

CHOPRA, REORIENTED: AN ECONOMIC HISTORY AND RAPID PROGRESSION

Dipesh Roy*

Abstract

Chopra, a Community Development (CD) Block of Uttar Dinajpur District bears sound historical background. The Block belongs to one of the most backwards district of West Bengal which has initially experienced rapid flourish of pineapple plantation. In subsequent time, the pineapple plantation shifted to small tea plantation due to a number of problems raised for pineapple conservation and marketing. In the present study, the researcher has tried to explore the causes and impact of development of small tea plantations on the altered economy of Chopra block.

Keywords: Pineapple Tea, Plantation, Development, Garden

Introduction

Chopra is located at 26°24'N latitude and 88°18'E longitude. Chopra Block established in the year 1964 although previously it was under the jurisdiction of Purina District of Bihar (Srtong, 1912). In the year of 1956 it was transferred from Bihar and comprised with West Bengal under the former West Dinajpur district. As per 2011 Census, Chopra block had a total population of 2, 83,761, out of which 1, 46,735 were males and 1, 37,026 were females. The West Dinajpur district is one of the most backward districts in the state and within the district also, the degree of backwardness varies across the block in terms of different economic indicators (Roy, 2011).

Historical Background

The emergence of small tea plantations in North Bengal is somewhat similar to North Eastern region. It is worth mentioning that plantations were introduced in both these regions in the year 1990. But before this, people of this area were extremely encouraged for the cultivation of pineapples (Hannan, 2013). After the Bangladesh war in the year 1972, many refugees coming from Bangladesh permanently settled in the District of presently Uttar Dinajpur (Chopra) and began to cultivate Pineapple on a large scale. Late Jaggeshwar Bhowmick, a migrant farmer from Mangachh of Chopra Block made the first plantations of pineapple in Chopra Block. This encouraged all other farmers. Gradually, the cultivation of Pineapple gained popularity and spread all over the Block. Prosperity followed soon. But a time came when the pineapple growers began to show less interest in the cultivation owing to some reason or other. By then, their interest moved on to the tea plantation in the following decade. There was only one large Tea Estate existed since pre - Independence. It was the Debijhora Tea Estate in Chopra Block in the District of Uttar Dinajpur. Interestingly settlement in Chopra began to expand following the transfer of territories from Bihar to Bengal in 1956.

*Assistant Professor, Department of History, Cluny Women's College, Kalimpong

Methodology

The study deals with the evolution of Chopra as a sub-urban area. In order to analyze the growth of the small tea plantation of Chopra, the researcher has tried to find out causes and consequences behind of its rapid development. For the purposes of study, primary data have been collected directly from field with the help of structured questionnaire. Focused depth interviews of the planters have also been taken. Besides, relevant literatures have been consulted thoroughly. Secondary data have been collected from different Government reports, records, unpublished and published documents and newspapers.

Shifting from Pineapple to Tea Plantation

The cultivation of Pineapple was introduced as an alternative model of commercial farming at the end of 1950s (HDR, 2010). With the spread of Pineapple cultivation on a large scale, a marketing crisis also cropped up. Being highly perishable, table ready pineapples could not be preserved and hence need to be transported immediately over long distances (Mandal, 2012). Most of the pineapples growing in Chopra Block had to reach cities like Delhi, Kolkata, Nagpur, Agra and Kanpur etc. and as a consequence, the farmers had to take help of broker or middlemen. The middlemen demanded a share of the product. Consequently the presence of middleman placed unnecessary burden on the producers. These adverse situations gradually inspired Pineapple farmers to look for an alternative product. This led its way to the emergence of small tea plantations in the two decades of the twentieth Century.

Development of Small Tea Plantations

The tea industry, to a large extent, drives the economies of the regions where tea gardens are concentrated, for example, Assam (Selvakumar & Jeyaselvam, 2012). Initially, small tea plantations started in Chopra and spread in other localities later. Chopra Block is recognized as the birth place of small tea plantations in North Bengal as well as in Bengal. In the initial stages, the small tea growers used to sell green leaf to the estate gardens. But later on Bought-Leaf factories came up to meet the needs of the small growers (Table-1).

Table-1, Small Tea Plantation in Chopra Block

(Size : < 5 acres)

SL NO	NAME OF THE FARM	NAME OF THE OWNER	AREA(IN ACRES)
1	Kamala tea Garden	Asit kumar Paul	2.33
2	Ismalia Tea Plant	Kusman Ali and Others	1.52
3	Sabitri tea Estate	Sohanlal Mundra	4.07
4	Roy Tea Plant	Suresh Roy	5.00
5	Jha Tea Plant	Sumita Jha And Others	4.30

Sources: District Land Revenue Office, 2011

During formative years, growers were continuously facing transportation problems as small tea plantations had emerged in backward areas. As per the other available sources, there are 20352 growers, distributed in four districts of West Bengal spread across 25708.06 hectares. Most of the growers were not registered with tea board due to lack of “No Objection Certificate” NOC from the land and land reforms department. Some of the growers of Chopra Block along with their land holdings are given in table 2, 3 and 4.

Table-2, Medium Tea Plantation in Chopra Block

(Size : 5-15 acres)

SL NO	NAME OF THE FARM	NAME OF THE OWNER	AREA(IN ACRES)
1	Swapan Tea Planters	Asit Kumar Paul	9.84
2	M.R Tea Estate	Abdul Mannan	7.96
3	Dalua tea Estate	Asara Khatun	7.14
4	Barkat Tea Estate	Dnah mohammad	6.07
5	Usha tea Plantations	Prodip majumdar	5.09

Sources: District Land Revenue Office, 2011

Table-3, Medium Tea Plantation in Chopra Block

(Size : 15-25 acres)

SL NO	NAME OF THE FARM	NAME OF THE OWNER	AREA(IN ACRES)
1	Rina Tea Garden	Kartik Sil And others	15.61
2	Paul Tea Estate	Laxmi Kanta Paul	16.68
3	Haque Tea Estate	Anwarul Haque	18.30
4	Das tea Eatste	Sankar kumar Das	23.22
5	Molani tea Estate	Taimur Rahaman	22.46

Sources: District Land Revenue Office, 2011

Table-2, Medium Tea Plantation in Chopra Block

(Size : 25 acre and above)

SL NO	NAME OF THE FARM	NAME OF THE OWNER	AREA(IN ACRES)
1	Giribala Tea Estate	Kanai Lal Bhowmick and others	138.89
2	Tulsivita Agro Farm	Shyam Krishna das	101.47
3	Puspa Tea Estate	Sukumar Roy and Others	281.64
4	Bhowal Tea Estate	Bimal Chandra bhowal	30.92
5	Santashi Tea Estate	Sachinra Nath Das	29.87

Sources: District Land Revenue Office, 2011

By 2003, small tea plantations and bought-leaf factories of Terai and Duars area of North Bengal were already producing nearly a fifth of the total processed tea produced within the region. While the number of BLFS had expanded to 62 in 2003 from 28 in 1999, production of tea by small growers in the region had risen from 13.1 million kg over the same period.

During the initial phase of development of small tea plantations in North Bengal, problem had arisen because of the purchase or leasing of agricultural land by the agents of big corporate tea companies, under the nomenclature of project tea gardens. Besides, high lands (dangis) were unsuitable for agriculture; agricultural low lands were acquired as per the assurance that the farming households that transferred such land would be provided regular employment on the new tea gardens at the rate of one job for every hectare of land and that was transferred to the big corporate tea companies.

The deep trenches that were cut to drain the new plantations also lowered the water table in surrounding farmlands, forcing other farmers to sell or transfer their holdings. In a chain reaction, the switchover from farming to tea gradually affected a longitudinal region stretching from the Daspara area in Chopra Block up to Patagora in Islampur. As wet rice cultivation was also affected adversely by such changes, a strong agrarian movement against further transfer of farmlands to tea ensued in the region in 1989-90.

In 1990's the Government of West Bengal articulated a policy regulating the conversion of farmlands to tea gardens. that barred such transfers from taking place on prime agricultural land, on lands under forest and tribal lands, and lands falling within the command area of the Tista project. Under the policy issuance, a "no objection certificate" by the state government became compulsory before undertaking new plantations. Although this partially checked the unregulated expansion of 'project gardens' or small tea plantations over areas of less than 25 acres by established tea companies to escape the statutory provisions of the plantation Labour Act 1951, a new model emerged under which small tea growers voluntarily took over the primary production of tea, selling the green leaves to nearby BLFS in the district Land conversion began to accelerate again, until the new tea crisis of 2002.

Although the establishment of tea plantation is a highly capital intensive process, the pineapple growers of Chopra Block and Islampur block initially had to finance this from their own resources without the support of the institutional credit system.

After the introduction of NOC system, a new tea grower has to secure prior clearance of the land revenue department, government of West Bengal, through the district land and land reforms officer (DLLRO), before applying to the tea board for registration of the small tea plantation. Under the government of West Bengal notice on 21 August 1998, owners of new tea gardens covering an area of up to 24.2 acres are classified as tea cultivators and are issued a certificate for cultivation of tea. If the plantations exceed a size of 7 hectare (17.3) acres, the owner also required to apply to government of West Bengal through the DLLRO for permission to hold land in excess to the statutory land ceiling. Since this is time consuming, less than 30 percent of existing small

tea growers in the Terai and Duars area of North Bengal are estimated to have received the required NOC's, from the state government till July, 2001 (HD Report, 2010).

Rapid Development

With the cultivation of pineapple, the life style of the people of Chopra however, was not satisfactory, as the business involved a lot of risk with mass interest of farmers shifting towards cultivation of tea which definitely was a lucrative business in the long run. Neglecting the initial costs involved, the standard of living has improved dramatically. Children now go to better schools, medical facilities have been upgraded while markets spread rapidly. It is quite likely that most of the blocks now have people who are owners of tea gardens, that have at least 5 acres of land under cultivation. Consequently, with the rapid development of economic conditions, most of the tea cultivators are now in possession of at least a two-wheeler or four-wheeler as signs of prosperity. A popular belief now holds over the people that, having tea gardens mean that one you can relax for the next 50 years.

Taking note of about the radical changes that swept the economic, social and cultural outlook of Chopra Block, it is indeed worthy of appreciation. The way transition has taken place over a span of 25 years that is commendable. Economic condition of the villagers has changed for the positive since the agrarian shift took off from Pineapple farming to tea garden.

It will be absolutely necessary to put in context the story of Taimur Rahaman here.

Taimur Rahaman, a resident of Kachakali Majiaili anchal was asked by the researcher many questions regarding his rapid development. He said, "I was a poor farmer and I could hardly meet both ends," At that time most of the farmers cultivated paddy and Jute and mainly depended on it. In course of time, production of Paddy and Jute decreased rapidly owing to the lack of rain and proper irrigation.

There was plenty of agricultural land. Plots of lands were selling at a very low price. Taimur Rahaman stated that, being frustrated from all corners, he started his own pineapple gardens in a small plot of land. He soon earned favour of his fortune and became a gainer in the very first year. He was glad to have received a considerable sum of money after selling the Pineapples in the market. Soon he started the cultivation of pineapples on a large scale and within a short time he became a full-fledged farmer. And this continued on for about six years. Later the mentioned plots of land were converted into tea gardens. He scaled new heights soon and possessed a Tea factory of his own and now several employees are working under him.

A clear picture of an area developing from a village to a sub urban has been achieved within a span of 25 years. People hardly seem to have any financial crisis now.

Conclusion

The tea industry has seen many structural changes over the last two decades (1990-2010) or so on (Arya, 2013). The unemployment problem of the area has been solved to some extent owing to the setting up of tea garden and tea factories. Some people living below the poverty line committed crime being frustrated to earn their livelihood from all corners at initial stage. Now, they are employed and don't find any time to commit crime. Tremendous economic development has been witnessed in Chopra. Most of the people have become reasonably comfortable and seem to live a contented and happy life. Chopra which was like a small village a quarter of century ago has turned into an economic sweet spot. There was a time, when people had to rush elsewhere to earn livelihood, to meet their expenses. But now, almost everything is available here. In spite of all these advantages, the whole block appears to be on the brink of communal disharmony. Intolerance seems to be on rise. Politics has taken a toll in the block. They became much agitated and do not hesitate to kill one another. Chopra has become a political potboiler.

People have become restive in social, political and religious spheres. Violence over trifling matter is now a common phenomenon. On the other hand, quantity of paddy land is on a steady decrease. Moreover, most of the farmers are not interested in paddy cultivation. It is needless to say that there will be scarcity of food in near future. Therefore, it is the high time to handle the problems of the area with care and sincerity.

References

- Arya, N. (2013). Indian Tea Scenario. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 3(7)
- Hannan, A. (2013). Organizational innovations and small tea growers in India, NRPPD discussion paper, pp. 20-21
- Human Development Report, (2010). West Bengal Ministry of Rural development. pp. 217-218
- Mandal, A. (2012). History of introduction and development of pineapples in North Bengal: as viewed by a grower. <http://indianpineapple.com/history-of-pineapple-wb>
- Roy, C. (2011). Economic Backwardness of Uttar Dinajpur : a Block Level Analysis . http://mpr.ub.unimuenchen.de/40376/1/Economic_Backwardness_of_Uttar_Dinajpur.pdf
- Selvakumar, M and Jeyaselvam, M (2012). Tea Industry: A tonic for the Indian Economy. www.ffymag.com/admin/issuepdf/Tea_April-12.pdf
- Strong, F. W. (1912). Dinajpur District Gazetteer. Pioneer press. Allahabad