

Periodic Research

Historical Geography of Tribal People in Birbhum District of West Bengal

Abstract

The history of Birbhum, one of the districts of Rahr Bengal, is very ancient. Various divisions taking place in different time periods have gradually reduced its area. Because of natural reasons, the map of the area characterized as Birbhum has undergone changes. Similarly, this map has been altered owing to administrative, linguistic and other reasons as well.¹ The flow of the history of civilization and culture has maintained its continuity through these natural and man-made changes and transformations. Amidst the uninterrupted conflicts and struggles between nature and man, the real history of the cultural transformation of Birbhum lies embedded in the flow of the social and geographical changes of the area. At present, it is a district lying on the western fringe of West Bengal, and near the border between Jharkhand and Bihar. In the district as a whole, hills and plateaus, dense forests, and hillocks of various heights are to be found.² This district, which abounds with ochre-coloured soil, in full of much diversity and is the residing place of many communities.³ A large section of the total population is tribal, and their food habits, habitations, lives and livelihoods are in keeping with the geographical environment. The tribes living in this district are Santal, Munda, Kol, Ho, Oraon, Paharia, Mahali, Lohar etc.⁴

Keywords: Community, Status, Development, Empowerment, Cultural Resource, Multi-Culturalism, Photo-Geographical Explanation.

Introduction

Present Birbhum is a separate district within the Burdwan division of West Bengal. In the past, this region was known as Rahr. Just as the mode of living of human beings depend on their natural environment, each region with its distinctive features come to grow on the basis of the likeness between natural and animate objects confronting man. The term region, in the context of West Bengal, refers to the divisions on the basis of the geography. The vast area stretched from the fringe of the plateau of the west to the western basin of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly River in the east and from the Ganges River in the north to the coastal area of Medinipur is ordinarily known as the Rahr region. The district of Birbhum lies within this greater Rahr region. This region became known as Birbhum since the 12-13th centuries A.D. During that period, a Hindu kingdom⁵ was set up around Lakhnour or Rajnagar. Later period, Lakhnour was the capital of Sen Dynasty of Bengal. The domain of the Birbhum Raj later on grew up with Rajnagar as the centre. More than 100 years duration, Rajnagar was the capital of Birbhum. Then, with the establishment of the rule of the East India Company, this area was converted into a district under this rule. During the British period, the area and administrative set up of this district underwent repeated changes. Along with natural diversity, diversity of communities too is observable in the district as a whole. People of various religions and cultures have been living in this region since antiquity. It may be noted in this connection that a large section of the total population of this district are tribes and their religion, society, food habits and customs are much different from the upper echelons. Yet they, by a process of intermingling with other inhabitants of Birbhum, have become the carriers of a unified culture. It is necessary to keep in mind that the specific shape of a regional culture is the product of the specific historical, social and economic was set up around quence of events. Having a close acquaintance with such regional cultures in necessary in order to acquire an overall familiarity with the Bengali culture, which is the product of the intermingling of various such cultures.

Area for Study

The study area is located at 5 km west of Rampurhat railway station, near Baramasia bus-stop. The study area is located between 24010" and 24013"N and 87039" and 87045"E (figure 1 and 4). The maximum and minimum altitudes are 86 metre and 36 metre from mean sea level respectively.⁶ for the essay of the phase under discussion, the district of Birbhum has been chosen. For a discussion of the history of this district, the issue of the geographical position must inevitably be brought in. Different scholars hold different opinions about the structure and origin of the name of the district. Similarly, there are myths. Without entering this tangled debate, we may try a linguistic interpretation. In the Mundari group of languages, the word 'Bir' means jungle, and the meaning of the Sanskrit word 'Bhumi' is land, or



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country.⁷ In a word, the term may be taken to mean jungle land. According to Gourihar Mitra, the term 'Bir' means jungle in the Santali language, and hence many are prone to think that the word originates from Santali. There is another opinion according to which a non-Aryan tribe called 'Bir' used to live in this area and the name 'Birbhum' is derived from that.⁸ It may be mentioned in passing that this area is largely populated by a lower caste named 'Birbansi'. There is a popular tale that a Khastriya royal clan bearing the title 'Bir' defeated the non-Aryans and established their hegemony here, and that the area was named Birbhum according to the names of the Bir kings.⁹ The first mention of the word Birbhum is found in the chapter '*Brammakhandā*' of the *Vabisiya Purana*, before which the entire area was known as Suhmmabhami and Bajrabhami.

The total area of Birbhum at present is 4562.14 square kilometers.¹⁰ The length is about 100 km from the north to the south and a maximum of 80 kilometers from the east to the west. In the three sub-divisions of the district, there are 19 *panchayet samities*, 167 *gram panchayets* and 2232 villages. There are six municipalities and nine towns. Among the latter, the chief ones are Dubrajpur, Nalhati, Rampurhat, Rajnagar, Bolpur, Saihtia etc. The land of the Rahr region is composed of sand, alluvium and gravel borne by the rivers flowing out of the Chhotanagpur plateau. The rivers whose names are worth mentioning are Mayuraksi, Ajay, Dwaraka, Rupnarayan, Banslai, Sal etc. The entire district lying within the Rahr land, the soil is red and hard. But the eastern part of the district, owing to its being located in the river valleys, is somewhat plain, but the western part is near the Chhotanagpur plateau, and hence jagged and uneven. Tribals are spread over almost the whole of the territory. Their number in the regions near the towns are, however, Lakhnour or Rajnagar.¹¹ Later period, Lokhnour was the capital of Sen Dynasty of Bengal.¹² The domain of the Birbhum Raj later on grew up with Rajnagar as the centre.¹³ More than 100 years duration, Rajnagar was the capital of Birbhum.¹⁴ Then, with the establishment of the rule of the East India Company, this area was converted into a district under this rule. During the British period, the area and administrative set up of this district underwent repeated changes. Along with natural diversity, diversity of communities too is observable in the district as a whole. People of various religions and cultures have been living in this region since antiquity. It may be noted in this connection that a large section of the total population of this district are tribes and their religion, society, food habits and customs are much different from the upper echelons. Yet they, by a process of intermingling with other inhabitants of Birbhum, have become the carriers of a unified culture. It is necessary to keep in mind that the specific shape of a regional culture is the product of the specific historical, social and economic set small. The density of the tribal population in different blocks has been shown in Table No1. Be that as it may, the geography and climate of the region as a whole have exercised a direct influence on the life and livelihood of the inhabitants.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives behind this work are as follows:

1. To search the historical geography of tribal environment in Birbhum district of west Bengal.
2. To investigate the socio-economic condition through author's annotations.
3. The present paper also aims to analyze how the backward classes in different gram panchayets of Birbhum district lived in below poverty line.

4. A comparison has been drawn from developmental aspect of the backward classes by comparing the involvement of these people in the government through different activities.
5. This paper aims to show how women in the study area are actively participating in the programme and their progress over years. The developmental and empowerment aspect of women help in reducing extreme poverty.
6. The study also aims to find out the major problems of these groups in reference to the study area.

Methodology

The tribal people, who are ancient inhabitants of Rahr Bengal, have been living in this region for long. Most of them live in villages, while only a handful resides in towns. Even after the expiry of sixty-five years of independence, their socio-economic development is negligible. Although provisions of drinking water and electricity have been made in most of the villages, improvements of roads and communications are much lower than expected. In order to gain knowledge of the historical background and geographical position of the tribal people during the period under discussion, I visited many villages of the nineteen blocks of Birbhum and collected much information about their lives and livelihood. I have tried to learn about their economic, political and social positions in comparison with the past. Although farming is their principal means of livelihood, most of them are landless. They are sharecroppers, agricultural labourers and other types of toilers. Economically they are not well off and they survive in the midst of constant struggles for existence. The houses of most of them are mud-walled. The walls of some of these houses are made with bricks and layers of mud. Many of the houses are roofed with palm or *hogla* leaves.

On the other side to strengthen the investigation, at-first, I concentrated in literature survey like the writings of different scholars on 'tribal life and their changing patterns'. The writings are 'Tribal Thought and Culture: Essays In Honour Of Surajit Chandra of Sinha and Saraswati (1991)', 'Changing Tribal Life: A Socio-Philosophical Perspective' of Sen (2003), 'Women Of The Earth Lodges: Tribal Life On The Plain' of Peters (2000), and 'Tribal Ecosystem And Malnutrition In India: Proceedings Of The National Seminar' of Tiwari and Sharma (1989) etc.

As well as English Books, I have received the help from some of the Bengali Books like, "Saotal Bidroha O Ganabikshover Itihas" by Dharendra Nath Baskey, "Birbhum Bibara" by Sahityaratna Harekrishna Mukhopadhyay, "Birbhumi Birbhum" Edited by Barun Ray, "Birbhumer Itihas" by Gourihar Mitra, "Saotal Abhyuthyan O Upojatider Sangram" by Arun Choudhury, "Saotal Bidroher Upor Aro Alokpat" by Nirod Bandhu Ray, "Rarher Samaj Orthoniti O Ganabidroho" by Ranjan Gupta, "Annals of Rural Bengal" by W.W.Hunter, "Rarher Jati O Krishti" by Manilal Singh etc.

The Land and the Tribal people

The Rahr region is an important part of Bengal. Birbhum, which lies within the ancient Rahr region, is an important area of Greater Bengal. Every region has its own independent history, and the history and geographical environs of this district are different from those of the other districts of West Bengal. This district, which is girt with jungles and forests, and vast plateaus, has been the habitation of different tribes for long. It is very difficult to determine the geographical location of this district. According to Dr Ramesh Chandra, more than two-thirds of the district of Birbhum, which is within the Rahr region that constitutes the western and southern parts of the belt of the Ganges flowing through West

Bengal, are covered with hills and primitive forests. From *Acharang Sutra*, the Jain religious text, it is known that in sixth century, the Rahr region was divided into two parts.¹⁵ The densely forested, rough and *adivasi* (aborigine)-populated region of the western part was known as Bajjabhumi or Bajrabhumi and the alluvial, almost plain region of the eastern part was known as 'Summabhumi'.¹⁶ Later, in the ninth and tenth centuries A.D. the region was divided, in accordance with their geographical positions, into two parts, 'North Rahr' and 'South Rahr'.¹⁷ Their respective geographical locations have influenced the socio-economic sphere too. Politically, the South is far more advanced than the North. For the same reason, the Summabhumi is far more developed than Bajrabhumi in respect of socio-economic, cultural and political aspects. The western part of Birbhum, known as Bajrabhumi, is really rich in respect of natural beauty. Yet, the numerous *adivasis* living in the midst of extremely backward socio-economic conditions were long unknown to the people of Summabhumi or the people of Greater Bengal. In the *Vedic* era, owing to arrival of the Aryans, the so-called non-Aryans had to leave the plains of the Indus and the Ganges and had to take refuge in forest-girt hills.

These people belonging to the ancient tribes have been living for centuries in isolation from the mainstream of society. Their needs are few, and although living in conditions of scarcity, they do not nurse any grievance about it. But when somebody hurt the lives and livelihood of these peace-loving, quiet and neglected tribal people, who live by struggling with nature, they were compelled to rise in revolt.¹⁸ Among the tribals of this region, the Santal population is highest. Besides, tribals like Oraons, Birhore, Mundas, Kols, Malpaharias, Mahalis, Bhumijas, Lohars, Mallas etc live here.¹⁹ A table showing the population of the tribals in different blocks of the district of Birbhum is given below. A list showing the percentage of tribal people in relation to other communities has been provided.

Distribution of the Population in the District

According to Census of 2001, the total population of Birbhum is 30, 15, 411. Out of total population of Birbhum, Tribals are belong to 30,15,422. Tribals are 6.74 % out of total population in Birbhum and 4.88% of West Bengal. A comparative study has flashed among the tribals of Birbhum and as well as all the tribals of West Bengal, which has shown by the (Table-2). But the growing rate of tribals is not equal in the whole district. The settlement of tribals is reacher in the eastern area than the western part in the district. Most of tribals in the district live in the villages and a little portion among them are living in many town by earning source. Density of tribal peoples in some blocks are very densed, like Rajnagar, Sainthia, Suri-II, Md.Bazar and Rampurhat-I etc. But the settlement of tribal people is very poor, like Murarai-II, Rampurhat-II, Nalhati-II, Nanoor and Khayrasole etc.

Table-1: Tribal Population (number and percentage) across blocks, municipalities and sub-divisions of Birbhum

Percentage of Population	% Birbhum	%W.Bengal
	Tribal	Tribal
Blocks		
Nalhati-I	9.1	4.4
Nalhati-II	0.9	0.9
Murarai-I	7.6	4.9
Murarai-II	0.7	0.4
Mayureswar-I	9.1	6.4
Mayureswar-II	7.6	6.7
Rampurhat-I	21.0	13.2
Rampurhat-II	0.7	0.4

Md.Bazar	26.8	19.2
Sainthia	21.2	12.1
Dubrajpur	8.1	5.1
Rajnagar	10.5	15.1
Suri-I	8.2	8.5
Suri-II	9.8	12.7
Khoyarasole	2.2	1.6
Bolpur-Sriniketan	32.0	17.9
Labhpur	7.3	4.1
Nanoor	3.8	2.0
Illambazar	12.7	8.8
Rural Birbhum	199.3	7.2
Municipalities		
Rampurhat	1.0	2.0
Dubrajpur	1.0	3.1
Suri	0.9	1.4
Sainthia	0.6	1.5
Bolpur	1.0	1.6
Urban Bolpur	4.5	1.8
Birbhum	203.1	6.7

Source:Census 2001, Note: Nalhati Municipality was established on 26/06/2001 Source: Census 2001

Table-2: Distribution of Tribal Population in Birbhum out of West Bengal, 2001

West Bengal Total Population	Birbhum Total Population	Tribal Population	% Tribal	%WB Tribal
80176197	3015422	20127	6.74	84.8

Major Tribal Communities

As mentioned earlier, many tribes live in the district of Birbhum, among whom Santals are the highest in number. Santals,²⁰ in their turn, are divided into various sub-groups, e.g.²¹ Hansda, Soren, Murmu, Mandi, Tudu, Kisku, Hembram, Baske, Besra etc.²² Santals are not the original inhabitants of Rahr Bengal. During the pre-Aryan age, they identified as 'son of the soil' in Sanskrit language.²³ According to anthropologists, the Santal tribe originated from the Munda community of ancient India. They first settled in the north-western part of Hazaribag, which belongs to today's Jharkhand, and then went to a place named "Saont".²⁴ Some scholars suggest that the Santal community has derived its name from this word 'Saont'. Mahalis are considered an inalienable branch of the Santal tribe; their principal occupation is to make bamboo-baskets and other similar types of utensils.²⁵ Their social structure and customs are like those of Mundas and Santals. They are not seen much in Birbhum, but in Medinipur, they are found in large numbers. The presence of Mundas in terms of number is not very prominent. The term 'Munda' means head, or village chief. It is an Austro-Asiatic group.²⁶ Mundas consider themselves Hindus, and their clans are named after gods worshipped by other Hindu communities.²⁷ Habitations of some people belonging to the 'Bhumija' tribe are also observable. Some Lodhas, a hunting tribe, also live here.²⁸ They earn their livelihood by procuring the fruits, honey etc that grow in forests. Besides, there are some Koras in the western part. They constitute a branch of the Munda community.

Demographic Characteristics

The population density of a region depends on the socio-economic, geographical, political, cultural factors. In the mountainous regions, the population density is low because the environment is unfavourable in respect of food, housing, communications etc. The district of Birbhum is no exception. In the plains of the eastern part, the population density is higher because the facility of farming and commerce is higher. Since these facilities are absent in the jagged plateau region of the west, the human settlements are scattered there, and the livelihood of the people is centred on forestlands. That is why many tribals have built up settlements in areas adjacent to forests. Besides,

permanent habitations have grown around agro-based industrial units and stone quarries. Owing to the construction of the Bakreswar thermal power plant some tribal people are engaged there in various activities as workers or day-labourers. On the whole, tribals have been living in various parts of the district in a somewhat scattered fashion.

Sex Ratio of the Tribal People

According to the Census of 2001, the total number of tribals in West Bengal was 44, 06,724. Among them, 22, 23,924 were males and 21,82,800 were females. Of this population, 41, 36,366 lived in villages, and only 270,428 lived in towns. (Table-3) It shows that the number of males is not much larger than females. The district of Birbhum presents a somewhat different picture as far as the percentage of tribal population in the total is concerned. In 2001, the total population of the district was 30, 15,422, while 2,031,27 were tribals. The number of males was 1,018,31. The number of females was only marginally lower, 1,012,96. Among the tribals, 1,982,96 lived in villages, and the number living in towns were only 4,515. Among the latter, almost everybody was engaged in government jobs or trade. There are many, however, employed in shops, garages etc. Both male and female tribals are very industrious.²⁹ Tribal women are habitually industrious and hardy. In many households, it is the women who are the principal earning members. Besides, women participate in farming activities along with men. In the tribal society, women's positions are higher than men's.³⁰

Economic Activities

Most of the tribals of Birbhum mainly live on farming activities as owner-cultivators, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. A section of them is engaged in non-farming activities as day-labourers, miners and quarry-workers. Some tribals are engaged in cottage industries and trades of their clan. But only a small number is engaged in services and commerce. Birbhum being a part of the Rahr region, the soil is here graveled and sandy, reddish and hard. This soil is not very much suitable for agriculture. Again, the quantum of rainfall is low and lack of proper irrigation facilities is also a handicap. The eastern part is suitable for agriculture, but the western part is not. This western part lies within the Chhotanagpur plateau and hence is jagged and covered with forests. It is worth mentioning that the majority of the tribal people in this hilly, arid region, and hence their standard of living is not developed.

Problems of Livelihood

Tribals are as a matter of fact, sylvan beings, living all along by struggling with nature in hilly regions. They live in the plains only marginally. Particularly, industrious and hardy tribes like Santal, Munda, Kol, Bhill etc live in plateau and forest regions. Although mainly living on agriculture, the occupations of many are hunting and food-gathering. Many of tribal peasants have no land of their own, and they work as landless labourers, bargadars, bataidars etc. A handful is, however, engaged in government jobs or commerce. The western part of Birbhum being agriculturally poor, the work of agricultural labourer is scarcely available, and hence they go to stone quarries as workers. But at present, the coercive dealings of owners in these quarries have deprived them of just wages. On the other hand, those who are dependent on forestlands are losing their traditional rights. In consequence, these hilly tribal people are faced with the problem of food and housing. Currently, various economic plans have been taken up by the government for these sylvan beings. But the measures for a lasting solution to their problems are taken up, many among the tribal population will benefit.

Conclusion

The tribal people of the Rahr region, who are divided among different communities and streams, possess some

distinctive features characterizing their languages, modes of living, social organizations and mental worlds, in their art, literature and culture. With these features, they have been living in this region for ages. In spite of their distinctiveness, some changes among them are noticeable, changes that are due to the geographical environment, closeness with neighbours, mutual exchanges in daily life etc. The nation cannot advance unless the conditions of all the people inhabiting a definite area are improved. But it is seen that a large section of the society is being left out of the development process under various pretexts. Yet these tribal groups have a special role to play in the socio-economic life of the district or, for that matter, of the nation. It is necessary to apprise all others of the socio-economic conditions of the tribal groups living in Birbhum and to come forward for their overall development in collaboration with all. It must be remembered that all human beings are treasures, and that the distinction between Aryans and non-Aryans, between castes and tribes is irrelevant here. The objective set by this piece of research is to highlight the necessity of knowing about the original history of the tribal people and about their contribution to society, about regional history and culture. This will help in removing the possibility of regionalism or regional revolts. The tribal people have to be brought into the mainstream of the society and the human civilization has to be taken to the road of progress in a unified manner.

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