
**The Relationship between the Tribes and the Forest : An Historical
Perspective of Forest Villages in Jalpaiguri
District, 1869-2014**

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Abstract: *In West Bengal, Jalpaiguri district is a district with rectangle shape, an abundance of natural beauty, mainly tea plantations and deep forest teeming with wildlife on the west bank of the Tista river, a major tributary of the Brahmaputra river. It is the district which is treasures some of the natural forest in the region. In this article we discuss about the relationship between the tribes and forest along with few forest village in Jalpaiguri district. Jalpaiguri district is the largest district of North Bengal. According to census 1961, the district contains the largest Scheduled Tribes population of all the district of West Bengal. Basically, the tribes who are known as forest dwellers or deligent. They are the original human settlers of forest. The tribal often called of the forest as they lived in the forest. There are altogether more than 20 scheduled tribes in this district, some major types such as Oraon, Santals, Munda, Kheria and so on. The relationship between the tribes and forest in Jalpaiguri district has their own tradition, cultural heritage and folklore. Hence, there life and economy intimately connected with forest. Forest are an integral part of their social life and their entire existence evolves around the forest. They live at forest with harmony without destroying and harming the forest.*

Keywords: *Aboriginal, Forest, Jalpaiguri, Harmony,Munda, Tista, Tribes*

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Introduction

The word '*Forest*' has been derived from the Latin word '*Foris*' which means outside.¹ Originally the word forest means uncultivated or uninhabited land. Forest have been a great natural asset to mankind. In this article we focus on the relationship between the tribes and forest in Jalpaiguri .Forest has provided the tribal's with a home since Ancient times. The tribals have developed intimate relationship with the forest which provides livelihood and the very means of existence.²

In West Bengal Jalpaiguri district before its inception in 1869 was part of Koch Kingdom. Jalpaiguri District a visually beautiful ethnically diverse and culturally rich district, situated at the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains is also known as the Duars region. It is one of the largest District of North Bengal. The name Jalpaiguri has been derived from the two Bengali words viz. '*jalpai*' which means '*olive trees*' and '*Guri*' means *a place where olive trees are available*.³ During british rule the Britishers easily occupied the tract and became the proprietors of the land. The British ruler, under the leadership of Captain Hedayat Ali, annexed the Dooars region in 1865 from the Bhutanese Kingdom. But subsequently, the area was divided into two parts, the areas east of the main river Tista is called *Eastern Duars* and the Western portion is called as *Western Duars*. The Eastern portion was merged with the Goalpara district within Assam and the Western part was turned into a new district is called Jalpaiguri. Thus the long history of the Jalpaiguri district has enriched the cultured and socio- economic set up of the region. From the geographical point of view, the district lies between latitude 27°00' N to 26°16' N and longitude 89°53' E to 88°25'E a major part of your district is covered by forest a vast population is directly or indirectly dependent on the forest of Jalpaiguri district.⁴ The forests, covering about 1,79,000 hectares of land which is 27.8 per cent of total geographical areas, are home to a fascinating variety of flora and fauna.⁵ In 1865 supreme legislative council had passed the Indian forest (act Vii) of 1865 according to this act all forest converted into reserve forest during this time indigenous people in the region have already lost their right to forest under the forest act but they have quietly cut down the forest and started planting tea gardens the forest department later

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selected some of the most favourable areas in the forest and settle them gave them land for farming, free poles, poles for building houses, firewood for cooking, fodder for cows and buffaloes etc. Instead each of them was required to plant an acre of new trees, and to maintain an acre of one year old plantations, and this was to be given free of charge. In this forest, a few houses have been built and this village came to be known as *Banbasti* or *Forest village*.⁶

The forest villages are very old entities at the times of Pre independence era duly existing in the forest record the establishment of the villagers was in fact encouraged by the forest authority in pre independence era for availability of labour within the forest areas. After independence 1952 on 12th may declare the first Indian forest policy. In 1942 working plan V of Jalpaiguri Forest department was formed. According to this plan speak to the inhabitants of forest settlement. It is suggested that forest villages must be rebuilt on better sites better housing, sanitation, water supply and medical should be provided. Transport should be arranged for taking the villagers to their work if it was more than one and half miles from their settlements six new forest villages were necessary to be set up at Gurumara, Ramshai, Banarhat, Khurtimari, Gairkata and Gosanihat feeling lines.⁷ But according to the 7th working plan of Jalpaiguri (1972-71 to 1989-90)- “No new forest villages need established. Excess land, if any, now being enjoyed by the villagers should be reclaimed by plantations. To prevent expansion of forest villages proper demarcation to be met by planting suitable trees around the village and also by fixing of pillars”.⁸

Forest area more or less than area of 4,35,000 acres in Jalpaiguri district which means that one fourth of the area of the district is covered by forests.⁹ The Forest areas of the district are looked after by 4 divisional forest officers.¹⁰ 1. *Divisional Forest Division (DFO), Jalpaiguri to the Forest divisions*, 2. *The Forest of Baikanthapur Division*, 3. *The Koch Bihar Forest Division*, 4. *The Boxa Forest Division in Alipur Duar subdivision*. The Jalpaiguri division generally produces big size of timber suitable for construction work. The forests of the Jalpaiguri division cover an area of 182 square miles and are situated entirely in the plains of the foot of the

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Bhutan hills. They are divided into forest four ranges Apalchand, Lower Tandu, Upper Tandu and Maraghat.¹¹

The tribals have symbiotic relationship with the forests. The tribals had generations long implicit view of forest as a community property resource. They had been using it without let or hindrance having had free access. They met their needs of construction, firewood, grazing, minor forest produce etc. from the forest. But the colonial power was driven by the doctrine of the state ownership for its own ends, which led more than a hundred uprising and revolts across the central tribal areas.¹² According to Risley a whole tribe of aboriginal or a section of a tribe, became gradually converted to Hinduism without, like the Rajbansis, abandoning their tribal designation. This is what is happening among the Bhumij of West Bengal. Here a pure Dravidian race have lost their original language, and now speak only Bengali. They still retain a set of totemistic exogamous subdivisions closely resembling those of the Mundas and the Santals, but they are beginning to forget the two totems which the names of the sub division denote. The tribe will then have become a caste, and will go on stripping itself of all customs likely to betray it's true decent.¹³ Out of total population of 8.04 crores, West Bengal has a Scheduled Tribes population of 51.23 lakhs. The Schedule Tribes population is spread over the district of *Midnapore, Bardhaman, Purulia, Bankura and Jalpaiguri*. The major tribes are the Santal, Munda and Oraon among 40 different Schedule Tribe communities. There primitive tribal groups have been recognised i.e. the Lodha/Kheria, Toto and Birhar.¹⁴ Two new Schedule Tribe communities have been added to the list i.e. Limbu (Subba) and Tamang to make the forty.

List of Scheduled tribes of West Bengal

1	ASUR	21	KORWA
2	BAIGA	22	LEPCHA
3	BEDIA, BEDIYA	23	LODHA, KHERIA, KHARIA
4	BHUMIJ	24	LOHARA

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5	BHUTIA,TOTO,DUKPA,KAGATAY,SHERPA,YOLMO	25	MAGH
6	BIRHOR	26	MAHALI
7	BIRJIA	27	MAHLI
8	CHAKMA	28	MAL PAHARIYA
9	CHERO	29	MECH
10	CHIK BARAIK	30	MRU
11	GARO	31	MUNDA
12	GOND	32	NAGESIA
13	GORAIT	33	ORAON
14	HAJANG	34	PAHARIYA
15	HO	35	RABHA
16	KARMALI	36	SANTAL
17	KHARWA R	37	SAURIA PAHARIA
18	KHOND	38	SAVAR
19	KISAN	39	LIMBE
20	KORA	40	TAMANG

SOURCE- District Census Handbook, Jalpaiguri, 2011.

Various Act and Policies were passed regarding the forest during the colonial and post colonial period. In 1865, the British Government passed the Indian forest act, which gave them the right to declare any Forest land to be Government land. There was no provision for the traditional rights of the tribal people. This act emphasized protection of forest and judicious use of timber. This act indicated the start of object oriented forestry, with greater control by the state over forest resources that had earlier been open for public use.

The Indian forest act of 1878, replace the 1865 act. According to this act the forest divided into 3 categories 1.reserved 2.protected and 3.village forest. The basic aim of the act was to remove local rights in the reserve forest and keep them exclusively as Government resources.

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Protected forests were those areas where it was not possible to reduce local use, while village forests were to be assigned to villagers to fulfill subsistence needs. Rights to all activities like hunting, grazing etc. were banned. Villagers could not take anything even for their own use.

The Indian forest act was enacted by the British Government in 1865 as amended in 1878 and finally in 1927. This act contained all the major provisions of the earlier Act. The amendments made included those relating to the duty on timber. The innocuous tribes had no other option to maintain their livelihood but from the forest, which was there inherent method of livelihood - sustenance. The tribes had continuous go with the forest was their own domain, their economy, social, religious and all found life sustenance maintaining by it. They had genuine claim on the forest and its produces. But the then administrator found the tribal counterparts were better acquainted the implication relating to the forest. The forest was their own abode, wherein they enjoyed age-old rights generation wise. But the Forest Act restricted their longstanding right over it. The act prohibited their social – economic, social - cultural, religious life. The dismal situation was continue till the Indian independence. The illiterate innocent tribes were absolute not to aware regarding the forest law and the implication relating to the forest.

Apart from land, forest has been the other cardinal resource of tribal life support system. Even in the present times, there are numerous tribal communities, whose member - depends for their sustenance to the extended of 50 per cent on forest, the other 50 per cent being from derived. Perhaps, unmindful of or deliberately ignoring it, the new administrator drafted the first forest policy document in 1854 which conferred some rights on tribals. Their 1894 forest policy turned them into "right and privileges". Surprisingly, however the 12th May 1952 Forest policy changed the "rights and privileges" to "rights and concessions".¹⁵ The Dhebar commission 1961 recalled the relationship between tribals and forests. The Dhebar Commission described the impact of 1952 forest policy promulgated in independent India in the following words : Thus the tribal who formally regarded himself as the lord of the forest through a deliberate process turned into a subject and placed under the Forest department. Tribal villages were no longer an essential part of the forests but were merely on sufferance.

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The 1952 forest policy was oriented toward evolving a system of balanced and complementary land use under which type of land is allotted to that form of use under which it would produce the most and deteriorate the least. The 1952 policy also adverted to the instructions of the union Government which exhorted exercise of greater regulation and control not only for the protection of forests but also for soil conservation etc.

In March 1984 the Ministry of Agriculture suggested to the state and UT Government that they should confer heritable and inalienable rights on dwellers of various villages in occupation of the land for more than 20 years. The Ministry of Environment and Forest in their order no. 13 - 1/90 - FP (5) dated 18.9.1990 directed conversion of forest villages into revenue villages and conferment of heritable rights on the dwellers. The Tenth Five year plan document of the planning commission states that the 2.5 lakh tribal families living in these forest habitations continue to remain "as one of the weakest links in the process of tribal development".¹⁶

The 1988 National Forest policy was differ from the earlier two forest policy. This policy mainly concern about the environmental stability and conservation, maintenance, sustainable, utilisation, restoration and enhancement of the natural environment. For the first time, a separate section 4.6 tribal people and Forests, appears in the Resolution. It enunciates that the primary task of all agencies responsible for Forest management should be to associate the tribal people closely in the production, regeneration and development of forest as well as to provide gainful employment to people living in and around forests. It will thus be seen that the 1988 policy marks a new welcome trend in favour of tribals.

In 1894, 1952 and 1988 various Government forest policy Resolution was passed. Here we briefly discuss the outline the Resolution – the 1894 Forest policy overed that “in almost all cases the constitution of the forest involved in greater or lesser degree, with the regulation of rights and restriction of privileges of user in the forest area which may have previously being enjoyed by the inhabitants of its immediate neighbourhood.”¹⁷ According to the policy of forest

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was one which enabled conversion of forests into agriculture lands. Wherever an effective development for cultivatable land exists and can only be supplied from areas.

The Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest dweller Act 2006, also known as Forest Rights Act, the Tribal Bill and the tribal Land Act. According to this act right to hold and time in the forest land under the individual or common occupation for habitation or for self cultivation, for livelihood by a member or members of a forest dwelling Schedule Tribe or other traditional forest dwellers. Rights of settlement and conservation of all of forest villagers, old habitation, unsurveyed villages, and other villages in forest, weather recorded, notified or not into revenue village; rights for conservation of pattas or leases or grants issued by any local council or any State Government on forest lands to titles. Must be a Scheduled Tribe in the area where the right is claimed.¹⁸

The Forest Department created so called Forest village from the late 19th century onwards. According to census 1961, a total of 76,610 persons declare Sadani or Sadri as their mother tounge. All of them were inhabitants of the rural areas or the Forest Sadri or sadni has become a pan tribal dialect of Hindi and mother tounge of many original speakers of Kurukh, Munda and Ho in this manner. There were 4,283 person in the rural areas as well as the forest areas of Jalpaiguri in 1961 who declare Madhesi to be their first language. In the forest village of Jalpaiguri houses having walls of bamboo, reeds and roof of bamboo, reeds, corrugated iron sheets, logs of wood or brunt bricks. The house therefore, appears a little raised from the ground level. According to census the report 2011, the number of forest villages in Jalpaiguri are 75. According to Kolkata Gazette 2014, list the name of forest village in Jalpaiguri and here we also briefly discuss some forest villages of Jalpaiguri-

Sl. No.	Name of the Forest Village		
1. 1	Kalamati	14.	Sonakhali

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2.	Budhram	15.	Gosaihat
3.	Chakowa	16.	Khuklong
4.	Kalipur	17.	Sipehu
5.	Baradighi	18.	Panjhora
6.	Bamni	19.	North Indong
7.	South Indong	20.	New Khunia
8.	Bicha Bhanga	21.	Dakshin Panijhora
9.	Saraswati	22.	Gajol Doba
10.	Murti	23.	Mech Basti
11.	Uttar Dhupjhora	24.	Magurmari
12.	Mela	25.	Soloharia
13.	Khuntimari		

Source-The Kolkata Gazette, Extraordinary, September 29, 2014.

Kalamati Forest Village : Kalamati forest village also known Kalamati Banbasti one of the well known forest village of Ramshai gram panchayat, Maynaguri block under the Jalpaiguri district. Now there are 80 families and more than 400 people lived there. Initially agriculture was their main livelihood but now most of the people have chosen themselves as tea garden workers mainly due to the infestation of wild boar by elephants and rhinos in the forested areas. Traditional shifting cultivation has been abolished today. Modern technology, modernization and communication technology have cast their influence on the tribal economy and society. It is known that, after independence they mainly came from Rachi, Chhotanagpur area and started living here permanently. The people of this village are mainly of Kheria and Oraon tribes. The village currently has a primary school and an ICDS center.¹⁹

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Kalipur Forest Village

Kalipur forest village is one of the well knowing forest village under Ramshahi gram Panchayat of Maynaguri block in Jalpaiguri district. Kalipur also known as kalipur eco Village camp is another eco tourist accommodation inside the Guru Mara National park. This village will give us the true feeling of staying at Jungle side. The small wooden cottages were beautiful hanging out there it seems like for better life in the forest village comparing to other. Here you can also enjoy feeding the elephant and the local tribal programs in the evening. Forest for the tribals represents a way a life, homes, culture, a place of worship food, employment and income.

Nimna Tandu Forest :

According to census 2011, the Nimna Tandu Forest village is located in Maynaguri Tehsil of Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal. The total area of village is 3,885 hectares has a total population of 720 people they are about 152 houses in Nimba Tandu Forest village.

Malhati Forest Village

In Jalpaiguri the Malhati forest village is one of the thinnest village, located in Mal subdivision with a population 3 people. The male and female population are 2 and 1 respectively. The size of the area is about 1.59 square kilometres. As per 2009 stats, Changmari is the gram panchayat of malhati forest village.²⁰

Sachapho Forest Village

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According to census 2011, is the location of village in Kumargram tehsil of Jalpaiguri. As per information Sachapho forest village is located 54.4 K.m. away from sub district headquarter Kumar gram and 132 K.m. away from district headquarter Jalpaiguri. The size of the village is 4845.7 hectares and has a total population of 96 people. Alipurduar the newly created district is nearest to Sachaphor forest village which is approximate 20 K.m away. Phaskhwa tea garden, Chunia Tea garden, Kartika tea garden, Jayanti tea garden, Rahimabad tea garden some are nearest villages of Sachapho forest village.

Khairbari Forest Village :

Khairbari forest village in Jalpaiguri district , Madarihat block is a medium size village with total 98 families residing there. The Khairbari forest village has population of 494 of which 261 are males and while 233 are females as per population census 2011.

Conclusion

Forest has always been an important resources which occupies a vital role in any tribal community. Forest for the tribals represents a way a life a homes, a culture, a place of worship, food, employment and income. The tribal people are unique on respect of customs, tradition, believes and other social dimentions. Traditional shifting cultivation has been abolished today. Modern technology, modernisation and communication technology have cast their influence on the tribal economy and society. Article 48(a) of the Indian constitution says that, the state government shall make an effort to protect the environment and improve it and also make sure to safeguard the forest and wildlife of the country.

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Notes & References

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