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## *Migration and Agrarian Change in Darjeeling*

Tanka Bahadur Subba

The objective of this paper is to probe into the reasons for migration of the people from outside, meaning mainly from Nepal, and to trace its impact on the agrarian social structure. The Lepchas who are considered to be the earliest inhabitants of Darjeeling practised shifting cultivation and landlessness was not known to them till the demographic changes due to migration reached its saturation point. Now, though the bigger landowners still, some of them have become landless too.

The changing agrarian scene cannot, of course, be totally attributed to the migration or the subsequent demographic change alone. There are many other intervening variables like education, occupational diversification, institutional measures, legislative steps and other such factors which also have played their respective roles in this regard. Nevertheless, the migration is a very important background variable. The present paper seeks to show the impact of migration mainly on the basis of the following two features of agrarian change : emergence of the sharecroppers' association and the rise of the agricultural labourers.

### **Demographic Profile :**

It is well known that Darjeeling was a part of Sikkim earlier. Nepal had invaded Sikkim in 1780 and ruled most of the district's terai area and the land east of Teesta River for about thirty years during when, under the Treaty of Titaliya (1817), the British restored the land occupied by Nepal to Sikkim. In 1835, the Raja of Sikkim presented Darjeeling, i.e., all the land south of the Great Rangit River, east of Balasan, Kahail and Little Rangit rivers and west of Rungpo and Mahanadi rivers to the British.<sup>1</sup> In 1839 Dr. Campbell came to Darjeeling as Superintendent with wide civil, criminal and fiscal powers. He was instrumental in encouraging the Nepalese settlement and changing the demographic structure of the region.

As a result, the population of this area increased from about 100 at the time of annexation to 10,000 in 1849.<sup>2</sup> By 1850, the number of inhabitants in this region had increased to 22,000 and by 1872, it was 94,712. But by then Siliguri was annexed and by 1866 Kalimpong was also included in the district—it was under the Western Duars for about one year after its annexation from Bhutan in 1865. The population of Kalimpong in 1865 was 3536 and the Census of 1872 recorded the population of Siliguri as 47,985. Thus, the high

## MIGRATION AND AGRARIAN CHANGE IN DARJEELING

rate of population growth in the district between 1850 and 1872 was also due to the annexations of Kalimpong and Siliguri. The decennial population growth in the district has been shown in the following table ( Table I ).

Table—I  
Decennial Population Growth in Darjeeling

Year	Population	Decadal Variation	% Decadal Variation
1872	94,712	—	—
1881	1,55,179	60,467	64
1891	2,23,314	68,135	44
1901	2,49,117	25,803	12
1911	2,65,550	16,433	7
1921	2,82,748	17,198	6
1931	3,19,635	36,887	13
1941	3,76,369	56,734	18
1951	4,59,617	83,248	23
1961	6,24,640	1,65,023	36
1971	7,81,777	1,57,137	26
1981	10,06,434	2,24,657	29

Sources : *Figures upto 1941 ( Dash 1947 : 49 ), from 1951 to 1971 ( Census of India 1971 ), and on 1981 ( Census of India 1981 Provisional. )*

The figures given above show that the decennial population growth is very high between 1872—1881 and 1881—1891. This is mainly due to immigrants who were absorbed in the newly opened tea gardens, building of roads and buildings and extension of agricultural cultivation. After 1891 the decennial population growth gradually decreases till 1941 and then shows a sharp rise in the same between 1951 and 1961. This is so because a part of Phansidewa area which was earlier in Bihar was included in Darjeeling district under the State Reorganization Act, 1955.

The growth of population in the district has been consistently higher than at the State level. In the first few decades of the present century the State experienced the phenomenon of depopulation upto 4.4% due to the great influenza and epidemic but the growth of population in Darjeeling did not show any such evidence though the growth was very low in those particular decades. By 1961 the State had 106.2% increase of population but Darjeeling had an increase of 135.0% on the whole. While the growth of population in Darjeeling was quite low ( 96.4% ) in respect of rural population growth at the State level its urban population had a remarkable increase—576.1% compared to 313.3% at the State level.<sup>8</sup> The generally higher growth of population in the district is basically due to migration but the significantly higher urban population growth may be attributed to the following :

1. A large number of Tibetans who fled from Tibet after the Chinese takeover of their country took refuge in the urban areas of Darjeeling also.
2. The non-Nepalese communities like the Marwaris, Biharis, Punjabis, Europeans and the Bengalis have also settled in large numbers in the urban areas of this district.
3. The low sustenance power of the hill economy seems to have driven the people towards the urban areas in search of non-agricultural occupations. Rural-urban migration has been a popular sport for many other reasons also like better communication, schooling and other such facilities.

### Reasons for Migration :

It is true that no full-fledged study has been conducted so far on the problem of migration into this region. There are, however, a few stray references to the reasons for migration from Nepal to this region. Munsii,<sup>4</sup> for example, mentions of the factors like development of tea industry and communications as being important in causing immigration into this region. He also says<sup>5</sup> that there were no village settlements in the proper sense of the term earlier in this region but only coolie settlements with separate enclosures. This was perhaps true but of Kurseong and Sadar subdivisions only : Kalimpong and Siliguri have sufficient indications to show that there were village settlements. These latter two subdivisions having hardly any tea garden earlier had little or no scope for giving birth to the coolie settlements.

O'Malley<sup>6</sup> considers the choice of Darjeeling as a health resort by the British and the subsequent tea plantation to be responsible factors for the development of this region. He but adds<sup>7</sup> that the continued migration from the east Nepal is due to the pressure on land there. Furer Haimendorf<sup>8</sup> also reiterates the idea of the population pressure and the scarcity of land in east Nepal as important factors for causing emigration from Nepal. Kansakar<sup>9</sup> regards the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley and the later expansion and unification of Nepal (1769) by king Prithivi Narayan Shah as significant changes causing emigration from Nepal. He points out further that the *Kut* system of land tenure in which the lessee pays a fixed amount of grain to the lessor impoverished the peasants of Nepal and made them leave their home land. He also talks of the recruitment of the Nepalis in the British army as an important factor. Dutt<sup>10</sup> talks of the factors like the increasing population, fragmented landholding, indebtedness, ecological crisis and food deficiency for causing migration from Nepal. According to him, the other reasons are : the Anglo-Nepalese Friendship Treaty of 1850, the Tripartite Delhi Agreement of 1951 and the revised Indo-Nepal Agreement of 1956.

The above contentions on migration from Nepal to India show clearly that there are more than one reason for the immigration of people from outside, mainly Nepal. The Nepalese were the most sought after not only as agriculturists but also as soldiers. They were considered<sup>11</sup> to be the best soldiers in Asia but due to the unwillingness of the Nepalese

Government to allow the British to recruit them, the latter adopted several clandestine measures, including the act of encouraging the Nepalis to settle in the hill areas like Shillong, Darjeeling and Dehradun.

Thus the Nepalese immigration took place mainly because the British enticed them to come here and work in the tea gardens and agricultural works and thus build up recruiting reserves within their territory. In all over the world the bringing of labourers from outside, preferably from far-off places, has been a common feature of the colonial economy. In some places it may be for indigo plantation or coal mines while in others for tea cultivation. But the main objective of the employers for bringing them from such far-off places is that more often than not they can keep the labourers tied to a strong invisible chain from which it becomes difficult for them to come out. In certain cases such an import of labour has also been due to the fact that such labour is relatively cheaper as it was the case in Germany in the early nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

In the case of Darjeeling the situation was slightly different. The Lepchas who were the earlier settlers there were probably reluctant to leave the forests and their traditional mode of life. On the other hand, the population was very low and insufficient to meet the labour needs of the growing tea industry and cultivation in the region. Thus the labourers had to be brought from outside and for this purpose the hills of east Nepal were an ideal place to hunt.

Till the Nepalese immigration started in this region, the local inhabitants called Lepchas practised shifting cultivation. As one can easily draw clues from the shifting cultivation areas of the northeast India, the agrarian class structure had not taken its roots then. The communal ownership without any special landowning right of even the chiefs/heads of the community was a powerful system that inhibited the emergence of a class structure. Thus, the agrarian class structure took its birth with the Nepalese immigration which meant the introduction of settled cultivation too.

Though the settled cultivation in this region started with the Nepalis the 'individual proprietorship' which gives the structural significance to the settled cultivation was not introduced simultaneously. It was only during the latter half of the nineteenth century that the lands were surveyed and laws and regulations regarding land were enacted. However, till March, 1937 Darjeeling was a 'Non-Regulation District' implying that the Acts and Regulations of the State government were not implemented there unless specially extended.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Emergence of 'Pakhurey Sangh' :**

The strain and stress in the agrarian society is not a very recent phenomenon in this region. It had started as early as the immigration started. But this was aggravated due to the

establishments of the Development Areas and Military Cantonments or the expansion of the urban areas. However, the situation does not seem to have reached the saturation point till the middle of the year 1979.

It was in June 1979 that a *Pakhurey Sangh* or "Sharecroppers' Association" was formed probably for the first time in the agrarian history of the hill areas of Darjeeling. A number of evictions had taken place before that in the villages like Echchay and Pudung following which a meeting was held at the former village under the leadership of some of the CPI members and a few well-wishers from the village. About forty sharecroppers and agricultural labourers had gathered there from different villages. Most of them looked very scared though some of them were courageous enough to expose the injustice done to them by their landowners. The meeting continued for more than four hours during when the leaders sympathized with the victims and denounced the concerned landowners. It appeared that a new era in the history of the hill areas of Darjeeling had begun.

It was unfortunate, however, that the organization had to stop very soon. The meetings held after that had a thinner attendance of the sharecroppers and agricultural labourers and the last attempt to hold a meeting during the end of 1980 was a failure as hardly any member turned up. A member of the CPI staying at Purbong village of Kalimpong tried to open a branch organization of the *Pakhurey Sangh* in the villages like Purbong, Tanek and Nasay but he too miserably failed despite his prestige as a village school headmaster.

The CPI (M) backed *Kishan Sabhas* are still active in the village of Kalimpong and Darjeeling but their activities do not seem to show any revolutionary character in this regard and are virtually silent after the Left Front Government took over the power in West Bengal in 1977. This is perhaps mainly due to : one, the political affiliation of the *Kishan Sabha* members with the ruling party in the State ; secondly, the class background of the leaders many of whom are landowners and are relatively well-off ; and, thirdly, a lack of class consciousness among the sharecroppers and agricultural labourers.

#### **Rise of Agricultural Labourers :**

In 1905, Bell<sup>14</sup> reported that the average landholding size in Kalimpong was 9.70 acres. The size of landholding in the coolie settlements of Sadar and Kurseong subdivisions was probably smaller though no data have been found in this regard. In the non-plantation areas, however, the landholding size is found bigger in size as it is still seen in areas like Bijanbari and the villages around it in Darjeeling.

The 1931 Census of India recorded 7.21 acres as the average landholding size in the hill areas. In 1941 it was found to have gone down to 5.21 acres and by 1971 the same had slimmed down to mere 1.19 acres. Even a low altitude village like Tanek in Kalimpong has only 1.56 acres as the landholding size per household. Rangbull, a village located at about 7000 feet above sea level has only 0.33 acre as the average landholding size.

Under these circumstances, the growth of the agricultural labourers' category is not surprising. Yet, this category was not noticed in the context of Darjeeling hills till the Census of 1941. It was in 1951 Census that this category was found recorded for the first time. From 1961 onwards this category has been found to be growing more and more bulky. By 1971, this category has already assumed a significant proportion in the hill areas of Darjeeling. The percentage increase of the agricultural labourers vis-a-vis the cultivators has been shown in the following table ( Table II ).

Table II  
Rise of Agricultural Labourers in Darjeeling

Block	Cultivator		Agricultural Labourer	
	1961	1971	1961	1971
Darjeeling-Pulbazar	47.0	38.4	2.7	7.4
Sukhia Pokhari-Jorbungalo	23.4	15.6	1.7	7.1
Rangli-Rangliot	40.3	34.5	1.1	7.9
Kurseong	27.5	18.8	0.3	7.8
Mirik	32.6	18.2	45.4	51.4
Gorubathan	45.4	51.4	3.1	4.7
Kalimpong I	83.5	66.1	1.4	7.4
Kalimpong II	65.2	56.2	8.0	24.3

Source : Census of India 1971. *District Census Handbook : Darjeeling*. Series 22, West Bengal, pt 10 A & B, 1971.

The above table shows that there has been a significant increase in the percentage of agricultural labourers between 1961 and 1971. On the other hand, the percentage of cultivators has decreased by about 6% in most of the blocks. The most spectacular increase in the percentage of the agricultural labourers has been in Kalimpong II which includes Pedong, Algarah and the region around. The increase in the percentage of the agricultural labourers in this area in an unusual manner ( from 8.0% in 1961 to 24.3% in 1971 ) is mainly due to the establishment of a large military cantonment there following the Chinese aggression in 1962. More than three hundred labourers had gathered there from different places like Pakyong ( Sikkim ), Baragel, Mangmaya, etc. in Darjeeling and a few from Nepal also. While some of them returned to their native places after the work was over most did not and settled there only.

The above Census data may be mentioned here to have been based on 'individuals' and not 'households'<sup>15</sup>. Such a classification brings out in detail how many persons or what percentage of people are engaged in cultivation, sharecropping or agricultural labour works but these are only figures and do not bring out the class profile of the agrarian society because a single household may have been represented in more than one category.

It may be added here that a table simply showing the increase of population following agricultural labour does not sufficiently focus the magnitude of the agricultural problem as such. The increase in the number of the agricultural labourers may mean different things at different places. This may mean, for example, the eviction of sharecroppers and turning them into agricultural labourers; the increase may be just due to leasing out of lands by the landowners to repay some contingent debts; or, in other cases the landowners may have started self-cultivation because getting the labourers on hire may have become more difficult due to their engagement in the non-agricultural works where they get a higher wage. In fact, this is happening today in the hill areas of Darjeeling. Since the leasing out of lands has become a risky affair for the landowners more and more members of the landowning class have been compelled to engage themselves in the agricultural labourers' works.

The increase in the volume of the agricultural labourers is a national phenomenon. Many scholars like Driver,<sup>16</sup> Khusro,<sup>17</sup> Dandekar<sup>18</sup> and Banerjee<sup>19</sup> hold that the most important reason for this is the inability of the non-agricultural sector to absorb the rising agricultural population.

This contention is true of the region under study also. The non-agricultural sector in Darjeeling consists mainly of the tea and cinchona plantations. Establishment of heavy industries is geographically difficult or ecologically unviable. Such a venture would not only further deteriorate the ecological niche that is already in shambles but also would be economically unprofitable. Tourist economy is quite encouraging but its capacity to absorb the rural unemployed is negligible. In fact, this would only partially cater to the needs of the urban unemployed. Small-scale or cottage industries are welcome but unfortunately no serious attempt has been hitherto made to develop this sector also.

Due to all these reasons the employment opportunities of the rural people in the non-agricultural sector is very limited. This problem is further aggravated by the low employment capacity of the agricultural economy itself. The presence of large tracts of fallow/waste lands, slanty, shady and marshy areas and other such physical handicaps have reduced the employment potentiality of the hill agriculture. Attempts at the diversification of agricultural economy has not been satisfactory either.

On the top of all these problems the average landholding size has been drastically reduced and the households which still hold an 'economic' size are very few and far between. Large scale migration into this region has stopped after Independence but the intra-regional migration still continues though in a mild rate. These newly migrated households are left with no option but to work as agricultural labourers because sharecropping is already almost closed and getting a new plot of land is very difficult today if not outright impossible.

The consequence of the growth of this category is not as yet felt very much. However, some impact of this change can be delineated. One of the most significant impacts of this

change is found among the landowners. They are growing more confident to carry on self-cultivation on the basis of hired labourers. Taking back of lands previously on sharecropping for self-cultivation is being more common today. This has increased the tenurial insecurity among the sharecroppers and the agricultural labourers.

Another impact of the growth of the agricultural labourers can be seen in the static condition of the wages. The wages have not much increased in the last few decades. Had there been a scarcity of labour supply in the villages their bargaining power would have gone up and automatically the wages would increase. But, unfortunately, their number is increasing steadily throwing themselves into a more vulnerable position. Even otherwise the increasing amount of land under self-cultivation should have raised their demand and subsequently their wages should have raised but since they are otherwise very weak, voiceless and unorganized they cannot simply assert their legitimate claims.

It would have been interesting to see its impact on production also but still the conditions are not probably very ripe to come to any definite conclusion. Hypothetically, it may be assumed that the production will decrease because the landowners themselves cannot pay proper attention to the agricultural operation. The hired labourers who work more or less mechanically cannot be expected to do very well specially in view of the low wages. The sharecroppers who at least tried to produce maximum to please their landowners as well as for their own benefit are gradually being deprived of this opportunity. As a result this is bound to decrease the production.

It may be added here that the Lepchas had to lose considerably in the process of demographic change. The constitutional measures to stop land alienation helped them to some extent but their lands are still passing into the hands of other scheduled tribes like the Bhutias who have the legal right to buy from the Lepchas. Consequently, many of them have turned into small landholders with hardly any alternative sources of income and some of them have become landless too. However, on a closer probe such landless Lepcha households are found to have immigrated from Sikkim or other surrounding villages. Within the Nepalese society also the later immigrants most of whom belong to the higher castes, have been absorbed in the lower ladders of the agrarian hierarchy. Due to migration, the caste-class overlapping found in Nepal is almost totally absent in Darjeeling.

### **Conclusion :**

In fine, the growth of the agricultural labourers' category has been primarily due to migration of the people from outside. The steady swelling of this category has further deteriorated the socio-economic condition of these people, the sharecroppers no exception. Politically, their strength is expected to increase with the increase in their number but otherwise they become all the more weak. In the process, a bipolarization of the society is theoretically inevitable. A conflict based on class rather than on ethnicity is expected because landlessness among the Lepchas—the earlier masters—is as yet an insignificant problem.

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