

ISSN 0976-8165



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

April 2013 Vol. 4 Issue- II

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Dooars Tea Tribals' Diasporic Identity

Abu Siddik

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Falakata College, Falakata,
Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, India. Pin: 735211

The term 'Diaspora' has a catastrophic origin. It derives from a Greek word meaning dispersion and it presumes that there exists a homeland to which the diaspora will eventually return (Tatla xviii).¹ And the term is often used by historians to describe the Jewish people's search for a home after their uprooting from the Holy land.

But today the term gains wider ramifications. According to Vijay Mishra Diasporas are people who are "precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile" (Mishra 1).² He shows that in seeking a common theory for the diverse phenomena of human migrations, the researchers have suggested diaspora to capture the most experience of displacement associated with migration, homelessness, painful memories and a wish to return to the land of origin. Some writers are, however, reluctant to extend the term 'diaspora' to migrant groups. They insist a diaspora condition represents a unique, a mythically experience of the Jewish exile. They argue that the term diaspora should be reserved for groups forced to disperse, and whose members conscientiously strive to keep memories, maintain their heritage, and are involved in a survival struggle. They refer to the classic case of Jewish, Chinese, Armenians, Palestinians diasporas (Tatla xix).³

Robin Cohen in his classic study Global Diaspora: An Introduction (2008) emphasizes on nine salient characteristics of diaspora:

1. dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically;
2. alternatively, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions;

1. Tatla, Darshan Singh. *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood*. London: UCL Press, 2005.

2. Mishra, Vijay. *Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. London & New York: Routledge, 2008.

3. Tatla, *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood* xix.

3. a collective memory of myth about the homeland; an idealization of the supposed ancestral home;
4. a return movement or at least a continuing connection;
5. a strong ethnic group consciousness;
6. a troubled relationship with host societies;
7. a sense of co-responsibility with co-ethnic members ;
8. the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in tolerant host countries.⁴

Moreover some theoreticians single out genocide and ethnocide as a part of the diasporic experience. And many others do not favour voluntary migration as a part of the diasporic condition at all.

My basic argument is that migration whether forced or voluntary can result in some diasporic incongruity, anomalies, a sense of displacement, painful memory of the ancestral past, a strong sense of ethnic bond, and a cultural impasse among the immigrant groups. Certainly these uprooted chunks of people fail to fulfil the classic mode of diasporic criteria prescribed by Cohen and analyzed by other theoreticians. They are not the victims of genocide or ethnic cleansing. But they are uprooted, displaced, dislocated from their land of origin as a result of migration. I think migration whether transnational or inland automatically imposes some diasporic experiences, such as, a sense of exile, alienation, inhibition, rootlessness upon the immigrants. Diasporic condition from my personal point of view can never be celebratory. Though the postmodern celebration of diaspora, as in the case of N. R. Is. is now well recognised. I, rather, agree with Mishra that diasporas are basically unhappy. “All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way” (Mishra 1). E.J. Hobsbawm rues, “wherever we live in an urbanized society, we encounter strangers: uprooted men and women who remind us of the fragility or the drying up of our own families’ roots (qtd. in Mishra 6). Thus, migration directly leads to diasporic condition, that is in other words, rootlessness, and a sense of ‘in-betweenness’ among the migrant groups. From this migratory point of view I try to focus on the diasporic identity or the diasporic condition of the Duars tea tribals, especially, Oraons, Mundas and Santals.

Duars had been historically a part of the Bhutanese domain and was a densely forested area. Plantation and scientific forestry came only after British occupation by defeating the Bhutanese kingdom. And with the establishment of the colonial rule, came the colonial economy. They set up Zamindari system to garner revenue. They destroyed the rural base of Indian economy. And for their industrial needs they started indigo plantation. Like indigo they also started to further their colonial enterprise tea and forestry economy in Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and the upper Assam. With the launching of tea plantation in the mid-1870s a large scale migration of tribal peasants,

⁴ Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. London and New York: Routledge, 2008. 17.

particularly Oraons, Mundas and Santals from Chhotanagpur and Santal Parganas to the Duars whom they call Bhutan, took place. They were recruited in tea gardens run by the British. Before the settlement of other communities they converted the forests into villages and busties. The remnants of these tribal people form a majority of the population in Western Duars.

These immigrants have unique ways of life and each sect has its particular culture and religious inclinations. The Oraons or Kurukh are victims of multiple migrations and they have a proneness to roam. They have a rich range of folk songs, dance and tales. They played traditional musical instruments such as Mandar, Nagara and Kartal. Both men and women participate in dance during festivals or any social celebrations. They followed the 'Sarna' Dharma. They worship Mahadeo, the other name of Dharmesh, their supreme god. They believe everything in nature has its own deity or god. They perform religious rituals under a sacred grove. They speak 'Sadri,' commonly regarded a sister language of Bengali, Oriya, and Angika. They believe in supernatural spirits and practise sorcery and witchcraft. They have their distinct cultures which do not conform to the majority of the people of Dooars. I here cite a few sentences from a song written in Kurukh to refer to their diasporic condition and the pain it involves:

Neka nortai bara lognai bala paira sohor baire
Na ga pur ti nagpuria
Bar lagnai bala pahera sohor bai
E raji nendar raji choi
Eangraji bhotang raji koi
Hare moto chutira lagi. (*Jalpaiguri Jela Sankalan* 666-667)⁵

It roughly means during our arrival to Bhutan (Duars) from Chhotanagpur we have to leave our relatives and even husbands behind. It is an unknown land or 'porar desh' and our lives are sordid indeed. This song attests to their diasporic condition and the pain and a sense of exile oozes out of it. So the Oraons address Duars as desh or another country, where everything is alien or unfamiliar and this unfamiliarity induces in them a feeling of exile, rootlessness, and unease and these characteristics are integral to any diasporic phenomenon. And Santals and Mundas have experienced the same pain and agony because of their uprootedness from their original homeland.

The Santals also believe in supernatural beings and ancestral spirits. Their rituals consist mainly of sacrificial offerings to the spirits or bongas. They have their own myth of creation. The two heavenly birds Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Buddhi were first created by God. One day the birds made a nest and laid two cosmic eggs and out of the two eggs came the male and females of

⁵ Kar, Aurobindo. *Kirat Bhumi: Jalpaiguri Jela Sankalan*. Vol. 2. 2004.

the earth. This myth is integral to the Santal worldview as it uniquely connects the life of humans to animals. The Santals have a high regard for the flora and the fauna and they decorate the mud walls of their houses with figures of animals and plants, known as 'fresco.' They express their joys and happiness through group dancing and singing. The three most quintessential instruments in Santali music are: two kinds of drums, Tumda and Tamak and the Tiriao or flute. Both men and women take part in dance and it has a wide variety of types and is attuned with the ceremony and social celebration. Similarly they have a variety of songs which are generally accompanied by dancing. Today many Santals have accepted Christianity, but still they retain their unique cultural identity. Even today the Santals of Samuktala, a Santal majority locality in the district of Jalpaiguri, arrange annual 'shikar Baithak' or 'La Bir-Baisi' (*Jela Sankalan* 642). Indian caste system is alien to them and, hence, Santal society is free from the maladies of untouchability and other rigid societal prejudices. They have no written form of language. Ol Chiki, the Santali script is relatively a recent innovation by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in 1925.

The term Munda designates the name of the leader of the tribal community. The Mundas call them 'Hodoko' which means 'human beings.' Like the Oraons and Santals, the Mundas have also a unique cultural affinity. Indian multifaceted caste system is alien to them. Buried ancestors are memorialized as 'Guardian' spirits or symbolized by burial stone 'sasandiri' and the bones of the deceased are placed under it. Once a year all members of the family are required to pay homage to sasandiri. Endogamous marriage is common among the Mundas. Like the Oraon, they follow the Sarna religion. Mundas converted to Christianity do still retain their intrinsic values though their life style has much been modified by the advent of modernity and globalisation.

These tribal immigrants barring few differences have nourished a strong ethnic unity. Duars is a foreign land to them. They were peasants and now have been tea labourers. They migrated to Duars in the hope of a better life. Their destitution and precarious condition of existence in their homeland made them fall to easy prey to the alluring prospect in the tea gardens promised to them as well as various enticements offered to them. They, however, on their arrival to the unknown region saw themselves duped and victimised. At the time of recruitment they were given advance to apparently pay off debts in their country but actually to ensnare them. They were required to put their thumb impressions on an agreement bond for work for a period of at least six months in the tea estate. Before despatching these 'coolies' to the tea gardens they were kept in a concentration-camp like situation. No complaints could be made to the managers or the sardars who were law unto themselves. Physical coercion, beatings and flogging were common. Incidents of death due to physical torture were not unknown. There were unrecorded accounts of troublesome workers being thrown into furnaces of garden factories. Besides, tiny plots of land were given to them for cultivation either free or at a nominal rent. It was a means of allurements with a view to binding them to the garden. Universal Sunday open markets were organised so that the labourers of a particular garden could not get scope of contacting and meeting their kindred

coolies recruited in other adjacent gardens. They had to work hard from dawn to dusk under the piercing eyes of an Indian subordinate staff such as sardar, dafadar, chaprasi, munshi and the like. The wages were too meagre to support a whole family. In consequence, the women and the children had to labour also. As a means of coercive practices, the British also introduced North Bengal Mounted Rifles (NBMR) to curb militant elements. Thus the planters devised various direct and indirect methods to these coolies on the garden and to hold them virtually in a state of captivity and servitude. They were in fact reduced to a semi-servile status.⁶ They passed their days in exile. They could not and did not integrate themselves with the majority of the people. They lived a life of segregated or isolated existence clinging to their mythico-magical ancestral past. So their condition was indeed diasporic.

Duars tea tribals' traditional life came to be severely dislocated because of their migration. They were pushed out of their traditional habitat and livelihood of a peasant in an unknown land. They were the most exploited groups of tribals. Their exploitation in colonial period by the sahibs and now by the various entrepreneurs lead to their social exclusion, backwardness, malnutrition, poverty and diseases. Poor standard of living with minimal health facility is noticeable everywhere. So what is seen is remarkable in our diasporic context. They migrated from their homeland to seek a better life. But on arrival their hopes and dreams were dashed. These peasants-turned tea labourers were herded together in a totally unfamiliar surroundings and this particular aspect itself put a restriction on their movement and freedom. The whole labour system involving their recruitment from their long distance home, the separation of workers from their known environment, their total isolation from their proximate surroundings because of geographical locations, social, cultural and language distances and barriers and various forms of open as well as hidden compulsions imposed on them by the sahibs are some of the major causes for their diasporic identity. All these factors coupled with their unforgotten past create a sense of alienation, aloofness, and exile among them. They have a strong ethnic sense. And Das Gupta mentioned these tribal groups in the early decade of their migration maintain a close link with their village homes. In course of time the majority of them settled permanently in Duars but their link to their original home has never been completely cut off. Over the years as a result of diverse influences, their customs and cultures came to be modified. A very large section was subjected to the impact of Hindu religion and Hindu social practices, while another section embraced Christianity. However, "both segments retained their religious beliefs and social practices to a substantial extent" (Das Gupta 24). It was seen that in various spheres of social life there was an intermingling of Rajbansi Hindus and Muslims creating condition for the growth of a composite culture with elements of syncretism at base level. But the "immigrant tribals, particularly the plantation workers led practically a life of segregated existence and their points of contact with the other population groups remained minimal" (Das Gupta 25). They were cut off from the mainstream of Jalpaiguri and national

⁶ Gupta, Ranjit Das. *Economy, Society, and Politics in Bengal: Jalpaiguri 1869-1947*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992. 66-67.

freedom movement. They exhibited a strong sense of xenophobia, witchcraft and other cheap amusement. So they can be called diaspora like Tobago, Trinidad and Fiji and any other form labour diasporas. However, by the second and the third generations the settlement patterns led to the development of at least some working relationship. Hats and other market places gradually became meeting points for economic and social intercourse between the local people and the immigrant tribals. But the Bengali middle class belonging to the higher castes as well the Marwaris with their widespread social networks bypassed and indeed looked down upon the indigenous autochthonous such as Meches, Rajbansis, Garos, Rabhas, Totos and the immigrant tribals.⁷ They lead now a life which is quite different from the indigenous people or bhatias or other immigrant groups such as Nepalīs, Marwaris etc. They stick to their basic cultural root and socio-cultural moorings. Economically, socially, historically and culturally they exist quite separate from the majority too. They have their own, pain suffering, alienation and aloofness caused by their dislocation from the land of their origin. They indeed did not experience the trauma shared by the Jewish. But their hope of better life has been betrayed in an alien land. And their present condition, though some developments obviously take place, cannot be said better than their previous one. Poor housing and health facilities, malnutrition, poverty still reign their ghettoised life.

Now to bolster my view of Duars tea tribals' diasporic identity I cite a Bengali short story "Chathuurtha Panipather Juddho" by noted writer Subodh Ghosh.⁸ Stephen Horo the principal character is a Munda student who has both physical prowess and intellectual calibre to mark his stamp on both academic and non-academic activities. He is thus the cynosure of attraction of the whole class and feared for his tribal origin and admired for his ability by both teachers and students alike. He has, as his name indicates, been converted to Christianity. But in course of time his proximity with Buro Sokha, the mentor of tribal culture has made him conscious his ancestral past. Awakened as he is, he now strives to free himself from the clutch of alien cultures. The author has provided a good example of his renunciation of the majority culture by not joining to a picnic arranged by his friends at Shiloarar jungle where palatable dishes are ready to be served. Instead to show his defiance he kills a squirrel to eat. This single incident proves his tribal root and he is very proud to exert his tribal identity. In the end we come to know that he has changed his name to Runnu Horo and is very conscious of his reclaimed identity. Thus we see Horo to exert his defiance against the alien culture and at the same time to return to his root. But we can add from our diasporic context that he has experienced some diasporic existential dilemma in his attitude to both the alien culture and to that of his own. Once in school he takes Sanskrit as his optional subject and gets the highest marks. He can easily quote from the New Testament to pleas Father Lindon. Thus he assimilates or acquires some traits of Hindu and as well as Christian cultures. But ultimately he forsakes them

⁷Gupta, *Economy, Society, and Politics in Bengal: Jalpaiguri 1869-1947*. 24-25.

⁸ Ghosh, Subodh. "Chaturtha Panipather Juddho." *Bangla Choto Golpo*. Ed. Bijit Ghosh. Kolkata: Granthathirtha, 2009.

and comes back to his origin. Now the basic question is, is his condition diasporic. I think so. We discern in him the 'in-betweeness' as he strives to exist between two strands of culture, one of his own and the imposed one. He is a Christian but he has not forgotten his ancestral past. His original identity is elaborated by Tudu, Horo's classmate. Horo beats drums in 'akhra,' drinks haria, a local brew, and makes love a girl of their clan, Chirki Murmu. In moonlit night he killed a deer with his bow. He dances with frenzy with other tribals with a 'tangi' in his hand to celebrate their festivals. He cuts a burning simul tree first and when he is burnt Chirki Murmu embraces him. He knows English, Sanskrit but he does not neglect his mother tongue. He is civilized as well as primitive. He did not throw away his cultural moorings. Had he heard the Father, he could have easily managed an honourable job. Instead he lends his hand to the tribal cause and thus convicted. During his school days he sometime proves himself sullen, aloof, and in a state of exile in the midst of alien land and culture. That is why his friends Kalko, Besra, Tigga not to mention the Bengali Hindu fail to understand the cause behind Horo's alienation and whimsicality. I argue that it is his diasporic identity which pains him and instils in him a sense of homelessness, and rootlessness. The sense of aching unease, difference, exile, alienation, deprivation, discrimination and deterritorialization can be discerned in Stephan Horo.

Now I present the following characteristics in brief in support of Dooars Tea tribal's diasporic identity:

1. They have been dislocated from their original homeland, namely Chhotanagpur and Santal Parganas;
2. They have a strong ethnic group consciousness based on a distinctiveness, a common history and the belief of a common fate;
3. They have a collective memory and myth about the homeland;
4. The Duars is a foreign land to them in that the people, the occupation and the region is quite unfamiliar and different from their land of origin;
5. a troubled relationship with the host societies marked their history too. That is why they try to keep a segregated existence of their own. Now they begin to voice their hopes and aspirations in the banner of Akhil Bharat Adivasi Vikash Parishad (ABAVP);
6. They cling to their mythico-religious past in the form of their various rituals and festivals;
7. Culturally they still maintain a pristine characteristics in which individuality and structure of personality cannot take root;
8. They exhibit existential dilemma and unilinear material development. They cannot, thus, relate themselves to history in process and literature as a social testimony.
9. A sense of unease, difference, exile, discrimination and rootlessness still reign their lives.

Thus the Dooars tea labourers' condition in strict compliance with Cohen and other theoreticians may not qualify as diasporic. But with some limitations and reservations the term can be used to them in reference to their migration, displacement, rootlessness, shared ethnic sense, a belief in common fate,

idealization of the ancestral past, sense of exile, and homage to rituals. Though much has been changed in their life styles, they still cannot and do not integrate themselves neither with the majority and the minority of the Duars nor with other immigrants such as Nepalis and Marwaris. And from this disintegration much of their diasporic identity emerges. Most of them cannot read Bengali, the language of the majority, till now.

Works Cited:

- Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Ghosh, Subodh. "Chaturtha Panipather Juddho". *Bangla Choto Golpo*. Ed. Bijit Ghosh. Kolkata: Granthathirtha, 2009.
- Gupta, Ranjit Das. *Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal: Jalpaiguri 1869-1947*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Kar, Aurobindo. *Kirat Bhumi: Jalpaiguri Jela Sankalan*. Vol. 2. 2004.
- Mishra, Vijay. *Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. London & New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Tatla, Darshan Singh. *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood*. London: UCL Press, 2005.