

## **Forced Migration of Tribes to the tea gardens: Historical account**

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### **Abstract**

Large scale migration does not provide development and human wellbeing as it promises. Economic planning based on infrastructure and large scale regional development has led to a large scale in-migration in developing nations. Theories of regional studies and labour economics suggest that this method of shifting large scale population for the particular economy is significant for its growth as it provides affordable labour force, further it adds to the economic prosperity of a developing nation. Also, it improves the migrants' quality of life in the long run. The present research is a study of tribal population in tea plantation regions in the state of West Bengal, India. Tea garden regions of Assam and West Bengal were once a prosperous destination for tribes from central India that employed sizeable tribal population in tea garden economy during the mid-19th century is currently on declined. The study uses both primary and secondary data, primary qualitative data was collected in 2007 and 2016, and secondary data is taken from the census of India. The paper explores the contradictions between development and migration, focusing on the livelihood challenges faced by the tea garden workers in the last decade. The results from the data show that today, poor quality of life due to low wages, painful working condition, unemployment and poor health is an everyday experience of tribal population in plantation economy with minimal alternative livelihood opportunities even after independence.

### **Introduction**

The onset of Industrialisation in the late eighteenth century to early 19<sup>th</sup> century in India during the colonial era brought about intentional displacement and migration of large populations mostly tribals from one part of the country to the other. The starting of Tea plantation by the European Planters in Assam in India in 1839, lead to the beginning of an era of mass labour migration. The first tea garden in the sub-mountain tract known as the Western Duars of Jalpaiguri district was opened in 1874. The land under tea plantation and the size of the labour force rose steadily until 1930.

To assist the development of the plantation industry to acquire vast acres of land at a concessional rate the colonial government initiated the scheme of "Wasteland Rules"<sup>1</sup> in 1938 (Goswami, 1984) (LaFavre, 2013) Later acts, such as the 'Fee Simple Rules', 'Revised Free Sample Rule' and 'New Lease Rule' was introduced in the years 1862, 1874 and 1876 respectively. The colonial authorities recognised that the problem of cheap labour was the key to the growth of the tea industry (LaFavre,2013).To resolve the problem of labour shortage the planters tried to uproot the local peasants from their lands. The indigenous labour population consisting of Rajbansis, Muslims, Mechs, Bhutias and Totos were reluctance to join the tea gardens. The problem of labour scarcity peaked by the year 1855. The British government had no option; therefore, they brought coerced labourers from other regions, and ultimately produced a system of neo-slavery (Bose, 1993) (Greaves, 1957).

The colonial government to create cheap surplus labour, which could be transferred to the tea plantation and other industry-first, dissolved the entire economy that was nomadic or forest-based. And expelled communities of people from the land to more backward areas, this caused the disintegration of the tribal economy in Chotanagpur. It was a two-way process; one from political control to economic gains; and the other, from economic gains to political control. By and large, all major tribes in the nineteenth century were emerging as a community of peasants while the minor tribes still depended on the forest. The setting up of the tea industry in Assam and Bengal set in motion stream of forced migratory movement. The condition of the tea garden was not very good before independence, and it remained poor even after independence accompanied by ever-deteriorating economic and social condition further aggravated by the frequent closure of many tea gardens.

### **The rationale of the study**

Duars area of Jalpaiguri District experienced mass immigration of tribal population to its tea plantation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The migration of tribes was forced and deceptive with false hopes of better wages and life as tea plantation labours. Instead, these people were put into a perpetual cycle of poverty and deprivation. The inhuman living conditions provided to the workers worsened the disease situation.

Now after more than a century after their migration, their situation has not improved but worsened with the closure of some of the tea plantation, worsening market condition, unemployment, poor health situation and poverty. This district standing ten on health index and

11 on poverty index among the 17 districts of the state (HDR, 2004) and under-five mortality is as high as 82 deaths per thousand live births (RCH-DLHS, 2002-04).

## **Objective**

The objectives of the paper are to understand how the migratory movement was put into motion for these tribals, their entrapment into a perpetual cycle of the poor socio-economic condition even today.

## **Methodology**

**Data:** This paper uses primary and secondary data source to fulfil its objectives. The census data is used to show the migratory movement of the tribal. The data on the work condition of the tea garden, Quantitative primary data of 150 tea garden women workers from five tea gardens were collected in 2007 and 2016. Before conducting the data collection, permission from the tea garden manager was taken. Name of the tea garden, and the respondent is not disclosed in this paper because of Ethical consideration. Further, 23 stakeholders were also interviewed; Qualitative data was collected several times over nine years to understand the situation of the tea garden labours over the last decade. The research relies profoundly on the narrative of the tea garden workers to understand the situation of livelihood and health in the tea garden.

The study uses narrative inquiry as the central methodology to understand the experiences of the tea garden labours in terms of health and livelihood. Narrative inquiry is an umbrella term that captures personal and human dimensions of experience over time and takes account of the relationship between individual experience and cultural context (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Narrative inquiry is a means by which we systematically gather, analyse, and represent people's stories as told by them, which challenges traditional and modernist views of truth, reality, knowledge and personhood. The result presented in this study is arranged in a thematic manner.

Apart from the narrative, the non-participatory observation of the researcher is also used to give context to the Narrations of the respondents. Marshall And Rossman (1989) define observation as "the systematic description of events, behaviours, and artefacts in the social setting chosen for study". Observations enable the researcher to describe existing situations using the five senses, providing a "written photograph" of the situation under study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

**Analysis:** Thematic analysis (TA) a wide, used qualitative data analysis method that involves grouping the data themes to define patterned meaning across a data set. Thematic analysis as a

method was first developed by Gerald Holton, a physicist and historian of science, in the 1970s. In the social sciences, TA has been extensively used for analysing qualitative data, but until recently, there has been little discussion of TA as a method or guidance provided for its use. In 2006, Braun and Clarke proposed a “systematic” and “sophisticated” approach to TA, which has subsequently been widely adopted. Although TA is often used merely to describe or summarise key patterns in data, for Braun and Clarke, a good TA involves more than simply reporting what is in the data; it involves telling an interpretative story about the data in relation to a research question (Clarke V., 2014).

The key interviews of this study were one couple aged 89 and 94 years, respectively in Nagrakata where they reside now. They belong to Oraon tribe from Chattisgarh. They were among few of the last people from this tribal community to migrate to Duars tea gardens in Jalpaiguri from Chattisgarh. They migrated in the year 1942 when she was 14 years of age, and her husband was 19 years old. They lived in a very impoverished condition in Chhattisgarh in a joint family with small agricultural land, and the product was not enough to sustain them.

Other narratives include narratives of women aged 68 the eldest daughter of the couple who is currently residing in Alipore Duar District West Bengal. Narrative of a man who is currently 61-year-old born and brought up in Naya Saili tea garden whose grandfather worked as Sardar in Haldibari Tea Garden in Duars, Jalpaiguri all of them was interviewed between 2008 to 2016 several times and for primary narrations of the first section in the result. The other qualitative narrations are used in the last section of the result. And the second section mostly comprises of literature review supported by few narrations.

## **Result**

The result is arranged in four sections describing the various aspects of the migratory movement and the socio-economic condition of the migrant workers. The first section on a Tea plantation and migration talks about the circumstances that were created to create excess labour and the migratory streams towards the newly established tea plantations. The second sections discuss the historical account of large-scale population movement. The third section and fourth section discusses the past and current health and working condition of the migrant workers.

### **Tea Plantation and Migration:**

The first-hand account of the experience of the migrants is rare; therefore, these interviews get some insight into the situation that existed at the time of migration.

The conversion of land into a scarce commodity and the growing ethnic cleavage in access to means of production mainly affected the tribals. In the more backward districts such as Chhattisgarh, this meant that hardly any tenants were granted occupancy right. The tribes in Chotanagpur lost their land at a much rapid rate, and the tribals were not only marginalised but also extensively exploited, they were reduced to the status of Kamiya (Bonded Labour). "Our agriculture land was very small, and we were not allowed to take resources from the forest, although sometimes we did go there to take wood and for sometimes for hunting. We would eat the red forest ants, bees and even worms in the vegetables, they were very nutritious along with rice. But there was very little food grain, and I had to cook for everyone in the house and divide it equally among all the family members. There were about ten people staying in the same house. It was difficult for me to manage the food for all the members in the house, so many days I had to go hungry. The situation started to become worse day by day. My mother in law stayed unhappy with me saying I was unable to manage."(89, Women). Many tribals experienced the same fate of limited food grain and constrained livelihood due to constraining to use forest resources. Failing to make out a living from the land the evicted and impoverished raiyats looked for occupations outside agriculture.

New employment options were opened up in the Mica mines, in Hazaribagh or the lac industry in Ranchi and further to tea plantations in Assam and Duars (Bates & Carter, *Tribal migration India and beyond*, 1992). The migration of labour could solve two problems; first, the requirement of cheap labour in tea plantation and secondly to re-populate the areas badly hit by the re-occurring Bengal Famine. The people with "alien origin" were brought using the extensive networks of Sardars (Referred as the leader) and Arkits (In some text it means fish hook, In tamil it came from all-Kati literally meaning who selects people) by persuasion and false promises of good wages, to settle permanently into these tea plantation areas.

These Sardars and Akrits were non-other than their relatives of tribal people themselves who got paid additional money for bringing labourers to the teagarden. There were many Sardars/Akrits who were responsible for keeping up the migration stream to tea gardens by telling them stories of money and prosperity in the tea gardens."One day, one of my brother (cousin) who was working in the tea garden in North Bengal came and told me stories about prosperity and work in the tea gardens. I decided to go because I could no longer live in the impoverished condition in my home. I told my husband I have decided to go, if you want to

come along you can come else I will go alone. Me and my husband decided to go north Bengal were much prosperity was there and we could get work.”(89years, Women).The sardars were well paid for their job to supervise the tea garden workers we can make out in the following experience "My grandfather, who was a Sardar in the Haldibari Tea Garden was a wealthy and powerful man. In the 1950s also he continued to earn as much as 500 Rs per month and had a truck. He would wear white dhoti and carry an umbrella very proudly. He was the only person in the whole village and the surrounding areas to own a truck."(61years, Man)

The movement of migrants was continuous and was assisted by the East Indian Company by reducing the rail fare (1.5 pice per mile instead of 2.5 pice per mile) for a large group of workers heading east, along with the Bengal-Nagpur railway. The tea plantation was able to withstand the fierce competition posed by the other emerging industries to attract labourers (Bates,2000).Mostly Santhal, Oraon and Munda tribal labourers moved in considerable numbers to North of Bengal, where they helped in the clearance of jungle. From there went on to the tea gardens in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling, or migrated to destinations overseas. The migration of nearly a million peasants from overcrowded lands in the east of Bengal to Assam was seen during the first three decades of the twentieth century (Bates 2000). "The tea gardens were in the midst of the dense jungle far away from each other. We arrived at Haldibari tea garden, but we did not like it there, so we escaped one night to Nagrakata tea garden. The tea gardens were heavily guarded, and it was tough to move from one garden to the other, but we managed"(89, Women).

Getting a job for the migrant was not a very difficult task, but they have to mandatorily register their name once a batch was taken new registration had to be done. Many a time’s many people got the job on the registration of other people. “When we came to Nagrakata we took the job which was registered in the name of Martina Tirkey and Bartholous Tirkey. We had to do this because there were no new registrations for the new workers. Only the old workers could pass down the work to their children. Therefore, we have worked in the tea garden all our life with false name...now all my documents are in that name...my husband does not even remember his original name." (89years, Women)

The recruits were kept in prison-like transit depots and sent to the tea garden under heavy guard. Physical coercion, beatings and flogging were all quite common (Varma&Chaudhury, 2002). To combat the high rate of absconding labourers, the Company enforced “strict control

through penal laws, floggings illegal confinements, and the chowkidari system," a system in which the British employed watchmen and guard dogs and did not allow them to mingle with the local peasant and native people to prevent desertion and disobedience (LaFavre,2013). "We were heavily guarded, and the officials were stringent; they would not allow us to escape. They would not allow us to interact with other people from outside. All this did not last because soon our country gained independence, and all the officials and guards were gone." (89years, Women)

Reverend E Wueste informed, on the basis of personal observation, that they "do not like tying themselves down". This explains the emigration of the Oraons, in particular, to the Duars instead of Assam, for in the Duars the contract system and the compulsion were relatively less oppressive (Varma&Chaudhury, 2002) but never the less a system to control the workers.

**Migratory Movement:** Out-migration from Chotanagpur alone was 3,30,000 in 1891, 7,07,000 in 1911 and 9,47,000 in 1921 (Singh, 1978). The 1901 census reported a steep rise in the number of incoming migrants in one decade in Jalpaiguri. The number of migrants rose from 143,922 to 188,223. According to 1911 census, as many as 126,214 residents of Jalpaiguri were found to have been born in Ranchi district, and many of Bihar, while in 1921 the 'most numerous' people among the labour force were reported to be Oraons and Mundas (Bose, 1993). In 1918-19, migration to the tea plantations was more than 31,000 from the Central Provinces. The 1921 census showed emigration of 322,805 from Raipur and Bilaspur districts of Chhattisgarh and total immigration of 188,073 (Bates C. N., 1985). Between 1872-1921, the population of the Jalpaiguri district increased by 244.2 per cent (6 times). In the same period, the population of AlipurDuar subdivision increased by 1042.2 per cent. The immigration of labours to the tea plantation caused an increase in population. Nepali immigrants from the Darjeeling district also contributed a significant proportion of the labour force in the gardens located in the hilly areas of the Duars (Varma&Chaudhury, 2002) (Bose, 1993)('The Making of the Working Class': E. P. Thompson and IndianHistory)

**The Socio-economic and health condition :** The climate at Duars was undesirable; Sunder's Settlement Report (1886-95) Grunning's (1911) study revealed that the chief diseases of the area were epidemic cholera, endemic fever both Remittent and intermittent, Blackwaterfevers (Kala-azar) diarrhoea, dysentery, goitre, rheumatic afflictions. By 1901 in eight out of the ten Jalpaiguri was among the six districts with the highest mortality rate from fever in the province of Bengal.



The Duars region no doubt accounted for the maximum malaria cases as compared to the other parts of the districts (i.e. the western part, with Jalpaiguri town and surrounding agricultural area (Chaudhury&Varma, 2002). The poor state of hygiene and arduous work made the workers more susceptible to diseases."We got a tea garden residential quarter with two rooms and a kitchen, where we have spent our whole life. We don't own anything much land or property in this region for more than 70 years these quarters are our home. We now passed our work to our children, and they continue to work in the tea garden. Most of us have never gone to our desh (Native place) (89years, Women)

The tea colonies had very poor health infrastructure which has barely improved even today"we treated small health issues with our tribal medicine, and someone is seriously ill; it is not strange for us to expect that he/she will die. Death is widespread in our village; some diseases may because of witch crafting that happens in the village." (32 years, Women). Famines and shortage of food have also been very common"I was 10 or 11 years old the agriculture crops had failed, and there was no food grain available so, and we survived to eat kodai (Ragi Millet)which we could grow in our kitchen garden with less water. We ate rotimade of ground Kodai and even ate boiledKodai."(56 years, Male)

Though protest took place in the Duars region in retaliation to poor living condition, and poor wages, the TanaBhagat movement of the Oraons had a sharper anti-imperialist edge which developed into a protest against the zamindaris, sahumars and sarkars and took a strong anti-British character. However, the limitations of this movement were severe- besides the difficulty of mobilising plantation workers insulated from all outside influence. In 1946, the first union of the Duars plantation workers was formed, and its meeting at Mal was attended by representatives from about 30 gardens. Widespread labour discontent and strikes were reported throughout the Duars. (Varma&Chaudhury, 2002) (Shukla, 2011)

**Working condition of the tea garden labourers** Studies have suggested during 1911 to1946 the living and working conditions of labour on the Jalpaiguri tea plantations 'remained more or less static'. Labour was generally paid by thika, which is the payment per 'piece work'. Those engaged in plucking were assigned a certain quantity of leaves as their thika. The wage for completing each thika was known as hazri. The hazri was four annas per thika for men, three annas for women and six pies for children, and it remained unchanged between 1920 and 1947. when the tea price collapsed during the 1920-2 slump and the 1930s depression the tea plantations cut back



on production and part of the 'surplus' labour was 'released'. The tea garden labourers could not fight against redundancy or for better wages because of isolation and lack of organisation among themselves. Wages were paid through the Sardar. The sardars received a commission for each worker under his charge (Bose, 1993). The government intervened in 1952 and fixed statutory minimum wage for the first time for tea-plantation workers in West Bengal. From 1952 onwards there was no organised coercive recruitment of workers by the tea-gardens.

The state of the people in the tea garden is nothing different from what it was. The survey conducted among the tea garden women in 2007 shows that the Women are still paid in terms of daily attendance known as "Hazira" and worked for six days in a week. The monthly salary is paid after deducting for ration (in which they mostly got one-two litre of kerosene oil and one kg sugar) and medical expenditure. The salary of the women varied between 1100 to 1500 Rupees in a month. The women could earn more than the stipulated salary by plucking more leaves if she was able to pluck more than 25 kg of leaf in a day she was paid extra money ranging from fifty rupees to hundred rupees extra. This is popularly known as "Doubling" in the tea gardens. There are no medical facilities provided in the tea garden, sometimes only a compounder may be available, and the tea garden hospitals do not have enough infrastructure or staff.

The housing facility is fundamental, with no drinking water and sanitation facility, the wells are never cleaned, and water is never purified, and many diarrheal deaths are reported every year. During the survey conducted in a tea garden in August-September 2007, I have observed that August being the rainy season, the diarrheal disease was rampant in the district...many numbers of people lost their lives due to diarrheal disease in a very short span of one month because they were drinking water from the village well, which was not treated. At least 3-4 people died in my village with two days of getting affected by diarrhoea. And similar was the situation in the neighbouring villages. Many of the tea garden colonies still do not have electricity, and medical facilities are very poor. Only a compounder is available at the health facilities. Most of the tea garden colonies in the Duars region are poorly connected by roads and are in areas which are not accessible during rainy seasons.

## **Conclusion**

To fulfil the demand for cheap labour there was an alteration in the land ownership rights and heavy taxations on agriculture land. These changed policies resulted in a substantial tribal population losing their land and losing their living based on the forest. When these tribal people

were rendered with no land and occupation, they had no choice but to migrate and work as plantation labours.

The contemporary crisis is severe, and the impacts are visible among the Tribal community of Duars and Tarai. The Colonial arrangements that have forcefully migrated the vast Chotanagpur Tribal community to meet the then demands of political economy have substantially left them with less option for their survival and identity. In the socio-economic perspective, the transformations from being agrarian community the Tribals were converted into working-class labour community, with no land rights and minimal social security. The post-Colonial system has somehow helped Tribal for their upliftment through reservation policies in education and employment; however, these measures have had limited impacts and a still large section of Tribal community is poor and largely depend upon Tea Gardens for their daily livelihood. The present globalised market economy, which results from the market scenario has changed gradually, and the domestic tea market has hampered. Such circumstances are providing loss of livelihood opportunities and least human development indicators among Tribal community. This raises a question on the methods of mobilising labour for development projects, which leads many of the communities such as the tribal tea community in Duars region more impoverished than before.

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