

# Post-Independence Demographic and Economic Changes in Cooch Behar

## Abstract

Cooch Behar, nestling in the area adjacent to the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas, is blessed with abundant human resource due to significant demographic changes in the post-independence period. The number of non-workers and marginal workers in Cooch Behar is very high leading to under- and un-employment. For optimum usage of work force, agro-industry should be set up in Cooch Behar. Focus should be on skill enhancement. This will lead to demographic dividend for Cooch Behar.

**Keywords:** Agricultural Labourers, Cultivators, Marginal Workers, Non-Workers, Human Resource Management

## Introduction

*'The demographic differentials reveal that over the next 20-30 years, India has distinct advantages in a population profile concentrated in the younger age group, where many new opportunities can be fully optimised.'*<sup>1</sup>

Indeed as envisioned in India's New Opportunity – 2020 Report of the High Level Strategic, India is set to reap a huge dividend of generating 40 million new jobs and \$ 200 billion annual revenue within the first two decades of this century. This can only be possible with rapid industrial growth and skill development. Industrial development has had an important role in the economic growth of countries.<sup>2</sup> Not only in India, but in the rest of the world the share of poor people in the global population has declined during recent decades. According to Chen and Ravallion (2004), one-third of the population of the world lived in poverty in 1981, whereas the share was 18 per cent in 2001. The decline is largely due to rapid economic growth in population-rich countries like China and India.

However, economic growth is also accompanied by economic inequality and income differentiation. Thus, there are remarkable differences in economic development in different regions of India. For example, in Cooch Behar even though there is significant population increase, there is unfortunately poor economic growth. As a result, the economy stagnates in comparison to other regions. The need of the hour is for better Human Resource Management in Cooch Behar. This paper seeks to highlight this malady plaguing the Human Resource Management in an otherwise resource-rich Cooch Behar and offer some suggestions for uplifting the economy of Cooch Behar.

## Study Area

The region of Cooch Behar is located in between 26° 32' 46"N to 25° 57' 6"N latitude and 89° 52'E to 88° 45' 02"E longitude. Cooch Behar is surrounded by Jalpaiguri District in north and west, Bangladesh in south and Assam in east. The total geographical area is 3386 square kilometers and the total population of the district is 28, 22, 780 (Census Report, 2011) with the population density of 833 per square kilometer. The district is a flat region with a slight south eastern gradient along which many rivers of the district flow. Most of the high lands areas are found in the Sitalkhuchi region and most of the low laying areas are found in Dinhata region.<sup>4</sup> Cooch Behar lies adjacent to the international border with Bangladesh and has seen a steady influx of immigration from across borders. Also, in recent times people from Assam have been migrating southwards to Cooch Behar to build their future. As a result, there have been significant demographic changes in Cooch Behar.<sup>5</sup>

## Aim of the Study

In the context of a largely populated country like India, the Sub-Himalayan District of Cooch Behar lying in West Bengal is a place of huge academic interest. Here, the main occupations of the people are



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Cultivation; Agricultural Labour and allied activities; House- holds Industry; Trade and Commerce and other services. This paper focuses on the myths demographic and economic changes in a marginalized area like Cooch Behar during post-independence period and offers an insight into the real malady plaguing this resource-rich region, awashed by the mighty Torsha river.

**Demographic and Economic Cooch Behar**

The study of the demographic and economic changes in Cooch Behar has been done by analyzing the data for the last five decades of the last century. For this purpose, data has been taken from the Census Books of 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011.

**Table 1: Population in Cooch Behar**

Census Year	Male	Female	Total	Rate of Increase over the earlier census
1961	539694	480112	1019806	-
1971	737931	676252	1414183	1.39
1981	915461	856182	1771643	1.25
1991	1122306	1048839	2171145	1.23
2001	1148530	1107650	2256180	1.04
2011	1451542	1367544	2819086	1.25

Source: Different Census Books

Table 1 reveals the population of Cooch Behar during the last decade of the last century by assimilating data from the Census Books of 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011. During this entire period, the population of Cooch Behar had increased by nearly 2.25 times, which is quite remarkable. The population of Cooch Behar has been constantly increasing, though the rate of increase in population has slightly decreased during recent times. During this entire period, taking 1961 census as the base year, overall, the population in Cooch Behar had increased by nearly 2.25 times.

Table 2 reveals the number of total workers in Cooch Behar over censuses 1961 to 2011 which had increasing steadily over the years. The rate of increase in the number of total workers was the highest in the 1981 census, thereafter the rate of increase had decreased somewhat. During this entire period, taking 1961 census as the base year, overall, the total workers in Cooch Behar had increased by nearly 2.33 times as compared to 2.25 times increase in population in Cooch Behar during the same period.

**Table 2: Total Workers in Cooch Behar**

Census Year	Male	Female	Total	Rate of Increase over the earlier census
1961	306341	17919	324260	-
1971	379064	11438	390502	1.2
1981	484819	28771	513590	1.32
1991	597823	65601	663424	1.29
2001	639791	114520	754311	1.14
2011	749848	136509	886357	1.18

Source: Different Census Books

**Table 3: Ratio of Total Workers to Population in Cooch Behar**

Year	Population	Total Workers	Ratio of Total Workers To Population
1961	1019806	324260	0.32
1971	1414183	390502	0.28
1981	1771643	513590	0.29
1991	2171145	663424	0.31
2001	2256180	754311	0.33
2011	2819086	886357	0.31

Source: Different Census Books

From Table 3, it is seen that the percentage of total workers of Cooch Behar to the population in Cooch Behar over censuses 1961-2011 has hovered around the 30% mark. The simple average mean of the ratio of total workers of Cooch Behar to the population of Cooch Behar over censuses 1961-2011 works out to around 0.3060. This transpires to 30% of the population of Cooch Behar being a part of the total work force.

**Table 4: Cultivators in Cooch Behar**

Census Year	Male	Female	Total	Rate of Increase over the earlier census
1961	228996	11310	240306	-
1971	261942	3416	265358	1.10
1981	263223	3950	267173	1.01
1991	306789	12853	329642	1.23
2001	277339	84501	361840	1.10
2011	302745	62052	364797	1.01

Source: Different Census Books

Table 4 reveals the number of cultivators in Cooch Behar over censuses 1961 to 2011 which had increasing steadily over the years. The rate of increase in the number of cultivators was the highest in the 1991 census. Thereafter the rate of increase had decreased somewhat. During this entire period, taking 1961 census as the base year, overall, the number of cultivators in Cooch Behar had only increased by nearly 1.5 times, as compared to the overall increase of 2.25 in the population of Cooch Behar and the 2.33 times increase in number of total workers in Cooch Behar during the same period.

**Table 5: Ratio of Cultivators to Population in Cooch Behar**

Year	Population	Cultivators	Ratio of Cultivators to Population
1961	1019806	240306	0.24
1971	1414183	265358	0.19
1981	1771643	267173	0.15
1991	2171145	329642	0.15
2001	2256180	361840	0.16
2011	2819086	364797	0.13

Source: Different Census Books

From Table 5, it is seen that the percentage of cultivators in Cooch Behar to the population in Cooch Behar over censuses 1961-2011 has been falling steadily. This transpires to the very basic fact that during this period nearly 10 percent decrease in

the percentage figure of the cultivators which means that they had become land losers and were converted into agricultural labourers or had emigrated elsewhere out of Cooch Behar in search of fruitful employment. These redundant cultivators could otherwise have been more economically used in other industrial sector through the proper Human Resource Management, but due to the dearth of industries in the area, there was no way these redundant cultivators, comprising a vital portion of the human resource of Cooch Behar could have been developed and employed fruitfully.

**Table 6: Agricultural Labourers in Cooch Behar**

Year	Male	Female	Total	Rate of Increase over the earlier census
1961	22537	483	23020	-
1971	57915	2982	60897	2.65
1981	128874	11040	139914	2.30
1991	306789	12853	319642	2.28
2001	170204	115222	285426	0.89
2011	257425	134450	391875	1.37

**Source: Different Census Books**

Table 6 reveals the number of agricultural labourers in Cooch Behar over censuses 1961 to 2011 which had increasing steadily up to 1991, after which the number of agricultural labourers had noticed a dramatic decrease in number. The rate of increase in the number of cultivators was the highest in the 1971 census at 2.65 times. Up to the 1991 census, the rate of increase was consistently hovering around 2.3 mark. Thereafter, in 2001 and 2011 censuses the number of agricultural labourers had actually decreased. During this entire period, taking 1961 census as the base year, overall, the number of agricultural labourers in Cooch Behar had increased by 12.4 times, as compared to the overall increase of 2.25 in the population of Cooch Behar, the 2.33 times increase in number of total workers in Cooch Behar during the same period and the 1.5 times increase in the number of cultivators in Cooch Behar during the same period.

From Table 7, it is seen that the percentage of agricultural labourers in Cooch Behar to the population in Cooch Behar over censuses 1961-2011 has been very low for the first three censuses but in the 1991, 2001 and 2011 census, the percentage of agricultural labourers to population in Cooch Behar has reached double figures to hover around the 15% mark. During this transition period of 1991, when the globalization process kicked off in India in the right earnest, some interesting developments took place in a marginalized area like Cooch Behar.

**Table 7: Ratio of Agricultural Labourers to Population in Cooch Behar**

Year	Population	Agricultural Labourers	Ratio of Agricultural Labourers to Population
1961	1019806	23020	0.02
1971	1414183	60897	0.04
1981	1771643	139914	0.08
1991	2171145	319642	0.15
2001	2256180	285426	0.13
2011	2819086	391875	0.14

**Source: Different Census Books**

It was seen that the number of cultivators in 2011 census has actually increased from 361840 to 364797, representing only around 1% increase of the total population of Cooch Behar. But during the same transition phases, the number of agricultural labourers had come down from the figure of 319642 in the 1991 census to 391875 in the 2011 census, which represents a decrease of 2% of the total population of Cooch Behar. So, the question that naturally arises is that the where have the people who left the occupation of being agricultural labourers gone to? The obvious answer that they became cultivators is not correct, as there was only an increase of 1% of the total population who entered into cultivating. There has been no growth in industry in Cooch Behar during the same period. Then the only possible answer is that they have migrated to outside Cooch Behar in search of employment, as the traditional agricultural sector could no longer provide them with the sustainable means of living. These redundant agricultural labourers, comprising a vital chunk of valuable human resource, could otherwise have been more economically used in Cooch Behar itself through proper HRM, but due to the dearth of industries in the area, there was no way that this vital human capital of Cooch Behar could have been developed and employed fruitfully in Cooch Behar itself.

Table 8 shows that the household industry has been steadily rising in Cooch Behar from 1961 onwards. In the transition period after 1991, the rate of increase in household in Cooch Behar noticed a very sharp rise from 1.48 to 2.56. This is very significant as it corresponds to the same period when the number of agricultural labourers actually decreased and the cultivators' percentage did not appreciate much. So, there was a shift in the labour force from the agricultural sector to the household industry 1991 onwards.

**Table 8: Household Industry in Cooch Behar**

Year	Male	Female	Total	Rate of Increase over the earlier census
1961	4726	3044	7770	-
1971	6729	1411	8140	1.05
1981	6966	3390	10356	1.27
1991	10374	4945	15319	1.48
2001	17893	21362	39255	2.56
2011	19269	21324	40593	1.03

**Source: Different Census Books**

**Table 9: Ratio of Household Industry to Population in Cooch Behar**

Year	Population	Household Industry	Ratio of Household Industry to Population
1961	1019806	7770	0.01
1971	1414183	8140	0.01
1981	1771643	10356	0.01
1991	2171145	15319	0.01
2001	2256180	39255	0.02
2011	2819086	40593	0.01

Source: Different Census Books

Table 9 shows that only a negligible amount of the population of Cooch Behar, that is only 1% to 2% of the population of Cooch Behar are engaged in the household Industry. Even in the transition phase after 1991, when there was actually an increase in the household sector in Cooch Behar, the absolute figure was limited to increase of 1% of the total population which has been employed in the household industry in Cooch Behar.

Table 10 depicts the trade and commerce picture of Cooch Behar for 1961, 1971 and 1991 censuses, as the figure from the other censuses was not obtainable. There has been an increase in number of people employed in trade and commerce after 1971. Initially after 1961, it had decreased a little.

**Table 10: Trade & Commerce in Cooch Behar**

Census Year	Male	Female	Total	Rate of Increase over the earlier census
1961	15298	558	15856	-
1971	15152	367	15519	0.98
1991	41853	1204	43057	2.77

Source: Different Census Books

However, just as in the household industry, even if the percentage figure had gone up, the actual number of people engaged in the trade and commerce in Cooch Behar actually hovers around only 1% to 2% of the population of Cooch Behar, as shown in Table 11.

**Table 11: Ratio of Trade & Commerce to Population in Cooch Behar**

Year	Population	Trade & Commerce	Ratio of Trade & Commerce to Population
1961	1019806	15856	0.02
1971	1414183	15519	0.01
1991	2171145	43057	0.02

Source: Different Census Books

Table 12 shows the number of non-workers in Cooch Behar over the censuses from 1961 to 2011. Though the number of non-workers in Cooch Behar has increased over the period, the rate of increase has gradually diminished.

**Table 12: Non-workers in Cooch Behar**

Year	Male	Female	Total	Rate of Increase over the earlier census
1961	233353	462193	695546	-
1971	358867	664814	1023681	1.47
1981	424498	819185	1243683	1.21
1991	521039	952224	1473263	1.18
2001	573544	938906	1512450	1.03
2011	606234	1084875	1691109	1.12

Source: Different Census Books

Unlike the household industry or trade and commerce, the percentage non-workers to the total population of Cooch Behar is consistently very high, hovering around the 60-70% mark. Table 13 shows the state of Human Resource Management in Cooch Behar in very poor light as there is a huge dearth of employment opportunities in Cooch Behar. Cooch Behar has abundant human capital, but they have not been fruitfully utilized in the Cooch Behar economy resulting in non-workers comprising nearly 70% of the population.

**Table 13: Ratio of Non-workers to Population in Cooch Behar**

Year	Population	Household Industry	Ratio of Household Industry to Population
1961	1019806	695546	0.68
1971	1414183	1023681	0.72
1981	1771643	1243683	0.70
1991	2171145	1473263	0.68
2001	2256180	1512450	0.67
2011	2819086	1691109	0.60

Source: Different Census Books

Table 14 shows the number of marginal workers in Cooch Behar only for the 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011 censuses as the figure of marginal workers for the earlier 1961 and 1971 census was unobtainable. The findings of Table 14 corroborate the findings of Table 12. Corresponding to the increase in non-workers, the number of marginal workers has also increased, especially in the transition phase after 1991, the rate of increase of marginal workers in 2001 census was as high as 6.16. Obviously, the available human capital in Cooch Behar is not utilized properly, resulting in increase in non-workers and marginal workers who only find seasonal employment.

**Table 14: Marginal Workers in Cooch Behar**

Census Year	Male	Female	Total	Rate of Increase over the earlier census
1981	6144	8226	14370	-
1991	3444	31014	34458	2.40
2001	58759	153635	212394	6.16
2011	95460	146160	241620	1.14

Source: Different Census Books

Table 15 shows that the ratio of marginal workers has increased to nearly 10% of the total

population of Cooch Behar in the 2011 census. This figure along with the nearly 70% of population who are non-workers add up to nearly 80% of the human resource of Cooch Behar which are either unemployed or marginally employed. In 2011 census, the percentage of marginal and non-workers have rose to nearly 80% from the previous figure of 70% in the 1991 census. This increase of nearly 10% of population who are identified as marginal and non-workers in Cooch Behar in the post-1991 period presents an abysmal figure of HRM in Cooch Behar.

**Table 15: Ratio of Marginal Workers to Population in Cooch Behar**

Year	Population	Marginal Workers	Ratio of Marginal Workers to Population
1981	1019806	14370	0.01
1991	1414183	34458	0.02
2001	2171145	212394	0.10
2011	2819086	241620	0.09

**Source: Different Census Books**

Just like it was mentioned while discussing the earlier Table 14, the post-1991 period in Cooch Behar witnessed an alarming increase of 8% of the population who are identified as marginal workers.

#### **Industry Scenario in Cooch Behar**

The topography of Cooch Behar is crisscrossed with a number of rivers like Teesta, Torsa, Jaldhaka, Dharla, Mansai, Kaljani, Raidhak, Gadadhar and Sankosh and rivulets like Sutanga, Khotamara, Giridari, Gilandi, Dudua, Dolong, Mujnai and so on. The climate of Cooch Behar is characterised by a very high level of humidity and abundant rainfall. All these traits make Cooch Behar suitable for agro-based industry. In fact, the very economy of Cooch Behar is agriculture-dependent. The inland marketing of the agricultural products mainly supports the economy of Cooch Behar.

However, Cooch Behar is industrially backward. To supplement the agriculture based economy, agro-based industries are in the first priority. Hence, the food processing industries like the manufacturing of jam, jelly, sauce & chips (supplemented mainly by the production of potato & tomato) have a good potential in the domestic market and at the same time can be exported to the neighboring countries.<sup>6</sup> Around 12 cold-storage units have been set up at Cooch Behar, which are far less than required.

In the absence of any big industry, the abundant work force of Cooch Behar finds employment in medium and small enterprises (MSMEs), however, with only one industrial area at Chakchaka, even the numbers of MSMEs are far less than required. The tourism sector in Cooch Behar, blessed by a large number of historical monuments and a rich cultural legacy, suffers from poor infrastructure and marketing. The women take recourse to Self help Groups (SHGs) in order to sustain their families. So, there is lack of absorbing the excess work force of Cooch Behar within the district which force the youths of Cooch Behar to migrate to bigger cities in India in search of better livelihood. In short, in absence of abundant

employable opportunities, Cooch Behar suffers from poor Human Resource Management.

#### **Conclusions**

##### **Human Resource Management Need of the Hour**

During the 1961 to 1951 censuses, the population of Cooch Behar had increased by nearly 2.25 times, the total work force had increased by nearly 2.33 times, the number of cultivators had increased by 1.5 times, the number of agricultural labour had increased by 12.4 times, the household industry had increased by 5 times and the number of non-workers had increased by 2.17 times. 30% of the population of Cooch Behar is a part of the total work force. During this entire period, taking 1961 census as the base year, overall, the number of cultivators in Cooch Behar had only increased by nearly 1.5 times. Nearly 10 percent decrease in the percentage figure of the cultivators which means that they had become land losers and were converted into agricultural labourers or had emigrated elsewhere out of Cooch Behar in search of fruitful employment. These redundant cultivators could otherwise have been more economically used in other industrial sector through the proper Human Resource Management, but due to the dearth of industries in the area, there was no way these redundant cultivators, comprising a vital portion of the human resource of Cooch Behar could have been developed and employed fruitfully. During this entire period, taking 1961 census as the base year, overall, the number of agricultural labourers in Cooch Behar had increased by 12.4 times.

From Table 7, it is seen that the percentage of agricultural labourers in Cooch Behar to the population in Cooch Behar over censuses 1961-2011 has been very low for the first three censuses but in the 1991, 2001 and 2011 census, the percentage of agricultural labourers to population in Cooch Behar has reached double figures to hover around the 15% mark. During this transition period of 1991, when the globalization process kicked off in India in the right earnest, some interesting developments took place in a marginalized area like Cooch Behar.

It was seen that the number of cultivators in 2011 census has actually increased from 361840 to 364797, representing only 1% increase of the total population of Cooch Behar. But during the transition phases, the number of agricultural labourers had come down from the figure of 319642 in the 1991 census to 285426 in the 2001 census, which represents a decrease of 2% of the total population of Cooch Behar. So, the question that naturally arises is that the where have the people who left the occupation of being agricultural labourers gone to? The obvious answer that they became cultivators is not correct, as there was only an increase of 1% of the total population who entered into cultivating. There has been no growth in industry in Cooch Behar during the same period. Then the only possible answer is that they have migrated to outside Cooch Behar in search of employment, as the traditional agricultural sector could no longer provide them with the sustainable means of living. These redundant agricultural labourers, comprising a vital chunk of valuable human resource, could otherwise have been

more economically used in Cooch Behar itself through proper HRM, but due to the dearth of industries in the area, there was no way that this vital human capital of Cooch Behar could have been developed and employed fruitfully in Cooch Behar itself.

There was a shift in the labour force from the agricultural sector to the household industry 1991 onwards, as noticed by an increase from 1.48 to 2.56. But due to only a negligible amount of the population of Cooch Behar, that is only 1% to 2% of the population of Cooch Behar are engaged in the household Industry; even in the transition phase after 1991, when there was actually an increase in the household sector in Cooch Behar, the absolute figure was limited to increase of 1% of the total population which has been employed in the household industry in Cooch Behar.

However, just as in the household industry, even if the percentage figure had gone up, the actual number of people engaged in the trade and commerce in Cooch Behar actually hovers around only 1% to 2% of the population of Cooch Behar. Thus the increase in employment in the household industry and trade & commerce in Cooch Behar is not of large amount to play a decisive role in HRM in Cooch Behar, even though the percentage figure had gone up for the two sectors.

Unlike the household industry or trade and commerce, the percentage non-workers to the total population of Cooch Behar is consistently very high, hovering around the 60-70% mark. Cooch Behar has abundant human capital, but they have not been fruitfully utilized in the Cooch Behar economy resulting in non-workers comprising nearly 70% of the population.

The findings of Table 14 corroborate the findings of Table 12. Corresponding to the increase in non-workers, the number of marginal workers has also increased, especially in the transition phase after 1991, the rate of increase of marginal workers in 2011 census was as high as 6.16. Obviously, the available human capital in Cooch Behar is not utilized properly, resulting in increase in non-workers and marginal workers who only find seasonal employment.

The ratio of marginal workers has increased to nearly 10% of the total population of Cooch Behar in the 2011 census. This figure along with the nearly 70% of population who are non-workers add up to nearly 80% of the human resource of Cooch Behar which are either unemployed or marginally employed. In 2011 census, the percentage of marginal and non-workers have rose to nearly 80% from the previous figure of 70% in the 1991 census. This increase of 10% of population who are identified as marginal and non-workers in Cooch Behar in the post-1991 period

presents an abysmal figure of HRM in Cooch Behar. In fact, the post-1991 period in Cooch Behar witnessed an alarming increase of 8% of the population who are identified as marginal workers.

Side by side, the industrial activities in Cooch Behar is by and far less than the other parts of the country particularly during the second five year plan and during the era of globalization. As a result, the number of population engaged in the industrial or household industrial sector had increased very marginally during this period. This ground reality calls for development of human resource in Cooch Behar so that the area no longer remains in the low level equilibrium trap. Institutes imparting livelihood training should be set up in proper numbers at Cooch Behar. Banks and financial institutions should be encouraged to give soft loans to farmers and artisans. There should be focus on proper demographic management in the form of strict vigilance and policing along the international borders to stop illegal immigration. The light of scientific education should permeate the dark canopy of illiteracy, superstitions, age-old practices. Ultimately, the skill profile of the average Cooch Behar resident should be enhanced to reap the benefits of the demographic dividend.

'India in 2020 is surely something the world can look forward to. According to economic predictions, that time would be the golden 'Growth' era in the demographic dividend. We would not only have enough manpower to meet our needs but we can help the rest of the world as well'<sup>7</sup>

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