

# **British Economic Policy in Dooars and its Impact on the Tribal People**

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From the very beginning of human civilization a motion of tradition, transformation and transition has been going on and in this very context a continuous change is being followed in the academic field. In the field of social science various branches and sub-branches emerged. This tradition brought blessing and curses simultaneously, many times central subject matter is being neglected to highlight the marginal area. There is an unhealthy competition between various branches of social sciences claiming the superiority in depicting the true picture of human civilization. Dealing with the modern trends of social sciences the historical study and research evolving from nationalism to regionalism, racialism to tribalism, structuralism to post-structuralism, modernism to post-modernism and even construction to de-construction. The disciplinary study and research are gradually transforming into inter-disciplinary. In this very context the subject matter and methodology of the present study has been selected. The process of change is noticeable in human society, culture and almost in every sphere. The tribal society and tribal culture are not static. So, transformation in the structure and functions of the tribal society and of their culture is rather obvious.<sup>1</sup> In this context I would like to trace a curterly picture of socio-economic transformation of the tribal people inhabiting in the Dooars i.e. the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. After British annexation in 1865 the tribal society of this particular region meted out various unwanted but long run changes.

'Dooars' is a geographical descriptive name. Down the Bhutan hills, the part of India with an average breadth of 30 kilometres and length of 350 kilometres in West Bengal and Assam is known as Dooars. Dooars or Duars meaning doors were the doors of Bhutan leading down to the plains of India and vice-versa. There were in total 18 Dooars, of which 11 Dooars were in Bengal and the remaining 7 Dooars were in Assam. The Bengal Dooars were: (1) Dalimkot, (2) Chamurchi, (3) Zumerkot or Maynaguri, (4) Luckee or Lakshmi, (5) Buxa or Baxa, (6) Bhalka or Bhulka, (7) Gommar, (8) Reepoo, (10) Bagh, and (11) Sidli. The seven Assam Dooars were: (1) Boree Goomah, (2) Kalling, (3) Shurkolla, (4) Chappaguri, (5) Banska, (6) Chapkahama, and (7) Bijni. Geographically the Assam Dooars were between the River Dhanshiri on the east and the Manas on the west; whereas the Bengal Dooars were between the river Manas on the east and Tista on the west. <sup>2</sup>The British Government first realized the importance of Dooars in terms of its natural resources, economic prospects and strategic importance. After the partition of India in 1947, the significance of Dooars has increased manifold for the chicken's neck of Dooars is the only corridor of communication of India with its seven eastern states.

Before entering into the subject matter it deserved to mention that outlining the Socio-economic changes of the tribal is not an easy task due to constant current of changes and also to regional and ethnic variations of the tribe. The changes are not taking place in a similar manner to the various tribal groups or people. In respect of geographical location and habitation pattern the tribal society of Dooars can be categorized into three distinct categories likely – (I) The tribal society living in the semi-hilly region; (ii) The tribal society living in the villages or semi-urban areas of the plains, which can be sub-grouped as – (a) The tea garden workers and (b) agriculturist; (iii) The tribal people living in the forest villages. <sup>3</sup> The motion and character of changes are not same in these above mention categories. The British intervention leads to massive population growth, economic compartmentalization, introduction of market- economy, commercialization of agriculture and conservation of forest etc. These developments compelled the tribal people to entire into turmoil of change.

## **Population Growth**

Before arrival of the Britishers the Dooars region was scarcely populate due to various geographical, political and climatic reasons. But after conclusion of the “Sinchula treaty” in 1865 the area incorporated with British India which led to political stability and various new economic activities. <sup>4</sup>The British imperial policy of commercialization of agriculture and sucking up the resources created the environment of human

migration into this region. A vast virgin un-occupied land, rich forest resources and introduction of tea plantation attracted the outsiders to settle down in Dooars. To meet out the govt. labour demand and for the above mention reasons led to the rapid change of human ecology and society in this region.<sup>5</sup> The migration of tribal and non-tribal people into Dooars led to demographic i.e. the socio-economic changes in the tribal society. The population figure of this area began to rapid increase from the first census operation (1872) to the twenties of twenty century and after a short interval its growth rate reached to the pick position during post-independent period. From the year 1872 to 1891 the population increased recorded nearly 200% within 20 years.<sup>6</sup> The following table will proved this massive growth.

**Table.6 Population Growth of Western Duars (1865-1891).**

Population growth of Western Duars	
Year	Population
1865-67	49,620
1872	100,111
1881	182,687
1891	296,964

*Source: Sunder, D.H.E. survey and settlement of the Western Duars, in the district of Jalpaiguri.*

Behind this monumental growth migration played a vital role. Regarding the migration of people into Jalpaiguri D.H.E. sunder wrote – “of the people who have come into the Duars those from Darjeeling have settled on tea gardens as coolies, while those from Dinajpur and Rangpur are chiefly cultivators, who have taken up land in Maynaguri and Falakata tahsils either as Jotedars or Chukanidars . Most of those from Rangpur are Thana Dimlah. The number of people from Kuch Bihar is very large ..... The immigrants from Bihar, Chottanagpur, Orissa and other districts obtain employment in tea gardens as coolies and their number is ever increasing owing to the extension of cultivation of tea and opening of new gardens. Many Oraons of Ranchi district may be found in Maynaguri, Falakata and Alipurduar tahsils, where they have settled permanently as Jotedars.”<sup>7</sup> Without entering into the semantic debate regarding the tribal people of Duars we can call the Indo-Mongoloid tribal people i.e. the Garo, Toto, Mech, Drukpa, Rabha etc. as the autochthones or early settlers of Dooars . On the other hand the Dravidian or the Austrick people i.e. the santal, Oraon, Munda, Mahali etc. as the immigrant tribe .<sup>8</sup> Regarding the human settlement and population growth of Dooars J.F. Gruning writes – “The increase of population is the best example of the prosperity of the Western Duars, between 1891 and 1901 . The increase amounted to 38.5%. The rise of the tea industry has led to introduction of numbers of coolies from Chottanagpur, the santal pargana and Nepal of who, after working for some years on the tea gardens, take up land and settle in the district.”<sup>9</sup> He also wrote – “A few gardens which are practically in the hills, still work almost entirely with Nepali labour, but as a whole, the Duars gardens are dependent on labour from a distance, the chief recruiting grounds being Chottanagpur and Santal parganas.”<sup>10</sup>

Famous social scientist S.K. Bhattacharya in 1970 observed that the Dooars region has been ideally suited for the traditional habitat of the Tribals. Hunting, fishing, collections of firewood and forest products played an important role in the life of the Tribals. Vast virgin tract, large forest areas and hilly terrain provided an excellent opportunity to them for pursuing there occupations. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a large amount of tribal people belong to either Austrick or Dravidian group migrated in this region.<sup>(11)</sup> According to Sharit Bhowmick – “...Tribal Society in Bihar (which includes Chottanagpur) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was in a state of turmoil. This is evident from a series of revolts and the general unrest prevailing in the area. The decay of their traditional society had started earlier, in the seventeenth century, when Hinduism crept into the ruling family. The tribal Raja of Chottanagpur elevated his status through the process of Hinduising himself. He no longer considered himself as a Munda and traced his lineage to Nag Devta, the serpent God. The members of the princely family, after Hinduisation were able to intermarry with neighboring

Hindu princely families. This resulted in the alienation of the tribal Raja and his Kinsfolk from the rest of the people ...”

Along with the Hinduisation came the “Dikus” (aliens) who gradually expropriated cultivators from their land. These people were mostly Non-Tribals, mainly Hindus who were encouraged to settle in Chottanagpur by the members of the princely families.”<sup>12</sup> After British annexation the entire tribal agrarian system was being destroyed, leading to the uprooting of the Tribals from their land. These misfortune tribal people were in a fatal situation and easily apologies’ by the broker to migrate in the Dooars.

Introduction of railway and other communication networks led the tribal and other migration into the Dooars. The Kol uprising (1831), santal uprising of 1856, Munda Ulgulan ((1898) compelled the British Govt. to initiate oppressive policy in the tribal belt of Middle Eastern India.<sup>13</sup> In this context with the occurrence of sever al famines the tribal people of that region were easily mobilized by the ‘Aarkathis’ (agents) to migrate into the Sub-Himalayan Bengal as coolies or railway workers .The British administrator, traders and planters along with their indigenous partner (Jotedars) encouraged this migration and several tribal colonies were made.<sup>14</sup> Due to this along with other reasons the population scenario of the Dooars dramatically changed. The population growth can be understood by observing the following tables.

**Table.7. Growth of population in Jalpaiguri district during colonial period.**

Year	Total Population	Rural	Urban
1901	54674	536475	10289
1911	663222	651457	11765
1921	695946	681333	14613
1931	740993	722031	18962
1941	847841	820065	27776

*Source: Gazetteers of India, West Bengal Jalpaiguri, A.M.Kusari and others. P.71.*

**Table . 8. Density of population and sex ratio in the Jalpaiguri District.**

year	Density / Sq.Km.	Sex ratio
1901	88	843
1911	108	829
1921	113	856
1931	120	830
1941	138	836

*Source: A.M. Kusari and others. The West Bengal District Gazetteers, Jalpaiguri. P.75.*

It is evident that within the half –a century between 1872 and 1921, the population of the district had increased by 244.2%. In the same period the population of Alipurduar subdivision had increased by a fantastic 1.043 percent. No other part of Bengal had in a period of comparable span, after the advent of census, recorded such increase in population. After 1921, the rate of growth of population declined and even fell below the rate of overall growth in Bengal. The Situation continued to 1951.<sup>15</sup> Though the partition of the country in 1947 gave rise to the problem of influx of refugees from East Pakistan i.e. Bangladesh, from Assam, Coochbehar, Nepal and Bhutan. This creates turmoil into the demographic scenario of Dooars.<sup>16</sup>The growth of population of Jalpaiguri after independence and number of immigrants from neighboring districts; states and country could be clear by considering the following tables.

**Table. 9 . Growth of population of Jalpaiguri district after 1947, with Decadal variation:**

Year	Total Population	Decadal Variation
1951	916747	+8.13
1961	1359292	+48.27
1971	1750159	+28.75
1981	2214871	+26.55
1991	2800543	+26.44
2001	3401173	-

*Source – Census of India, 1991, 2001.*

**Table. 10 . Density of population and Sex Ration in Jalpaiguri District –**

Year	Density / Sq. Km.	Sex Ratio
1951	149	825
1961	220	854
1971	280	887
1981	356	910
1991	450	927

*Source: A.M. Kusari and others West Bengal, District Gazetteers. p – 75.*

**Table. 11. Number of immigrants in Jalpaiguri District in different Census Years :**

Year	Number of immigrants
1901	95899
1911	1,52,174
1921	1,63,024,
1931	1,58,757
1941	156,765
1951	2,78,842
1961	4,54,177

*Source: A.M. Kusari and others – Ibid – p-73.*

The Population growth opens up a new vista to the tribal society of Jalpaiguri district. This influx of people from outside broke the demographic balance which led to the admixture of people in the Dooars. In this context the socio-economic life of the tribal people undergo a dramatic change.

**Impact of colonization:**

Before the British conquest the Dooars had a very different system of social organization, political system and economic structure from that of the adjoining parts of Bengal. Soon after its formation as a new district Jalpaiguri was subjected to major structural changes comparable with few others. From a feudal and theocentric society it entire into a imperial system, which subjected to various changes.<sup>17</sup> Considering the ecological, geographical, environmental and strategic importance the colonial ruler declared the Dooars region as Govt. “Khasmahal” or non-regulated area . Although settled farming and right to the land was the principal modus – operandi of Bengal agrarian system, this region had traditionally reverse pattern. The ‘autochthones’ were both interregional and intra-regional migratory peasants, who never bother about

formal settlement on a particular piece of land for the peasantry, had been virtually a tribute earning colony.<sup>18</sup> The colonial rules imposed Tax per person, tax per-spade, Dao Tax, Tax per cattle and so on. The British land settlement and land revenue system introduced Zamindar, Jotedar- jargaon in-replace of subaltern social stratification.<sup>19</sup>

After the creation of Jalpaiguri district the Britishers made several settlement operations. For the first time the task had been done under the Deputy Commissioner of Western Duars, O.A. Beckette in 1871 and consequently it was followed by lord Ulick Brown's (1880); D.H.E. Sunder's (1891-95); J.A. Milligan's (1905-16) and so on.<sup>20</sup> These settlement operation introduced new economic order based on the ownership of land with Jotedari –Zamindari system of fixed rent collection. The capitalization and commoditization of land invited land greeders from outside to the newly created land market of Dooars. It led to migration and emigration together.<sup>21</sup> Along with other various tribal people migrated here and settled down as agriculturist and even very few numbers as Jotedars. But real story is that the indo-Mongoloid tribal people were losing their land through various legal or illegal manners and started to leave this place to settle down in undisturbed areas.<sup>22</sup> The marketing of land leds to the class formation in the peasantry and which initiated inter–class exploitation in Duars. This trend destroy the earlier social harmony where tribal became the worst affected. 8888888

The colonial administration led to the subjugation of the rights of joint owners and established one or two individuals as the sole owner of what was earlier a joint property. This system was beneficial for colonial masters and their indigenous counter parts but the sub-alterns were badly affected.

The colonial system of forest reservation and tea plantation initiated un-precedentent change in Duars. The demarcation of land for tea gardens and forest meant the creation of special enclaves for the production and the supply of materials which, though highly prized by the colonial state, were of little or no value to the local communities.<sup>23</sup> Such enclaves meant the destruction of the mechanism of exchange that had existed between various groups in the Duars prior to the colonial intervention. North Bengal railway was started in 1874 in response to the demand for transporting tea and timber that provided the forest department with the much needed market for its products. The colonial rulers started to make more and more forest areas as reserve forest. On the other hand the forest resource i.e. the timber was entire into massive exploitation. To meet the growing demand of railway construction the forest areas of Duars becoming bushy grass land<sup>24</sup>The following table gives some idea as to the extent of deforestation that took place to meet the demand from the railways.

**Table.12 No. of sleepers supplied from the Buxa Forest Division (Duars) during 1879-1882.**

Year	Number
1879	18449
1880	22683
1881	29865
1882	21602

*Source – D.H.E. Sunder: Survey and settlement report.*

Thus overall colonial needs and not an open market policy came to dictate the use or abuse of forests. Another implication of the increased demand was the sequestration of more and more forests by the forest department under the garb of conservation. Its implication to the native people was fatal. Although cultural forestry system offered a typical employment opportunity to the forest villages since the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century but it was nothing but changing the forest dwellers or dependants into 'bonded labourers'.<sup>25</sup> After the second Anglo-Bhutan war and the conclusion of the historic 'Sinchula Treaty' in the year of 1865 the entire land of Dooars came under British subjugation. From the year of 1866 the colonial ruler began to interfere in the matter of forest. Initially the forest related matters were handled through the revenue department of Bengal presidency and remained open for indiscriminate felling. But during the year of 1874

the department of forest was introduced and the entire forest land of Dooars was declared as reserved and was divided into two sub-groups keeping river Torsha as the demarcation line namely -1. Buxa Division and 2. Jalpaiguri Division.<sup>26</sup> The colonial ruler started systematic extraction of timbers from the reserved forest for the construction of railway sleepers, making tea boxes and ships etc. They were especially motivated regarding Sal (*Shorea robusta*) plantation and its conservation. But this special intention and so called scientific forestry led to severe bad impact on the multi-species forest land of Dooars, the prevention of fire was also a new challenge. In this backdrop few officers like Hart, E.O. Shebbeare and J.W.A. Grieve suggested to clear the bushy grass land lighting fire and planting new Sal tree in those lands. This method was originally imported from the method of shifting cultivation by Dietrich Brandis who was involved in the forest department in Burma. For the cultivation of Teak tree this burning and clearing method was known in Burma as “TAUNGYA”, which means- taung(hill)+ Ya (cultivation). In this method fire is used to burn the unwanted trees and bushes to improve soil fertility. This ‘Taungya’ system was introduced In Dooars which lead to re-structuring the existing forest village system as a whole because under the new system skilled labour which knew the technique of slash and burn was required. Hence, the indigenous shifting cultivators like Rava, Mech or Garo whom the British forester threw out from the forests earlier in the fire prevention regime were back in the newly established forest villages. In these newly created taungya villages the residents were allowed to raise agricultural crops for two years in clear-felled coups between the lines of forest plantation. As soon as the crops grew to shade the space between the tree seedlings, the villagers had to discontinue cultivation and move to a new site of plantation. Along with plantation, the villagers were involved in associated weeding, cleaning, thinning operations and had to save the plantation from fire and grazing hazards for four to five years. In exchange they were entitled to certain privileges and facilities granted by an annual agreement or bond with the forest department like free timbre and other implements for building quarters, drinking water, limited medical assistance, free firewood and fodder in addition to cultivable land of not more than five acres and cash payment for extra work. The system continued even after two decades of independence and remained the crux of forest conservation and regeneration until the historic movement against Taungya in 1967.<sup>27</sup> This is to mention here that the ‘Taungya’ system uprooted many tribal families and forced them to become wonderers. The century old cultivation process got a setback. The forest officers often punished them and even forced to leave the forest. So this system worsens the tribal economic and social life. The process of commercialization made a rapid growth when the British lieutenant governor Sir George Campbell switched on for a move for tea plantation in Duars. After the creation of Gazaldoba tea Estate (1874) within the year of 1891, more than 104 tea gardens sprang up. This process consequently increased and thousands of acres lands were converted into tea garden<sup>28</sup> Tea plantation encouraged the immigration of labour especially from Bihar, Chottanagpur region and the tribes of Dravidian or Austro – Asiatic group poured into the region which breaks the social ecology and economic stability of this region.

Before coming of the Britishers a vast portion of Duars forests and grasslands were utilized by the indigenous people for grazing Animal husbandry across the riverside forests, hunting and fishing was the lifeline of tribal inhabitants. In between 1874 and 1884 most of the forests were made reserved, demarcated and gazetted which put stop grazing, collecting woods and other forest resources and large fine were levied for law breakers . The reserved forest system also led to decline of cotton cultivation along with ‘Jhum cultivation.’ The ‘autochthones’ of Duars used to produce cotton, locally known ‘khun or Foon’ through shifting cultivation and used to make their own garments, thus agriculture and handicraftsc were playing an important role in the tribal life. But due to the plantation and conservation of forest this Jhum cultivation meted out rapid decay. Cultivation of cotton by ‘Jhum’ was an important component in the symbiotic relationship between different communities in the Duars. It was prohibited within the limits of the forests as early as 1870 but was permitted in the ‘Jhars’ or places where the Jungle consideration from the govt. Enclosed by forest land the “villagers” could not carry out shifting cultivation and forced to migrate out of the limits of the reserved forests . In this context the Mech Community started to push towards Assam.

It is also to mention here that there were intra-regional and interregional trade links in Dooars. The Meches, Totos, Rabhas, Garos and Drukpas used to supply cotton, oranges, ginger etc. to the people or

the plains; on the other hand the people living in the south exported rice and other commodities to the north. There had been a harmonious ‘Tibet-Bhutan-Rangpur’ international trade link through Duars.<sup>29</sup> In this trade system many tribal people were meaningfully involved. It was a clear-cut barter-economy which disappeared due to colonization. The territorial amalgamation through district formation emitted intra-regional crisis resulting from many facets of socioeconomic environment in Duars. The little experienced shifting cultivators had to meet a challenge with the century old experienced agriculturists of the southern parts of Bengal. The policy of ‘Bengalisation’ also enhanced new problems. The penetrations of patriarchal and new social hierarchy; Hindu ways of living, new material culture create a new challenge to the tribal peasantry. Not only land market was created but the colonial rule introduced a new commodity-market into Duars. Till the year 1895 there were 61 markets in Duars, amongst them 17 were in run by the Jotedars and 44 by the Govt. By granting special lease to the interested persons or the Jotedars the private market developments were initiated by the Britishers, which increase the collection of revenues.<sup>30</sup> These can be clear through the following table.

**Table.13. Collection of Tolls in cash (in Rupees)**

Tahsil	188-89	1889-90	1890-91	1891-92	1892-93	183-94	Tot. of 6year
Maynaguri	520	5019	5646	9774	9667	11802	42430
Falakata	939	1728	3091	3446	3338	1670	14214
Bhalka	22	183	205	228	260	281	1181
Total	1481	6930	8942	13448	13265	13753	57825

*Source: Sunder’s Report.*

It is clear from the table that the toll collection was very much positive during the 6 years between 1888-89 and 1893-94. It was phenomenal mounting to 828.63 percent. Although new markets were beneficial for the colonial govt. and non-tribal traders but it felt harass treatment to the tribal people. This tradition even continued to till date.

The new land revenue system cash-crop culture, tea-timber-tobacco marketing brought the Duars into the world arena of the capital market. The new socio-economic order now penetrated into the contour of economic compartmentalization of the region. The struggle for existence led the tribal people to the race of being more intelligent and urban. So the politics of development crept into the tribal society of Duars. At this juncture the migrators became the land owner and the former land owners became landless.<sup>31</sup> The land holding pattern could be clear through following tables

**Table. 14. Community wise distribution of Raiyats in Western Duars in 1895 in terms of number of jotes settles under Sunder’s settlement.**

	Name of the Community	Quantum of land settled (in acre)	PC to total quantum of land settled
Tribal	1. Bhutia	2	
	2. Garo	33	
	3. Mech	766	
	4. Munda	4	
	5. Oraon	116	
	Total	921	09.24%
Non-Tribal	6. Rajbanshi	5264	52.79%
	7. Mohammedans	2692	27.00%
	8. Others	1094	10.97%

	Total	9971	100%
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Source: D.H.E. *Sunders Settlement Report (1895)*

**Table.15. Community wise distribution of Raiyats in Western Duars in 1895 in terms of quantum of land settled under Sunder's settlement.**

Sl. No	Name of the Community	Quantum of land settled (in acre)	PC to total quantum of land settled
1	Bhutia	16	
2	Garo	938	
3	Mech	20,593	
4	Munda	111	
5	Oraon	2,900	
	All Tribes	24,558,	06.38%
6	Rajbanshi	180910	47.00%
7	Mohammedans	1,21,583	31.59%
8	Others	51,844	15.03%
	Total land settled	384895	100%

Source: D.H.E. *Sunders Settlement Report (1895)*

Thus during British rule the old order in the Dooars had been destroyed forever and was replaced by the new colonial structure. The new land revenue system, introduction of market economy, commercialization of agriculture, resource management changed the old system of tribal economy which create the environment of social changes.

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