

FOUR IMMIGRANT TRIBES IN TRIPURA
—THEIR LIFE AND CULTURE

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Four Immigrant Tribes of Tripura

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FOREWORD

The work deals with Santals, Oraon, Bhil & Mundas who are known as immigrant tribes to TRIPURA. These tribes provided the traditional source of plantation labour in the State. This is a pioneer work and covers an important and interesting area of Tripura's socio-demographic mosaic.

The dynamics of Tripura's demography with reference to migration of Tribes are yet to be fully brought into account. We hope, with the publication of this work, Scholars in future will be encouraged to unfold the past account.

Agartala,
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J. C. Chakraborty,
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Agartala,
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O. S. Adhikari

INTRODUCTION

Many a group of people-tribal as well as non-tribal migrated to this densely wooded hilly terrain of Tripura from time to time. Whether the state was under Princely rule or British subjugation or a part of the Indian Republic, migration into it had been continuous. The reasons for such migration may be grouped into political, economic, ethnic or Princely patronage all of which may not have worked simultaneously at each point of time. The impact over time of the massive influx of immigrants on the demographic balance of this state is easily perceptible.

Today we do find a rich volume of literature on many of the tribes living here for generations. Thanks to the alien ruler's interest in the life and culture of the tribes as well as to the inquisitiveness of the contemporary scholars from the different fields of social sciences, that a lot of information is available on many of the indigenous and immigrant tribes of Tripura. What is lacking, however, is the literature on the life and culture of the Bhil, Munda, Oroan and Santal who migrated to this state in the first quarter of the present century. The literature that we may consult today to get ourselves acquainted with these tribes is broad-based in the sense that its focus is on how they live in their respective places of origin or concentration—the Central and Eastern India. But the question whether these tribes have been able to maintain their life style, language, socio-cultural system etc. after migration to this state or whether they have adjusted themselves with other tribal and non-tribal inhabitants of the state cannot be known from the existing literature. The objective of the present study is to fill in this gap.

The study is presented in three chapters. The first chapter contains a brief analysis of the antecedents of these four tribes based on available published materials. The tribal demography of the state in general with particular reference to the four tribes including an enquiry into the factors leading to their migration into the state are discussed in second chapter. The third chapter contains a description of the life and culture of these tribes as revealed through a field survey and an epilogue.

CHAPTER—I

TRIBAL LIFE AND CULTURE IN INDIA —MYTHS AND REALITIES

Before the antecedents and characteristic features of the tribes under consideration are sketched, let us expose ourselves in brief to the general framework of Tribal India and to the concepts and categories essential for understanding the framework.

When the British came to India, tribal societies were in quasi-feudal capable of maintaining themselves but 'It was the colonial market which made the quasi-feudal systems difficult to reproduce themselves. They were to an extent restructured to meet the colonial interests. Land was made alienable and the labour was made mobile in the pre-capitalist sense. In the process the tribal people as well as the non-tribals got the dispossessed by the merchants' and usurers' capital'¹. The other factors responsible for the process were the introduction of zamindari and ryotwari system of land tenure, increasing commercialisation of agriculture, reservation of forest on the one hand and settlement of tribals in hitherto uninhabited forest land on the other, demographic expansion of both tribals and non-tribals, recruitment of tribals to plantations and mines, use of forced labour in construction of roads, bridges, railway tracks, etc.

It is true that the tribals of India were not totally spared by the Hindu and Muslim rulers but the level of extortion never went beyond what was tolerable. This was precisely because 'Seldom the Hindu or Mughal rulers imposed their hegemony directly and in any case it percolated very little to the masses of producers. The gathering communities reproduced themselves without any perceptible change ; while the chiefdoms stood in between these two levels of integration'². There were skirmishes between the tribals and certain Maratha rulers as 'the Maratha rulers failed to articulate their interests because of their derecognition of local powers'³.

'Unlike the Marathas, the British rulers were quick to recognise the significance of the tribal chiefs and aristocracy for their dominance. They treated them as accomplices to their rule, and hence abetted every crime perpetrated by these quasi-feudals colonialism not only allowed persistence of traditional quasi-feudal potentates but also enhanced their juridical, political and economic control over their subjects. This precisely was the reason for their subservience to colonial interests'⁴.

The level of extortion and repression brought about by the feudal and colonial domination was such that the tribal mass belonging to one commu-

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- 1, J. Pathy. Tribal Peasantry, 1984, P. 60
 2. *Ibid*, P. 59.
 3. *Ibid*. P. 59
 4. *Ibid*. P. 59—60.

nity or the other rose in revolts in a number of occasions. 'The major causes of their struggle were forced dispossession of land by outside landlords, contractors, usurers, traders and retired army officials; as well as oppressive taxation, forced and indentured labour, reservation of forest. The additional causes were excise policy, use of force to cultivate cash crops, loss of culture and religion, replacement of traditional powers and the like'⁵.

Without going into the detailed nature, causes and consequences of these struggles it may be said, "The tribal people were amongst the earliest communities in India who fought against the British expansionism, and made the greatest sacrifices. The British faced formidable challenge in Chotonagpur, Kandhaland and in fact almost everywhere in the tribal India The Santals rose in revolt against the rapacious moneylenders and landlords in 1855-57, 1869-71, 1882 and 1885. So did the Mundas in 1789, 1808, 1811, 1818, 1820, 1832, 1857, 1887-90 ad 1895-97. The Oraons took up arms in 1895-97. So did the Bhils of Gujarat in 1809-28, 1846, and 1857-59."⁶ The legendary figures like Kanu and Sidhu Murmu, and Birsa Munda do hardly have parallels in the history of tribal movements in India but unfortunately 'Many of our historians ignore their contribution in the long struggle for freedom. Some, in the moment of self-realisation and self-criticism, describe the earliest tribal rebellions as 'local rebellions' and 'stray explosions' having no bearings on the freedom struggle.'⁷ It is only recently that some scholars are giving due recognition to these tribal movements. There were indeed various weaknesses in these movements and they were crushed with military might of colonialism, including cold-blooded murder, execution, burning down of villages and fields, indiscriminate arrests and intimidations. And yet with a limited organisational strength and without any clear idea of what could be the best way of eliminating their sorrows and pains they fought boldly and courageously but this was recognised neither by the contemporary national leadership nor by the rising educated middle class. The educated middle class, which was considering the British rule as a blessing were on the contrary critical of the tribal movements as they were interested in the stability of the alien rule. Thus the fact that the tribal people had acted without the sympathy and guidance of those who could have helped them is one possible explanation of the failures of the tribal movements in India ⁸.

The mythical concepts about tribal life and culture found in many writings may be easily washed away if the general history of tribal India presented in the following paragraphs is kept in view.

There are a number of evidences which show that even in pre-colonial India tribes were not in general in complete isolation and free from interaction with the outside world⁹. As a matter of fact, a society whether primitive or not must produce some surplus unless which it cannot repro-

5. J. Pathy. Op. Cit. P. 67

6. Ibid. P. 67.

7. N. Hasnain. Tribal India Today, 1983. P. 122.

8. N. K. Bose. Some Indian Tribes, 1972. P. 137.

9. J. Pathy. Op. Cit., P. 118

duce itself. Likewise, transfer and exchange of certain goods against others is also a precondition for its growth and development. Therefore, the concept of isolation of tribal world is a myth. Neither did the tribals live in isolation in pre-colonial India nor did the British conspiracy to keep them in forced isolation materialise totally due to the expansion of modern transport and development of trade routes as prerequisites for colonial expansion. Of course, the context and degree of exchange and interaction need not be unique in time and space as these are determined by a host of factors including economic necessity, geographical feasibility, socio-cultural affinity and political pragmatism and whatever it may be, the point is the tribals did have regular contact—political, economic, cultural and social—with outside their so-called closed society.

When the premise of absolute isolation is nullified neither the theory of static culture nor the proposition of exploitation-free homogeneous tribal society holds good. Every bit of transaction brings with it among other things, cultural contact as well as exploitation. 'Even before the British rule, the major tribes of India had pronounced uneven distribution of economic resources, and there were broad classes of nobility, peasantry and slaves belonging to conquered groups'¹⁰.

That the tribesmen are mobile is proved by the simple fact that at least one-fourth of the number of the declared tribes today are spread in three or more states of India. The spread of individual tribes not being always contiguous also means a greater degree of mobility. The fact that the non-tribal dominated states like Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and West Bengal have largest concentration of tribals is to be explained in terms of the mobility and immigration of tribals. Not only that, today in almost all the states and union territories of India tribes other than indigenous ones are found to reside permanently. The reasons behind why such people left their homelands and migrated to some other places are manifold and may be categorised broadly into economic and non-economic factors. Without going into the detailed nature of the various forces responsible for immigration it may be said that with the advent of British rule the traditional tribal base dependent primarily on land and forest was destroyed and they fell prey to the colonial market. They were brought into new and new forest area for settlement so that waste land could be increasingly brought under cultivation thus enhancing the state revenue. At the same time they were also brought as indentured labourers to work in the plantations and mines, and were also recruited for construction of social overheads. Thus goes the story of tribal mobility and immigration¹¹.

It is needless to repeat that the tribals did have regular contact for one reason or the other with the non-tribals and so there is no a priori ground to conceptualise their cultural set up as a static one for generations uninfluenced by extraneous factors. Today it is in fact very difficult, if not impossible, to identify an ethnic group which has remained more or less static from the days of the beginning of human society ethnologically, linguistically, socio-culturally and economically. Manifold and multi-

10. J, Pathy. Op. Cit. P. 22

11. I bid Pp 19,61-66

directional changes are always taking place in every realm of life. Tribal life and culture are no exceptions.

In the foregoing framework let us now review in brief the economic organisations, linguistics, social institutions, religious faiths and political administration which appear to have been prevailing for years in places where the Bhils, Mundas, Oraons and Santals have been living en masse for generations. The principal habitat of the Bhils are in the Vindhya ranges in the western part of Madhya Pradesh while the principal homes of the Mundas, Oranos and Santals are in the southern plateau collectively known as Chotonagpur comprising the districts of Palamau, Hazaribag, Ranchi, Singbhum and Dhanbad, and in the Rajmahal Hills in the Santal Pargana district of Bihar. Today we however find that these tribes have settled in good numbers in some other states also. Bhils are now found in seven states, Mundas, Oraons and Santals in five states. How, why and when Tripura was introduced with these tribes are discussed in the following chapter.

All the tribes under consideration did take up plough cultivation quite a long time ago in their native habitat. To quote an old publication. 'The Bhils have now had to abandon their free use of the forests, which was highly destructive in its effects and their indiscriminate slaughter of game. Many of them live in open country and have become farm servants and field labourers. A certain proportion are tenants, but very few own villages. Some of the Tadvi Bhils, however still retain villages which were originally granted free of revenue on condition of their keeping the hill passes of Satpuras open and safe for travellers Bhils also serve as village watchmen in Nimar and the adjoining tracts of Berar Districts.'¹² To enforce order among their own people tribes like Bhils were recruited in large number during the British period. In the fifteen year period 1825 to 1840 three Bhil corps were formed in Khandesh, Ajmer Mewar and Udaipur.¹³

So far as the tribes of Bihar are concerned, 'Almost all these tribes have now taken to cultivation of rice and millets. A very small fraction living on the slopes of the plateau in western Palamau carry on slash and burn cultivation, by means of which they grow a special variety of pulses which is readily purchased by the neighbouring peasant communities.'¹⁴

Tribes like Oraon, Munda and Santal are excellent cultivators of rice and millet and have long been recruited for work in the tea, coffee and rubber plantations of Assam, North Bengal, Nilgiris and Tripura. 'They have migrated for new opportunities of work in Bengal as well, where they are employed as farm labourers; thus the contact of these tribes with peasant communities has been of long duration.'¹⁵

A reference to the recent analysis of the occupation of 384 Indian tribes does not appear to be out of context here. It is found that as many

12. R. V. Russel and Hira Lal, Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India, Vol. II, 1916. Pp. 292-293.

13. J. Pathy, Op. Cit. P. 65.

14. N. K. Bose, Op. Cit. P. 8.

15. I bid. P. 9.

as 234 enlisted tribes (60.94%) are agriculturists while 40 others live by selling labour power, 56 depend primarily on trade, commerce and handicrafts, and only 71 small tribes depend on primitive ways of living.¹⁶

It may therefore be hypothesised that the tribal economy is an integral part of Indian economy today. That the tribes of India are economically the poorest hardly need any empirical evidence right here.

The Santal and Munda speak dialects belonging to Austric or Mundari family of languages while the Oraon and Bhil speak dialects falling under Dravidian speech family.¹⁷ It is however interesting to note that the dialects just referred to have not remained 'pure' in the sense of being free from the influence of other dialects. 'As a consequence of the continuous contact with merchants and travellers operating between northern and Southern India in which tribes like the Banjaras are supposed to have played significant part as carriers, the languages of Bhils, have been deeply affected by Rajasthani, Gujarati and Hindi.'¹⁸ Likewise, the dialects of Santal, Munda and Oraon have also undergone changes under the Hindu peasant influence spread over centuries. The impact of more recent massive economic influence the dialects of the tribes under consideration due to the introduction of plantations, mining and other industrialisation strategy is easy to speculate. It goes without saying that the dialect of a group of people provides an important tool of understanding with which other group or groups of people the group in question has come into contact in the course of time socially, economically, and culturally. It is indeed naive to speculate an unidirectional change. It may be both ways. Life and culture of one group is likely to affect as well as be affected by those of other group or groups. But generally speaking, it is the socio-economically dominant group whose culture, religion, dialects, customs and the like affect those of a minority group.

The long term contact of the concerned tribes with the Hindus, Muslims and Christians has a natural bearing on their religious faiths.

A seventy year old publication states, 'The Bhils worship the ordinary Hindu deities and village godlings of the locality. The favourite both with Hindu and Muhammadan Bhils is Khande Rao or Khandoba, the War-god of the Marathas, who is often represented by a sword. The Muhammadans and the Hindu Bhils also to a less extent worship the Pirs or spirits of Muhammadan saints'¹⁹ The Bhils irrespective of whether they are Hindus or Muslims in faith have retained many of their animistic beliefs and superstitions like the other tribes.

Today almost 90 percent of Indian tribes follow Hindu religion in one form or the other and as a matter of fact it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between tribal religion and Hinduism.²⁰ This is so because the tribes have embraced Hinduism in accordance with their own genius. To

16. J. Pathy, *Op. Cit.* P. 22.

17. N. K. Bose, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 4-6.

18. *Ibid.* P., 4.

19. R. V. Russell and H. Lal, *Op. Cit.* P. 289.

20. N. Hasnain, *Op. Cit.* P. 60.

specify;’ the Oraons had made certain forms of Hinduisms, belonging to the Bhakti School, their own and even recast their practices in accordance with their own genius²¹. Similar is the case with the Munda and Santal. Practically speaking, contact of the tribals with the Hindu is old for centuries and because of its unobstrusive and non-proselytizing Character allegiance to Hinduism did not involve any significant break with the past. The tribals adopted popular Hindu Deities, festivals and religious beliefs without giving up their own deities and gods. It is because of this reason that we find the Bhils, Mundas, Oraons and Santals all worshipping not only Hindu gods and goddesses like Siva, Kali, Lakshmi etc., but a host of evil spirit (Banga) as well out of their animistic beliefs.

Although the percentage of tribal population who practice Christianity in India today is 6.0 only it has made tremendous headway among most of the tribals of North East India. A good number belonging to some major tribes of Chotonagpur like the Oraon, Munda and Santal follow Christianity. Through its proselytizing and penetrating moves Christianity has been able to bring about far reaching changes in the life and culture of many of the Indian tribes. In fact, ‘It (Christianity) came clothed with the civilizing mission of the west and not merely a religious reformation²². Christianity has undoubtedly brought the message of richer life, a wider companionship and a new sense of dignity to converts. The fundamental difference between the way in which the Hinduism affected the tribal life and culture and the way in which the Christianity did it lies in that the latter ‘was never moulded by the tribes in accordance with the genius of their own culture as long as British rule lasted in India.’²³ It is only recently that attempts are being made particularly in Church-dominated areas to glorify the tribal ways of life and culture so as to remain in association with the whole community concerned.

Tribals of India present a bewildering collection of socially, economically and culturally diverse groups each having its own political organisations starting from a highly decentralised form to an extremely autocratic form. So far as the political organisations prevailing among the tribes under consideration is concerned it may be said that they are run on a democratic line. There are village headmen and other office bearers who are assisted by council of elders and any matter coming to them is settled either through consensus or majority verdict, the office bearers, whether hereditary or elected, having no power to veto it.²⁴ In other words, some form of present day village panchayats have been in vogue among these tribes.

The institutions of marriage among the Indian tribes are also of various forms. Depending on convenience and social acclimatization in their respective cultural ecological setting, the tribals resort to various forms of matrimonial alliance. The different ways of acquiring the mates are reportedly as follows.²⁵

- a) Marriage by capture
- b) Marriage by exchange

21. N. K. Bose, *Op. Cit.* P. 144.

22. *Ibid.* P. 145.

23. *Ibid.* P. 146.

24. N. Hasnain, *Op. Cit.* P. 53.

25. *Ibid.* *Op. Cit.* P. 24

- c) Marriage by purchase
- d) Marriage by elopement
- e) Marriage by service
- f) Marriage by instrusión
- g) Marriage by trial
- h) Marriage by mutual consent
- i) Marriage by probation

While the system of proving one's prowess before a groom can claim the hand of a desired bride i.e. marriage by trial is most popular among the Bhils, the system of marriage by purchase is most prevalent among the Munda, Oraon and Santal. One, however, cannot be very definite as to how a groom will actually marry a bride. All depends upon the particular circumstances. It may, however, be said that increasing spread of education on the one hand and contact with the non-tribal communities on the other, are bringing a lot of changes in the sphere of marriage systems as in other realms of tribal life.

Youth dormitory has been an institution of many Indian tribes, known among them by various names, in which the tribal youths reportedly learn how to lead a corporate life, and how to work for the villagers in common and the secrets of sex life. This institution has been prevalent among the Munda and Oraon but is gradually falling into disuse. There are several reasons for it, like the advent of modern education, and frequent and deeper contact with the urban way of living.²⁶

The tribals of India have also a very rich heritage of arts of various sorts like dancing, singing, decoration etc. 'Among the tribes indulging in various artistic performances on the occasion of marriage, Santals appear to be the most enthusiastic. They are famous for making beautifully decorated palanquins in which bride and groom are carried from house to house.'²⁷ Needless to mention, almost all the tribes of India have evolved one type of collective dance or other. Every tribe has its own folk song, folk lore, and even musical instruments; the four tribes we are discussing are no exceptions.

A special mention may be made of the ornaments especially used by the tribal women for they give us some idea of their artistic creativity and aesthetic sense. 'The Bhils with huge bangles, bronze anklets, necklaces and other jewellery made of white copper, lead, bronze, beads, nuts, straw, grass and silver present a very colourful and attractive look..... The Oraons make artistic costumes and ornaments from peacock and bhangara feathers In Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa where flowers grow in abundance they form the principal medium of dress and hair decoration.'²⁸ When other aspects of tribal life are found to have been undergoing changes it is natural that art will not remain static. Tribal art is getting swamped by modern non-tribal art.

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- 25. N. Hasnain. Op. Cit. P. 34.
 - 26. N. K. Bose, Op. Cit. Pp. 133-134.
 - 27. N. Hasnain. Op. Cit. P- 64-
 - 28. Ibid Op. Cit. P. 65.

CHAPTER—II

GLIMPSES OF TRIPURA'S DEMOGRAPHY IN RETROSPECT —THE STORY OF TRIBAL IMMIGRATION

Out of the five full-fledged States and two Union Territories which collectively constitute North Eastern India, Tripura is the smallest administrative division. It accounts for only 4.11 per cent of the regional area. So far as the share in regional population is concerned, Tripura is in the second place (roughly 8%) preceded by Assam (75%).¹ It has, however, a considerably high density of population per sq. K.M. This phenomenon is to be explained in terms of the massive population growth in the State over the preceding years. During the seventy year period, 1901-1971, while the percentage increase in population for India as a whole was 129.6 only, that for North Eastern India in general and Tripura in particular was 358.4 and 797.9 respectively.² This indicates that the growth rate in Tripura was of an extra-ordinary nature. To have a clear idea on the trend of demographic expansion in this state we may have a glance at the following table.³

Table—1 : Decadal Variation in Population Growth of Tripura

Decade	Percentage Increase	Absolute Increase
1901—1911	32.5	56,258
1911—1921	32.6	75,224
1921—1931	25.63	78,013
1931—1941	34.14	1,30,560
1941—1951	24.56	1,26,019
1951—1961	78.71	5,02,976
1961—1971	36.28	4,14,337
1971—1981	31.91	4,96,716

There can be no denying the fact that such demographic explosion in this state is attributable more to the influx of immigrants than to the natural increase of indigenous people.

Numerically, the most significant immigration into this state had been that of the non-tribals. How the non-tribals have outnumbered the tribal population in the state over the preceding years is shown in the following table.⁴

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1. J. P. Singh, *Human Resources of North Eastern India*, 1982. P. 11.
 2. *Ibid.* P. 59-60.
 3. J. B. Ganguli, *The Benign Hills*, 1983. Pp. 17,37,46.
 4. B. P. Misra, *Socio-economic Adjustment of Tribals*, 1976. P. 26. and relevant Census Reports.

Table—2 : Tribal and Non-tribal Population of Tripura in Some Selected Years

Year	Tribal	Non-tribal	Total	Percentage of S. T. Population to Total
1901	91,544	81,781	1,73,325	52.81
1931	1,90,032	1,92,418	3,82,450	49.69
1961	3,60,070	7,81,935	11,42,005	31.53
1971	4,50,544	11,05,798	15,56,342	28.94
1981	5,83,920	14,69,138	20,53,058	28.44

Notwithstanding that there were immigrants—tribal as well as non-tribal—from other provinces and native states, the Bengalis hailing from the adjoining districts of Syllhet in Assam Province, Tipperah, Noakhali, Chittagong, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Dacca constituted the bulk of immigrant settlers in Tripura. For example, in 1901 alone out of 43,694 immigrants, 39,807 were Bengalis hailing from the aforesaid places.⁵ Again, as many as 1,84,000 displaced persons entered into Tripura in 1950-51 alone⁶ quite a good number of whom finally settled down here.

The story of non-tribal immigration to this state actually dates back to the fourteenth century when Raja Ratnamanikya-I settled 4,000 Bengalis in four places of Tripura.⁷ It was however since the end of the last quarter of the nineteenth century that immigration of Bengalis had been enormous.⁸ In the initial period, the Throne was in favour of the settlement of Bengalis in the state in its own socio-political and economic interest. With the intervention of the British in the state administration, a genuine pressure was felt by the Throne to usher in an administrative structure capable of implementing its modernisation plans and programmes. Land settlement was given encouragement and so was the overall expansion of agricultural activities. The basic objective behind all these was to raise land revenue collection so that the cost of modernisation could be met. It was in this background that large-scale immigration of middle class educated people including professionals, and the peasants from Bengal into this state was encouraged by the then Maharaja. Needless to mention, 'Despite all encouragements and incentives immigration on a large scale would not have taken place had there been no economic and other compulsions for the immigrants to leave their ancestral homes to which, like all men, they had natural attachments'⁹

The next numerically important group of immigrant settlers in the state were the Manipuris. 'In 1931 Manipuri population was 19,200 of whom agriculture (plough cultivation) was the main occupation of 4,171 and subsidiary occupation of 2,640 persons'¹⁰.

5. B. P. Misra, Socio-economic Adjustment of Tribals, 1975. P. 25 and relevant Census Reports.

6. J. B. Ganguli, Op. Cit. P. 47.

7. B. P. Misra, Op. Cit. P. 20.

8. J. B. Ganguli, Op. Cit. P. 14.

9. Ibid P. 4.

10. Ibid. P. 33.

To form an idea on the numerical strength of the immigrants from Bengal vis-a-vis from other states and provinces into Tripura we may look into the following table.¹¹

Table—3 : Immigrants from different States and Provinces in some selected years.

	1911	1921	1931
Bengal	48,042	46,061	67,946
Assam	27,506	36,976	33,262
Bihar-Orissa	2,002	5,077	4,153
Madras	1,086	2,675	2,166
Central Province	1,341	2,227	1,432
United Province	1,281	1,685	2,116
Ajmer Mewar	1	70	9
Punjab	50	44	80
Bombay Province	1	77	82
Indian Native States	244	1,244	2,591
Burma	4	8	12
Nepal	94	219	523
Other Countries other than India	34	9	11
Total	81,666	96,374	1,14,383

The table shows that immigrants hailing from places other than Bengal were numerically less significant. It may, therefore, be said that it has been the immigration of the Bengalis that has changed the demographic composition of the state over the years.

The tribal immigrants into the state had added mere to its demographic varieties than to its size. Out of the nineteen enlisted tribes found to be settled in Tripura today, eight, namely, Tripura, Riang, Noatia, Jamatia, Halam, Kuki, Chaimal and Uchai are known to have migrated to this state from outside in the historical period, and as such, they are regarded as the original settlers of Tripura. The list of immigrant tribes includes the rest that is, Chakma, Mag, Garo, Khasi, Lushai, Bhutia, Lepcha, Bhil, Munda, Oraon and Santal.

The Chakmas and Mags are known to have migrated to Tripura from Chittagong Hill Tracts and Arakan not earlier than the eighteenth Century¹² In 1931 their population were 8,730 and 5,748 respectively. Regarding their occupational position in the same year an excerpt may be cited, '..... while jhum cultivation was the predominant form of economic activities among the Chakmas, a good number of Mags took to plough cultivation as the main occupation retaining jhum cultivation as the subsidiary occupation¹³. Notwithstanding that there were other

11. J. B. Ganguli. Op. Cit. P. 16.

12. Ibid. Pp. 30-31.

13. Ibid. P. 31.

reasons like internal feud, growing population pressure on land and the consequent excess demand for land in the country-side etc., easy availability of Ital as well as plain land on the one hand, and the Princely patronage through extension of various facilities to the immigrant settlers on the other, were the two most important factors which were responsible for Chakma and Mag immigration¹⁴.

Garo, Khasi and Lushai are Assam tribes and are known to have migrated to this state at different points of time. 'The immigration of these people (the Lushais) into Tripura took place long back and as they also lived in the Lushai Hills, there had been a constant movement of these people within this area in course of their economic pursuits, that is, practising shifting cultivation¹⁵. The Garos came much earlier to Tripura than the Khasis. In 1931 the population of Garo and Khasi tribes were 2,143 and 23 respectively. Both these tribes migrated to this state in search of jhum land. The Khasis who were mostly settled in the North District of Tripura were also famous for their cultivation of **pan** (betel leaf) and because of this, they were also in the good book of the state administration.¹⁶

The Lepchas and Bhutias who hail from the Northern Frontier of India, that is, from Bhutan, Sikim and North Bengal are the lesser known tribes of Tripura. In the 1961 Census, while their population were seven each only, in the 1971 Census their respective figures became 175 and 3. It is very likely that these two tribes are not immigrant settlers as such. They might have come to this state for purposes of service and trade.

The Bhil, Munda, Oraon and Santal—the Central and Eastern Indian tribes—are hardly seventy years old in Tripura. 'When tea gardens were set up for the first time in Tripura in 1916-1917, Coolies had to be recruited from outside. The administration encouraged the recruitment of Bhil, Santal and other tribals for the purpose¹⁷. Since then they have settled in Tripura mostly as tea-garden labourers; some among them have become brick-kiln-workers or farm labourers while some have even become cultivators¹⁸.

As a matter of fact, recruitment of tribes from Central and Eastern Indian states namely, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal for reclamation of waste land and as workers in the plantations was a part of the British policy¹⁹. To substantiate this view, we may quote a scholar, 'In the late nineteenth Century the Gond, Kandha, Saora, Munda, Oraon, Santal semi-bounded labourers, non-occupancy tenants and small peasants were brought as indentured labourers into the tea, coffee and rubber plantations of Assam, North Bengal and Nilgiris. The outmigration from Chotonagpur alone in 1891 was more than three lakhs and that increased to about nine and a half lakhs in 1921. The 1931 Census revealed that one-fourth of the Chotonagpur tribals worked in the tea gardens of Assam

14. B. P. Misra, *Op. Cit.* P. 18.

15. J. B. Ganguli, *Op. Cit.* P. 29.

16. B. P. Misra, *Op. Cit.* P. 19.

17. *Idid* P. 18.

18. *Ibid.* P. 4.

19. S. C. Chakraborty, *The Tribals of Eastern India in ECOSCIENCE. Vol-II* Nos. 1 & 2, Spl. Issue, 1982. P. 277.

alone²⁰. Needless to repeat once again, the tribals could not be so easily lured or coerced to leave their homeland en masse to join the ranks of wage earners, had the tribal societies not been shattered and transformed into depeasantised-bonded-tenant ones. The Bhils, Mundas, Oraons and Santals whom we identify today as immigrant settlers in Tripura, it may be conjectured, are the products of the same alien machination.

In 1931, 'The total number of labourers engaged in tea gardens (in Tripura) was 5,451 out of whom 2,896 were men and 2,555 women'²¹. How these people were actually brought, whether as indentured or as contact labourers, and to be more specific, whether the 'arkati system' of recruitment of labourers was also in vogue in Tripura could not be known from the available published materials. The present study also fails to throw much light on this issue as the respondents in most of the cases either cannot recall or do not even know how they or their forefathers actually came to Tripura. The information that comes out of the interviews with the elderly tea-garden workers and veteran trade union leaders in the state is that in some cases 'Sardars' of the gardens were engaged to bring in labourers from their respective homeland and in other cases the labourers themselves have migrated to this state on not being absorbed permanently or being retrenched from the tea gardens of neighbouring Assam and Bangladesh. But then, there must have been, it may be hypothesised, some persons who acted as the linkmen.

The names of the tribes who came from the West, their population, and their occupation are available for as early as 1931²²

TABLE—4 : Distribution of Immigrant Tribes from the West in 1931

Tribes	Hailing From	Population	Main Occupation
1. Oraon	Chotanagpur, Bihar	979	tea garden labour
2. Kanda	Orissa	667	—do—
3. Kandra	Orissa	34	day labour & watchman
4. Kaur	Chotonagpur, Bihar	117	tea garden labour
5. Kurmi	Bihar	338	agriculture & domestic servant
6. Koch	North Bengal	67	agriculture
7. Kora	Dravidian origin	172	earth cutting
8. Khandaet	Orissa	752	tea garden labour
9. Khaira	Chotonagpur, Bihar	133	agriculture & tea garden labour
10. Gareri	Bihar	58	tea garden labour
11. Ghashi	Chotonagpur	90	—do—
12. Turi	Chotonagpur	139	—do—
13. Naia	Santal Pargana	37	—do—
14. Nageshia	Chotonagpur	22	—do—
15. Pan or Panika	Chotonagpur & Orissa	1064	—no—
16. Binjhia	Chotonagpur	114	agriculture
17. Bhuia	Chotonagpur	139	tea garden labour
18. Bhumija	Orissa	452	—do—
19. Munda/ Mundi	Chotonagpur	2058	tea garden labour & agriculture
20. Lodha	Chotonagpur	37	—do—
21. Santal	Santal Pargana	735	—do—
Total		8204	

20. J. Pathy, *Tribal Peasantry*, 1984. Pp. 64-65,

21. J. B. Ganguli, *Op. Cit.* P. 33.

22. *Ibid* P. 34.

It is to be noted that out of the 21 tribes mentioned in Table-4 only three tribes—Oraon, Munda and Santal—are present in the list of Scheduled Tribes in the state today, while as many as four namely, Ghasi, Kanda, Koch and Kora are seen to be included in the list of Scheduled Castes. Therefore, it may be said that the 1931 Census wrongly identified some immigrant groups as tribes or that some people are now identifying themselves as such and such caste. In any case, the list of Scheduled Castes and Tribes taken together no longer contains the names identified as 'immigrant tribes' in 1931, from which it may be concluded that not all the groups of people who were identified as having migrated to Tripura have finally settled down here.

Tribe-wise demographic composition of the state in the recent past may now be taken up for review. Table-5 below is presented for the purpose. The table shows that not all the tribes are able to maintain their relative strength in the total S.T. population of the state.²³ When the percentage of tribal population to total population is dwindling over the years, it is natural that numerical importance of a few tribes cannot but fall. For a particular tribe, however, natural extinction may also be a responsible factor. At the same time factors involved in the census enumeration process should not be totally kept aside while interpreting the census results.

Table—5 : Demographic Composition of Tripura in Some Selected Years

POPULATION			
Tribes	1961	1971	1981
1. Chaimal	50	—	
2. Halam	16,298	19,076	
3. Jamatia	24,359	34,192	
4. Kuki	5,531	7,755	
5. Noatia	16,010	10,297	
6. Riang	56,597	64,722	
7. Tripura	1,89,799	2,50,382	
8. Uchai	766	1,061	
Tripura Tribes	3,09,410(85.93)	3,87,505(85.96)	5,02,171
9. Chakma	22,386	28,662	
10. Mag	10,524	13,273	
Chittagong Hill Tribes.	32,910(9.14)	41,935(9.30)	54,304
11. Garo	5,484	5,559	
12. Khasi	349	491	
13. Lushai	2,968	3,672	
Assam Tribes	8,821(2.45)	9,722(2.15)	12,554
14. Bhutia	7	3	
15. Lepcha	7	175	
N. F. Tribes	14(Negligible)	178(Negligible)	410
16. Bhil	69	169	
17. Munda	4,409	5,347	
18. Santal	1,562	2,222	
19. Oraon	2,875	3,428	
Central & Eastern Indian Tribes	8,915(2.48)	11,166(2.48)	14,481
Total of all Tribes	3,60,070(100)	4,50,544(100)	5,83,920

23. The table is based on the relevant Census Reports. Figures-in paranthesis indicate percentages to total S. T. population. Community wise distribution of S. T. population not being available for 1981, such figures are arrived at by projection on the basis of community-wise share of S. T. population in 1971, given the total S. T. population for 1981. The style of presentation is borrowed from B. P. Misra. Op. Cit. P. 5

The distribution of Tripura's population by major religions in some selected years is presented in the following table²⁴.

Table—6 : Distribution of Population by Religion in Some Selected Years

Religion	1951	1961	1971	1981
Hindu	4,84,231 (75.0)	8,67,998 (76.0)	13,93,689 (89.55)	18,34,218 (89.34)
Muslim	1,36,981 (21.21)	2,37,002 (20.1)	1,03,962 (6.68)	1,38,529 (6.75)
Buddhist	17,552 (2.72)	33,716 (2.9)	42,285 (2.72)	54,806 (2.67)
Christian	6,181 (0.96)	10,039 (0.87)	15,713 (1.01)	24,872 (1.21)
Sikh	21 (Negligible)	49 (Negligible)	318 (Negligible)	285 (Negligible)
Others	741 (Negligible)	201 (Negligible)	375 (Negligible)	348 (Negligible)
Total	6,45,707(100)	11,42,005(100)	15,56,342(100)	20,53,058(100)

The table shows that the relative position of different religious groups has remained unaltered over the preceding years but the Hindus are increasingly commanding an overwhelming majority of the state population. The decline in the percentage of Muslim population may be explained in terms of their emigration to the adjoining districts of Bangladesh. It is well known that the Chakmas and the Mags mainly constitute the Buddhist population in the state. The fall in their relative population actually started in 1951. 'Upto 1941 the rate of increase among the Buddhists was higher than that among the Hindus and Muslims. But a fall in the rate is marked in 1951 and this perhaps was due to enumeration of a large number of Buddhists as Hindus²⁵. The increase in Christian population may be attributed to the spread of Christianity in the recent years among the tribes of North Eastern India in general and those of Tripura in parti-

24. The table is based on the relevant Census Reports. Figures in brackets give percentage to total population, (The figures of 1951 are taken from Tripura Darpan Tathya Panji O Nirdeshika, 1985. Total population figure for this year does not tally with the Census Report. In 1951 population was 6,39,029 instead of 6,45,707.

25. K. D, Menon (Ed.). Tripura District Gazetteers, 1975. P, 142.

cular. The comparative strength of the main language groups in the state in two selected years, 1931 and 1961, is presented in the following Table—7²⁶.

Table—7: **Language Groups in Tripura in two Selected Years.**

Language Group	Number of Speakers		Variation over the years
	1931	1961	
Bengali	1,65,530	7,22,442	+ 5,56,912
Hindu	12,804	18,457	+ 5,647
Santali	2,173	1,634	— 539
Assamese	467	123	— 344
Oriya	5,457	11,582	+ 6,125
Telegu	1,918	1,713	— 205
Tripuri	1,48,298	2,11,883	+ 63,585
Chakma	5,220	22,361	+ 17,141
Kuki	1,470	1,902	+ 432
Manipuri/Meithei	19,536	27,940	+ 8,404
Halam	10,370	5,481	— 4,889
Garo	2,740	5,458	+ 2,718
Lushai/Mizo	2,000	2,941	+ 941
Khasi	23	332	+ 309
Nepali	875	1,682	+ 807

It is well known that Bengali was the official language during the Princely rule and given the heavy immigration of people from the Bengali-speaking areas adjoining Tripura, it is natural that Bengali would enjoy a dominant position. It may be noted that out of 7,81,935 non-tribals, as many as 7,22,442 persons have returned Bengali as their mother tongue in 1961 Census. As a matter of fact, 'There are groups who use the language (Bengali) even though they have a separate dialect of their own, that is used exclusively within the community'²⁷. It may further be conjectured that many immigrant groups have lost their linguistic identity during the course of their contact for years with the Bengalis as well as other ethnic groups and are returning Bengali or other languages as their mother tongue. Other-wise, it is sometimes difficult to match the number of persons estimated on ethnic basis with that obtained on linguistic consideration.

Tripura has been making remarkable progress in the spread of literacy over the years.

26. Table—7 is excerpted, as it were, excepting the sign rectification in its last entry in col. 4. from K. D. Menon (ed). op. cit. p. 139.

27. Ibid. p. 140.

Table—8 : Growth of Literacy in Tripura.²⁸

Year	Percentage of literates to total population		
	Persons	Male	Female
1951	15.61	24.63	5.58
1961	24.34	35.31	12.36
1971	30.98	40.20	21.19
1981	42.12	51.70	32.00

The literacy among the women as well as among the men in Tripura as shown in Table-8 are higher than that of India as a whole (the corresponding figures being 36.17 and 24.88 percent). If, however, the spread of literacy among the tribals in the state is considered, the picture does not appear to be encouraging. Table-9* below contains a picture of literacy among the tribals in 1971.

Table—9* : Literacy among the Tribals in Tripura in 1971.

Tribe	Total population	Literate	Illiterate
1. Chaimal	—	—	—
2. Halam	19,076	1,813	17,263
3. Jamatia	34,192	5,063	29,129
4. Kuki	7,775	1,113	6,662
5. Noatia	10,297	607	9,690
6. Riang	64,722	5,039	59,683
7. Tripura	2,50,382	44,548	2,05,834
8. Uchai	1,061	136	925
9. Chakma	28,662	3,648	25,014
10. Mag	13,273	1,494	11,779
11. Garo	5,559	1,129	4,430
12. Khasi	491	34	457
13. Lushai	3,672	2,397	1,275
14. Bhutia	3	0	3
15. Lepcha	14	5	9
16. Bhil	169	24	145
17. Munda	5,347	215	5,132
18. Oraon	3,428	201	3,227
19. Santal	2,222	202	2,020

28. The table is excerpted from J. B. Ganguli. op. cit, p. 51 excepting that 1981 figures are taken from Census of India 1981. Paper 2 of 1982, Series 21 Tripura, P. 1.

* The table is excerpted, as it were, from Tripura Darpan Tathya Panji O Nirdeshika, 1985, P. 34. Once again it is to be noted that Lepcha population is shown as 14 while the correct figures should be 175 (See Table—5).

Table-9 reveals that the immigrant tribes as a whole, excepting the Khasis are lagging behind their indigenous counterparts. As a matter of fact the tribes as a whole are lagging behind the state average in terms of literacy rate. In 1981 Census while 42.12 per cent people are literate, the corresponding figure for the tribes as a whole is only 23.07. Needless to mention that while this is the position of the tribes in general, tribal women cannot but lag behind their made counterparts.

There has been a slow but steady growth in urban population of the state over the preceding years.

Table—10: Rural Urban composition of Tripura population
(in percentage terms).

Year	Percentage of total population	
	Rural	Urban
1951	93.3	6.7
1961	91.0	9.0
1971	89.57	10.43
1981	89.02	10.98

Table-10 shows that urban population has been growing in the state over the last four decades. The percentage of tribal population living in urban areas is, however, yet to pick up. In 1981, out of 5,83,920 tribal population, as small as 7,668 (1.31%) lived in urban areas²⁹. In fact, Tripura's economy is basically an agrarian one and that urbanisation—a concomitant of industrialisation and spread of service sectors—is still in its infancy. This leads us to the question of occupational distribution of population in the state.

Distribution of Tripura's total population as well as S.T. population according to different occupational categories as revealed in 1971 and 1981 Censuses is presented in Table-11. The table reveals that Tripura's population in general, and the tribes in particular are predominantly dependent upon the primary sector. Secondary and tertiary activities are yet to make a headway so as to reduce the dependence of the state economy on agriculture and allied activities.

Table—11 : Occupational Distribution in two selected years.*

Categories	1971		1981	
	Person	S. T.	Persons	S. T
I. Cultivators	2,35,292 (54.43)	1,07,122 (75.37)	2,64,094 (43.57)	2,11,058 (64.03)
II. Agricultural labourers	86,340 (19.96)	28,628 (20.14)	1,44,910 (23.91)	60,616 (28.72)
III. Livestock, Forestry, Fishing, Hunting and Plantations, Orchards and Allied Activities.	9,573 (2.21)	1,749 (1.23)	N.A.	N.A.
1. Primary Sector I+II+III	3,31,202 (76.60)	1,37,499 (96.74)	N.A.	N.A.
IV. Mining and Quarring	—	—	N.A.	N.A.
V. Manufacturing, Processing, Servicing and Repairs.	15,229	575	N.A.	N.A.
VI. Construction	3,138	46	N.A.	N.A.
2. Secondary Sector IV+V+VI	18,367	622	N.A.	N.A.
VII. Trade and Commerce	24,437	261	N.A.	N.A.
VIII. Transport, Storage and Communications.	6,194	215	N.A.	N.A.
IX. Other Services.	52,263	3,538	N.A.	N.A.
3. Tertiary Sector VII+VIII+IX	82,894	4,014	N.A.	N.A.
A. Total Workers 1+2+3	4,32,463	1,42,134	6,06,153	2,11,058
B. Non-Workers	11,23,879	3,08,410	14,46,905	3,72,862
Total Population A+B	15,56,342	4,50,544	20,53,058	5,83,920

* The table is excerpted from Tripura Darpan Tathya Panji O Nirdeshika 1985. Pp. 32, 35 excepting the percentage figures shown in brackets. Non-workers category includes marginal workers. Total non-workers figure as given in the source has been replaced by another so that it matches with the total population of 1981 (last but one entry in the third col.) Disaggregated figures for 1981 Census are yet to be available.

Although compared to 1971 Census the proportion of cultivators in general and among the tribes in particular fell in 1981, that of agricultural labourers rose. The percentage of main workers in household industry and other workers to total workers in the state in 1981 were 1.62 and 30.50 respectively while the corresponding figures for 1971 were 1.40 and 24.23³⁰. This implies that agricultural population of the state in general and among the tribes in particular constitute the major portion of their respective total.

30. J. B. Ganguli, op, cit. P. 56.

CHAPTER—III

**A LOOK INTO THE LIFE AND CULTURE OF SOME
IMMIGRANT TRIBES IN TRIPURA
—ISOLATION VIS-A-VIS ASSIMILATION**

Findings of the present study are based on a field survey conducted in ten tea gardens in the state of which six are in North District and four in West District. The names of the gardens covered under the survey are shown below :—

WEST TRIPURA DISTRICT

1. Mekhlipara Tea Estate
2. Fatikherra Tea Estate
3. Malabati Tea Estate
4. Durgabari Tea Estate

NORTH TRIPURA DISTRICT

1. Huplongcherra Tea Estate
2. Murticherra Tea Estate
3. Manu Valley Tea Estate
4. Kalisashan Tea Estate
5. Tachai Tea Estate
6. Rangrung Tea Estate

In total fifty households are contacted in the survey. A questionnaire is canvassed to each head of household and a diary is also maintained so that any interesting matter coming up during the course of interview but not included in the questionnaire does not slip out. As no readymade data on the tribewise composition of the workforce in the tea gardens are available it has not been possible to adopt a scientific method of selecting the households. As a matter of fact there is no system of keeping tribewise labour roll in the tea gardens. The most notable thing that comes out at the time of interviews with the managers and office staff of the Tea Estates is that they are not even aware at times of the ethnic groups to which the workers in the concerned gardens belong. Not only that, the workers are also not always conscious about the ethnic identity of their fellow workers.

Out of the fifty households surveyed, twenty are Mundas, fifteen are Oraon, while the number of Santal and Bhil are ten and five respectively. Most of the households surveyed hail from Bihar while a very small number of households are found to have immigrated from Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. Since no perceptible difference in the life and culture of these tribes could be ascertained in the survey all of them are treated as a single category with the provision that differences noticed wherever pointed out are.

ECONOMIC CONDITION :

On an average each of the surveyed households has two or more earning members working in the garden. With a wage rate of Rs. 7.35 per day per adult worker and subsidised ration of three and a half *Ser* of rice and flour taken together per week for each working adult, (a little over fifty percent and a little below twenty percent for working and non-working

minor respectively) a household with five to six members, on an average, in its own view, should be able to make both ends meet. There are indeed some other factors behind this assertion. Besides the regular wages in cash and kind workers get other benefits like free medical and housing facilities, bonus and other service benefits in accordance with the relevant Act. What deserves special mention is that most of the household covered in this study are cultivating land allotted to them by the garden authority free of revenue for the purpose only, or lease in land from land-owners outside the gardens as well. The table below shows that in every garden a considerable amount of land is not under plantations and is used for labour line, office and factory site, cultivation of paddy and other crops etc.

TABLE : Workers' strength and the extent of cultivable land in the surveyed tea estates.

Name of the Tea Estate	Total area in acres	Area under (In acres)			Workers' Strength
		Plantation	Cultivation	Other uses & waste	
Fatikcherra	1065	489	100	476	250
Malabati	138	88	—	50	38
Mekhlipara	568	366	70	132	286
Durgabari	163	103	—	60	48
Rangrung	524	252	75	197	137
Tachai	284	100	3	181	63
Kalisashan	494	151	n.a.	n.a.	65
Manu Valley	1223	327	n.a.	n.a.	216
Murticherra	2100	650	147	1303	294
Huplongcherra	750	412	75	263	236

Discussion with the garden authorities and workers also testifies that cultivable land, if available, is generally distributed among the workers free of cost more or less equally. Of course, the workers enjoy only the right of cultivation. A number of cases are also detected in the field survey in which workers are found to lease in land for cultivation from the land-owners outside the garden. Leasing in or leasing out of land within a garden is also not very rare. Generally, large-sized households with many dependents-minor as well as adult-are found to lease in land on crop-sharing basis, and they also often resort to wage labour outside the garden. In the busy season in plantations many casual workers are also recruited by the garden authorities normally from the working households. All this shows that a household working in the tea garden has many a living opportunity to eke out. Yet even a cursory look at the labour line within the garden brings out a picture of palpable poverty among the tea garden labourers in general and among the Bhil, Munda, Oraon and Santal workers in particular. Why this is so explained in details in this chapter later on.

EDUCATION :

Education is probably the most effective tool for ensuring equality of opportunity but it is well known that tribal people all over India, excepting

a few tribes of North East India, are lagging far behind their fellow country men. While the literacy rate for India as a whole is 36 percent that among the tribes is only 11.

In the present survey it is found that formal education has not percolated to any significant extent among the tea garden labourers in general and those belonging to Santal, Munda, Oraon and Bhil in particular. Although there are primary schools inside or in the vicinity of almost all the tea gardens, the number of school-going children in the surveyed households is not significant. The drop-out rate at the primary stage among the children is also a matter of serious concern. The most important factors behind such low level of education is to be found in the poor economic condition of the households in one end and in their apathy, indifference and lack of interest in the other, reasons of which in turn may be found in the curriculum, medium of instruction, mismanagement of the schools etc. Above all till such socio-economic conditions among the tribes could be created as would be conducive to the tribal students' developing sufficient interest in their studies, no real change can be brought about in the picture on education among the tribes.

HOUSING :

Many of the Indian tribes can pride themselves on developing a technology of house building with the materials available from nature and suitable to its ecology. Since for the tea garden labourers houses, as a rule, are provided by garden authorities, we see more or less similar structure of houses for different ethnic groups working in the garden. The condition of houses, of course, are seen to vary, though not much, from one garden to other. A single medium-sized house made of mud wall with thatched roof and a small thatched kitchen are generally seen to be provided to all the working households in the gardens. Out of the ten gardens, one garden, Haplongcherra Tea Estate in Dharmanagar Sub-Division, however, stands as an exception. Here the authorities have provided standard sized, tin-roofed, mud-walled houses with windows and separate kitchen to many of its workers. In other gardens houses of the workers are not found to have windows; instead they have round shaped medium-sized holes on the walls yet these are seen to be neat and clean. The courtyards of almost all the houses visited are found to be particularly beautiful, broad, neat and clean testifying to the aesthetic and artistic sense of the households. Since there is plenty of fallow land in the tea gardens, whenever a worker feels the necessity of erecting a new house at his own expenses, he can easily do it but before that he has to take a formal permission from the management. Therefore, when the family size increases the households construct a new house generally of mud wall with thatched roof for accommodating new members. In case a house provided by the authority is in a dilapidated condition and requires repair or renovation either the authority concerned provides necessary materials and wages to the household for getting it repaired or built up anew, or gets it done by using other hired labour.

Thus, so far as housing condition is concerned it may be said that the tribes under consideration are living in houses which are well-built, neat and clean and more or less well-ventilated.

FOOD HABITS :

The tribes under consideration have got into the habit of consuming wheat or flour while years before their immigration they reportedly did not prefer it. As a matter of fact, all these tribes are principally rice eaters and they still have a preference for it. It is found during the course of field work that many households grow millet in the small kitchen garden behind or beside their houses and this garden also gives a beautiful look to their habitat. The new habit that has grown up side by side with their taking up of works in the tea gardens is the habit of taking tea and even the minor children are found to be very much addicted to it. It may be noted that every working household gets a good quantity of made tea or green leaf free of cost from the garden authorities. The workers have developed a method of their own to produce made tea from green leaf. The made tea thus produced, needless to mention, is inferior in quality. Anyway, the point is that these tribes have perhaps become much more addicted to taking tea than to anybody else outside the gardens having a habit of drinking tea. The respondents even say that drinking a cup of tea energises and inspires them a lot though they hardly use milk or sugar in its preparation.

DRESSES :

Dress provides us yet other way of witnessing how the tribes under consideration have been changing their habits. The young men are dressing up very much in accordance with the day's fashion with polyester trousers, half-sleeved or full-sleeved vests and shirts, wrist-watches and even sunglasses. In Tripura, the tea gardens are not very far away from the local towns or market places and are located beside a metalled or soled road with stone and brick chips. Thus the labourers are connected with the urban ways of living and this attracts the young boys to spend their off time not in the labour line but either in cinema halls in the town or at least in chatting in groups with their mates in the tea stalls in the nearby market. The hair styles of many of the youngmen are found to resemble those of the film super-stars of the day. The tribal young girls are also lagging behind. While they do not come to the town or market places as frequently as do their male counterparts, yet their styles and fabrics of dressing clearly show how much they are falling into the habit of dressing up in the local non-tribal women fashion with 4.5 metre long handloom as well as powerloom sarrees, sometimes even printed, cotton or polyester, full-sleeved blouses with under garments. It is indeed very difficult to specify which of the four tribes of our interest is in the forefront in the question of adapting to the local fashion. Since all these tribes are placed in one and the same framework and since culture contact is increasing day by day there does not appear to be any a priori reason for believing that one would lead while the other would lag. After all, dress is the second most primary need of mankind and so, if funds permit, it is natural that one would try to dress himself in more and more up-to-date fashions particularly when he has a regular contact with the urban way of living. The trouble with the tribal young boys is that they do not always cut their coat according to their cloth because of their lavish nature.

The field work does not reveal, however, any remarkable change in the dresses of the elderly men and women belonging to Bhil, Munda, Oraon and Santal. Those who have retired and cannot work hard are found

seated in their courtyards with a small piece of cloth around their waist and a waist coat at best. The elderly women are still found to wear sarces of inadequate length covering their bodies upto their knees seldom along-with undercloths.

DIALECTS :

The field work envisages a remarkable experience in the field of tribal dialects. It appears that dialect is the first entity of a group of people that bears the impact of those of other group or groups the former comes across. Otherwise how can it be explained that Dhuma Oraon, a sixty years old retired tea-garden worker in Mekhlipara Tea Estate (who is the first generation immigrant) has forgotten his mother tongue totally? On enquiry it is found that there are only four Oraon families in the garden and as he has little scope to use his dialect, he has forgotten it. But how is it possible that if one does not use his mother tongue for years he will forget it? This is a very difficult question. Not only this fellow but many a household is found in the course of field work in which not all the members can speak its own dialect. When the children cannot speak the dialect of their parents this has got one simple explanation. The children always pick up the dialect of their parents, but if the parents themselves do not converse in their own dialect, the children cannot learn it.

The dialect that is mostly used by the Bhils, Mundas, Oraons and Santals is the one admixture of the Bengali dialects of Syllet, Noakhali, Comilla, Meimensingh and Dacca which is in vogue throughout Tripura. The fact that Hindi is also mixed up in their dialects has already been explained in Chapter I. Many of them can also speak a pure Bengali dialects known among them as "Jangli Bhasa". Why this is so called cannot be ascertained but how do they know it may be explained in terms of their temporary settlements either in the tea gardens of North-Bengal, Assam or in the neighbouring districts of Bangladesh.

RELIGION :

The people covered in this survey are found mostly to practise Hinduism. Only 5(five) households have been identified in the field study as Christians (three in Tachai and two in Durgabari). In fact, people belonging to different castes and communities who have come to settle in the tea gardens of Tripura are mostly Hindus. It is, however, interesting to note that the people of all communities are found to take part in all sorts of rituals and festivals organised by one ethnic group or the other inside or outside the garden, not to speak of the surveyed tribes in particular. Thus Mahadeva or Shiva is the most widely worshipped God among the tribes under consideration. Besides, there are goddesses like Kali, Lakshmi, Manasa, Sasthi, Durga and the like worshipped by them. At the same time they are found to retain their animistic beliefs and worship the evil or ghostly spirits. There is, however, one point to note here. While the elderly people are trying to maintain their traditional religious ceremonies, many younger people do not even know their names. What they do know are Durgapuja, Kalipuja, Saraswatipuja, etc. which are solemnised in the non-tribal Hindu locality outside the garden or even by the fellow workers belonging to other ethnic groups inside the garden.

ART :

The rich heritage in the art of folk-song, folk-dance and folk-tale among the Bhil, Munda, Oraon and Santal that is talked about in Chapter-I still prevails among them in Tripura. What is however making tremendous headway among the young generation is the stories and songs of the silver screen. Playing of Hindi songs through Stereo or Microphone is a common scene in the tea garden. Whether it is in observation of rituals related to child birth, marriage, spraying of colour or in religious worship the use of record-players is found to be growing day by day.

So far as ornaments are concerned, womenfolk can only recall, when enquired, what their predecessors were used to. Today they even do not prefer those ornaments as, in their own view, they give a shabby look. What they use today are the cheap but beautiful ornaments made of rolled gold, plastic and glass which are popular among the non-tribal women in the locality as well. The elderly tribal women are however using whatever old ornaments like bangles, ear-rings, anklets made of zinc or brass which they still have in their possession.

MARRIAGE SYSTEM :

Consequent on the cultural contact with the non-tribal people of the State for over sixty years, the institution of marriage among the tribes is undergoing significant changes. Marriages by mutual consent are gradually taking places of marriages by service, by purchase and by elopement. Not even that, inter-community marriages are also reportedly taking place. The elderly people, when requested to comment on this during the field study, express their helpless position. They, however, normally do not come in confrontation with the younger members committing such act and are also gradually trying to adapt themselves to it. The anguish they still retain in their minds comes to an end with the birth of the first child to the couple and they even become very fond of the baby. One particular case may be mentioned here. Shri Haran Hembram, the eldest son of a retired tea garden worker, Surai Hembram of Manu Valley Tea Estate, working as office-staff at Kailasahar Sub-Judge's Court is reported to have married a girl belonging to non-tribal community by elopement. This incident caused some misunderstanding and commotion in his family which subsided later when a baby was born to the couple.

Before passing on to the topic of political administration prevailing among the tribes referred to in the present study, it may be noted that the institution of the youth dormitory is no more in existence nor can it exist even theoretically in the labour lines of the tea garden constituent parts of which belong to heterogenous ethnic groups.

POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION :

The age-old political institutions of the tribes which still prevail in their respective places of concentration cannot be found as such in Tripura. As the tea gardens of Tripura fall under one Gaon Panchayat or the other and as there are trade unions affiliated to either CITU or INTUC, people residing in them exercise their franchise to elect their representatives, to the

respective bodies, besides taking part in the election to the State Assembly and Indian Parliament. The Gaon Panchayats have replaced the traditional political institutions of the tribes. There is, however, an informal council of elders in each of the four ethnic groups covered in this study. In the internal matters like social functions, rituals, ceremonies, intra-ethnic clashes or inter-ethnic conflicts it is this council of elders which settle them. This settlement remains binding on all concerned.

The existence of trade unions in the tea gardens is an evidence of political involvement of the workers in general and the tribes under consideration in particular. In all the gardens surveyed excepting Durgabari and Tachai which are workers' run co-operative tea gardens and where the trade unions are affiliated to the Tea Workers Union only, trade unions are recognised by either the Tea Workers Union or the Cha Mazdoor Union --the two state level organisations of the tea workers in Tripura, the former being affiliated to CITU and the latter to INTUC. So far as the strength of these two organisations is concerned, it may be said that the former has a definite lead over the latter, the reasons of which lie in the continuous movements for higher wages, better working conditions, amenities and rationing for the workers launched by the Tea Workers Union under the banner of CITU. The Tea Workers Union on its turn has strengthened the left and democratic movements by extending its support to them.

Discussion with the people during the field study, however, gives an idea that political training is not imparted to the workers in general and to those belonging to the concerned tribes in particular in any regular manner. Whatever contact the leaders make with the workers is very casual and occasional. Had the tribes who have to their credit a tradition of fighting against oppression, exploitation and superstition been imparted appropriate political education not only would their apathy and indifference towards formal education of their children be reduced, if not eliminated, many of their conspicuous expenditure on rituals, ceremonies and dresses etc. would have been minimised and also their drinking habits, the curse of tribal life, might have been modified.

DRINKING :

The attachment of Indian tribes to liquor of one form or the other has been so deep that it may be said to be a part of their social milieu. Whether it is fastive occasion, a marriage, a funeral or another ceremonial occasion or it is a normal day tribes are very much in the habit of consuming liquor. Such liquor is reportedly prepared from rice at home and even purchased from the local market. The habit is common to all age group starting with adolescents. Though people of all age groups never sit together to enjoy liquor, the elders, it is learnt, do not mind if younger people drink. Needless to mention, it is their social system which permits it.

Two exceptional cases found in the field study need special mention. Leaders of the Tea Workers' Union in both Durgabari and Tachai Tea Estates report that they have been able to reduce the drinking habits of the workers to some extent. In case a worker loses control over himself after taking liquor and is noticed by the fellow workers, the matter is brought to

the notice of the 'Bagan Panchayat' and disciplinary action in the form of wage cut for a day or two is taken. This practice is reportedly proving to be a success.

In other gardens, however, drinking is rampant excepting in a handful of households belonging to each of these four tribes in which the members have formal education. It is a common scene that on the evening of pay day as well as on the days after intoxicated tones come out of many of the houses in the labour lines. When enquired about the amount spent on drinks each household head blushes first of all and then remarks that "the question itself makes no sense" since 'there is no guarantee that expenditure on drinks would be kept within such and such a limit ; all depends upon the mood, companionship, religious and rituals', compulsions etc.

The drinking habit appears to be the single most contributory factor working behind poverty and impoverishment of the tea garden workers of Tripura belonging to Bhil, Munda, Oraon and Santal tribes, the others being their extravagance in other spheres like dress, ritual and religious ceremony. Idleness is also a factor for some of the households not being able to make both ends meet. All these factors may be classified into a single category "impragmatic attitude towards life". It is well known that tribes, in general, are mostly concerned with 'today' only ; even 'tomorrow' is not in their purview and herein lies the basic explanation of impoverishment among the tribes in general and the immigrant tribes of Tripura in particular.

ISOLATION VIS-A-VIS ASSIMILATION :

Although no clear-cut answer as to since when the concerned households have been settled in Tripura could be obtained, discussion with them reveals that in most cases it is the grand-father or the father of the reporting head of the household who migrated right from Bihar or the tea gardens of Assam and adjoining districts of Bangladesh to this state to work as tea garden labourers either voluntarily or through indenture or contract. Out of the fifty cases in as small as less than half a dozen cases the reporting households have themselves migrated straight from Chotonagpur or Santal Pargana of Bihar to this state in the fifties and sixties. The inter-garden mobility of the tea garden workers is also a phenomenon to be noted. Notwithstanding that Tripura was introduced with the Bhil, Munda, Oraon and Santal not earlier than seventy years ago, they have been adapting to the way of life of the majority in the state starting from food habits, dresses, dialects, religious faiths, ceremonies, art etc. to the political administration. Not even that, when requested to say a few words on how they view their homelands vis-a-vis Tripura the answer that comes out in many cases is particularly encouraging. "The hardship of the pre-migration days which our forefathers suffered but for which they could not be so easily lured to the tea plantations is no more." In their own words "today we are in a comparatively better position." In some cases the answer is still more encouraging ; "Tripura is our homeland ; we have no homeland other than Tripura." This particular answer comes from those households which have settled in the state two or three generations ago and who have the least reminiscence of their ancestral background.

Notwithstanding the reports of repatriation of a few tea garden workers of Bihar by various tea garden authorities in the state in the seventies or of workers returning to their homeland on their own, only one or two respondents acknowledge regular contact with their kin in their homeland through postal communications and to the majority of them, the touch has been cut off totally. Nostalgic feeling is found to be almost non-existent among the respondents irrespective of whether they are young or old in age. On enquiry it is learnt that even the small number of elderly respondents who are the first generation immigrants and who still feel some attraction for their homeland do not dare to take the risk of traversing the long distance so as to reach there due primarily to financial involvement and marginally to the apprehension of not being recognised by the relations and fellow villagers therein. The younger-generation is found to be totally indifferent and ignorant about their original abode. This change, however, is inevitable and it is good that the tribes under consideration as a whole have no feeling of isolation and have been adapting themselves to the socio-cultural and political milieu of the state over time. The process of assimilation is almost on the verge of completeness among the surveyed immigrant tribes.

EPILOGUE

Not all of the immigrant tribes—the Bhils, Mundas, Oraons and Santals—have been absorbed in the tea gardens of Tripura; quite a good number of them are reportedly working in the brick kilns, road construction sites or elsewhere as day labourers. They are not brought under the purview of the present study. In this respect the study has certain limitations; any conclusion drawn on the basis of field survey on a handful of tea garden workers belonging to the concerned ethnic groups should not ideally be taken to represent the position of the ethnic groups as a whole. This limitation is humbly acknowledged with the simple submission that from the viewpoint of culture contact, workers other than those absorbed in the tea gardens are much more exposed to the outside world than their counterparts by virtue of their locale of work and residence known among them as “Bustee”.

The immigrant tribes under consideration are rapidly changing their way of life and are adapting themselves to the local socio-cultural and political conditions leaving behind their age-old values, norms, conventions, customs, superstitions and the like. Economically, in their own words, they are better off compared with their counterparts in their original abode as well as in other occupations in this state; and yet there is a genuine scope for raising their standard of living through the spread of education, health-care facilities, provision of better amenities including social entertainment, programming of creative cultural functions, imparting appropriate political training etc. Though they have settled in this state not very long ago they are fast losing memory of their antecedents and are becoming a part and parcel of Tripura in all respects. The feeling of isolation no longer seems to prevail in them. This is a welcome phenomenon.

Tea plantation being the largest organised industry in the state, the workers of the tea gardens in general and those belonging to the Bhil, Munda, Oraon and Santal tribes in particular can play a positive role in ushering in a just society, given their glorious tradition and heritage of fighting against exploitation and oppression in the colonial days of the past.

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