

Book Review-2

Dr. Anil Kumar Biswas, *Right to Education of Tea Tribes: Feasibility and Reality*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2023, p. 178, Rs. 700

Right to Education of Tea Tribes authored by Dr. Anil Kumar Biswas is an important and insightful book on the right to education for tea tribe communities around Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar in the Western Duars region. It is empirical research carried out by the author under the IMPRESS scheme, sanctioned by the Indian Council for Social Science Research. The author and his research team have extensively travelled to the targeted research area in the Western Duars to examine and critically analyse the implications of the Right to Education Act, 2009 on the tea tribes of the Western Duars of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar.

It is poignant to note that the author had visited 36 tea gardens and also taken up the arduous task of collecting empirical data from 18 selected primary schools even during the onslaught of the covid 19 pandemic. Despite many undescribed challenges; which may have been faced by the author have come up with robust data and analysis of materials which have culminated into the publication of this book. This insightful book is expected to contribute greatly to understanding why the tea tribes of the Western Duars region are still appallingly lagging in education and other aspects of socio-economic and political indicators in comparison to other mainstream communities.

The book gives a glimpse of the historical account of how the Oraons, Mundas, Santhal and other tribes migrated to Western Duars in the mid-1870s. According to the authors, these tea tribes were originally from Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Orissa. One interesting observation made by the author was the fleeting description of the several tribal uprisings in Chotanagpur that escalated in the mid-18th century due to British interference. This unrest forced many of the tea tribes to migrate in flocks to the Western Duars to work in the tea plantation area. In the book, the author attributed the migration of the tea tribes to the Western Duars region due to the British policy to invest and trade in tea plantations in the mid-1870s. The book also documented how the tea tribes would visit their place of origin from time to time. With time, they permanently settled in the tea plantation area in the Western Duars region.

In the book, the author further narrated that since the tribal peasants were either mere migrants or they were forcefully brought to the region by the Britishers to work in the tea gardens they were deprived of the means to own their land. The British exploited the tea tribes and that did not have

any policy for them. In post-independent India, the Government enacted the Plantation Act, of 1951. According to the Act, the management of the tea garden needed to provide basic amenities like quarters, a hospital and a school for the children of the tea tribes. According to the author, the reality is a sordid tale of mismanagement and exploitation. He further elaborated that because of the meagre salary paid to tea tribes, they never had the wherewithal and the economic means to buy their land and as such they ended up getting trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty and mechanical ordering of birth.

Though the book did not lay out the culture or customs of the tea tribes in detail or whether there has been perceivable assimilation of their culture to the culture of the places where they have finally settled, it has, however, successfully established as to how the tea tribes have ingeniously developed a link language for communication. The author had extensively visited the scattered tribes in and around Jalpaiguri and the new Alipurduar in the Western Duars region to elaborate on how the tea tribes had developed a linkage language which is nomenclated as '*sadri*'. According to the author, *Sadri* is a link language which is a mix of *Mundari*, *Kurukh*, Hindi and Bengali.

In Chapter 5 the author made a pertinent inference that in most of the schools in the 36 tea gardens that they have visited, the medium of instruction was either Bengali, Nepali or Hindi. Since the tea tribes, students did not speak any of this language they either lost interest in studies or they simply were unable to cope with the learning process. Such students eventually end up dropping out of school. This finding of the author is pertinent and relevant for policymakers to keep in mind if the right to education for the tea tribes is to be made more equitable.

Right to Education and the Tea Tribes

From the onset of the book the author had, more concisely, templated his research on three broad objectives: firstly, whether the Right to Education Act, 2009 has been implemented in letter and spirit to ensure access to education for the children of the tea tribes. Secondly, whether tea tribe children have basic minimum support regarding human resources or decent school infrastructure. Thirdly, the right to education of children could be a tool to ameliorate and emancipate the tea tribes from the shackles of bonded labour. In Chapters 4 and 5 of the book, the author elaborated on the empirical data that the author collected during field visits. He has successfully visited and collected data from 36 tea plantations in the Western Duars region of Jalpaiguri and New Alipurduar. Their effort is commendable not only for their sincere efforts but also due to the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic at that time.

In the penultimate chapter, the author highlighted how the ideals of the Right to Education Act, of 2009 may not have been able to benefit or have any implications on the tea tribes' children and their right to education in the Western Duars region. According to the literature survey of the author,

the western Duars region has a cumulative population of 23, 81, 596 as per the 2011 census. Out of the total population, the population of the tribal community is 7,31, 704. Regarding literacy rate, the Western Duars stands at 77.99 per cent while the literacy rate among the tea tribes in the region is a mere 58.96 per cent. This means that there is a huge 19.03 per cent literacy gap between the tea tribes population and the rest of the populace. Thus, the findings reflect the importance and significance of the study conducted by the author and his research team.

To understand the cause and implications of the huge 19.03 per cent gap in the literacy rate among the tea tribes and the rest of the communities in the Western Duars, the author visited 36 tea gardens. In the book, it is reported that out of the 36 tea gardens, there is no school in 03 tea gardens, 04 schools are in precarious condition, only 06 numbers of schools are vibrant and thriving, and a total of 23 schools are merely average schools. Based on the data collected by the author and also based on insights from interviews with school authorities, the author attributed the poor literacy rate among the tea tribes of the Western Duars to the following:

1. Poor infrastructure

According to the findings of the author, most of the schools in the tea plantation areas have inadequate infrastructure. There are no adequate classrooms, hygienic toilets, kitchens, playgrounds etc. Even in schools where there is a workable mid-day meal scheme, there is no adequate space for children to eat their meals. In some schools due to lack of proper infrastructure major portions of the school premises would end up being flooded during monsoon. Even in some exceptional schools where there is a computer lab more than 500 students are made to share 10 computers.

2. Lack of adequate Human Resource

Most of the schools suffered from a lack of teachers and other administrative staff. The author made this observation that most of the teachers were engaged in the management and preparation of mid-day meals for students or they are engaged in filling up stipend forms for students or they are engaged in election duties. The dire situation of most of the schools reflects that the primary duty of the teacher is highly compromised as teachers have to engage themselves in extraneous activities but teaching.

3. Poor Management of Tea Plantation

According to the author in some tea plantations, frequent change of ownership of tea plantations or appointment of incompetent managers based on nepotism etc. has a spiraling negative impact on the overall functioning of the tea plantation. Since most of the tea garden management's goal is to make a profit, in some of the tea gardens the management is hard-pressed to provide basic minimum maintenance of quarters, provisions for clean water and schools for

children. But for tea plantations which have efficient management, the overall surroundings and schools managed by them are thriving and performing very well.

4. Language Barriers

According to the author, since the medium of instruction in most of the schools in tea plantation areas is either Hindi, Bengali or Nepali most of the tea tribe students are not able to comprehend elementary teachings as they speak only the linkage language of *sadri*. As well due to the mushrooming of English medium schools of late, parents of the tea tribes, like any parent would do, prefer sending their children to English medium schools.

5. Location Logistics

In most tea gardens the schools are located within the tea plantation area or in the vicinity but when some schools are located beyond 10 kilometres of the settlement of the tea tribes, without provision for means of transportation going to school becomes a hurdle as there is fear of safety and security of the tea tribe children.

6. Trapping of Vicious Cycle of Poverty

The author highlighted that the daily wage of tea tribes is a mere INR 250 per day for 14 hours of hard work every day from the peak season starting in March till mid-November. The tragedy of extremely low wages and also due to the lack of any medical or pension schemes, the tea planters end up in a vicious cycle of poverty. Owing to the strenuous physical demands of the nature of the tea planters' work, tea tribe parents believe that to sustain and survive in this profession children need to be accustomed to or groomed from an early stage of childhood. Also, because of the abysmal conditions of schools and the trapping of poverty, the parents believe that their children will eventually join them in their profession, and thus they prefer that their children join them in tea plantation from an early age. As they could ill afford to buy their land or build their own house with their paltry earnings, the only way for them to retain their quarters in their old age is by making their children join them in their profession.

However, one positive finding of the research was the declining child marriage among certain girls students who have benefitted from the Kanyashree Prakalp scholarship at their Senior Secondary School. This scholarship scheme is a huge financial incentive not only for female students but also for their parents. The author elucidated that the scholarship scheme has been instrumental in the decrease of the practice of child marriage among the tea tribes in the region.

The book is the culmination of the author's sincere effort and commitment to address the appalling challenges and to find solutions for the reasons why tea tribes were lagging in literacy rate. According to the

author, as it has been more than 10 years since the enactment of the Right to Education Act, of 2009, the objectives and the research queries raised by him are not only pertinent but it is also a clarion call to find a means to help eradicate the huge literacy gap that the tea tribes in the Western Duars are currently facing. It is also envisioned and spiritedly articulated by the author that without addressing and redressing the literacy divide faced by the tea tribes the intended goals of NEP 2020 may not be holistically achieved. Therefore, the book will serve as a significant document for policymakers, researchers, scholars and academics who are committed and motivated to create a more egalitarian and inclusive Bharat.

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