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## Quality of Life of Selected Tea Garden Tribal Workers of Jalpaiguri District from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### ABSTRACT

The quality of life of the tribal communities residing in the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri district has advanced through significant changes under the influence of historical, socio-economic and policy-driven forces during the twentieth century and the first half of the twenty-first century. Historically, during the colonial era, tea workers recruited from tribal communities such as the Santal, Munda and Oraon have long borne the legacy of marginalisation, characterised by exploitative labour practices, low wages and limited access to basic services. The main objective of this study is to analyse and determine the quality of life of the tribal communities based in the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri district during the twentieth century and the first half of the twenty-first century. The study used both primary and secondary data. Primary data includes interviews of tea garden workers, and secondary data includes the district gazetteer and different online sources. The study reveals that wage stagnation, inadequate access to quality healthcare and higher education, and limited political representation have, taken together, significantly constrained the living standards of the tribal communities on the tea estates to this day. This study underscores the complex interplay between historical plantation industries and contemporary development processes, highlighting both the progress achieved and the persistent inequalities that continue to shape the lived experiences of the tribal



## 1. Introduction

After the Second Anglo-Bhutan War in 1864-65, the British formed the Western Dooars district with the territories occupied by Bhutan. The district existed for four years. On 1 January 1869, the British government abolished the Western Duars district and added parts of the Rangpur district to form the Jalpaiguri district. Historically, the most significant development after the formation of the district was the growth of tea plantations and the tea industry. The tea industry has significantly changed not only the district landscape, but also the demographics and socio-economic patterns. Western Dooars, which was once sparsely populated. With the opening of tea gardens, the process of urbanization of this district increased further. Richard Haughton was the pioneer of the tea industry in the Jalpaiguri district. He planted tea gardens at Gajaldoba in Jalpaiguri district in 1874 and at Bagrakot in 1875. D.H.E Sundar's settlement report shows that the tea industry in the district started in 1874-75, and the first 22 plantations were given to leases in 18771. The cultivation and production of tea began. Tea garden workers are the main resource of the tea industry. Most of the tea garden workers are from tribal communities. The opening up of tea plantations in the Dooars and Terai regions necessitated the need for outside labour. So, the British East India Company brought labourers from the Chhotonagpur region to work in tea plantations, forest cutting, etc. According to the new forest policy of the British Government, the felling of trees in the reserved forest areas was banned and made punishable, due to which the people living in the forest areas were deprived of their traditional way of life. For this reason, the Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Mahali, Malpahari, Santal, Koroa, etc., communities of the Chhotonagpur Plateau region, who were dependent on forests, came to settle in the Dooars<sup>2</sup>. In the Dooars, they were mainly employed as tea garden labourers. Most of these tribes were poor, simple and illiterate. Most of the tea gardens of the entire Dooars and Jalpaiguri district are dependent on the tribals. Those who mainly work as labourers, drivers, and all garden-related jobs. The tribes that depend on tea plantations for their income are called tea tribes. This article discusses the life of tea garden Tribal workers in the 20th century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Even in the 20th and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the life of the tribal people of tea gardens was not very good. The tea tribes of Jalpaiguri district have been facing various problems since the inception of the tea gardens. This is one of the major obstacles to improving their quality of life. One of the problems of the tea garden tribal community is economic problems; the tea garden workers are paid very low wages, which makes it very difficult for them to manage their daily lives. Also, the closure and lockout of tea gardens were daily



news since the last decade of the 20th century. The closed tea garden workers were not given government financial assistance on a regular basis. As a result, the workers were forced to work as daily wagers elsewhere<sup>3</sup>. In some cases, the type of work provided was unsuitable for tea garden workers, especially female tea garden workers who were not accustomed to hard work. There were also legal complications in the distribution of financial assistance to all the workers of the closed Tea garden. In addition, under the existing rules, tea garden workers who did not have a provident fund (P.F) account were not entitled to receive the allowance. As a result, many tea garden workers have still not received the allowance. Many tea workers fell into the clutches of moneylenders or moneylenders due to their poor economic condition. This created a vicious circle from which they could not come out<sup>4</sup>. These were the problems faced by the tribal people of Jalpaiguri district. This creates a major crisis in their daily life.

One of the major obstacles to improving the quality of life of the tribal communities in Jalpaiguri district is unemployment. This problem continued to increase during the twentieth century and into the early part of the twenty-first century. Because tea plantations are the main source of employment for the indigenous people of the Dooars. This unemployment peaked during the closure of tea gardens, as tea workers lost their jobs during this time. The workers from the abandoned tea gardens move to other professions after a long wait. Abandoned tea gardens are those gardens which are more than a hundred years old - the yield decreases<sup>5</sup>. Due to this unemployment in the tea gardens, in the last few years, hundreds of tribal boys and girls from the poverty-stricken dying tea garden areas of the Dooars have come out of their homes, dreaming of a better life and hoping for various lucrative jobs. However, in this case, they, especially girls, have often been subjected to human propaganda. Local agents have trapped them with the promise of lucrative jobs in the big cities of the country. However, the girls could not be found after they left the house<sup>6</sup>.

The quality of life of the tribal workers in the tea gardens can be observed by looking at their housing. Shelter is a basic need of human life and an indicator of well-being and quality of life. The housing condition of the tribal labourers in most of the tea gardens of the Jalpaiguri district is very poor. Long before independence, tea workers were made to live as slaves, with only one room as their living space. In some tea gardens, tea workers used to live in garden quarters. Such quarters are mostly semi-pacca. Also, the tea garden workers live in the kacha building prepared by them<sup>7</sup>. However, the tea garden owners, who want to provide quarters for the workers, have not yet paid for the accommodation of many Tribal workers<sup>8</sup>.



In the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the most important problem in the life of the indigenous tea garden workers is the low literacy rate. Tribal children are born in tea gardens with the same talent as non-tribal children, but the lack of educational infrastructure, rapid work participation of children, extreme poverty and lack of supportive educational culture in the community have led to an increase in the rate of illiteracy and dropping out of primary school among the tribal population in Jalpaiguri district<sup>9</sup>. Also, a significant problem in the education of tribal children is the linguistic crisis. Tribal children did not have the option to study in their mother tongue. At school, they had to study in Bengali, Hindi or Nepali medium. The teachers were also Bengali, Hindi and Nepali speaking, and they could not communicate enough with the indigenous children and understand their indigenous culture and feelings. So tribal children had to face an identity crisis<sup>10</sup>. Even the tribals had to learn the Bengali language to communicate with their dominant neighbours, such as the Rajbangshis or the southern Bengalis. However, most of the educated people have a formal primary education. Adults are either illiterate or have received a primary education. The percentage of educated people is filled with young people. The rate of higher education among the tribals is very low. An average of five percent of tribals have higher education, i.e. graduate or post-graduate<sup>11</sup>. Overall, illiteracy and lack of awareness are prevalent among the tribes of the Dooars. Due to a lack of awareness, many tribal people and poor people are not able to afford the government facilities introduced among them. Besides, the dropout rate in schools is also high among the tribals. As a result, higher education is still out of reach for tribal workers in tea gardens.

Ignorance of proper hygiene and low standard of living due to low literacy of the tea garden indigenous workers puts the tea workers at risk of multiple diseases. Due to a lack of medical facilities in the tea gardens of the Dooars, they lost their lives to diseases like black fever, malaria, dengue, cholera, etc. Although there is a hospital for plantation workers in the tea garden, the health care services in that hospital are inadequate, and all the patients are treated as outpatients; the same syringes and needles are continuously used for injections throughout the day, and the doctor ignores their minor ailments<sup>12</sup>. However, the modern health policy of the colonial period in the Jalpaiguri district made the identity of the tea garden workers even more critical. After getting quick results from modern health policies and allopathic treatment, some tribal workers gave up their long-standing herbal and readily available medicines. Despite several developments in the field of modern health care and local medical science, health and hygienic conditions led to several movements among the tribals of Jalpaiguri district. This is because the tribal workers in the tea gardens did not receive adequate medical care compared to the non-tribals in the Jalpaiguri district. For example, in 1915-16, the Oraons in Jalpaiguri district revolted for



better health<sup>13</sup>. Apart from this, the tribal workers of many tea gardens of Jalpaiguri district agitated with many demands besides improving their health and hygiene.

The 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have seen a change in the lifestyle of tea garden tribal workers in terms of language. These linguistic changes have endangered their own language and traditions. Language is the basic identity of any nation. It clearly differentiates each other. Language is not only a medium of communication, but it is also an important aspect of a nation's identity and culture. Through language or words, people express their human values, customs, stories, songs, and nature. However, the indigenous tribes did not have the same written traditions as other cultural groups; they had oral traditions. So, language was the only means for the tribes to transfer their traditional knowledge from one generation to another. Language was very important to them. But now the tribes are losing their mother tongues to a great extent. It should be noted that different tribal groups had different mother tongues at the time of migration. For example, Kurukh was spoken by the Oraons, Mundari by the Mundas, and Santali by the Santals. From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Sadri language, a mixture of tribal Hindi and other tribal dialects, became popular among tea garden workers in the Jalpaiguri district. And later, Sadri became their second mother tongue. As a result, of which the importance of their mother tongue kept on decreasing and even getting lost<sup>14</sup>. So, if their mother tongue is lost, it is not only the loss of language but also the loss of history, tradition, thought, oral literature and indigenous knowledge collected over centuries.

One of the most significant features of the lifestyle of tribal labourers in tea gardens is their religious consciousness. Most of the tribes of Jalpaiguri district follow their traditional beliefs. The tea garden tribes worshipped nature. For example, among the Oraon, the Karam Puja was very popular. Karam is a kind of tree; unmarried girls plant a branch of the Karam tree in their homes to begin ritual ceremonies. Among the tribal communities, the celebration of Kali Puja and Christmas was quite common. Fagua is a festival celebrated in the month of Falguna and is regarded as one of the most sacred occasions in North India. For Garja Bhumi, a sacred land or forest area is selected. Among the Santals, Sohorai is an important festival. At present, these rituals and ceremonies are very common among the Oraon, Munda, Bhumij, Ho, and Kharia tribes. Singbonga is a ritual observed by the Mahalis; Singbonga is essentially the Sun Goddess. For the welfare of cattle, the Mahalis observe the Goroya festival<sup>15</sup>. The tribes of the Duars worship wild elephants as Mahakal. (Both Karam Puja and Mahakal Puja can be considered forms of local nature worship.) However, it is noteworthy that after independence, a group of Catholic Christian missionaries spread throughout the Duars among the tribal communities. Boarding schools were established in the region to impart modern education. Due to the continuous efforts of missionary



activities among the poor population, a section of the tea tribes became attracted to Christianity, and many people converted to the Christian faith. The practice of Christianity promoted the spread of education among the converted sections of the major tribes and thereby helped to remove age-old superstitions in various spheres among tribal labourers. These philanthropic personalities freed the tribes from practices such as witchcraft and introduced Christian and Western concepts of life and morality among them. In short, they provided a new way of life. Christian missionaries thus played an important role in bringing about cultural change among the major tribes of Jalpaiguri district<sup>16</sup>. As a result, the tea garden tribes lost their traditional culture, which led to a situation of crisis.

In addition, during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the lifestyle of tribal communities in tea gardens witnessed an almost complete erosion of their folk culture. The introduction of modern education systems by the central and state governments also hindered traditional cultural aspects of the major tribal communities of the Jalpaiguri district, such as folk music and musical instruments. Parents began sending their children to schools located in urban centres far away from tribal areas. As a result, children had fewer opportunities to understand and develop sensitivity toward their traditional folk music and musical instruments. This did not directly destroy tribal folk music and instruments; rather, it transformed the entire system of cultural values, in which tribal identity had once formed the core foundation<sup>17</sup>.

Another major crisis in the everyday lives of indigenous tea garden workers of the Jalpaiguri district and the Dooars region is human–wildlife conflict. In the past, the entire Dooars area was covered with dense forests, and the population was very sparse. Therefore, the free movement of wild animals within the forests was a natural and common phenomenon. However, with the gradual thinning of forests, wildlife habitats have been rapidly reduced. As a result, in recent years, human–wildlife conflict has increased sharply. At the same time, Jalpaiguri district has several wildlife sanctuaries and national parks, including the Chapramari Wildlife Sanctuary and Gorumara National Park. The most prominent wild animal in the Dooars is the elephant, which causes significant loss of human life and property. Due to habitat fragmentation and the obstruction of traditional migration routes, both humans and elephants are often injured or killed. The Dooars region possibly witnesses one of the highest levels of human–elephant conflict in Asia<sup>18</sup>. Other dangerous wild animals found in the Dooars include bison (gaur) and leopards. From November to April, bison frequently come out of the forests and wander into nearby agricultural fields, eventually entering tea gardens, where conflicts arise between these animals and tea garden workers. However, the most frequent attacks in tea gardens are carried out by leopards. The leopard's natural traits, such as its high adaptability and ability to survive in a wide range of habitats, bring it close to human settlements in search of prey, leading to human–animal conflict. Tea gardens serve as major



sites of conflict because leopards' prey on livestock reared by tea garden workers. Occasionally, they also attack humans<sup>19</sup>. These attacks by ferocious wild animals make the daily lives of indigenous tea garden workers extremely precarious and insecure.

## **2. Recommendations**

The tribal communities living in the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri district have to face various problems in their daily lives, along with earning their livelihood. The previous chapter discussed these problems, and the present chapter seeks to explore some remedial measures to resolve or reduce them. However, it is difficult to implement these suggestions properly.

### **2.1 Pay Hike and Livelihood Security**

The daily wages of tea garden labourers are so low that it is extremely difficult for them to meet their family's minimum living expenses. Therefore, it is imperative to increase the wages of the labourers. At the same time, it is essential to ensure regular wage payments and job security for tea garden workers. With the active involvement of the government or local administration, initiatives can be taken to resolve issues through joint discussions between tea garden owners and workers. Furthermore, to reduce over-reliance on the tea gardens, it is necessary to create alternative livelihood opportunities. For instance, the introduction of activities such as handicraft development, eco-tourism, forest-based industries, poultry farming, and dairy production could establish new sources of income for the workers' families and improve their standard of living.

### **2.2 Creating Employment Opportunities**

Unemployment is steadily rising among the tribal communities of the tea gardens. As a result, their socio-economic conditions are being adversely affected. In this situation, creating alternative employment opportunities could bring about a positive change in the living standards of the tribal population of Jalpaiguri district. To improve the economic condition of the tribal communities and reduce unemployment, it is essential to develop various alternative vocational opportunities beyond reliance on tea gardens. In particular, it is necessary to attract and organise the youth towards livelihood-oriented work other than tea garden labour, such as carpentry, masonry, tailoring, and various artisanal and small-scale enterprise-based professions, including food processing.



### **2.3 Housing and Basic Amenities**

The proper and transparent implementation of various government housing schemes, including the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), is essential for the tribal families residing in the tea-plantation-dominated areas of Jalpaiguri district. By selecting genuine beneficiaries, expediting house construction, maintaining quality standards and ensuring a corruption-free distribution process, the rights of tribal families to safe and dignified housing can be secured.

### **2.4 Improvement of Education Qualities**

It is absolutely essential to strengthen the primary and secondary education system in tribal areas by providing adequate infrastructure and appointing qualified teachers. Language is an extremely important element in effective communication between teachers and students. However, in most government-sponsored schools, where teachers are predominantly of Bengali background, many tribal students cannot properly understand the Bengali language. As a result, their interest in education gradually diminishes. In reality, it is observed that most tribal students in the tea garden areas understand Hindi relatively better than Bengali. Therefore, to facilitate their education, schools with Hindi as the medium of instruction could be established. On the other hand, as Sadri is the primary medium of communication within the tribal labour community of the tea gardens, it is particularly necessary to appoint teachers who are proficient in Sadri and familiar with that socio-cultural context. This will enhance mutual understanding between teachers and students and improve both the participation of tribal students in education and the quality of their learning.

### **2.5 Health and Nutrition**

It is necessary to further strengthen the access to healthcare services for the indigenous communities living in the tea garden areas through primary health centres, mobile medical units and maternal health programmes. At the same time, mid-day meals and the ICDS. It is essential to tackle malnutrition and anaemia in child and maternal health through the effective implementation of the Mid-Day Meal and ICDS programmes. At the same time, ensuring the availability of safe and clean drinking water, improving sanitation facilities and raising public awareness to prevent various infectious diseases are extremely important.



## **2.6 Cultural Preservation and Identity**

The preservation and promotion of tribal languages, folk culture and traditional knowledge systems is particularly urgent, as these cultural elements among the tribal communities inhabiting the tea-plantation-dominated areas of Jalpaiguri district are increasingly on the verge of extinction due to modernisation and socio-economic change. In this context, it is necessary to organise regular cultural programmes and, with the cooperation of the local administration, to undertake community-based participatory initiatives to ensure the active involvement of the indigenous population. At the same time, it is crucial to document and preserve the indigenous history, folklore, customs and traditions in order to strengthen cultural identity and self-esteem. These initiatives will help to preserve the distinct identity and historical heritage of the indigenous community for future generations.

## **2.7 Addressing Human-Wildlife Conflict**

It is necessary to provide appropriate and timely compensation, as well as financial and social support, to families affected by wildlife attacks. At the same time, it is essential to establish early warning systems, solar-powered fencing and awareness programmes in forest-adjacent and at-risk areas. Equally, effective coordination and mutual cooperation between the Forest Department and local indigenous communities must be further strengthened to manage human-wildlife conflict.

## **2.8 Policy Implementation and Governance**

Most of the labourers in the tea-estate-based tribal communities have low literacy rates and, due to general ignorance, are unaware of the various government development schemes formulated for their welfare. Although the Government of India has launched several significant projects for the development of tribal communities, in practice, the benefits of these schemes often fail to reach the intended beneficiaries and are instead misappropriated by middlemen or unscrupulous individuals. In this context, it is crucial to ensure transparent and effective monitoring of tribal development projects and to implement community-based planning by involving tribal leadership and local institutions.

## **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be said that in the new socio-economic context, the tribal tea garden workers of Jalpaiguri district have lost many of their traditional beliefs and rituals. In reality, economic crisis, unemployment, cultural crisis, and a crisis of self-identity have ultimately turned into a broader identity crisis. Even in the present time, the tribes of Jalpaiguri district are regarded by the caste Hindus as



marginalized or inferior communities. Therefore, it is absolutely essential to remove these crises in order to improve the standard of living of the tea garden tribes. Regarding tribes and their problems, the researcher Elwin stated that “everything necessary should be done for the development of tribals provided that the quality of tribal life is not impaired, the tribal culture is not destroyed, and tribal freedom was restored<sup>20</sup>.” Hence, for the development of the tribes, there is a need for higher income, greater job security, and above all, economic development. Along with alternative employment opportunities, expanding education and school education based on tribal languages are indispensable for them. Development practices should be based on the cultural characteristics, environmental features, and traditional skills of the tribes. In implementing development projects, local political leaders and the administration should pay special attention to serving poor tribal communities; otherwise, the benefits will not reach the grassroots level, and it will not be possible to improve the standard of living of the tribal peoples.

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