

MIGRATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC TENSION IN POST-COLONIAL WESTERN DOOARS IN NORTH BENGAL

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Post-Colonial Western Dooars of Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal witnessed large scale exodus of refugees from erstwhile East-Pakistan as a result of the Partition of Bengal. Again after the Bangladesh War of 1971, a large number of infiltrations took place in the region. Most of the infiltrators could not be identified properly by the Govt. and they remained here permanently. This migration from erstwhile East-Pakistan first and then from Bangladesh had changed the demographic picture of the region drastically.

It is well known to us that the History of any country is generally well connected with geography. Therefore, it is imperative to deal with the geography of our present study. Though the present study is concerned with the Geographical area of Western Dooars of present North Bengal of West Bengal but for the well understanding of the Geographical background of the Western Dooars, the geographical background of the other parts of Dooars i.e. Eastern Dooars is needed to be mentioned. The Dooars are the passes or gateways to Bhutan. Therefore, they are located at the border between two countries-Bhutan and India. At the Dooars each country possesses different topography. On the Indian side the flat land is concerned with dense forest while on the Bhutan side the hilly terrain contains rough and tough passes to enter the country.

However, the Dooars¹ are generally divided into two parts-Eastern Dooars or Assam Dooars and Western Dooars or Bengal Dooars. There are eighteen Dooars altogether and of which eleven Dooars extending from the river Tista in the West to river Sankosh in the east are known as Bengal Dooars or western Dooars and remaining seven extending from the west bank of river Sankosh to river Dhunseeree in the east are known as Eastern Dooars or Assam Dooars.²

It is very interesting to note that the Geographical area of Western Dooars is generally the plain land on India side and the topography suddenly changes to uphill to north on the Bhutan side.³

However, the western Dooars region is a strip of land about 38 miles or 16.16 kilometers in breadth from north to south and is about 87.75 miles or 139.61 kilometers in length from east to west (source). It was between the parallels of $26^{\circ}13'$ and 27° north latitude and between $88^{\circ}.30'$ and $89^{\circ}55'$ east longitude. The total area by present survey has been found to be 1,209.70 square miles, or 774,208.16 acres, extending the lands and forest land, which from no part of this settlement. Out of this 421.20 square miles or 269,569.88 acres were surveyed on scale of two inches to a mile, and the remaining area cadastral surveyed is 788.50 square miles.⁴

The Western Dooars it is to be mentioned that though previously or before the creation of the Alipurduar district, the Western Dooars has located only in Jalpaiguri district but at present a vast geographical area has become the parts of newly creation Alipurduar district.⁵ Considering the above study is to be shown in two different periods i.e. before the creation of the Alipurduar district and before the creation dividing Jalpaiguri. The Western Dooars was under Jalpaiguri and its geographical area was consisted of the Eastern part of the river Tista and the northern part of the district. During the period of our study, the boundary of western Dooars was that it was bounded with Darjeeling district and Bhutan in the north, the Sankosh river and Assam in the east, Coochbehar district in the south and Tista river of Jalpaiguri district in west. However, the Western Dooars at present is consisted of the whole of Alipurduar district, the Malbazar subdivision and some of the blocks which are on the eastern bank of the river Tista of Jalpaiguri district.⁶

The present paper is not the first attempt on the problem. The local historians, scholars, social scientist have thrown some lights on the topic. But the fact remains that they were silent about other supplementary factors which were also greatly responsible for the economic bankruptcy of the Rajbanshi *Jotedars* of the region besides the land Reform programmers of the Govt. of W.B. Therefore, emphasis shall be given to explore those other factors for the rapid economic decline of the aforesaid community with a few decades after implementing the Estate Acquisition Act of 1953 and the W.B. Reform Act of 1955.

It is found that before coming of the British, this area was first ruled by the Koch Kings and the Bhutia subsequently. The population of the area was very thin and was consisted mainly of Rajbanshi and some tribe namely Mech, Toto, Garo, Rabha and Drukpa. However, most of the *Jotedars* belongs to Rajbanshi community. The *Jotedari* system prevailed in the area even before the establishing of the British rule. But it is very difficult to trace beginning of the *Jotedari* system in the area for the lack of sufficient document. But after occupation of this area 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 British utilized this area introducing their economic policy in the field of agriculture, land revenue, trade and commerce as a result of which socio-economic condition of this area

changed rapidly. It is found that the British started survey and settlement works, lands in the Western Dooars were declared as waste lands, possessing all the land under control, they gave the lands to the *Jotedars* or non-cultivated *Jotedars* namely traders, servicemen, *Mahajan* and money-lenders by lease or pattani, beside these lands were given to the tea-planters for tea-cultivation by lease. Different type of people (different classes and different caste of religion) had been immigrated in the Western Dooars and a result of which population had been increasing gradually,⁷ and the socio-economic conditions of the concerned area became more complex.

Thus, the non-cultivating *Jotedars* increased day by day in this region and secured a dominant position in the local agrarian structure. Based on the settlement reports, Amit Mitra has shown the ethnic composition of the *Jotedars* of the Falakata tahsil of Western Dooars in Jalpaiguri district between the year 1894 and 1905 where the Rajbanshis held 40% of the total *jots* in 1894 and around 34% in 1905.⁸ There, were however, subsequent changes in the pattern of land control in North Bengal with the result that the Rajbanshi were gradually pushed out by the non-Rajbanshis land holders from their position of eminence. In 1911, only 1.2% of the Rajbanshis who had any occupation derived of their income from rent. In Rajbanshi division, which contained the major concentration of this caste population, they constituted only 10.68% of the rent-receivers, while, the representation of the Brahmins in this category amounted to 25.26%.⁹

Post colonial: The changes that were taking place in the economic share because of war, depression, and famine in Bengal also severely affected the existing pattern of land ownership in the North Bengal districts. The rise in prices of food grains, and other necessities, following the world War 11, also seriously affected the middle and poor peasants and this culminated in the great Bengal famine. The beneficiary's from this crisis were the merchants, moneylenders, and speculators-those who also invested their capital in land. The result of this development was the transfer of land from small *Jotedars* and middle peasants to rich farmers, money lenders, and speculators.¹⁰ In the Western Dooars of West Bengal of India, large-scale transfer of land from the Rajbanshis to this non-Rajbanshis, which had started, from the late nineteenth century was only accelerated further by this later developments.¹¹

Another important reason for land transfer to the non-Rajbanshis was the migration of a large number of outsiders to different districts of North Bengal. At the earlier stage, the attraction of this region were the abundance of land, possibility of good business, job opportunities in Government offices as the local people were not in a position to compete with them, opening of tea gardens which provide job facilities for both the '*Babus*' as well as labourers.¹²

Regular settlement work was undertaken and the Western Dooars had been brought under regular administration providing security to the inhabitants. This administrative stability had particularly induced migration. However, most important factors that had encouraged the migration of the landed gentry were the land price of land and low rent compared to the situation in other parts of Bengal. Therefore, in the third settlement a large number of people who were not born to the soil could obtain lease from the Government as *Jotedars* in the settled area.¹³ Some ones acquired *Jotes* through purchase. Escalation of land price caused by migration furthered transfer of *Jotes* through sale to outside. In fact, the migrants were controlling many of the *Jotes* paying revenue from Rs.20 to 2000 per annum after the 1895 settlement in Western Dooars.¹⁴ Comparing the population statistics of the 1881 Census with that of 1891 one finds an increase of 114277 in the population of the Western Dooars. The breakup of the increased population, who were migrants, can be studied based on the following table.¹⁵

Table: Name of the places from migration in colonial period.

Name of the places from migration in the Western Dooars (1881-1891)	Number of migrated peoples
Rangpur	10101
Kuch Behar	32224
Darjeeling	1588
Dinajpur	505
From other Districts out of Bengal	11364
Bihar District	8491
Orissa	292
Chhotnagpur	20341
Others Province	29371
Total	114277

Source: Sunders's Report; Gruning, Jalpaiguri District Gazetteer; Census Statistics, 1881- 1891.

This process continued as the 1901 Census shows that nearly one third of the inhabitants of Western Dooars were foreign born and the figure of the migrants rose to 188223. All the migrants i.e.; 73946 persons after 1818 have settled in different areas of Western Dooars.¹⁶ Most of the migrants from Darjeeling, Bihar and Chhotonagpur have been employed by the tea gardens as workers because the indigenous people were less interested to work in the garden. So the tea planters looked for labourers from outside the Western Dooars mainly Santal and Oraon. People from Dinajpur, Cooch Behar have taken up land as *Jotedars*. The census figure on

migration for the period between 1891 and 1921 (table 4.10) in Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling Districts give us an idea of the volume of migration that was taking place in North Eastern part of India.¹⁷

This large influx of people not only led to a growing demand for land but also led to a rise in land prices. Local people, tempted by the spiraling prices soon began to sell their lands leading to the transformation of the local small and middle *Jotedars* into under tenants, subservient to a new class of immigrant landed gentry, In Rangpur and Dinajpur, the big *Jotedars* and non-agriculturists brought the maximum number of *Jotes*.¹⁸ In Jalpaiguri, the number of *Jotes* held by the Rajbanshis are decreased, while the *Jotes* held by the Marwari, the upper caste Bengali, middle-class people, others are increased sharply.¹⁹ By 1872, in Cooch Behar 54% of the revenue paying land had passed into the hand of the outsiders.²⁰ Indeed all over North Bengal the phenomenon of transfer of land from the hands of the Rajbanshis to those of the non-Rajbanshis became a standard pattern and in course of time it generated a sense of grievance among the disposed Rajbanshi gentry.

It is very relevant to mention here that by introducing colonial agrarian system the traditional agrarian structure of India broke down more or less. As a result the village community faced a crisis; and many benevolent *Zamindar* lost their *Zamindaris* by the law of 'Sun set' and *Jotedar* lost their *Jotedaris* for revenue (Non-regulated area), many peasants must sell their land and become sharecroppers or laborers due to indebtedness. It was also found that lands were utilized for commercial purpose by introducing the cultivation of commercial purpose by introducing cultivation commercial crops like jute, tobacco, tea, blue, etc. The cultivation of the commercial crops was profitable, but the profit was obtained by the *Zamindars*, *Jotedars*, intermediary's, *mahajans* and ultimately by the Britishers depriving the cultivators. In a nutshell, it can be said that feudal system in agriculture was strong during the colonial period as because of five or six stages of intermediaries, were created who had only intention to gain more revenue or wealth by hook and crook depriving and exploiting the cultivators where there was no question of sympathy or cooperation to the cultivators.²¹

As a result of the partition of India in 1947 than was a hues refugee problem in Bengal and Punjab. It is known to all that partition of India badly affected Punjab and Bengal the two provinces which were divided into two parts each religiously. Bengal was more adversely affected than Punjab, from the point refugee problem. It is a fact that Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal had to bear more burden of refugee problem than other districts. Though from 1947 to 1951 the exchange of Hindu Muslim refugee between Jalpaiguri and erstwhile East Pakistan maintain a counter balance but the later development was completely difference. After 1951 flow of the Muslim refugee erstwhile East Pakistan was stop. But the counter flow of Bengali Hindu refugees from their was unabated. I was found that from 1951 to 1961, the rate of the population growth in Jalpaiguri District. From the

semi census report it was known that 60% of the total population in that decade came from erstwhile East Pakistan. It should also be mention the rate of population growth in the district at the next census was also higher than average rate of population growth in West Bengal. So it is clear various census reports that from 1951 to 1971 the demography of the district was radically changed. It is also be mention that after the Bangladesh War in 1971 at large numbers of infiltrations also in infiltrated in the district.²²

After independence in 1947 the Government of India tried to reform agrarian structure and agrarian systems like other reforms and development in different fields. As there was feudal and semi-feudal system in the agricultural field of India till then, there were many big *Zamindars*, *Jotedars* and intermediaries, many of whom had giant-sized *Zamindari or Jotedari* areas and belong to thousand acres of land, on the other hand there were so many people who had no land to dowel or livelihood, so it was necessary to reform the agrarian system and agrarian structure by abolishing the feudal and semi-feudal system in the lands. Before independence the demand was raised to abolish the *Zamindari* and *Jotedari* system.²³ The report of Floud commission was come out in 1940 where proposed to abolish the *Zamindari, Jotedari* system and declared in favor of sharecroppers or *Adhiars* to have 2/3 of produced crops. But it was not implemented in the colonial period²³ (Floud Commission Report).

So, post colonial Government realized the necessity to reform the agrarian systems by abolishing *Zamindari* and *Jotedari* system all over India, but the task was very difficult as because the *Zamindars* were politically, socially and economically powerful in position and in any spheres they occupied politically strong position. In spite of that Govt. was eager to drive in the reform of agrarian structure of India. According to Dr. Pradip Kumar Bhowmik, the Central Government proclaimed only those agrarian policies which were feasible within the limitations of the contemporaneous rural set up²⁵. He again writes, “It varied from abolition of intermediary tenures as emphasized in the first plan to reform to tenancy in the second plan also provisions for ceiling on agricultural holdings in third plan. The concern for tenure reform and redistribution of land holding pattern was noticeable in the successive plan documents.²⁶

After independence the Govt. of West Bengal began the Land Reforms in slow motion and it only remained in papers, practically it was not implemented during the region of Congress Govt. viz the West Bengal *Bargadars* Act (1950), the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act. (1953) and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act. (1955) were passed gradually. Theoretically, by these Acts Government wanted to abolish *Zamindari and Jotedari* system as well as abolish all the intermediary systems.²⁷

The West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act 1953, by the section 6, mentioned the limitation of *khas* land possesses by the intermediaries after acquisition- 25 acres of agricultural land. There was no restriction of ceiling on the land covered by orchards, tank, fisheries and *debottar* land.²⁸

The above mentioned ceiling of lands had been modified by the amendment in 1972 of the Land Reforms Act. 1955. The ceiling areas according to section 14 M has been described as follows²⁹:

- a) In the case of *raiyyot* who is an adult unmarried person, 2.50 standard hectares.
- b) In the case of *rayat* who is the sole surviving member of a family, 2.50 standard hectares.
- c) In the case of *rayat* a family consisting of 2 or more but not more than 5 members, 5 standard hectares.
- d) In the case of a *rayat* having a family of more than 5 members, 5 standard hectares plus 0.50 standard hectares for each member in excess of 5 subject to an overall upper limit of 7 standard hectares for a family, however large it may be.
- e) In the case of other *rayat*, 7 standards, a standard hectare has been defined to be equal to hectare in an irrigated and 1.40 hectare in other area.

The ceiling will not apply to any agricultural land held by a local authority or a *rayat* in the hilly portion of the district of Darjeeling, but the exemption of ceiling provisions in respect of hill areas expired on 31st December, 1977 and so the hilly areas were then subject to the ceiling.³⁰

Through the work of land reforms started from the very beginning of the formation of independence Govt. different Act were passed from time to time, but these Acts had not been implemented properly before 1967, the formation of United Front Govt. in West of Bengal. After declaration and passing the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act 1953 and land Reforms Act. 1955, it was found the *Zamindars*, *Jotedars* and all the intermediaries possessed their lands by names of every number of house, servants and relatives. Not only that they held their land declaring very (Land for fisheries), orchard and *debottar* land through these were still agricultural lands.³¹

The section 5A and 5B of the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act empowered the state Govt. to examine transfers of land intermediaries between May, 1953 and April 15, 1956 & April 14, 1956 to satisfy itself of their bonafide. But, for the unfair attitude of the officials and bureaucrats of the Govt., proper inquiry could not be performed as a consequence of it; the Govt. failed to acquire excess lands over ceiling from *Zamindars*, *Jotedars* and intermediaries. Todormal writes, “A transfer made principally or partially with the intention or motive of

enhancing the amount of land above the ceiling set for one individual or similarly the compensation payable for land, vested with the state. Soon also were transfers to near kin such as wife, husband, parents, children etc. the term 'transfer' in the context meant sale, mortgage, lease, exchange gifts etc.³²

The work of land Records over ceiling and distribution among the landless peasants and laborers actually started from 1967 by the state Govt. of West Bengal. We get in district gazetteer of land records and surveys, West Bengal it is not possible to say the exact total quantities of lands before 1967.³³ Movements for the Reforms gained momentum when the united Front (U.F.) consisting of the centrist and leftist parties was voted to power in the state for two short spells in 1967 and 1969.³⁴

The abolition of *Zamindari, Jotedari* system and the introduction of the ceiling of the land in West Bengal in post colonial era had a great obverse effect in the socio-political and economic life of *Jotedars* of Western Dooars in particularly and the Rajbanshi people in general which has an exceptional phenomenon in terms of the good result that it had in the rest of Bengal. A gauged attempt would be made to view that how the adverse effect of the afore said land reform policies of the Govt. of W.B. had given birth of a conducive ground for the emergence of a regional political party by a section of a Rajbanshi ethnic group of people.³⁵

However, the afore-said the concerned geographical area is the habitat of the Rajbanshi people who were the dominant social and economic group not only during the whole colonial period but even up to few decades of the post independence period. The *Jotedars* belonged to his ethnic group of people suffered economically as a result of the above mentioned land Reform policy of the Govt. of West Bengal.³⁶

When the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act of 1953 and the West Bengal Reform Act of 1955 were passed respectively, almost all the member and even the speaker of the West Bengal state Assembly declared these two 'Act' as 'Revolutionary and Epoch making'. Satya Kumar Bose, the then Revenue minister was of the opinion that these two acts heralded the end of feudal system in West Bengal thereby abolished the dominant power of all that related to land. The intermediary's share-croppers and agricultural laborers were greeted benefited as a result of introduction of state ownership of land.³⁶ Truly the abolition of *Zamindari-Jotedari* system and the introduction of the ceiling of land were revolutionary steps on the part of the Government and marked a new domination in the agrarian field and also in the life of the peasant's particularly small and marginal farmers. It is not be mentioned in this context that even the *Zamindar and Jotedars* of West Bengal barring their counter parts of the region under study were not affected economically because of some obvious reasons. Side, it was

found and which already been mentioned that the *Jotedars* of the concern region were adversely affected as a result of the introduction of the land reform Acts mentioned above.³⁸

It should be mentioned that the process of migration in the region was actually started with the beginning of the colonial rule and with the introduction of Tea industry here. The migration during colonial period also had changed the demographic picture to a large extent. But that the demographic changed did not create any socio-political tension in the concerned region. On the other hand after independence it is seen that the migration or refugee exodus and later infiltration from erstwhile East-Pakistan in the region created a socio-political tension.

The factors which are to be tested and explained in our discourse are –i) demographic changes made pressure on land on land, ii) The Land Acquisition and Land Reforms Acts of 1953, 1955 made adverse effects on the indigenous *Jotedars*, iii) Possession of Vested Lands from the hands of *Jotedars* made an economic crisis among the local *Jotedars*, iv) Distribution of vested lands mostly among the refugees created grievances among the indigenous people in general. So all these factors along with other contributory factors led the socio-political tension in Western Dooars area.

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