

Tradition, Change and Land Alienation: A Study among the Totos of Totopara, District Jalpaiguri, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT: Forests are the ancestral habitat for many tribal or indigenous communities. Their society, culture, religion, economy, health and identity are closely related with concerned habitation. Due to various reasons these customary rights are denied for many decades. The article explores the process of land alienation which leads to culture change among the Totos, a mongoloid primitive tribal group residing specifically in the Totopara village of Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal. At present day scenario of land alienation is the main issue for understanding the serious situation and the changing lifestyle of the Totos. In fact the Totos are compelled to take up different categories of occupations for their livelihood due to shift from their traditional subsistence activities. As a matter of fact, they could not maintain their relative isolation and eventually their social system has undergone a drastic change which results a consequent social class formation in their society.

INTRODUCTION

According to 2001 Census the tribal population of India is little more than 84.3 million, which constitute 8.2 per cent of total population of the country while the tribal population of West Bengal constitutes 5.2 per cent of total tribal population of the country. On the basis of population strength of tribals in India, West Bengal secures ninth position. The total tribal population in West Bengal is estimated as 4.4 million against 84.3 million tribal population of India as a whole. The distribution pattern of different tribal groups of West Bengal shows two broad and distinct geo-ethnic zones, (a) Mongoloid tribes of North Bengal, and (b) Proto-Australoid tribes of South Bengal. It is very interesting to note that the tribes of Mongoloid origin have been mostly confined

to northern districts of West Bengal, especially in Himalayan and Sub-Himalayan regions of the state, consisting mainly of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts, while the tribes of Proto-Australoid ethnic group are mainly confined at southern parts of West Bengal. The northern region of West Bengal is considered to be the most unique place of this state both for its geographical characteristics as-well-as cultural diversities. This area is the homeland of large number of populations who speak different languages having diverse ethnic origins (Grierson, '09) and varied cultural traditions. They have come from different directions and at different times by various routs of early migration, namely, the northern passes of Bhutan; Tibet, Nepal, Assam-Mayanmar routes of eastern side; and the valleys of the western direction formed by Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers. Nearly 0.64 million tribals live in the Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal which constitute 14.56 per cent of the total tribal population of West Bengal.

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Totos are the only primitive tribal group (PTG) found in North Bengal. They are exclusively confined in Totopara, a small village under Madarihat police station of Jalpaiguri district, which lies between 89°20' East latitude to 26°50' North longitudes. The Totos are considered not only as a primitive tribe but also the smallest tribal group of the State. The present article has been made to explain different consequences of land alienation and its impact on the traditional culture of the Totos.

The Toto settlement is distributed among the six sectors of Totopara, viz, Panchayat goan, Mondol goan, Subba goan, Mitran gaon, Puja gaon and Dhumchi gaon. Initially all the six sectors were visited for the pilot survey but the present study was conducted among the four sectors of Totopara, i.e. Panchayat gaon, Subba gaon, Mitran gaon and Puja gaon.

BRIEF HISTORY OF TOTOPARA

There is no proper historical record regarding the exact period when the ancestor of the Totos arrived in the village Totopara. According to the past records, this region was under the control of the Bhutan and ultimately British Government ceded it to India after the Bhutan war in 1865. Several scraps of information that are available at present may give a clue regarding the origin of the Totos. Probably before the Indo-Aryans reached North Bengal and Assam a branch of Tibeto-Burman group came as far as to the foot of the Bhutan hills and settled in Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. During that period a branch of Indo-mongoloids of Assam-Burmese group speaking Tibeto-Burman language, containing within its fold the great Bodo group, came to Assam and North Bengal and spread themselves from the Himalayas up to the seas. They have been described by some as Kiratas (Chatterjee, '51: 16). These two groups came into conflict several times for the political supremacy of the hills and the plains. Thus in the historical period a tribe called Tephu, probably a branch of the Bodo group, took possession of Cooch Behar and then conquered Bhutan. Again by the middle of the fifteenth century A.D. they were driven off from the hills and a part of the plains below, called the Duars, by the Tibetans who took possession of the whole of Bhutan and Duars. These Tibetan rulers

were called Bhutias (Hunter, 1876: 52; 1911:216-218).

K. K. Bose (Bose, 1865) in his "Account of Bhutan" reports that he arrived at Poonakha in Bhutan, which was ruled by the Maha-Raja of Cooch Behar. He was defeated by 'Dhurum Raj' and the tribe was deprived of their caste and their descendants were called Thep. The son of a Bhutia and a Cooch parent is called 'Thep'. Probably this tribe was called Tephu by Hunter. They were the people from Cooch Behar who occupied Bhutan at one time about two centuries ago (Eden, Pemberton and Bose, 1865).

The Bhutias taking advantage of the unsettled Government in Bengal carried on outrages on the people of the plains below. So much so that since the beginning of the 18th century and by the 1765 Bhutan was supreme in Cooch Behar and nothing could be done without the sanction of her representative (Malligan, '19: 6). In 1772, Bhutan took actual possession of Cooch Behar, captured the Raja and carried him off to Bhutan. The Cooch Behar Raj appealed for help to the East India Company then in charge of Dewani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa conferred on them by Shah Alam, Emperor of Delhi. A treaty was concluded between the Cooch Behar State and the East India Company in 1773 and Capt. Jones was deputed to drive the Bhutias out of Cooch Behar. Capt. Jones defeated the Bhutias in Buxa and Dallimcote and drove them out of Bengal. The Bhutias prayed for peace and at the intervention of the regent of Tibet a treaty was concluded between the Deb Rajah of Bhutan and the East India company on the 25th April 1774 by which the Raja of Cooch Behar, Dudjindra Narayan, was restored to Cooch Behar and company allowed Bhutan to retain possession of the portion of Duars to the North of Maynaguri, including the temple of Jalpesh on the district in understanding that the Bhutias would never disturb the peace of Cooch Behar and the company's property.

The Bhutias soon forgot to implement the terms of the treaty and started trouble in Bangal and Assam Duars. Bangal Duars was called Western Duars and Assam Duars was called Eastern Duars. The Bhutias continued their outrages and aggressions on the British subjects of Western Duars. They plundered the inhabitants and massacred them or carried them off as slaves (Sunder, 1895: 19). The arrival of the party

of Zeenkafs (Bhutia Officials) of the Paro Pilo (Government of Bhutan) in the Duars on any pretence was a calamity. The oppressions of the Bhutia frontier officers had driven the inhabitants of Bengal Duars to open rebellion. Horo Govinda Katham of Kyrantee (in Western Duars) and Hari Das of Maynaguri (Western Duars) were subjected to the most in human oppression and injustice. Their arms and cattle were carried off and their families were subjected to repeated indignities. They revolted against Bhutan, collected arms and men and occupied Bhutanhat, Maynaguri, Chergmari in Western Duars (see Bose, 1865: 168). All these led to a brief campaign known as Bhutan War of 1864-1865. The Bhutias were completely routed by General Tytler and Tombs and the whole of Western Duars, then under Bhutan was annexed to India by the British by the Proclamation of Annexation issued on 12th November 1864. The final treaty was signed on 11th November 1865 (Sunder, 1895: 20). The Bhutias were given possession of the hills of Dewangiri and some other hills to the north and east of Buxa. T.H.O. Donnel demarcated the boundary between Bhutan and British India in 1866-67 and complete peace was restored in the Indian portion (Milligan, '19).

The hill now occupied by the Totos and the area is known as Totopara. The district of Jalpaiguri was from the district of Rangpur and the whole of Western Duars. The Totopara is included in Jalpaiguri district since then.

The Totos of the Western Duars are officially described as a primitive tribal group (PTG). History of the Totos remains obscure as there are no written records of the Totos. During different studies, none of the Totos could even recall any folktales or story of previous migration. They are a branch of Tibeto-Mongoloid people and linguistically belong to the Tibeto-Burmese family (Grierson, '09). From anthropological point of view, the Totos were settled in different villages in Duars and later on after 1865, they left their old habitations and moved towards Bhutan, (Chakrabarty and Chattopadhyay, '64; Roy Burman, '64; Das, '69; Bhattacharya, '98; Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri, 2005). This could be supported by the fact that the Totos had a great extent of cultural similarity with Bhutanese tribe 'Dayas' may be due to prolonged interaction with them. The circumstances

may be political or geophysical that compelled the Totos to leave their old settlement and finally settled in the present village of Totopara (Mitra, '53).

By examining the general method it was ascertained that the Totos migrated to this village at least eight to ten generations ago. In earlier, the small ethnic groups used to pass their days in tension out of fear of losing their separate ethnic identity with any other large community. As a result, they took shelter in the secluded and inaccessible places behind the veil of deep forest and imposed more rigidity upon their customary laws and social control mechanism. Totos were also not the exception, they also haunted by a deep rooted fear psychosis of being completely extinct. For which they selected a secluded and inaccessible place like Totopara for a long time as their shelter. This fear psychosis plays behind their rigidity in every aspect of their socio-cultural and religious functions. But the tide of change has swept over every corner of Toto society from socio-religious customs to political organization, from health to hygiene (Das, '69; Sinha and Paul, '84; Sarkar, '91; Tarafdar, '2009, 2010).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Toto society is not just an egalitarian but a rank society having a tradition of heredity headman locally called 'Mondol'. In earlier times the whole area of Totopara Mouza (revenue village) was recorded in the name of then 'Mondol', Mr. Dhanapati Toto, as a community land on behalf of the whole community. But recently the most important problem is that the Totos are facing scarcity of land and in reality they have been evicted from their cultivable lands which they enjoyed under tribal land tenure system.

According to O'Donnel and Hodgson the entire area of Totopara was 1027.36 acres in 1866. The same area was stated to be 1116.74 acres by D. Sunder, Settlement Officer, Jalpaiguri, in 1889-1894, and 2003 acres in 1906-1916 by J. Milligan (Malligan, '19). The total area of Totopara was stated to be 1996.96 acres in 1951 by Census Survey of the Government of India (Mitra, '53). The Totos were enjoying the 1996.96 acre land before the year of 1969. Then the entire size of land was recorded as a community land in the name of their 'Mondal' Dhanapati Toto. But

in 1969 the scenario of land in Totopara has been changed. The officer in charge of the West Bengal land and land reformation department captured the community land under the section 44 (2A) of West Bengal State Acquisition Act and redistributed 347.43 acre land among the 89 Toto families. The rest amount of land has been converted into vested land. Such land reforms and family wise distribution of land among the Totos in actually resulted in the replacement of traditional occupancy of cultivable lands because of the Governmental policy and rapid intrusion of the other populace. It is circumscribed to the extent that communal rights have disintegrated into private ownership.

Before the independence, the permission was not given to the outsiders to live in the Totopara permanently. But after 1951 other peoples mainly the Nepalese and Biharis took entry into the Totopara. By using the simplicity of the Toto peoples and the aloofness of the Government officials the outsiders started to transfer the tribal land. But according to the Government rule (Section 14c, Land Reformation Act 1955) it is not possible to acquire the land of Totopara by the outsiders. At present, the Totos are the minor population group in the village. They constitute only 43.19 per cent population in the total village (Table 1).

From the Table 1 it has been noticed that the Totos are facing tremendous problem regarding land usage due to the rapid influx of the other population (mainly Nepali and Bihari population) in the area. In 1931 there were only six Nepali individuals in the Totopara. But the number of outsiders gradually increased day by day and now 56.81 per cent of the total populations are formed by them. They grabbed the fertile land of Totopara without the permission of the Totos. At present 138 acres of land from the 347.43 acres has already been grabbed by the outsiders mainly by the Nepalese who came into Totopara for the first time with 12 families after being driven away from Nepal in 1950.

The British Government gave the rights to enjoy the land of Totopara mouza, an area of 1996.96 acres, to the Totos in exchange of a capitation tax of Rs. 2 per household. Later, in 1931, the tax was raised to Rs. 142 for 63 households. The Mondal was responsible for collecting and depositing such tax to

the appropriate authority. After the introduction of the Left Front Government in West Bengal (1969) it was stated to the Totos, that if they registered more land, they should pay more tax for that. Because of that reason the Totos registered less amount of land in their name and in this way the total amount of registered land was reduced into 347.43 acres. After that the Totos have not paid any tax up to 26 years. At that time the Government officials have not alerted them for paying the arrears of rent. After that the Totos are recently paid their tax (Rs. 2-2.5 lakh approximately) and every house hold had to pay an amount of 10-15 thousand. But the most striking feature is that the Nepalese and the other outsiders never paid tax for the land although they are holding substantial amount of land taken away from the Totos.

Another great problem of the Totos is that there was no demarcation of their land. They paid the tax for land, but they were not much aware of the place, size and the exact area of their land. The Totos had requested to the Government for demarcation of their land, but the Government has not attended to their request and has not take any step. Afterwards the Totos are thinking about a strong movement to solve their problems of land. From the Table 2 it is revealed that up to 1961, per head land was about 5.06 acres, and in 1971 per head land distribution came to 0.59 acres, and eventually the figure came down to 0.29 acres in the present study conducted in 2010. The Totos were not much aware of the their land alienation that is being taking place, they could not realize its consequences even in 1969 when the Toto 'Mondol', Dhanpati Toto, agreed to lease out good cultivable land to a Nepali in exchange of Rs. 700/- only, under certain terms and conditions. However, the Nepali migrated population did not adhere to the terms and conditions agreed upon with the Totos, and in turn they became the self declared land owner of the land without any tax burden.

During British Raj the Totos remained more or less isolated and had maintained their traditional way of living. The problem started with the increasing number of intrusion of outsiders in the Totopara since 1952 (Table 1). The outsiders who were economically well off and started to reside in the area have made the Totos feel inferior in their own village. At the beginning, the outsiders had started to make friendship

with the Totos and but gradually, friendship and trust of the Totos have been betrayed by the outsiders. The rapid infiltration of population is not only altering the land-man-ratio but is also affecting their socio-cultural beliefs and practices.

Land alienation has been the main issue of understanding the abysmal situation and the changing lifestyle of the Totos. In fact, the Totos are compelled to take up different categories of occupations for their livelihood. During last few decades the Totos have been increasingly participating in different economic activities. This is largely due to shift of their traditional subsistence activities and taking up of different non-traditional categories occupations like agricultural labour, daily labour in road construction, worker in the mining factory of Bhutan, helpers in local business on contract basis. Besides the stated categories, some of the school educated Totos are engaged in service, earning monthly salaries from Government and non-Government agencies. In fact their participation in organized and unorganized sectors generated uneven economic development among the families of the Toto society. As a result, they are participating in wider market oriented commercial network of this locality which is mainly based on agricultural economy. The result of such economic involvement of the Totos has altered their social structural equilibrium which eventually is responsible for the onset of stratification of Toto social system which basically existed on their social solidarity. As a matter of fact, the present day Totos could not maintain their relative isolation and eventually their social system has undergone a drastic change. They have been incorporated into the regional social system of other endogamous and hierarchically arranged communities. The net result is transformation of rank society towards a peasant like community with some sort of class differentiation. Such land reforms and per head distribution of land (Table 2) among the Totos in actuality resulted in the replacement of traditional occupancy of cultivable lands. It is circumscribed to the extent that communal rights have disintegrated into private ownership (family or person) which has lead to significant economic and social changes which thus seriously affected the tribal social equilibrium. A class differentiation, if not so marked in the milieu of traditional social system, is emerging based on the exclusion of some Totos from access to ownership of arable land. Such deprivation

of cultivable land coupled with adoption of differential occupation is practically changing the tribal ethos.

With the changing economic scenario the Toto people also altered their religious and cultural activities. Some of them have converted to Christianity to bring down the burden of expenses in their traditional animistic rituals and cultural practices related with animism. Monthly incentives from the Christian missionaries may be another cause for religious conversion. Those who belong to the comparatively lower economic group and have not converted their religion into Christianity bring down their budget amount in respect to their traditional rituals. For instances, in case of a Toto marriage the groom's family usually sacrificed five cows in earlier times but now-a-days they reduce the number of the cows into two. They also curtail the number of celebration days in comparison to their traditional marriage due to the marginalized economic condition. In earlier days the Totos sacrificed blood and flesh of cow to their traditional deities during worship but now-a-days they offer hen or pigeon or pig to their deities because cow is more expensive than the other animals like pig and pigeon etc. They have mainly adopted these practices from the adjoining Nepali inhabitants who have come from outside and have started to live in the same village.

The change of the traditional subsistence activities has been reflected in dress and personal adornment of the Totos as-well-as in the household goods and utensils which they use in daily life. Recently most of the Totos use modern dresses like their so-called mainstream neighbours wear because they cannot afford the cost of purchasing and maintenance of traditional dress. Inequality of contemporary form has begun to appear which is however, regulated and controlled by new emerging ethos.

Government has taken some special attention to increase the population of the Totos because right now only 1171 Toto individuals are exclusively inhabited in Totopara of Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal and they are not found in any other part of the world. This is no doubt an admirable effort that has been taken up by the Government but at the same time Government should positively think about their land problem because, the Totos are mainly depended on land and

forest for their economy and food source. If the amount of the land has not been increased or settlement made there will be great problem for them regarding their land. The agriculture based economy experience serious effect with the changing scenario (Table 2) of per head land distribution specifically with some segments of population among the Toto who are now compelled to exercise the family planning programme for limiting their family size to cope up with their meager economy even hiding or changing their own identity.

CONCLUSION

It appears from the above discussion that at the present situation, market or commercial exchange is predominant in Toto society. Money is now increasingly being circulated in transactions. In fact, certain items of modern system and market oriented commercial system have been bringing change in the age-old socio-economic life and traditional values and belief system of the Totos. It was noted earlier that over the years the Totos had lost a large amount of their land. The major problem faced by the Totos is land alienation. Most important demand of the Totos is to restore the land of their ancestors. The prospect of the land of their ancestor being restored to them is still quite difficult. The shifting of subsistence strategies from hill cultivation to cash crop production had pauperized some segment of the population belonging to the group and the emerging distress economic situation make constraint in the way for many Toto children to attend the schools. Besides, socio-political subjugation even in their own village leads them to feel socially inferior. The pattern of unequal land distribution and invigoration of modern white collar jobs among the Totos also indicates their poor economic condition and existing inequality in their own society which led a straight inception of class formation even in the egalitarian society. With the changing economic scenario the Toto people also set up a new type of cultural practices which is inexpensive in respect to their traditional one and eventually imbibe intrinsic compromise with indigenous cultural traits.

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TABLE 1
Population of Totopara since 1931

Year	Source	Toto Population	Others Population	Total Population
1931	Census of India	334	06	340
		98.24	01.76	100.00
1952	Cultural Research Institute, Kolkata	383	191	574
		66.72	33.28	100.00
1953	Indian Social Institute, New Delhi	322	228	550
		58.55	41.45	100.00
1969	Cultural Research Institute, Kolkata	482	674	1156
		41.70	58.30	100.00
1981	Census of India, WB, Jalpaiguri	709	788	1497
		47.36	52.64	100.00
1991	Census of India, WB, Jalpaiguri	904	898	1802
		50.17	49.83	100.00
1993	Cultural Research Institute, Jalpaiguri	962	1190	2152
		44.70	55.30	100.00
2010	Field Study	1171	1540	2711
		43.19	56.81	100.00

TABLE 2
Year-wise per head land distribution in Totopara

Year	Toto population	Total amount of land (in acre)	Per head land distribution (in acre)
1901	171	1116.74	6.53
1911	235	2003	8.52
1921	271	2003	7.39
1931	334	2003	6.00
1941	321	2003	6.23
1951	321	1996.96	6.22
1961	395	1996.96	5.06
1971	584	347.43	0.59
1981	709	347.43	0.49
1991	904	347.43	0.38
2001	1157	347.43	0.30
2010	1171	347.43	0.29

Fieldwork (2010)

Source: Census of India (1901-2001)

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