



Research Paper

Population Growth and Changes of Economic Activities in Underdeveloped Areas (A Study from Terai Region in Darjeeling District Of West Bengal)

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ABSTRACT

It is right that population is one of the essential components of economic activities of any society. Different power holders like Cooch Behar Kingdom, Sikkim, Nepal, East India Company etc controlled Terai region in Darjeeling district in different periods. Once upon a time this region was vacant or very less populated. This area started to attract the people to settle here largely when the British East India Company acquired it from Sikkim. After that, this area started to become filled with people coming from different parts of this state, and other states of India and from other nations also. This growth of population has brought many changes in economic activities in this region. This paper aims to highlight the economic changes that are resulted due to the growth of population. This study is mainly based on secondary data.

KEY WORDS- Economic Change, Land-Man ratio, Occupation, Population growth

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I. INTRODUCTION

The economic life of Indian people is mainly shaped by the agricultural activity. The rural people mainly depend on agricultural activities. The agricultural activities are not limited in rural areas only, they are also observed in urban settings in different manner. Actually, the urban areas are grown from the womb of village or rural areas and the people living in urban areas, city or town are psychologically agricultural. A larger section of urban population has experiences on agricultural activities. The population structure of town or city is formed by the agglomeration of rural people. In different towns and cities, the setting up the pots of chilly and flower on the veranda, roofs of building is observed nicely. In rural areas, the family, which has only homestead or small part of land, produces different vegetables like chilly, ginger, potato, *lapha*, onion, tomato, brinjal etc for own consumption. Even it is found that there are many families in town which are basically depended on the agricultural products supplied from their own lands located in village. But this occupation in our country is not developed equally. Population is a phenomenon. This growth of population affects human society in different ways. It has affected the economic activities of the people of Terai region in Darjeeling district of North Bengal also. To understand the impact of population growth on economic activities, some historical background of this region, and traditional economic activities of the people are discussed.

II. METHODS AND DATA BASE

This study is an outcome based on my field experiences. This study mainly incorporates the secondary sources of data and some information has been gathered from field work also.

LAND AND MAN

Tarai region has a long historical background. Researches manifest "Terai is the tract of lying at the foothills which is bounded on the north by mountains, on the south by the Purnea district, on the east by Jalpaiguri, and on the west by the state of Nepal. It has breadth

from north of south of 18 miles, and a breadth from east to west of 16 miles excluding the area covered by forest, it contains a total area of 230 square miles. This tract was acquired by conquest from Sikkim in 1850. After the annexation, it was first decided by Government that the southern portion of the tract should be placed under the Collector of Purnea, and the northern portion attached to Darjeeling. But apparently in consequence of extreme dislike shown by the inhabitants of the southern terai to the transfer to Purnea. The Government decided in the same year to attach the whole tract to Darjeeling. Before this was done however, a settlement of the land revenue for 3 years had been affected by the Collector of Purnea with the Rajbanshis and Musalman inhabitants of the lower Terai. Meanwhile, Dr. Campbell, the superintendent of Darjeeling, had made a settlement for 3 years of the upper Terai, which at the time seems to have chiefly inhabited by Meches. Previously to the annexation, the revenue was derived from dao or hoe tax paid by the Meches and Dhimals; from lands settled with the Bengali inhabitants to the lower Terai; from dues paid for cattle sent from the adjoining districts of Bengal to graze during the early months of the year from produce; from excise or spirits; from market dues; from fines and from a tax on musicians, the revenue raised from the first two at least of these sources was collected by Bengali Officers called Choudhuris, who also exercised certain civil and criminal powers, and were apparently in all cases jotedars or holders of large grants of land".¹

This territory was known as the Eastern Morung and it was matter of conflict among Nepal, Sikkim and British India. It is said that "a small strip of land, about 28 sq.miles in measurement and situated at the foothills of the Himalayas on the northern side of West Bengal was a cockpit of power struggle between three states, Nepal, Sikkim and British India, towards the close of the 18th century, the topographical features of this area being highlighted by plain surface, canopied by lush green trees of commercial importance and well washed land through multiple river systems attracted the notice of the adjoining powers. They could hardly ignore the importance of its routes, strategic location and timber wealth. Consequently, mobilization of forces at the trans-governmental level took place, arguments to justify the fictitious and conflicting claims of each of the contenders were put forward and the disputed region changed hands a few times within the span of eighty years until the East India Company's Government annexed it permanently in the fifties of the nineteenth century. The Company's Government was not initially eager to take possession of this territory, as the terrain was hazardous. Besides, it had to concentrate on more important issues. ..But after the Darjeeling grant of 1835 the British government thought seriously of controlling this territory, for all trade routes to Darjeeling and Sikkim lay through this region."²

Though the above three states were in power struggle upon the territory and Nepal, Sikkim and the British India dominated this territory, but, it is found that this territory was a part of Cooch Behar Kingdom. It is stated that "till the seventeenth century the disputed territory known as Eastern Morung in contemporary records was a part of the Cooch Behar Kingdom which extended up to Tirhut in the west and approached the slopes of the Himalayas in the north and was administered by the Baikunthapur branch of the royal family based in the present Jalpaiguri town."³ From the later part of the sixteenth century the Cooch Behar Kingdom had been involved in internecine quarrels over succession issues and was also considerably weakened by the aggression of the Mughals who established their suzerainty over Cooch Behar through repeated attacks⁴. For a long period Eastern Morung remained *terra incognita*, because neither the Cooch Behar state nor the Subedars of Bengal tried to bring it under affective administration. Unfortunately, as it turned out after a few years, "this possession did not prove durable, for in the wake of Nepali expansion after the Gurkhas came to power in Nepal in the middle of the eighteenth century, all vestiges of Sikkim administration in Eastern Morung were wiped out during 1770-86."⁵ Later on to find out the trade route to Tibet, the British India took step toward this region attentively. In this regard the war between Nepal and British India became inevitable in 1814. "The Anglo-Nepal war ended in the defeat of Nepal: the terms of Nepal's surrender were spelt out in the Segauli Treaty signed in 1815. By another treaty signed on 8 December, 1816 Nepal ceded the territory between the Singalila range and the Tista river to the Company".⁶ And later on by the treaty signed at Titalya on 10 February, 1817 the Company handed over to Sikkim Eastern Morung in "full sovereignty."⁷ Finally the British annexed the Sikkim Terai (Morung) in 1850, the tract which was considered by the British to be the only lucrative or fertile estate he (the Sikkim King) possessed. The seizure was quietly effected by four policemen taking possession of the treasury, which it is said, contained exactly six rupees, and by announcing to

the villagers the confiscation of the territory to the British Government.⁸ Since the time, it remained as a part of British India and presently it is a part of Darjeeling district in West Bengal and the Siliguri sub-division covers the area. It is said that "after the great famine of Bengal in 1869-70, this areas became actually a 'No mans' land" due to desertion of the inhabitants, there grew thick and vast forests, impossible to penetrate and badly infested by Robbers, Fakirs, Sanyasis and invariably murderous, beasts and animals. Thereafter, this sub-Himalayan area changed hands successively from Cooch Behar, Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal, and finally came in the hands of East India Company. The Company first formed the 'Terai Sub-division", with headquarters at Hanskua. At a later period, some portions from Jalpaiguri district (formerly Rongpur) were annexed to it and the name of the sub-division, changed from "Terai sub-division" to "Siliguri sun-division" with headquarter at Siliguri in 1907. The Siliguri sub-division is bounded by Kurseoug sub-division in the north, Jalpaiguri district and Bangladesh in the south, Jalpaiguri district and Kalimpong sub-division in the east and North Dinajpur, Nepal and Bangladesh in the west. The longitude of Siliguri is 88⁰⁶^I and latitude is 26⁰⁴³^I north. This sub-division covers 918 sq.kms with 6, 15,101 population (1991 Census).⁹ There are four blocks, 22 Gram Panchayats, and 388 villages (1991 Census).

LAND AND ECONOMY

The physical configuration of the district makes the conditions of agriculture in different parts of exceedingly varied. The strip of the country at the foot of the hills contains level stretches of alluvial soil admirably suited for rice cultivation. In the interior is a mass of hills, the slopes of which are, in places, so stony and precipitous that nothing but shrub jungle can thrive on them or an occasional tree in the crevices of the rocks. Much of the land is unsuitable for cultivation of any kind, but on the other hand, the soil on the gentle slopes is often wonderful fertility. The soil of the hill is largely different from the plain Terai region. It is said, "The hill cultivators themselves recognize only three kinds of soil - white soil, red soil and black soil. Of these three, black soil is the richest, white soil is considered always poor, while the red occupies an intermediate position, requiring heavy manuring to give us good an outturn as black soil. Land, abounding in large rocks is usually composed of the latter soil, and is most suitable for dry crops, such as maize, and *marua*, owing to the rich vegetables, mould it contains, but the soil in the Terai is composed of alluvium, a light sandy loam being common, and the total area under cultivation in the Terai is 70,000 acres or 50 percent of the whole tract excluding the land under forest. But far the greatest portion of the cultivated areas is under rice; in fact, if we deduct the area under tea which is cultivated solely by the holders of waste land grants, and the under thatching-grass which can hardly be called a crop, we find that 46,000 acres out of a cropped area of 54,000 bear this crop. The artificial irrigation is common in the Terai, the slope of the land and numerous small streams affording great facilities for the utilization of the water supply. It is estimated that 60 percent of the low land on which haimantik paddy is grown obtains the benefit of irrigation. It is almost prevalent in the lands to the north and along the Mechi, Blalason and Mahanadi rivers where it is easy to dam up the streams to construct water channels taking off from the nearest river or stream."¹⁰

The above discussion makes it clear that the economic activities of Terai region related to agriculture and the agriculture was in a backward stage. The agricultural backwardness of this region is led by various factors. The colonial interest of the British East India Company was one of them. After annexation of this tract, they did not take interest to develop agriculture; rather they were interested in tea plantation. The agriculture is not looked carefully from the beginning.

POPULATION AND POPULATION GROWTH

It is a phenomenon that initially the terai region was less populated. It is stated that 'every part of the district showed an increase except the Terai which is notoriously unhealthy. But the population structure is changing fast. It is also stated that "the pressure of the population on the soil is greatest in the Terai, where there are 279 persons to the square mile, it gradually diminishes towards the north, and in the headquarters of sub-division there are only 184 persons to the square mile" and 'in the Terai it receives numerous settlers from the adjoining districts of Purnea and Jalpaiguri who engage in cultivation, and a large number of coolies from Chotanagpur and the Santal Parganas who are attracted by the wages given in the tea gardens. But the great bulk of the immigrants come from Nepal, chiefly as labourers in the

tea garden, and in the hills the population is mainly Nepalese”.¹¹ Presently, the population of terai region is 8, 18, 581 persons (2001 Census) which show the increase of population 203480 persons from census year 1991. The decadal growth rate is much higher than the district as a whole. In case of the district, the decadal growth rate is 23.79% during the year 1991-2001 and in case of Terai region the decadal growth rate is 31.08 percent during the times.

The scholars for the abnormal rapid growth of population identify different reasons. It is stated that “exodus of Hindu community from the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and as a result, arrival of countless refugees here, due to partition of India in 1947 which is still unabated, owing to constant persecution there. Arrival of Hindu refugees again, due to mass massacre in 1950 in East Pakistan. Arrival of Hindu refugees here, due to the Communal Riot in 1952, ‘which is known as ‘Khulna-riot’ in East Pakistan. The same was repeated again in 1965, when India was invaded by Pakistan. The same was recurred in 1964, due to so called “Hazrat-bal” issue followed by mass killing in East Pakistan. Mass arrival of evacuees from Burma in 1967 due to their repatriation. When East Pakistan was invaded by their counterpart West Pakistan in 1971, about hundred lacs of refugees took shelter in West Bengal. Ultimately, India was forced to intervene, on humanitarian ground and the “Bangladesh” was born. Thereafter some portion of the refugees did not return to their homeland, instead they settled over here. Again the same scene was repeated in 1992, when fanatics of Bangladesh, committed all sorts of persecutions on the minority community, over the Babri Masjid”, issue. Besides above stated factors, there is a steady flow of settlers from Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and other North Eastern states due to regular unrest there for a long time. Heavy and constant infiltration of unlawful intruders from border countries-Bangladesh and Nepal, Siliguri is a cosmopolitan town in letter and spirit. She refuses none, offers hospitability to everyone, whoever may be. Therefore, men from every part of the country and even beyond come and settle there in search of fortune”.¹²

Similarly the growth of population in this region affects the land owning structure also. The growth of population shows the decrease of the number of big land holders or cultivators and it indicates the growth of landless peoples. A study made by M. Dasgupta¹³ (1986) makes it clear that in Naxalbari area the number of landless people was 71.40 percent and the number of marginal, small, middle, big, and share-croppers are 19.01, 5.91, 1.33, 0.36 and 2.18 percent respectively. More or less similar picture was found in other areas of Terai region. The following table is quoted for better understanding the situation.

Table I: Categories of cultivators in Terai regions of North Bengal (percentage)

Area	Landless	Marginal	Small	Middle	Big	Share cropper
Bgdogra	64.80	26.10	4.80	1.20	0.30	2.80
Naxalbari	71.40	19.01	5.91	1.33	0.36	2.18
Hatighisa	39.00	35.26	11.29	2.31	0.33	15.81
Atharakhai	62.77	19.29	4.60	1.76	0.23	11.45
Gossainpur	59.15	26.10	9.31	3.49	0.63	1.32
Buraganj	21.93	47.10	22.97	6.09	1.09	0.82
Patharghata	27.00	17.78	7.79	2.11	0.50	5.55

Source: M. Dasgupta, "An Audience Profile, Darjeeling District". Report, Economic Department, North Bengal University, 1986, p. 29

In the context of North Bengal, it is stated that "indeed with the increase in population, there has been a trend that the land-man ratio for cultivable land is continuously on the decline. Taking the example of Darjeeling hills of North Bengal, it is stated that there has been a trend of decrease in land-man ratio for cultivable land in the area. The rate of such decrease has been substantial (30%) during the period between 1961 and 1981. Similar fact may be seen in case of entire North Bengal that the land-man ratio for cultivable land in this region is on the decline. And such diminishing in land-man ratio may be more in other parts of the region. As a result of decline in such ratio, the pressure on land has obviously increased over the whole period. These have resulted in more intensive cultivation in similar plots as well as in smaller plots and resultantly decrease in crop productivity. It has also brought about more marginalization of farmers and more sub-division of holdings. Besides, diminishing land-man ratio usually also brings in various other environmental hazards.”¹⁴

The growth of population shows the establishment of new settlements or new villages in the limited territory. According to the Census of 1981, the total number of villages was 382 but the census 1991 shows 388 villages. Another study conducted in a Indo-Bangladesh border village i.e. Thakurpara village located under Phansidewa block shows that more than 50% householders are landless and only 49.18 percent are land-owners with unequal amount of land holdings.

Table 2: Distribution of households according to possession of land (cultivable)

Caste/ communities	Land less	Land Owners				Total	Total no. of households with %
		Upto 3bigha	Upto 3.1- 6bigha	Upto 6.1- 9bigha	Upto 9bigha+		
Jugi	0	0	1	0	0	1	1 (1.64)
Kapali	0	0	0	1	0	1	1(1.64)
Musore	5	0	0	0	0	5	5(8.20)
Namasudra	23	13	8	2	1	24	47(77.04)
Rajbanshi	3	3	0	1	0	7	10(11.47)
Total	31	16	9	4	1	30	61(100)
Percentage	50.82	26.23	14.75	6.56	1.64	49.18	

Source: An unpublished dissertation paper, submitted to the Dept. of Sociology, NBU, in 1998 for M.A. Degree by Ranjit Roy.¹⁵

POPULATION GROWTH AND URBANIZATION, INDUSTRIALIZATION

The growth of population in this region initiated the growth of urban centers. The urbanization in this region is one of the results of population growth. Due to growth of urban centers and urban fringes in Terai region the agricultural lands decrease gradually. It is generally stated that "due to large migration from bordering states, countries (along with natural population growth and the resultant increase in population), as well as along with massive destruction of trees in successive decades because of railways, industries, illegal cutting and falling, establishment of new settlement and agriculture/cultivable areas after clearing forests etc. in North Bengal are rapidly decaying."¹⁶ In case of Siliguri, it is found that there are many small scale industries viz timber, saw mill industry, door-window frame making, furniture, ply wood and cabinete making etc, steel and iron fabrication, Aluminum, bell-metal, brass and copper fabrication, food, food processing, weaving, drugs and chemicals processing, printing, manufacturing of ornaments with gold and silver, manufacturing of lozenge, chocolate, biscuit and flour etc, manufacturing of spun-pipes and sanitary-fitting etc, milk processing, crushing of wheat, turmeric, oilseeds etc, manufacturing of small parts for machineries, manufacturing of cane products, candle, plain-sheet boxes etc."¹⁷ This industrialization becomes inspiring source of rural-urban migration of people largely.

Thus, the agriculture loses a considerable force. The census reports also support the decrease of cultivators and agricultural labourers than the number of people taking part in all categories of non-agricultural activities. According to the Census 1991, it is found that in Terai blocks, out of the total workers 68677 or 17.25 percent persons worked as cultivators and agricultural labourers and 329475 or 82.75 percent people are found in all other categories of occupations. The urbanization and industrialization affect the agricultural land and agriculturists in larger extent. It is stated that "another fact contributing to the increase in the number of miscellaneous labour (agricultural and non-agricultural) in the immediate vicinity of the town of Siliguri is the rapid conversion of agricultural land for non-agriculture purpose. Besides land acquisition by institution like the North Bengal University, North Bengal Medical College etc. and an increasing defense establishment the 'boom-town', character of Siliguri, acquired mainly through its strategic location has meant rapid expansion of brickfields godowns and transport garages encroaching on land which was previously being used for agricultural purposes. No doubt the economic use of land for purposes other than agriculture by itself is neither unwelcome nor should automatically mean suffering for the agriculturists. But in the absence of proper social control in the form guarantees of alternative land for cultivation and for ensuring retention of adhiars on farms or land leased for non-agricultural purposes, such changes in the use of land cannot but increase the army of disposed agriculturists. Such has been the case in the Siliguri area. On enquiry, it was found that brick fields alone displaced more than 300 agriculturists (mainly adhiars) from the vicinity of this township in one single year (1969-70)."¹⁸

POPULATION GROWTH AND OCCUPATIONS

The growth of population brings changes in occupational structure in Terai region rapidly and presently the people living in this region are not completely much dependent on agriculture mainly. Due to small land holding the people become agricultural labourers. The Census report of 1991 shows the increase of agricultural labourer in the terai region. In the Census of 1981, the number of agricultural labourer was 22808 persons and in the report of Census of 1991, it became 38320 persons. The number of cultivators did not increase largely. The number of cultivators was 32806 and 34446 persons in the Census reports of 1981 and 1991 respectively. On the other hand, on the basis of total main workers (i- ix) the dependence on cultivation decreases hugely. It can be easily understood through the following table:

Table 3: Participation of cultivators in agriculture activities in terai region

Category	1961	1971	1981	1991
Main worker	65871	71367	160073	139378
Cultivators	32300	27326	22808	34446
Percentage	49.03	38.28	20.49	24.72

In case of Indo-Nepal border trade it is observed that due to growth of population, a larger number of people both male and female are linked with non-agricultural activities. Most of them work as carrier of commodities from Nepal to India and India to Nepal. Even some of the males and females carry out the selling goods into several markets in Terai region like Naxalbari, Bagdogra, Siliguri etc. This activity offers them larger income than the income earned from agricultural labour activities. Due to this engagement of the people in non-agricultural activities in border areas, during the peak situation in cultivation of land and plantation of paddy, the region suffers from shortage of agricultural labourers. In case of Indo-Nepal border, it is informed that during rainy season some agricultural labourers are taken from another district like Uttar Dinajpur. It is also found that in this region the number of female agricultural labourers is increasing largely. According to Census of 1981, the total female agricultural labourer in Terai region was 1068, but in 1991 it became 3447.

III. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it may be concluded that the population growth has brought both positive and negative changes in this region. It has brought positive changes in terms of producing new variety of agricultural products. And due to the growth of population, the people of this region have come into contact with industrialization, urbanization and some new occupations. It is observed that some people in border villages show a dominating role in producing and supplying the products in several markets in terai region like Shivmandir, Siliguri, Bagdogra, Naxalbari etc. It is also found that the Shivmandir market located very near to the University of North Bengal, 80 percent of vegetables are taken from some border villages located near Indo-Bangladesh border areas under the Phansidewa block. And a considerable amount of vegetables produced in Kharibari areas located in Indo-Nepal border areas are sent to Nepal. The later migrants in terms of producing agricultural products are influencing even the early migrants or aboriginals. On the other hand, this growth of population has negatively affected this region also. Due to growth of population, land-man ratio in this region has been decreased and the number of agricultural and wage labour has increased and environmental hazards is also in increase.

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