

CHANGING SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL LIFE OF THE TRIBAL WOMEN OF TERAI REGION OF DARJEELING DISTRICT (WEST BENGAL)

Krishna Barman

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Nakshalbari College, Nakshalbari, Darjeeling, India

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ABSTRACT

Tribes belonging to various ethnic groups are living in the Terai region of Darjeeling district. Some of them are living in this part of the country long before the establishment of British rule but most of the tribes of this region are living here after the establishment of Colonial rule. The tribes mainly belonging to Oraon, santhal, Munda, Ho, Paharia, Mal-paharia, Kisan, Nagesia community came here as the tea garden labourers with the introduction of the tea plantation by British in this region. They came here with their family. When they came they brought their culture and customs with them. The tribal women of Oraon, Santhal, Munda, Mal-Paharia. Paharia community initially performed lots of rituals and customs, but with the passage of time number of changes had taken place in their social life. Though a number of changes have occurred in their life-style by coming in contact with the modern world but in terms of education they are still lagging behind. Though a steady growth in tribal women education has been noticed in this region from Census 1991 to 2011, but it is not as good as compared to their total population. A lot of changes now have been noticed in the mind set of the women who had got educated and their presence is remarkable in various political gatherings and rallies organized for demanding their various right.

KEYWORDS: Tribes, Terai Region, Women, Rituals, Customs, Life-Style, Education

INTRODUCTION

The low lying belt of the Darjeeling Himalayas is known as the Terai region. Mainly the Matigara, Naxalbari, Phansidewa and Kharibari, these four blocks of Darjeeling district are located in the Terai region of Darjeeling district. A major portion of this region is covered with tea-gardens and the majority of the tribal population of this region are living in these tea-gardens. Here in West Bengal we mainly notice the existence of four language- groups namely Austro- Asiatic, Dravidian, Sino-Tibetan and the Indo-Aryan and most of the people of these four language-groups are present in Terai region of Darjeeling district. Tribes like Koches, Meches, Dhimal, Tharu, Oraon, Santhal, Munda, Nagesia, Paharia, Mai-Paharia, Mahali, Ho, Kisan, Karoya, Kheris, Sabar, Lodha and Gond are such races mainly found in this region. But in terms of population the Oraons are the majority. Here in this article I will discuss about the tribal people who mainly came in this region as the tea garden labourers from Santhal Parganah and the Chotonagpur region. The tribal people who came here from Santhal Parganah and the Chotonagpur region mainly belonged to the Dravidian language group. They came in the Terai region with the beginning of the Tea gardens in this region. Some came alone but most of them came in the tea- gardens with their family, because the tea-garden industry is very much dependent on female workforce. In this article I will try to explain the changing social and educational life of the tribal women mainly living in the tea garden areas of this region and the role of education in their life.

The tribal society of this region is mainly patriarchal then also the place of women in the society is very remarkable. Tribal women of this region are never ignored or neglected by the society. Even there is no tendency to determine the sex of the baby before birth among the tribes of this region.

The following table shows the sex-based statistics of Schedule tribe children aged between 0 to 06 years according to the Census 2001 and 2011 in the four blocks of Terai region of Darjeeling District:

Table 1

Name of the Block	Total Number of Children	Total Male Child	Total Female Child
Naxalbari	4451	2231	2220
Phansidewa	9682	4853	4829
Khoribari	3172	1579	1593
Matigara	3098	1507	1591
Total	20,403	10,170	10,233

Source: West Bengal Census of India, 2001, p.243-245.

Table 2

Name of the Block	Total Number of Children	Total Male Child	Total Female Child
Naxalbari	3,943	1,952	1,991
Phansidewa	8,695	4,409	4,286
Kharibari	3,266	1,662	1,604
Matigara	3,386	1,694	1,692
Total	19,290	9,717	9,573

Source: District Census Handbook (Darjiling) 2011. P.98

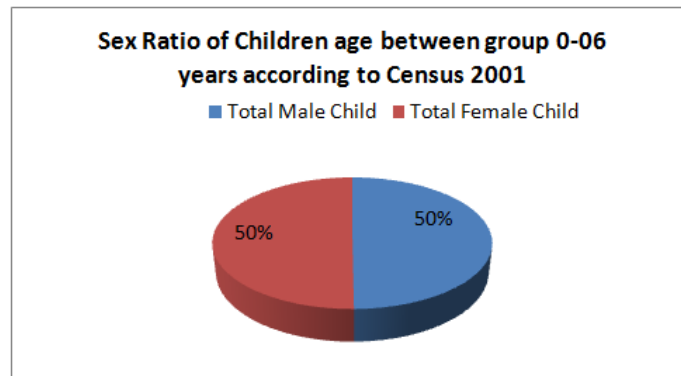


Figure 1

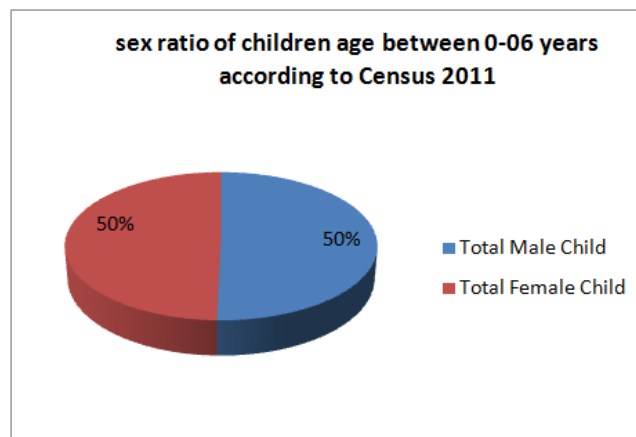


Figure 2

From the Census of 2001 and 2011 it is found that the number of girl child age between 0-06 years shared nearly the 50 percent of total child population. According to Census 2001 the total number of tribal male population was 58,280 persons and total number of tribal female population was 57,960 persons and in the Census of 2011 the total number of tribal male population became 70,290 and the total number of female population became 72,439 persons. In the Census of 2001 the total number of tribal female population was nearly equal to the tribal male population but in the Census 2011 the total number of tribal female population became to some extent higher than the tribal male population. While the sex ratio in respect of the whole country is in favour of the male population, the story is totally different for the tribal people of this area which shows a significant dominance of female sex over male which is praise worthy. Based on the above statistics it can be said that the killing of female foeticide is totally absent in the tribal society here. Where the every Census report in India is report decline in numbers of girl child, gender equality in the tribal society is really admirable. One of the main reasons behind this gender equality is that women are never regarded as the burden of the family. Now many tribal families are giving priority to the birth of the girl child than the boy child, because during field survey it was noticed that most of the male members of the family in the tea garden areas remain intoxicated most of the time. Major portion of the wages they earn by working hard in tea garden are spent on buying Haria (one kind of country liquor). Due to the regular intake of alcohol, they are losing their vitality. The addiction of alcohol in tribal men of this region is the main reason for their backwardness in the society. In order to earn money almost all the women of tribal families living in the tea gardens or adjacent villages, engage in various works e.g. they engage as permanent or temporary labourers of tea-gardens and also as the constructional labourer in nearby urban centre. To run the family they spent all their incomes. So it can be understood that the financial base of the tribal families is very much dependent on the income of the female members of the family. They also have to perform all the households' activities along with the outside work.

The marriage is one of the important aspects to understand the changing social position of tribal women in this region. Conservatism in marriage was prevalent in their society and still prevalent in some cases. For example in Ho, Munda, Santhal, Oraon, Mahalo and Mal-Paharia community there is no provision of marriage in their own sub-caste. Again an Oraon, Munda and Santhal woman never wanted to marry a man of Mahali. Ghasi, Chikbaraik community, because they regarded the other tribes subordinate to them. Earlier Oraon, Munda and Santhal tried to confine their marriages in their own community. In a tea garden society these three communities considered themselves of higher status and ethnically superior to other tribes. But now the situation has changed greatly. Now the tribal girl of Oraon, Munda and Santhal community are getting married in other tribal community also. Now the inter-caste marriage is also happening among the tribes of this region. Nowadays the tribal girls are getting considerable freedom in the matter of marriage. During survey it was noticed that now in the matter of marriage, girls are giving priority to their choices and their families no longer stand as an obstacle in the way of their marriage. The tendency to marry boys who work in the same tea garden has increased among the tribal girls of this region. Because couples working in different tea garden have to face various difficulties in their day to day life. In present days the number of nuclear family is increasing among the tribes of this region. Because the women are now aware of enough freedom and in most of the cases they do not want to stay under other dominions.

The custom of Child marriage is not present among the tribes of this region. Girls are usually married between the ages of 18 and 25. Widow marriage is prevalent in their society. From very long time the custom of "Debarbaran" has been present in their society. According to this custom after the death of the elder brother, younger brother can marry the widow

of the elder brother. But after the death of the younger brother the elder brother of the family can not marry the widow of his younger brother. This practice is still present in their society. The practice of dowry is totally absent among the tribes of this region. The custom of dowry is one of the deep rooted social evils which flourished in the Indian society at an unprecedented rate. Today we the Indians, despite being well educated and modern, have not been able to free the society from this social evil. Now one of the main reasons behind the gender inequality or female foeticide in the country is the presence of the custom of dowry in our society. But the custom of dowry has never been a part of the tribal society in India who are still considered as neglected and backward class by the educated and so-called civilized society. In India we see that during the time of marriage the bride families are forced to give dowry to groom's families. But here in the tribal society we see the practice of 'Bride Price' is present. The custom of bride price is really a unique custom which still prevalent in most of the tribal community of India and this custom make them different from the so-called civilized society. Tribes of this region never regard their girls as burden; rather they consider them as an important wealth of the family. Because the un-married girls help their families with various house-hold chores. So when a girl gets married and moves elsewhere, it is seen as a loss to the family and bride-price is taken as the compensation of that loss. Though the custom of dowry is not present among the tribes living in the tea-garden and the villages of this region, but the affluent tribes who are living in the urban areas are giving some gifts in their own daughter's wedding.

Huge changes can be noticed in the dress code of tribal girls in this region. They no longer wear their so-called traditional dress. Women of Oraon, santhal, Nagesia, Karwara tribal groups used to wear thick cotton saree and women of the Munda community used to wear two pieces of cloth, the upper parts was called 'Pariya' and the lower part was called 'Lahenga'. The use of petticoat and blouse was unknown among them. But now with the interaction with modern civilization, they are wearing synthetic sarees, petticoat and blouse and the younger girls prefer modern cloths like jeans, frock and salwar.

Tribal peoples of this region belong to different ethnic groups and each group has its own custom and culture. Here are some of the rituals that girls of certain ethnic groups had to perform are mentioned. In the past there was two Majlishi House or 'Dhumkuria' for unmarried girls and boys in each Oraon village. Majlish house of the girls was known as 'Pel Erpa' and the boys known as 'Jonkh Erpa'. The unmarried girls and boys used to spend their night in their respective Majlishi houses and by living a separate life away from home they were able to discover themselves more properly. The tradition of Majlishi houses for girls was also prevalent among the Sawria Paharia people of this region. Girls of Santhal community also had to perform some rituals. In Santhal community it was mandatory to pierce the nose and ears of a girl within six months of her birth. But now these practices are no longer seen in them. Again the practice of tattooing was very common among the girls of the tribal society. The girls used to make tattoos of various design on their hands, neck and forehead to make them beautiful. In fact, making tattoo was one of the important parts of the non-Aryan civilization all over the world. But now the practice of making tattoo among the young girls has almost disappeared. Now the tattoo is only seen in the body of the old women.

In religious matter the tribal women participate very spontaneously. Karampuja is one of the most important festivals in the tribal society of this region and the participation of women in this festival is very important. But still during the time of pregnancy the women have to maintain various restrictions.

Tribal people of this region, especially women are lagging behind in terms of education despite the impact of modernity on their dress and various aspects of lifestyle. Before independence they did not see the light of education at all. They were not in a position to think about education. Even after the five to seven decades of independence, the environment of education in these areas of Terai and Duars has not changed in that way as it should have been. Though in an early phase whatever educational environment had been developed was mainly by the Christian missionaries. The following tables show the literacy rate of tribal peoples in the four blocks of Darjeeling district according to the Census 2001 and 2011.

Table 3

Name of Block	Total Male Population	Total female Population	Total Literacy	Total Male Literacy	Total Female Literacy
Naxalbari	13,575	13,501	9,451	6,181	3,270
Phansedewa	26,898	26,756	18,503	11,686	6,817
Khoribari	8,585	8,514	4,609	3,199	1,410
Matigara	9,222	9,189	6,662	4,285	2,377
Total	58,280	57,960	39,225	25,351	13,874

Source: West Bengal Census of India, (Darjiling) 2001.p.243-245.

Table 4

Name of Block	Total Male Population	Total Female Population	Total Population	Total Literacy	Total Male Literacy	Total Female Literacy
Naxalbari	15,989	16,399	32,388	17,627	10,038	7,589
Phansidewa	30,744	31,851	62,595	31,276	17,713	13,563
Khoribari	10,615	10,647	21,262	9,472	5,619	3,853
Matigara	12,942	13,542	26,484	14,872	8,299	6,573
Total	70,290	72,439	142,729	73,247	41,669	31,578

Source: District Census Handbook (Darjeeling) 2011, p.98, 99

From the data given above it can be assumed that education did not spread among the women belonging to tribal community of these areas not in the way that it should have been. According to the Census of 2011 only 51 percent of total tribal population are literate. So still now nearly half of the total tribal population are illiterate in this region. Though the tribal women of this region share the 50 percent of total tribal population but in terms of education they are lagging behind their male counterpart. 59.28 percent male persons of total tribal male population were shown as literate in the Census of 2011. But according to Census of 2011 only 43.5 percent of total tribal female population are literate though in the Census of 2001 and 1991 it was only 23.9 percent and 12 percent. Although there has been a comparative increase in literacy rate among the women during the period from 1991 to 2011, but the enhancement is not in accordance with the rate of their total population. Though the scope of education has increased a lot compared to early days. Now most of the girl children of tea garden are going to school because of the different government aid (Aid from Sarba Shiksha Mission), Introduction of Mid-Day meal and the grants by Tea- Board. But even after all these, very fewer number of girls reach the helm of higher education. During survey it was noticed that most of the girls of this area leave school after class VII to VIII. The economic backwardness, various family problems are some of the reasons behind the dropouts of girls from school education. It is here to be mentioned that most of the tribal girls living in the urban areas are going to college and University level, but their number is very low. Because very few families of the ST community resides in the urban areas and they are mainly employed in government offices and schools. But the tribal girls living in the tea belt areas are lagging behind in matter of education because almost all women from tea gardens areas have to leave their home for work by 7.30 a.m. in the morning and as a result almost all the burden of house hold work falls on the shoulder of the girls of the family.

After doing all the household work they have to reach the school. So they get very little time for study. Further lack of parental awareness is also largely responsible for girls' lagging behind in education. During survey it was noticed that majority of these students are first generation learner. Although all the tribes living in this region have their own language but almost all of them now communicate with each other in Sadri language. Moreover they are mainly comfortable in Hindi compare to Bengali. But the number of Hindi medium schools is very less in this area as compared to their requirement. Even till date there is no separate Hindi medium college in this region. Due to some unknown reason Hindi is not propagated as the medium of instruction in the existing colleges and University of this area. So after completion of school education the tribal students who studied in Hindi medium, are forced to take up their higher education in English language. So the lack of scope of higher education in Hindi version has also restricted their socio economic expansion.

Now a lot of changes have been noticed in the mind set of the tribal girls who are getting education. They have not confined themselves in their old customs. The incidence of witch hunt is as little as nil in this area as compared to other ST dominated areas. The educated girls have liberated themselves from the shackles of various restrictions which were imposed on them since long. Modern outlook and education has helped some of them to come out from various medieval age superstitions. In regard to the matter of family planning the tribal women are now very conscious. At present most of the women are taking only two children. Merely ten years ago also women of this region gave birth to their child in their home with the help of Dhais instead of going to hospital. But now under the guidance of Asha health workers and some government assistance most women are opting for government hospitals for child delivery.

Presently a lot of political awareness can be noticed among the tribal women of this region. Women like Sitamuni Malpaharia(Manjha Tea Estate), Lalita Sawria (Naxalbari tea Estate), Mokshi Oraon(Jabra Tea garden) are playing important roles in the trade unions in their respective areas. Due to the presence of good number of tribal people in this region some seats are reserved for tribal women in the election of Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti. Some tribal women actively participate in politics by contesting these local body elections under the banner of various political parties for the post of which are reserved for them. Even after the spread of political awareness, very little number of tribal women are coming to the leadership level. But their presence is remarkable in various political gatherings and rallies organised for demanding their various right.

It can be concluded that the poverty, which is the daily companion of the tribal society, is mainly responsible for the backwardness of tribal society especially the women of this societies. Most of the tribal people residing in this region are living below the poverty line. Due to poverty women are not able to undertake nutritious foods which result in malnutrition and they suffer from various diseases. So at last it can be categorically emphasised that administration should give special effort for the economic upliftment of the tribal society and government should look into the matter of education so that more and more tribal girls and boys get proper education.

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