May and June), there was no food in the houses of marginal farmers and agricultural workers. At this time the workers used to take advantage of the big farmers. Since the big farmers paid the workers in advance, they paid half of the price.¹ The workers used to run the family with it. Meanwhile, in the busy season, the workers had to work hard. Again, in the month of *Kartik* (October-November), the workers would become unemployed. At that time also advance had to be taken for harvesting paddy. Without this advance, the family would run by borrowing money on interest. There was no way open for them to pay that money. The moneylenders were paid

¹ Pasarul Alam: *Islampur na Ishwarpur? A collection of essays on socio-cultural history of Islampur.* Sahajpath Publication 2019. p. 48.

to sell the goats and cows of the house. These goats and cows were taken by the workers. The calculation of this animal was like this: the wife of a big farmer or the wife of a moneylender used to buy small goats and cows with her saved money. The working family used to raise those goats and cows. Then if all those goats and cows were given to the kids, half of it would go to the working family and half to the original owner² which is called *Aadhi*³. At that time the income of a worker was negligible. "The earliest record of the value of labour in Purnea appears to be contained in a letter of the collector to the Board of Revenue dated the 16th of April 1778, in which they estimated the average earning of the labouring classes at one rupee a month."⁴ Probably this remuneration was for the workers of Purnea town or Katihar town. Their income was not equal across the district. The reason is that in 1810, When, Mr. Buchanan Hamilton said "The lowest class of farm laborers received 8 annas a month and an eighth of a *ser*⁵ of cleaned rice a day."⁶ As regards the laborers, who are always the first to feel the pinch of scarcity, this class is not only less numerous but also less helpless in Purnea than in another North Bihar district. The great demand that exists for laborers and the high wages earned by them, especially in Surjapur Pargana, where during the paddy reaping season 6 to 8 annas a day are readily attainable by unskilled laborers.⁷

The land they were cultivating before the settlement remains with them. This relationship with the tenants and zamindars did not last. This relationship tends to deteriorate because, from 1917 to 1940, the relationship between the peasant and the zamindar and his bureaucrats began to be bitter. Yet for a long-time workers and peasants controlled the land they had cultivated which has already been highlighted. There was little demand for labour due to the proximity of the land to many and the cultivation of paddy in more lands. Those who came from outside and worked here harvesting paddy were called *Paschima*. Of all the Purnea districts, the people of Surjapur Pargana were economically self-sufficient as their wages were a little higher. However, despite the demand for workers during the season, they did not have the means to work throughout the year. There were no factories here.

Agriculture: Basically, agriculture is the main profession of the Surjapuri Rajbanshi Community. In the 1951 census, 88 percent of the total population were agriculturists in the Purnea district.⁸ From the early twentieth century to today the

² Personal interview with Purna Mohan Singha at Samsargaon, Islampur, Uttar Dinajpur. Date. 10.01.21.

³ Personal interview with Kushila Singha at Samsargaon, Islampur, Uttar Dinajpur. Date. 14.12.22.

⁴ L.S.S, O'Malley, *West Bengal District Gazetteers, Purnea*, (BSBD) Kolkata 1911, rpt., N.L. Publishers, 2011. p.192.

⁵ A 'Ser' is a unit of measuring things, like a ser of rice that means one kg rice.

⁶ L.S.S. O'Malley, Op. Cit., p.192.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 205-206.

⁸ P.C. Roy Chaudhury: *Bihar District Gazetteers Purnea*. S.S. Press, Bihar, 1963. p. 388.

bulk of the Surjapuri Rajbanshi people in the Surjapur pargana (present Uttar Dinajpur district) and the whole of North Bengal mostly depended on farming and agriculture. However, an alteration has been noticed that there is a propensity among the educated Surjapuri Rajbanshi to slender towards Government service. In spite of that agriculture is the main source of income for this community. Though, after a few decades they moved to Tea Plantation as their Secondary income source. But, in the present-day, various kinds of reasons are responsible for losing their land. Within the economically altering society, a back of people is called *Surjapuri Rajbanshi* Community.

The traditional occupation of the Surjapuri *Rajbanshi* community is agriculture. But in the present day, they depend on various occupational imitations. Whereas, most of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis lived in rural areas so the majority of them are cultivators. Some of them are agricultural laborers and a few sharecroppers. Once there were many *Rajbanshi Gachdars*. Once there were many rich *Gachbandi*⁹ from the Surjapuri Rajbanshi Community of Kishanganj in the Purnea district, but at present-day for various reasons they have lost their major holdings of land. For different monetary urges, the landholding of the big and rich Surjapuri Rajbanshis has steadily become split. Before a few decades, cultivation was mainly carried out conventionally which meant that it completely depended on manual skill and organic fertilizer. Indeed, the production was less than at the present time. In the present time, the scenario has changed. Today the rich Surjapuri Rajbanshi landowners and also farmers prefer to use tractors instead of the plough, tilling machines, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and genetically mutated seeds in farming. Though, an ordinary and poor farmer even today follows the traditional technique of production. Except for the cultivators there exist various types of occupational groups among the *Surjapuri Rajbanshi* of North Bengal. Out of the urban areas, most of the *Surjapuri Rajbanshis* are mainly cultivators and craftsmen who produce goods and services for the people. A major part of them is agricultural labour and some are self-cultivators. But today agricultural laborers are altering into different occupations. They are seeking work in the urban areas because they have been paid excessive money as agricultural laborers. In the villages or the rural areas, the youths and some semi-aged people go to other states like Delhi, Mumbai, Punjab, Gujrat, etc.,¹⁰ as a labour to earn money for their families because of a lack of education. A few decades back some of them moved to a new profession, they planted tea as a commercial product. This is done in high-altitude land. In this field majority of the Surjapuri Rajbanshi women work as tea garden Labourers. They are paid weekly at minimum wage.

⁹ L.S.S. O'Malley: Op. Cit., p. 154.

¹⁰ Personal interview with Mahendra Singha at Gandaktola, Islampur, Uttar Dinajpur. Date. 14.08.22.

The *Surjapuri Rajbanshi* contribution to Uttar Dinajpur's agricultural products mostly *Heoti*, and *Boro* paddy (Winter Seasonal paddy), jute, maize, wheat, mustard, pulses like *Maskalai*, and sesame is very significant.¹¹ It is known that a large quantity of jute was produced at Islampur Thana in the Kishanganj subdivision.¹² Besides, tobacco and sugarcane were cultivated. This sugarcane was used to produce molasses and export it. However, jute was the most lucrative crop. What is known about jute cultivation here is "The jute crop is mostly grown in the north-east of the Purnea district in the Kishanganj subdivision (present Islampur Subdivision and some part still remain in Bihar), where thanas Bahadurganj and Islampur account for 53,000 acres."¹³ Jute farmers produced their products here and sold their products in the Haldibari market. *Aman* or *Heoti* paddy was cultivated in 73% of the cultivable land. Besides, paddy like *Kala Neniha*, *Mansara*, etc. was produced. All these *Aman* cultivation were called *Heoti* cultivation.¹⁴ Besides, *Vadoi* paddy was cultivated during the *Rabi* Season (winter season). Besides cultivation, some *Surjapuri Rajbanshis* are engaged in making agricultural tools and other materials for domestic use. Today they also engaged in house mason work. If we look at fifty years ago almost all the houses of the better class of tenantry had another type of cottage, the '*Dhawa*'¹⁵. In the villages, this *Dhawa* house was made of homemade muddy bricks as a wall and a sloping roof made of straw with a bamboo frame which is called *Dhawar Ghar*.¹⁶

Industry: In general, it can be said that there were no big industries owned by the *Surjapuri Rajbanshi* Community. A few decades ago, most of the people from Surjapuri Rajbanshi have been involved in handicraft industries like sackcloth, jute rope making, etc., and these small handicraft elements are used by them in their daily life. But in the present day, these handicraft workers are decreasing day by day.

Industry counted for 11.8 percent of the total population in 1901, 6.7 percent in 1911, and 4.3 percent in 1921 in the Surjapur area. In the district census handbook of Purnea, mentioned that 3.2 percent of the total population was engaged with small industries in the 1951 census. There were various industries like processing of foodstuff, rice mills (Rice mills of Uttar Dinajpur are also an important small-

¹¹ Jatindra Chandra Sengupta, *Gazetteers of India, West Bengal, West Dinajpur*, Superintendent of Government printing, Calcutta, 1965. p. 97.

¹² L.S.S. O'Malley, Op. Cit., pp. 158-159.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Pasarul Alam: *Islampur na Ishwarpur?* Op. Cit., p. 49.

¹⁵ L.S.S. O'Malley, Op. Cit., p. 125.

¹⁶ A comfortable and pleasant house which is made by home-made muddy bricks as a wall and sloping roof made by straw with bamboo frame.

scale industry)¹⁷, oil mills, cottage industries, jute industries, timber, etc.¹⁸ A few decades ago, the people of the Surjapuri Rajbanshi Community used *Dheki*, *Cham-Gain* (Mortar) to make rice from paddy. Basically, these tools were used by female members of the family. Besides female members, male members also helped them for some time. But in the present day, the situation has changed, and this technique of cleaning the grains is hardly available. They also made nets for fishing.

*Dhokra*¹⁹ is an ancient cottage industry in the Dinajpur district. It's made of jute yarn. In villages, this gunny is known as *Dhokra*. It's used for guest hospitality. It is only made of jute yarn. In this district, a lot of jute is cultivated. The soil is very fertile in the district. The jute bark is made of lace and with two or three barks from this fleet, it is taller with ashes. The tall jute is tempted with the help of the legs in their thighs. If there was a remedy, it was twisted in the twisted yarn. As much as the yarn will be beautiful, it will be beautiful. So, the yarn has to be very careful.

In order to draw the *Dhokra*, straightforwardly, two bamboo poles are infixed into the soil. A bamboo tied with two poles is called *Tachla*.²⁰ Two more small poles are infix, one *beyo* and a small *beyo* and three spindles which are called *Bhorol*, *Majhia*, and *Neti*.²¹ The first yarn is tied with the spindle and brought downwards to the bottom of the spindle; the sticks were taken from the bottom of the spindle. In this way, *tachla* and sticks are admitted. Then the patch of tagged threads is first on the top of the staff, and then as a similar *vondoor*, the stick is in detention. Then they implicate them with each yarn and the weave begins. Turning the cycle in the rope and pressing with bitterness. This is how it is woven.

These *Dhokras* made by them are not only used for entertaining guests in their homes. In many homes in the city, this *Dhokra* is spread under the bed. Many people are using this fraudulent bag. By doing all this, this deceiver has left the district and moved to another district. The needy women of the Surjapuri Rajbanshi community of the district do this work for two reasons in the needy family. Especially in Islampur Sub-Division, most of the women of the Surjapuri Rajbanshi community of the village have been doing this job very efficiently for a long time. It takes them five to six days to make one. They do not have many land deposits. As a result, they are still clinging to *dhokra* for their daily life. They have to buy jute at the rate of twenty to twenty-five rupees per kg. Sometimes money to buy

¹⁷ Madhusudhan Karmakar: *A Geographical Outline of North Bengal*, N.L. Publishers, Siliguri, 2011. p. 127.

¹⁸ P.C. Roy Chaudhury, Op. Cit., p. 390.

¹⁹ Brindaban Ghosh: *Uttar Dinajpurer Dhokra* in Barma. Sukhbilas, Das. Avijit & Chaki. Debabrata (eds); *Uttarer Lokosanskritir Dhara-1 (A collection of Published Bengali Folk Essays from Uttar Prasanga)*. pp. 222-223.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Personal Interview with Kushila Singha at Samsar Gaon, Islampur, Uttar Dinajpur. Date. 14.12.22.

jute has to be borrowed from moneylenders. In return, they have to pay high-interest rates. Many people sell ducks, chickens, and goats and buy jute with that money.

Katihar is the only town where the workers get other jobs besides agriculture, because some small and big mills were built there. There were no mills in the Islampur area. There was no other way of earning except in agriculture.

Number of Registered Small Scale Industrial Units with Corresponding Employment in North Dinajpur District.

North Dinajpur		
Years	Units	Employment
2002	6388	36151
2003	6593	37430
2004	6735	38367
2005	6842	39080
2006	6948	39692

Source: Directorate of Cottage and Small-Scale Industries, Govt. of West Bengal. 2006.

Trade and Commerce: Besides agriculture there is a small section of them involved with trade and commerce. Besides, those who have been involved with these professions had many small businesses. They are involved with the business of cows, buffalos, goats, and pigeons. They are not professionally involved with this business but are also involved with agriculture. Internally, agriculture is correlated with this business because cows and buffalo are used for ploughing the land. The cow and buffalo were used for pulling bullock carts and carrying grains from agricultural land. Finally, these grains need to be sold in the market which is carried by the bullock cart. So, the businesses of cows and buffalos are very influential among the Surjapuri Rajbanshis. Some important markets of Surjapur Pargana (present Uttar Dinajpur district) are - Islampur market, Ramganj, Chopra, Daspara, Kalagach, Kachakali, Sonapur, Jagtagoan, Matikumda, Darivit, Kalanagin, Sonamoti, Rasakhuya, Panjipara, Dhantala, Gaisal, Kishanjang, Kanki, Domohna, Karandighi, and Tunidighi, etc.²² Apart from these regions, there are also some places outside the state of West Bengal such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Bihar, and Jharkhand where the native inhabitants of Malda and Jalpaiguri districts maintained their business.

The people of the *Surjapuri Rajbanshi* Community are also involved with some other business-like paddy, Wheat, Jute, pulses, potatoes, mustard Oil, Sugarcane, Sesame, Maize, etc. The peasants of this community sell their goods to the big

²² Personal interview with Mahendra Singha at Gandaktola, Islampur, Uttar Dinajpur. Date. 14.08.22.

Mahajan or dealers who control the whole Mundy. They sell their agricultural products at a minimum profit. Maximum profit gained by the *Mahajan*. Because they store the goods for a long time and sell their goods when a crisis arises in the market. Peasants are forced to sell their agricultural products because they do not keep their products for a long time, because they need money for their next seasonal crops.

Apart from these businesses, there is another business called *Muri vaja* (puffed rice) among the Surjapuri Rajbanshis. This business is mostly associated with the women of the community.²³ The majority of lower-class families are involved in this business. The puffed rice is made from paddy. The making process of this rice is very critical. First of all, clean the paddy and boil it with some hot water then dry it at a maximum temperature. Then separate the husk from the paddy. After that this rice is mixed with salt and fried with hot sand in an urn. This whole process is done by a woman. Last, of all, this puffed rice is sold by the male or female members of the family in a bazaar or market.²⁴ The people of this community apart from doing such business are also involved with some other business-like shopkeepers, cosmetics, grocery, and the different types of vegetable shops.

Labors: The majority of people of the Surjapuri Rajbanshi community are economically poor. In the first half of the twentieth century, they had no choice but to transform their profession from agriculture. So, they are obedient to work as agricultural laborers. Most of them were daily laborers and some of them were permanent servants under the Zamindar or rich Mahajan. But, the present condition of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis has altered in various professions. Except for agriculture they are involved in different sectors such as labour like- masonry, industry, carpenter, infrastructure, etc. A labourer paid 8 *annas* a month and an eight of a *ser* of cleaned rice.²⁵ It was applicable to the Surjapuri Rajbanshis and other communities also. In the twentieth century day laborers worked for their food they did not think to save their money. Because they had not done much more work except the season time. The working time of the labour was maximums but the wage was minimums. Whereas, they were mostly involved with agriculture so their main work in the agricultural field was ploughing, sowing, implant, *Nirani*, spadework, irrigating, Jute cutting, Paddy cutting, soil digging, etc. The barter system was also prevalent in the society, because some women engaged in making flattened rice. 1 kg/ser flattened rice was given instead of 2 kg paddy.²⁶

The female members of the community were also forced to do some other services to maintain the economic condition of the family. Apart from this, the children of the family also engaged in various workplaces, basically they helped elders to

²³ Personal interview with Nindo Singha at Samsargaon, Islampur, Uttar Dinajpur. Date. 15.09.21.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ L.S.S. O'Malley, Op. Cit., p.192.

²⁶ Personal interview with Nindo Singha at Samsargaon, Islampur, Uttar Dinajpur. Date.15.09.21.

complete their work. Another thing is that they were not conscious of their family so they spread their family with many children because of a lack of education. But the scenario has changed now.

Most of the people of the Surjapuri Rajbanshi Community of North Dinajpur district are laborers. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the people had a huge amount of land. But, after the independence of India, they lost land in a major number. This situation has changed because of a lack of education and social unconsciousness. Finally, they migrated from rural areas to urban areas and sought jobs for their livelihood.

Service: The Surjapuri Rajbanshi people were engaged in government service in very few numbers, because, this community was not interested in education, women as well as men also. So, their number in government services is much less in comparison to other communities. Actually, they loved agricultural work and they feared working in government Services. They think that Agricultural work is much easier than the government service. The literacy rate of this area is the lowest in number, 47.89% were literate in the 2001 census.²⁷

Other occupations: In urban areas, the Surjapuri *Rajbanshis* are engaged in shop-keeping, tailoring, masoning, rickshaw-pulling, and agency services. The *Rajbanshi* women basically belonging to poor families are engaged in various economic activities. First of all, they are housewives and then work as agricultural laborers, construction workers, and tea garden laborers. Economically, the majority of the Surjapuri *Rajbanshi* people in both urban and rural areas are poor. Apart from the above-mentioned economic sources, another interesting feature of their income is that they are deeply engaged in bamboo and tree planting in North Bengal, especially in North Dinajpur.

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