

Demography of the Duars: Tribal, Nepali and Others

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Jalpaiguri district was one of the created districts during the colonial period. It is known that the expansion of the East India Company led to the war of Plessey in 1757 and the war was won by Clive by treachery and eventually it led to fall of dilapidated Mughal Empire in 1857 and finally in aggrandizement sequel the East India Company enunciated the 'Doctrine of Lapse'. When the control of the East India Company was fall they looked for new pasture for primitive accumulation of capital and new settlement for tax and revenue. For example, Santal Pargana district was created by scuttling forest to create new Zamindar and which led to eventually the famous Hul rebellion. Similarly and in different vein most of the present day North-Eastern states were taken control for their colonial interest and policy of aggrandizement. Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) was annexed which had been forested and unsuitable for living. While the NWFP were carved out to be the bull work against advancing Czarist Empire. Now it may sound history but NEFA was created out of colonizing mission for natural resources, and, despite much philanthropic claim any person with anti-colonial mentality call the famous Elwin as Kutz of conrad¹.

When the annexation and conquest of the East India Company was complete and the juggernaut² of exploitation was made privy of imperial law and order in a local bandobast ushering in local comprador classes, the colonial authority equipped itself with local knowledge and geographical details. Darjeeling was annexed from local kingdom of Sikkim for summer recess and white peuchant³. Duars (now Alipurduar district since 2014, June) was traditionally divided into western and eastern part. The eastern Duars consisted of east of Alipurduar town, i.e., Kumargram block and Alipurduar II block, while the western Duars consisted of blocks, namely, Alipurduar I, Falakata, Madarihat, Kalchini, Nagrakata, Malbazar, Dhupguri and Moynaguri block. Alipurduar became 20th district on June 25th, 2014 through bifurcation of the Jalpaiguri district. Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee declared it in the Assembly beforehand and she said that the bifurcation was needed for both administrative convenience and addressing local concerns⁴. The new district of Alipurduar had got locations of following police stations or thanas, namely, Alipurduar, Shamuktala, Madarihat, Jaigaon, Birpara, Falakata, Kumargram, and Kalchini areas. While the Jalpaiguri district will comprise nine police stations – Jalpaiguri kotowali, Rajganj, Bhatnagar, Mainaguri, Dhupguri, Banarhat, Malbazar and Metaille and Nagrakata.

Before bifurcation the Jalpaiguri district had an area of 6202 square kilometer and a population of 38.46 lakh as per 2011 census. Mr. D.P. Roy Congress MLA from Alipurduar lauded the state government's decision. Residents of Alipurduar sub-division, irrespective of political affiliation celebrated the state government's decision of a separate Alipurduar district. The celebration came before a day of Chief Minister's programme at the Parade Ground at the town. According to a senior administrative official in Jalpaiguri, the Second Anglo-Bhutan war resulted in the annexation of Duars in the end of 1864; they were divided into the district of western and eastern Duars. The western Duars district was formed in the end of 1864 and its three sub-divisions were Sadar headquarters Mainaguri, Buka and Bhalka (which was soon to be renamed Alipurduar after Colonel Hedayet Ali Khan, originally from Danapur Bihar, and powerful officer of the British in the 2nd Anglo-Bhutan War, who succeeded F.A. Doxough as the civil officer of Buxa and Dalinekte (presently Kalimpong)⁵.

Origin of the Tea Estate

It was stated that 'increasingly new tea estates were set up in the waste land of Duars and forest clearings. Even in jote land or agricultural lands tea garden was set up. By 1930 there were 130 tea estates. Even this trend of setting up tea garden in agricultural lands continues today by small tea gardens without factory in plains of Jalpaiguri district and North Dinajpur district⁶. Tea estates in agricultural lands made eviction and new landless. The Rajbansi of Duars was agriculture dependent. They had no occupation or skill other than agriculture. So landlessness caused by tea estates turned them day labourers but they did not opt for tea garden labourers⁷.

Before the partition of 1947, from adjacent districts came to Duars in the tune to get foothold of land. In 1881 census it was seen that 44.118 people came from surrounding district to Duars. Increasingly numbers of settlers increased. In 1881 census number of Rajbansi in Duars was 45 percent and in 1921 census number of Rajbansi decreased to 30 percent⁸. So in annual and decadal movement land rights were increasingly shifted to outside people specially money-lenders. In 1905 in Falakata Mouza 205 jote was sold to outsiders. Those jotes were purchased by outside Marwari, non-Bengali and Kabuli businessmen. In Mainaguri mouza 102 jotes were sold at Totgaon, Udalbari, Sarugaon, Fulbari etc. Most jotes were purchased by money-lenders⁹.

In fifty years of 1872 to 1921 population increased rate in the Jalpaiguri district was 244.2 percent. In no other district of West Bengal population increased so much dramatically. Most of the migrants were agriculturists and they mostly migrated from Rangpur, Dinajpur, Pabna, Malda, Rajshahi, Bogra, Goalpara, and Mymensing districts. Local jotedars had welcomed this trend of new settlement for agriculture and making cultivable lands more by dint of labour. But by 1920 almost all fallow lands were redistributed. Migrant peasants were mostly caste Hindus, unlike Rajbansi and tribal, and so they could gather money to become socially influential to the extent of buying new lands. Buying and selling lands out poverty, family distress and indolence or prodigality had been a vogue in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri district. Rural poverty and immigration created landless peasants, mostly of Rajbansi people in the two districts.

In the fifty years from 1901 to 1961 number of immigrants in Jalpaiguri district can be gauged in the following statistics¹⁰:

Year	Number of Immigrants
1901	95,899
1911	1,52,174
1921	1,63,024
1931	1,58,757
1941	1,56,765
1951	2,78,842
1961	4,54,177

The effect of partition of Bengal was strongly felt in Jalpaiguri district. The western most part of Jalpaiguri district went with East Pakistan with 672 sq. miles, name, Boda, Pachagor, Debiganj and patgram. Though at the time of partition population influx on both sides of Hindu and Muslim denominations were more or less same, but after 1951 population influx was much more than efflux. For that reason in the decade of 1951-61 population growth rate in Jalpaiguri district was double than all other district of west Bengal. In 1971 census it was seen increase of population in Jalpaiguri district was 3,90,867.¹¹

Increasing population pressure led to land fragmentation and landlessness. Simultaneously, there were no other sectoral growths of the economy in the district. Tea and forest became structural to cope with it. In the leftist regime since 1977 there were slogan of land reforms and scheme of 'Operation Barga' but sadly there was no incentive to price of agricultural products. And without agricultural price to the extent of profit, land reforms became slogan mongering. High hope died down and inland migration daily work set in towards far away North India and South India. In all towns of North Bengal the rickshaw-pullers and masons are Rajbansi in ethnicity, which was unimaginable in few decades earlier, and it was mostly caused because of landlessness and dwindling natural resources in North Bengal.

<i>Growth of Jalpaiguri Town</i>			
Year	Persons	Decadal variation	Decadal percentage variation
1872	6,598		
1881	7,936	+ 1,338	+ 20.27
1891	9,682	+ 1,746	+ 22.00
1901	9,708	+ .26	+ .26
1911	11,469	+ 1,761	+ 18.14
1921	14,520	+ 3,051	+ 26.60
1931	18,962	+ 4,442	+ 30.59
1941	27,766	+ 8,804	+ 46.43

SOURCE: Census Reports for the relevant years.

The Rajbansi community is the largest subaltern community in North Bengal. As has already been mentioned, they have already made demand for separate state, “Kamtapure”, sometimes called “Uttarkhand” and more in recent years “Greater Cooch Behar” by Banshi Badan Barman, an young maverick and ex-CPIM activists, who became disenchanted by the CPIM leadership as it had been controlled by upper caste, especially people from the Eastern Bengal. Atul Roy leader of the KPP was a subordinate staff of the North Bengal University and left his job for independent Kamtapur state to be ruled by Rajbansi alone. But all the ethnic movements of the Rajbansi community in North Bengal since 1970’s seem to have had trouble in mobilizing the larger Rajbansi community living in rural areas and in North Bengal towns. One reason for this that the Rajbanshis is rather a stratified community with large social, cultural and economic differences between the “elite” “creamy layer” who are educated, government job holders and wealthy and partly integrated to urban Bengali society, while the majority who live in harsh conditions of village whose agricultural lands are getting increasingly fragmented, agricultural prices are fluctuating in market vagary, while natural resources dwindling fast, are compelled to work as agricultural labourers or rickshaw-pullers in Siliguri, Cooch Behar, Alipurduar or any other fast growing towns of North Bengal¹². There are also important historical explanations. Through the expansion of the British colonial infrastructure in North Bengal new possibilities opened up – job opportunities in the tea industry, in governmental service, in education, and through commercialization of agriculture- but Rajbansi elite found these opportunities were monopolized by immigrant upper caste Hindus¹³. The caste Hindus looked down upon the Rajbanshis¹⁴. In reaction, the Rajbansi elite organized the so-called Rajbansi Khatriya Movement. The direct cause or spark for the movement was the colonial census operations of the late 19th and 20th centuries. Rajbansi elite or landed influential and intellectuals objected to the census classifications by which the Rajbanshis were treated as equals of the Koch (who were classified as ‘tribal’ or ‘semi-tribal’). They themselves claimed to be a caste with Aryan origin that should be enumerated as Khatriya. Through this struggle to pass as twice-born Hindus, the Rajbansi elite have come to distance themselves from those less advanced sections of the community who are rooted in the local culture¹⁵. Sometimes educated Rajbansi still often try to hide their background and pass as Bengalis¹⁶. For example, they would hesitate to speak the local Bengali dialect, associated with the Rajbanshi community, in public. But one can also note tendencies in the opposite direction, a strong sense of community seems to have emerged among the Rajbansi as a whole¹⁷.

In the first few years of tea plantation enterprise in Duars, the labour employed was almost Nepali. But soon it was found supply of Nepali workers was not sufficient to meet the demand of plantation. Further, the local inhabitants were reluctant to work in tea gardens. Under the circumstances, the planters had to look elsewhere for securing labour and experience of Assam indicated from where labour could be produced. Within seven years of plantation, a trickle of Choto Nagpur labour started to arrive in Duars. In 1881 census recorded 210 Oraons and other smaller groups of tribals. The number grew rapidly and by 1901 a sizable labour force was built up (see table). While Nepali immigrants from Darjeeling district continued to constitute a fair portion of labour force in the tea garden from distant Choto Nagpur and Santhal Parganas. According to 1901 census Report, there were 188,223 immigrants in the district as a

whole. The bulk of them enumerated in the Duars and half of the immigrants were from Choto Nagpur and Santhal Parganas.

The method of recruitment for the Duars gardens differed from that adopted in Assam. The Duars labours were free in the sense that they were not indentured labours subject to penal measures. Perhaps one reason for this difference was the early 1880 migration from Choto Nagpur and nearby areas for work in tea gardens was an established social process. The non-indentured recruitment was done through the garden sardars. An additional reason, as suggested by Griffiths, might have been that the fact Duars was closer to Choto Nagpur than Assam, so planters did not resort to such overt acts of coercion which were found in Assam¹⁷.

There had been enough evidence to show that considerable coercion, direct as well as indirect, and sometimes outright terrorization techniques were used by planters and their agents in (i) procuring labour, (ii) putting them to work, (iii) keeping them under control¹⁸. It was partly due to considerable involvement of Indians in the Duars tea enterprise that the system of recruitment of labour and their living conditions did not receive much public attention. Hence it is difficult to provide detail documentary evidence in support of the above. But even the limited materials available for the late 19th and early 20th century and somewhat detailed account of conditions of labour as early 1940 made it abundantly clear that the Duars plantation labour was wage labour put under various types of non-economic constraints which severely restricted the mobility of labour and it turned out as labour held in bondage in a free market¹⁹.

Year	No. of gardens	Total under tea (in acres)	Approximate production (in lbs.)	Average in lbs. per acre of mature plants	Number of labourers employed		
					Permanent	Temporary	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
1874	1	...	...	...	...	...	...
1876	13	818	29 520	...	...	...	...
1881	55	6 230	1 027 116	...	...	...	...
1892	182	38 583	18 278 628	...	...	...	...
1901	235	76 403	31 087 537	441	47 365	21 254	68 619
1907	180	81 338	45 196 894	...	...	...	...
1911	191	90 859	48 820 637	583	56 693	18 622	75 315
1921	131	1 12 688	43 287 187	426	86 693	1 871	88 564
1931	151	1 32 074	66 447 715	534	1 12 591	4 262	1 16 583
1941	189	1 31 770	94 604 450	765	1 36 491	4 896	1 41 387
1951	158	1 34 473	137 194 660	1020	...	...	1 78 009

SOURCES: For the years 1874 to 1892 and 1907 *Jalpaiguri DG*, p.103, and for the remaining years *Jalpaiguri District Handbook*, p.iii.

At the time of recruitment they were given an advance, partly refundable and partly non-refundable. This advance was given to the recruits to pay off their debt in the country and to enable them to meet road and sundry expenses. This practice gave them an expression that they were free to move. This impression was also strengthened by the further practice by which every new recruit was required to put his thumb impression on an agreement bond for work for a period of six months in the tea estate which brought him from his native place²⁰.

Plight of the Tea Garden Labourers

On the arrival at the tea gardens, the labourers were put in a concentration camp-like situation. The managers enjoying the implicit and explicit support of the colonial authority and mystique of the Sahibs were law unto themselves. Physical coercion, beatings, and floggings – all these were quite common. Incidents of death from physical torture were not unknown. There are unrecorded accounts of troublesome workers being thrown into furnaces of garden factories²¹.

The very fact that thousands of tribal peasants were wrenched from their habitat and moved to work sites far from their homes and that these distant migrants were herded together in a totally unfamiliar surroundings itself put a restriction on their movement and freedom. The labour system, the separation of

labourers from their known environment, their total isolation from the proximate surroundings because of geographical locations, ethnic, cultural and language barriers, and various other open and concealed compulsions – made the workers vulnerable to violence and coercion. That the Duars plantation area was non-Regulation tract meant that many of the ordinary laws and regulations were not in force in the area. This administrative feature gave virtually unlimited power to the Sahibs²².

Along with the tea tribal there are forests tribal. And for that reason we have to look back into history. The British Indian Government established Forest Department in 1861. According to this Act all forests were turned into Reserve Forest. In 1878 the earlier law was revoked and new law was enacted. In 1894 there was first Forest policy declaration.

In 1961 census there was 172665 tribal in the Jalpaiguri district. In 1971 it became 428595, and in 1981 census it became 744640. Amongst them number of forest-dwelling tribal was 12195. That is 1.63 tribal were forest-dwellers living in 77 forest villages. These forest villages scattered in 33 in Buxa Division, 19 in Cooch Behar Division, 4 in Baikantapur Division, and 21 in Jalpaiguri Division. Beside tribal in the forest villages, there are other people too. In the forest villages 65 percent are tribal and 34 percent non-tribal.

In 1952 independent India Government declared first Forest Policy. Though there was little difference of the new policy from the earlier. In that policy there was plan regarding forest villagers. It was declared in the plan, “It is suggested that forest villages must be built on better sites, better housing, sanitation, water supply and medical supply. Transport should be arranged for taking the villagers to their work place. Six new forest villages were necessary to be set up at Gorumara, Ramsai, Banarhat, Khuttimari, Gairkata and Gossainhat felling lines”²³.

And in the Seventh Working Plan (1970-71 – 1989-90) decisions were taken that, “no new forest villages need to be established. Excess land, if any, now being enjoyed by the villagers should be reclaimed by plantations. To prevent expansion of forest villages proper demarcation to be made by planting suitable trees all around the village and also by fixing pillars”.

Due to increasingly decrease of forest work, the forest dwellers are prone to use forest to collect dry woods, and graze about cows and goats, but the Forest Department are strict and high-handed and in sequence sometimes there happens enmity and clash of Forest dwellers with the Forest Department. In 1969 Forest-dwellers were given right to day labour in the forest and five acres land per family, which was reduced to two acres subsequently. But population increased and number of families increased but neither land or work in the forest increased.

In the forest land and villages of Jalpaiguri there are Lepcha, Bhutia, Toto, Mech, Rava and Garo. In 1980 the Calcutta Research Centre conducted a survey upon the Rava and found out that there are 1016 Rava families in the forest villages. Due to increase of family and population only 40 percent Rava had got right to work with the Forest Department, while 60 percent Rava had not right to work in the Forest Department, and they are known to be Faltu, they have to seek work outside the forest²⁴.

In connection with the demographic composition of the Duars it should also be mentioned that the hilly tract of the district came to be inhabited by, among others, a sizable group composed of several Nepali castes. In 1921 they numbered nearly 20,000. A very large proportion of them were employed on tea gardens as labourers, and also junior supervisors such as baidars, chowkidars etc.²⁵. Some of the Nepali communities have a long history in Duars²⁶. Beginning with commercial tea plantation in Darjeeling hills and Duars a large number of people from hills of Nepal migrated to slopes of Darjeeling hills and subsequently in ten numbers in Duars tea garden in the upper region. Forced labour for state and state official was accepted and routine practice in Nepal under the Rava rule. So British ruled Darjeeling hills and upper Duars was an attractive destination for the Nepali migrants. Understandably most of them were the Matwalis, i.e., the hill tribes of Nepal²⁷.

One of recurrent feature of Duars demography in recent years is human-elephant conflict. The intensity of the conflict is increasing year after year as the loss of habitat and fragmentation of forests are forcing the elephant to migrate. Round the year in Duars there comes sporadic report of elephants destroying maize and wheat fields, destroying houses, tea garden quarters and tea saplings. Though the human-elephant conflict is rising across India, Elephants nearly kill 400 people every year and about 100 pachyderms lose its lives. Although government estimates show that number of elephants in India has increased from 25000 to 29000 since the inception of Project elephant, but their habitats have been degraded and conflicts have

increased. The Elephant Task Force, constituted by the Union Government Ministry in 2010 recommended measures for a “secure future” for elephants, estimates nearly 400 people are killed by elephants and about 100 elephants lose their lives every year in the country. Raman Sukumar of Indian Institute of Science is also member of the Project Elephants damage 0.8-1 million hectares of crop every year and more than 50,000 families are affected by it. While chasing away elephants with search lights, crackers or guns make them more aggressive, said Vidya Athreya of Wildlife Conservation Society of India²⁸.

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