

Indo- Mongoloid Tribes of the Western Duars – Their Identity Crisis: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract: *Western Duars is situated in the northern portion of present West Bengal in India. In the pre-colonial period this area was a part of Pragjyotishpur- Kamrup, Kamatapur and Cooch Behar State. Population was very meagre as this area was covered by hill and jungle; only the people of some Indo- Mongoloid tribes such as Mech, Toto, Garo, Rabha, and Druca lived there. After the occupation of the Duars by the British in 1865 by the 2nd Anglo- Bhutanese war, Britishers cast their commercial eyes on that area. They introduced new economic policy creating new jotedary system in the lands and establishing tea enterprising in the Duars. Huge number of people of different castes, creeds, religions and class immigrated in the Duars for their livelihood and economically to be benefited as a result of which the indigenous people of Indo- Mongoloid Tribes only depended on their own ethnic culture and nature- based shifting cultivation faced identity crises and to save their identity and culture they left the place and shifted in the North-Eastern part of India. In the present paper the history, culture and the reason for living the place and shifting in the other part of the country of the Indo- Mongoloid Tribes have been shown.*

I. Introduction

Before coming of the British, the area of the Western Duars was ruled by the Koch Kings and the Bhutias subsequently. In this area population was meagre, only the people of some tribes namely Mech, Toto, Garo, Rabha and Druca lived in the hilly and forest areas of the Duars in the intolerable situation and distress climate. In the plain areas of the Duars such as south Maynaguri, Falakata and Alipurduar the indigenous people like Rajbanshis and local Muslims lived here and there of the Duars. It is relevant to mention here that most of the areas of the Western Duars were full of jungles' and ferocious animals. For the climatic disaster and unhealthy condition no people other than Mech, Garo, Rabha and Toto could live in this area. Among these tribes Meches were the majority people in the Western Duars areas. Surgeon Rennie wrote in this regard, 'The inhabitants chiefly consists of a tribe called the Mechis who appear to be the only people so constituted as to be capable of permanently enduring the climate.'¹

II. Ethnic Identity of the Indo- Mongoloid Tribes

The tribes namely Mech , Toto, Garo, Rabha, Druca etc. were originated from Indo-Mongoloid race and simple in habit. They were habituated with shifting cultivation treating the lands and natural resources as the property of God. There are many debates on the origin and ethnic identity of the said tribes. Dr. C. C. Sanyal, wrote, 'Such was the history of a tribe, the Bodos who migrated into India through Patkoi hills between India and Burma and gradually spread themselves into the whole of modern Assam , North Bengal and parts of East Bengal.'² W. W. Hunter pointed out in his book, 'The Mechs of Jalpaiguri principally inhabit the Western Dooars portion of the district. They are the western branch of the great Kachari tribe and the most numerous in the districts to the east of Jalpaiguri. In the Eastern Dooars they are called indiscriminately either Mech or Kachari and in the Assam districts they are called Kachari alone, losing the name of Mech altogether.'³ Though there were some differences among culture and livelihood of the different groups of the Indo Mongoloid tribes, they were simple in habit. They lived out of the ambit of so called civic society. After living in a particular place depending on the shifting or jhum cultivation, they shifted into another place and started to live in the same way. They were nature lover. They conducted their lives led by moral or mandal (leader a of particular group). For any kind of problem or crisis or dispute they never would go to the so called civic society or Government; everything was solved or settled by themselves led by their leaders on the basis of their ethnic culture.

III. Occupation of the Duars by the British and taking measures

After occupation of the Western Duars by the British in 1865 by the treaty of Sinchula after the 2nd Anglo Bhutanese war situation was going to be changed gradually. For the economic interest Britishers utilized this area introducing their economic policy in the field of agriculture, land revenue, trade and commerce as a result of which demographic pattern and socio-economic condition of this area changed rapidly.

As a consequence of the Second Anglo-Bhutan War in 1865, the British-India Government occupied the Western Duars and they cast their commercial eyes on the area because it was full of natural resources, huge

number of forests full of valuable timbers, animals; and the soil was favourable for cultivation of different crops. At first, they thought to collect the information about the geographical position at micro level so that they could take initiative for economic reforms and for that Mr. Rennel was assigned to make a geographical map on this area. B.C. Basu, Esq. The Assistant to the Director of the Dept. of Land and Land Records and Agriculture, Bengal reported to the Director of Land Records and Agriculture, Bengal –

“The approaching settlement of the Western Duars is likely to have prejudicial effect on the extension of cultivation, the ryots, many of whom have only lately immigrated into the subdivision, cannot have any great attachment for the villages in which they live so that the least distance may frighten them away.”⁴ Mr. Basu pointed out more assuredly to extend cultivation for the economic benefit if they initiate some measures – He reported-

“In connection with the subject of extension of cultivation a few words may be said regarding village sanitation. The Western Duars enjoys the reputation of possessing a most insalubrious climate. Fever is rife in most parts of the year and epidemics are of frequent occurrences The present unhealthy condition of the Duars is not unlikely to keep away many people who would otherwise like to immigrate into the estate. This consideration alone should be sufficiently strong to induce Government to pay more regard this it has hitherto done to question of sanitation. The present land revenue of the estate is about three lakhs of rupees and Govt. were only to allot one percent of the income for miscellaneous improvements, a great deal could be done to improve the condition of the tenantry”⁵ On the basis of the information and necessity at micro level they started survey and settlement works gradually it is found that the first settlement took effect from April, 1871 by W.O.A. Backet, The 2nd settlement generally took effect from the 1st April, 1880 by Ulick Brown, The 3rd settlement was started from 1889 and ended in 1895 by D.H.E. Sunder and the 4th settlement was completed by J.A. Milligan during 1906-1916. As a result of these settlements the revenue in the Duars increased rapidly. Before the settlement the amount of annual tax was approximately Rs. 39526.00, but after the first settlement the land revenue was raised to Rs. 88,618.00, after the 2nd settlement to Rs. 1,51,862.00, after the 3rd settlement it was Rs. 3,74,901.00 and after 4th settlement it was Rs. 6,77,000.00.⁶

B.C. Basu Esq Assistant to the Director of the Dept. of Land Records and Agriculture reported –

“The natural condition of the Western Duars is highly in favourable to immigration. There is an abundance of good alluvias land which can be very easily brought under the plough. The settler has not to wait long for the return of his outlay, which need not be great. A pair of bullocks costing about Rs 16 and a set of implements for Rs 2 or Rs 3 are all the stock that the needs invest in commencing cultivation. The neighbouring state of Cooch Behar and the district of Rangpur are pretty densely populated, so that with proper encouragement the surplus of population will naturally flow into the Western Duars”.⁷

As a part of their agrarian reforms the Britishers divided the lands into three categories in the Duars according to the quality and necessity of the land – namely (1) Lands for agricultural purposes, (2) Lands for Tea - Cultivation and (3) Lands for reserve forest. In the field of agriculture, they introduced jotdari system in a new forms differing from other parts of North Bengal. After each settlement a large number of jotes were created and these were given to the jotdars by agreement or lease. Most of the jotdars did not cultivate the land directly; therefore, further devolution of land was necessary. On the basis of an agreement of revenue named ‘Pattani’ to the intermediaries on middle ranking tenure holder called Chukanidars, Dar-chukanidars, Tasya-chukanidars, Dar-darchukanidars. Moreover, there were bargadars or sharecroppers who had no right on land. They cultivated the land of the jotdars as well as of the intermediary tenure holders. In general, the land holders under whom the bargadars cultivated the land, were called ‘giri’ and got 50% share of the crops.

At the first stage, as there was no shortage of land in the Duars, the jotdars, after getting lands from the Govt. by agreement or lease, collected cultivators from outside the Duars and gave many facilities including Bhuta (a kind of loan) to cultivate and dwell in the land.⁸ In the neighbouring areas of the Duars it was a propaganda among the peasants and merchant class as well, that the lands were available easily in the Duars and there was no burden or restriction for any kind of tax or revenue at the first stage, Grunning wrote, “It has always assumed in the Duars that every field under cultivation has been reclaimed at the tenants expense from the original jungle and, after the Bhutan War, it was found that the tenants held at a mere jungle rent. This was allowed to continue without change for six years, when the first settlement of the Western Duars was made, and since then the rents have been gradually enhanced at successive settlements as the country has been reclaimed and land has increased in value.”⁹

B.C. Basu, Esq, Assistant to Dept. of Land Records and Agriculture reported –

For the first two years, the land pays no rent, for the next two at 3 annas per acre; for the 5th and 6th years at 6-annas per acre; and for the seventh and eighth years at 8 annas per acre. At the end of the 8th year the land is measured again; the portion which has been reclaimed is then assessed at the Pergunnah rates, which are Re. 1-8 for up land and Re. 1-4 for low land and the unclaimed position is made to pay at 3 annas per acre. The settlement is made for 30 years. The terms appear to be very fair and are readily acquired in by ryots.¹⁰

IV. New Demographic Structure in the Duars

As there were no sufficient people in the Duars to cultivate lands, people of different communities, religions and classes immigrated in the Duars from neighbouring areas. They settled and obtained lands from the Government by lease or agreement and started cultivation. Many of them cultivated lands directly and became jotdars, many jotdars cultivated lands by giving pattani to another intermediaries and many times recruiting sharecroppers or adhiars. In this way population in the Western Duars increased rapidly. Statistics is given below—

Number of population in the Western Duars increasing gradually.¹¹

Year	Population	Percentage of increasing
1872	90668	-
1881	1,82,687	101.49%
1891	2,96,348	62.21%
1901	4,10,606	38.55%
1911	5,19,372	26.49%
1921	5,58,971	7.62%
1931	6,61,068	18.26%

For increasing population in the district, on the other hand for the increasing of land revenue one after each settlement, the relation between cultivators and the ‘giri’ namely jotdars, intermediaries and merchant classes became bitter day by day. Ranjit Dasgupta writes, “.....the adhiars (share croppers) were always treated by the jotdars as socially inferior in status, even when the two belonged to the same socio-religious group¹² Apart from this, for the immigration of different types and classes of people, land crisis was seen as

The land of the district turned into a commercial market. Merchants, money lenders, Mahajans, pleaders etc. were interested to get land from the Govt. by agreement. After taking land, they lived in the town and gave the land to the intermediaries who had no direct relation with the cultivators and no experience of cultivation. There were absentee jotdars who got the land only for extra income as a result of which original land holders lost their lands, particularly the small jotdars. There were also local jotdars of different communities and tribes who took land and became big jotdars. Ranjit Dasgupta writes, “Out of 5,542 transfers which came to the notice of the settlement officer, the purchaser in 3,444 were jotdars already in possession of other jotes, in 637 cases he was Mahajan, in 83 cases a pleader, in 100 cases a tea garden or its representatives, while in 12, 98 cases, the purchaser was a Chukanidar and presumably a resident cultivator. In 1912 it was ascertained that out of 9,910 maljotes as many as 3,996 were held by non-resident jotdars.¹³

The following table shows the jotes were passing into the hands of outsiders which was made in 1905 for the Falakata tahsil-¹⁴

Class of people	Number of jotes	Area in acres
Rajbansi	1,638	58665.23
Muhamadan	1,092	40739.47
Mech	381	7599.52
Jalda	19	577.16
Garos	17	302.28
Santhal	2	24.52
Oraon	263	6,182.99
Nepali	140	4,990.49
Marwari	115	6551.13
Up-country men	272	14,097.20
Kabuli	14	381.41
Asamese	18	1,132.65
European	7	1,036.19
All others	136	5074.22
Total	4,114	1,73,523.46

From the above table it is found that about 15 percent of the settled area in this tahsil was in the hands of Marwaris, up-country men, Kabulis and “other persons” many of whom are Bengali Babus. Here another table is given which shows the different castes to which the jotdars of the Duars belong, the number of jotes and area of land and revenue paid by them after the Sunder’s settlement (1889-95):-¹⁵

Caste	Number of Jotes	Area		Revenue paid in Rupees
		Acres	Dec	
Paharia	147	6,064	06	6,815
Chatri	67	2,502	13	3,156
Oraon	116	2,899	99	3,225
European	57	3,940	00	4,361

Mech	764	20,593	64	18,523
Kapali	8	2,09	10	367
Muhammadans	2,692	121,583	20	1,11,967
Shaha	76	3,533	42	4,217
Tanti	24	7,94	09	816
Rajbanshi	5,264	130,910	52	1,83,089
Kyasth	192	3,503	17	7,813
Bhutia	2	16	66	39
Brahman	201	11,316	37	9,191
Gope	47	3074	53	2,594
Kyan	99	12,612	87	11,979
Napit(Barbar)	34	1090	03	2,212
Hari	6	143	27	142
Banik	13	314	55	353
Mahji	5	112	98	72
Bairagi	13	270	31	341
Teli	3	175	33	216
Garos	33	938	46	694
Byadh	1	116	12	132
Mali	2	56	13	61
Baidya	2	69	01	85
Kumar	6	379	40	471
Jugi	11	456	43	556
Dobasiya	54	901	19	764
Jalda	2	31	36	20
Sutar (carpenter)	14	239	54	241
Kamar	4	76	74	61
Kalwar	1	26	53	21
Nepalise	3	69	60	67
Munda	4	111	58	87
Sanyasi	2	43	43	32
Total-	9,971	3,34,995	91	3,74,901

From the above table it is seen that the different types of people immigrated into the Western Duars and they settled after having land, even the tea-garden labourers immigrated from Chhotanagpur and Santal Pargana, out of working in the tea garden used to have land and cultivated. Grunning 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 percent. The rise of the tea industry has led to introduction of numbers of coolies from Chhotanagpur, the Santal Pargana and Nepal of whom, after working for some years on the tea gardens, take up land and settle in the district”¹⁶

As a result of increasing population a business of land selling and purchasing started in the Western Duars. The business class, particularly the Marwaries and some servicemen, Doctors, pleaders purchased lands and gave it to the intermediaries or sharecroppers to be financially benefitted. The following table shows the average sale of land per annum in each tahsil of the Duars during twelve years, from 1883 to 1894.¹⁷

Name of Tahsil	Number of Sales	Area of Land sold in acres	Assessment Rs.	Price Rs.	Price per acre Rs.	Number of years Purchase of assessment
Maynaguri	305.5	4,549	4,438	58450	12.8	13.1
Falakata	70	1,647	1442	9,225	5.6	6.8
Alipur	10.9	251	183	545	2.1	2.9
Bhalka	4	93	71	274	2.9	3.8
Ambari Falakata	8	236	209	1047	4.4	5.0

Here, it is to be noted that as a result of immigration, the population of different castes and classes had been increasing gradually in the district, but the population of different indigenous tribes namely Meches, Totoes, Garos, Rabhas etc. decreasing gradually. Statistics is given below:-

The following table shows the population of Mech community decreased gradually.¹⁸

Years	Population
1891	21,608
1901	22,350
1911	19,893
1921	10,777
1931	9,510
1941	6,886
1951	10,507
1961	13,178

The following table shows the variations of the Totos in the district-¹⁹

Year	Population
1901 (Census)	171
1910 (Mr.Ainslie, Subdivisional officer)	200
1911 (Milligan)	235
1921 (Census)	271
1931 (B. Mukherjee)	263
1931 (Census)	334

V. Crises of the Indigenous Tribes

It is relevant to mention here that the indigenous tribes of the Western Duars not only lost their lands and liberty, but also lost their ethnicity and ethnic culture. Mainly two immigrated culture entered in the Duars like other parts of the country that were the Aryan culture or Sanskritisation and the Westernisation or Western culture by which the Indigenous tribes were affected. By the penetration of the Aryanisation and Westernisation many tribal people were bound to convert themselves into Hinduism and Christianity. For the conversion of the tribal people into Aryanisation and Christianity, the culture of their own or ethnicity had been going to be demolished. The casteless and classless ethnic based society was felt into a crisis; their unity was affected because they were divided into separate groups accordingly the various groups of Hinduism and Christianity.

Separate colonies were established for the protection of the Mech, Garo, and Santals. Mr. Sunder settled 766 jotes covering 20,593.66 acres with Meches, but these were only a portion of the total community. Milligan writes, "A block of land approximating 20,000 acres, known as Satali, was at last settlement set aside as a reserve for Meches and Garos. Unfortunately the leases granted allowed the right of transfer and sub-infeudation to all and sundry, so outsiders soon began to creep in, for the land is very fertile in Satali."²⁰

Like the Meches and the Totos, the people of Garo community once lived in the Duars, left the place. Why the people left the place? It is assumed that due to identity crisis, they left the place and moved towards east. Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal writes, "Analysis figures of the census report it appears that there was a large exodus of the Mech from Bengal towards Assam and then further eastwards."²¹ As a result of immigration of the outsiders in the colony, the Meches and Garos began to leave the place. Here also, Milligan writes, "Soon after this the Mech exodus from the Duars began, and in 1915, I was informed that practically every Mech had moved over into Assam. I have said little of the Garos, but that is because they never patronized the colony to any extent. A number of that tribe still remain in the district in forest villages, but none in the colony."²²

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