PARAGANNAH OF BARABHUM

LAND AND PEOPLE
Chapter II

Pargannah of Barabhum: Land and People

The setting in space:

Barabhum lies between 22°42' and 23°12' north latitude and 86°1' and 86°36' east longitude. It includes three police station areas of Purulia district of West Bengal, namely, Balarampur, Barabazar and Bandoyan and the entire area of Patomda police station and the major portion of Chandil police station in Singhbhum district of Bihar. In the earlier administrative reports, Barabhum had been referred as the "wildest and most remote area of the Jungle Mahals."

The Pargannah of Barabhum, a former kingdom from a tribal base, is located in the southern portion of the former district of Manbhum (merged with Purulia district of West Bengal and Singhbhum district of Bihar since November 1, 1956) and covers an area of 634 square miles with a total number of 244,733 persons of 64 castes distributed in as many as 576 inhabited revenue villages. Nearly two-thirds of the Pargannah is plain while the rest is covered with jungles of Sal (Shorea Robusta), Aesan (Terminalia Tomentosa), Kend (Melanoxylon), Pial (Buchanania Latifolia), Mahua (Bassia Latifolia), Palash trees and with uplands and hills. The extensive deforestation during last hundred years or so is responsible for the depletion of the fauna. In the restricted forest zone at the foot of Dalma Range which stands as the southern boundary of the Pargannah, some tigers, leopards, bears, hyenas, jackals and small herds of wild elephants are still found. To-day excepting the hilly portion of the south, the entire area is easily accessible. A branch line of South-Eastern Railway i.e. Howrah-Adra-Chakradharpur line passes through the northern edge of the Pargannah. It was opened in the early part of 19th century. A number of motorable
roads are found to run across this area connecting it with the industrial township of Tatanagar and urban centres like Purulia, Chandil, Bankura. A direct bus route has also been opened from Purulia and Calcutta via Durgapur, a township grown around steel plant installation. At present, Barabhum contains two semi-towns: Barabazar, head quarter town of this estate and Balarampur, a semi-industrial town emerged out of the processing and exporting of lac.

The undulating topography of the area, lateritic soil condition and terraced paddy fields and other natural features are very similar to the natural condition of Chotonagpur. Barabhum may be considered as an extension of Chotonagpur plateau. The average annual rainfall is about 54 inches. Monsoon starts with June when the downpour comes to 9.5 inches and in the wettest months of July and August it gives some 13 inches and in September about 8.5 inches. The mean temperature throughout the year is 77°. It reaches its maximum peak of 103° in April and May. The minimum temperature is recorded in December and January (Coupland : 1911).

The setting in time:

The kingdom of Barabhum is situated in the middle of the five zamindaries or former chieftaincies : Panchokot and Baghmundi in the north, Patkum in the west while Seraikella, Dhalbhum are located in the south and Manbhum in the east of it. The Raja had to be careful in guarding his estate from the incursions by the neighbouring chieftains.

This Pargannah derives its name from Nath Bara (Nath, the Boar), the legendary ancestor of the present Zamindar of Barabhum. The legendary story about the origin of this estate runs as follows:

"A prince from Rajputana was going on pilgrimage to Puri accompanied by his pregnant wife. On the way, near Rupsang village in this area which later on became known as Barabhum, the queen gave birth to a pair of twins, without the knowledge of the king and left them by the side of a forest. A pig took pity on these babies and
reared them along with her own litter with her milk. The Bhumijas belonging to Gulgu clan rescued these godly babies by killing the pig. The twins became known as Svet Baraha (White Boar) and Nath Baraha (Nath, the Boar). As boys grew up the Bhumij watched with admiration and amazement the remarkable mental and physical qualities of the boys, and were convinced of their Kshatriya parentage. The Bhumij then took the boys to the court of Raja Vikramjit of Patkum, who used to rule over this tract in those days. It is said that impressed by the princely courage of the brothers, Vikramjit honoured Nath Baraha with a portion of his own kingdom. The new kingdom, having a circumference of 16 Yojanas*, came to be known as Barabhum." (Sinha : 1962).

A variant of this story has been given by Dalton (Dalton : 1872, pp. 176-177).

The British control over Barabhum had been established on formal level with the grant of Dewani of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa in 1765. But the British could establish actual authority over Barabhum after a series of military campaigns during 1766-68 and eventually the Barabhum Raja agreed to pay a token revenue in 1776 (Higginson : 1776). We can gather some idea from the report of Shifton about the planned and systematic manner by which the indigenous Bhumij Ghatowals losing their land titles, part or whole, to Robert Watson Company and its successor, Midnapore Zamindari Company between 1883-1907 (Shifton : 1907-12, para - 134).

In the settlement survey of 1908-13, we find the former structural set up of Barabhum as follows:

The entire Pargannah was divided into 9 territorial segments or taraf. Keeping the central taraf i.e. Gortoli under the direct control of the Raja+ and an adjacent taraf of Dubraji for the maintenance of his eldest son, the other 7 taraf were distributed to 7 taraf-sardars who were also Bhumij. These taraf-sardars in their

*Yojana is equal to four Kros and a Kros is equal to 8,000 cubits.
+Probably of Bhumij descent.
turn distributed portions of their own taraf to minor fief-holders like the Sadiyals and Ghatowals. Thus starting from the bottom, the ordinary tenure holders - the villagers, above them were the Ghatowals or the headmen and tenure holders of single village, Sadiyals or the chiefs of about twelve villages, taraf-sardars or zamindars of large a number of manjas varying between 110 to 17 villages and above all was the Raja of Barabhum - the supreme chief of the estate. These units might be considered as units in terms of political and military organizations rather than mere land-tenure units. It appears that none of these units starting from the villagers upto the level of the taraf-sardars used to pay any cash rent for their cultivable plots to their immediate superior authorities in those days. In lieu of rent they used to give donations of various kinds such as specific quantity of rice, clarified butter, he-goat etc. on the occasion of Royal festivals through their respective taraf-sardars, as well as the assurance of protecting their respective frontiers against any incursions by the neighbouring chieftains. The taraf chiefs had full power of controlling their respective tarafs and they were duty-bound in the matter of supplying military force at the time of foreign invasions. These festivals were "important sources for the Royal Exchequer." The main income of the estate was from the cultivable lands, invariably of the best quality (man-jami), which the Raja kept under his direct control. In these man-jami, the villagers had to give free labour individually for the cultivation of rice. The Bhumij were found to monopolize all important positions of power and land holdings even in the recent past (Sinha : 1962).

History of Barabhum in Pre-British Period:

It is very difficult to make systematic historical reconstruction of the tribal kingdom or chieftaincy due to lack of reliable historical material in Pre-British times. The British came in contact with Barabhum around 1770. The Moslem record is too inadequate for this purpose. Moreover, the spurious long genealogies of this 'pseudo-Rajput' tribal chief are quite misleading.
Sporadically scattered archaeological evidences in this tract belonging to a period between 8th to 12th century A.D. strongly suggest an earlier extension of Jaina-Buddhist-Hindu civilisation. The origin of this tribal kingdom was definitely later than the breakdown of these earlier civilisations, probably between 13th to 16th century A.D. There is no record of Moslem or Maratha incursions into this tract. The Bhumij took up the ideas associated with kingship after coming in contact with the Brahmanical civilisation. Mention of Barabhum or Barabhum in the Brahmaṇa section of the Brahmaṇya Purana compiled in 15th to 16th century A.D. also supports the dating of the origin of this estate. It also provides us with the then prevailed condition of Barabhum: that the entire country was covered with impenetrable forest of Sal tree, numerous mountains and rich mineral deposits of copper, tin, iron etc. The people were mostly Rajput by caste, robbers by profession, and were irreligious minded and savage. The women were like Rakshashis than human beings (Coupland: 1911). In the early days of British contact with Barabhum, the Rajput-aspirant tribal Raja of this estate was found to be a true patron of Brahmanism; he was constantly surrounded by upper castes like Brahman, Chhatri and Kayastha as his advisors in religious and secular matters. The Raja needed the recognition and active support of the high caste Hindu in order to get his Kshatriya-hood firmly established in the minds of the local people. The creation of miraculous flattering myth regarding the origin of Barabhum kingdom may also be considered as a positive move in getting out Bhumij affiliation (Sinha: 1962).

Population: Ethnic Groups: Occupation:

The rapid exposure to the outside world since 1866 brought a large influx of immigrant population from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. It is quite interesting that ethnic groups starting from Kharia, Pahira who are in hunting and food gathering stage to the sacerdotal caste-groups like the Brahmin, Vaishnava are found to reside in proximity in this estate for generations. It may be noted that most of the groups partly or wholly depend on agriculture, at present.
them, some castes like the Brahmin, Kayastha, Vaidya, employ labourers for ploughing while the Bhumij, Mahato, Santal etc. are themselves the tillers of the soil.

Of the 64 ethnic groups living in Barabhum the population of 47 groups who are having a numerical strength of more than 100 has been given below (Table No.1)*.

TABLE NO.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETHNIC GROUPS</th>
<th>OCCUPATIONS</th>
<th>POPULATION</th>
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<td>FAMILIES</td>
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A. SACERDOTAL CASTE GROUPS:

1) Brahmin - Priest ... 1296 8421
2) Boistam - Religious Preceptor ... 815 4203

B. ARTISAN GROUPS:

1) Chhutor - Carpenter and mask-maker ... 45 203
2) Dom - Small basket-maker ... 503 2302
3) Gorain - Oil presser ... 1001 5517
4) Jugi - Wood weaver ... 22 111
5) Jolha - Muslim weaver ... 472 2366
6) Kamar - Blacksmith ... 958 4654
7) Kumhar - Potter ... 1406 7522
8) Mahali - Big basket-maker ... 377 1665
9) Muchi - Leather worker ... 440 2248
10) Sahis - Bark-rope maker ... 769 3848
11) Syankra - Goldsmith ... 70 394
12) Tanti - Hindu weaver ... 424 1924

*The population and caste figures have been taken from our overall survey of the Pargannah during 1957-60 (Sinha, S.C. and B.K. Dasgupta, H.N. Banerjee : 1966(1964)).
TABLE NO.1 (Contd.)

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<tr>
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<td>FAMILIES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13) Thenteri</td>
<td>- Brass worker (who follow lost wax process)</td>
<td>... 41 180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C. TRIBAL GROUPS:

1) Bhumij       - Landed aristocrat agriculturist       ... 8395 37947
2) Kharia       - Food gatherer, broomstick maker      ... 759 3740
3) Munda        - Agriculturist                         ... 32 175
4) Orang Mudi   - Labourer                             ... 292 1645
5) Pahira       - Food gatherer and broomstick maker    ... 85 362
6) Santal       - Agriculturist and Agricultural labourer ... 8349 40236
7) Kora Mudi    - Earth worker                          ... 570 2677

D. OCCUPATIONAL CASTES:

1) Bhatt        - Bard                                  ... 27 150
2) Bagti        - Chapped rice maker                    ... 76 340
3) Bagal or Gope - Milk man                            ... 901 4658
4) Dhoba        - Washerman                            ... 377 1832
5) Ghuniya      - Fisherman                            ... 90 443
6) Keont        - Fisherman                            ... 216 1049
7) Kayastha     - Scribe                               ... 275 1534
8) Moira        - Sweet vender                          ... 339 1999
9) Napit        - Barber                                ... 803 4373
10) Paitkar      - Painter                              ... 23 118
11) Rajowar      - Chapped rice maker                   ... 122 575
12) Sunri        - Country liquor distiller             ... 498 2859
13) Tamli        - Dealers in betel leaf                ... 224 1363
14) Vaidya       - Medical practitioner                ... 23 171
TABLE NO.1 (Contd.)

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<td>FAMILIES</td>
<td>PERSONS</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. TRADER CASTES:</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Benia (Gandhabanik)</td>
<td>Dealer in grocery, rice and lac, herbal medicine and indigenous cosmetics</td>
<td>... 399 2377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Marwari</td>
<td>Large scale businessman in grocery, stationery, lac, cloth and oil etc.</td>
<td>... 220 1590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. AGRICULTURIST GROUPS:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Chhatri</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>... 479 2491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Ekadash Teli</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>... 99 492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Mahato</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>... 13955 71892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Sadgope</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>... 49 296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Deshwali Majhi</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>... 843 3912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. TRADITIONAL LABOURER:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Bauri</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>... 170 912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Bhuinya</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>... 290 1382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Ghasi</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>... 46 202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Lohar Majhi</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>... 192 948</td>
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</table>

It is quite apparent from the above table that the following three groups share about 60 per cent of the total population of Barabhum:

- Mahato ... 30%
- Santal ... 16%
- Bhumij ... 15%

Total: 61%

The Kora Mudi have a very low numerical strength in comparison
to these groups; they form about 2% of the total population. The Bhumij at present claim to be the earliest settlers who cleared the jungle and assert that they belong to the race of the "kings" or "rulers". That is why the Bhumij even at present enjoy most of the "khunt-katti" tenureship of the area. Their tradition says that they came from Nagpur side i.e. Chotonagpur. The other groups who came along with them are the Kharia, Pahira who are still in the food gathering stage and practise shifting hill cultivation by "slash and burn" method in the foot-hill regions of Dalma range. Then came a number of artisan castes, Kora Mudi, Orang Mudi, Mahato, Santal and the sacerdotal castes subsequently. The Kora have a similar tradition like the Bhumij that they came from the west i.e. Chotonagpur side.

The typical Hindu ideology to place the Brahmin at the topmost position in caste ranking is found deeply entrenched in the minds of the local people including the tribals and other 'lowest' caste groups. The Kshatriya or Chhatri, Kayastha and the Vaidya occupy the next ranking. Below them, are the few clean castes and 'Naba Shankh' groups. Below them, are the different lower castes and tribal groups who are constantly trying hard to a stable higher status in the regional caste system. The position of the Vaishnava is somewhat ambiguous. Some rate them below the Kshatriya-Kayastha groups while others put them in even lower caste-status. The above caste-ranking is found to be based upon the concept of ritual pollution and upon the longstanding Hindu idea about the acceptance of various items of food and drink from other ethnic groups of the area. (For details – see Chapter-X).

The Regional economy of Barabhum:

Agriculture forms the main basis of the rural economy. It is provided with a superstructure formed by a network of artisans and their crafts and the chain of weekly markets with a handful of professional traders. To cater to the needs of about 64 castes of Barabhum, about 14 artisan groups pursue 14 types of craftwork.
The Bhumij, the earliest settlers used to possess the bulk of the cultivable land. They had an outright supremacy over land hold of this area. But at present larger portion of the Bhumij land, has passed out to other ethnic groups, principally to the Mahato. The Santal are also good cultivators. Besides these agriculturist groups, the artisan and sacerdotal castes are also found to live on the income of agriculture or agricultural labour. The trading castes, like the Benia, Marwari, Teli, have their own cultivable plots to meet the food requirement of their house-holds.

The area of 634 sq. miles of the Pargannah is studded with 12 weekly markets. These weekly markets are the main channels for the distribution of local and imported goods in Barabhum. Agriculturists, horticulturists, artisans, fishermen, collectors of forest products, professional traders dealing with export of local items and import of manufactured goods from outside meet in these weekly markets. Barter plays relatively more important role in these markets in the transaction of local goods even at present.

Barabhum is also known as an important lac exporting centre. Some lac processing factories were installed around 1910 and are still functioning. The semi-industrial town of Balarampur has grown as a centre of lac industry, exporting lac even to the foreign markets. As a subsidiary source of income, the local people including the tribals cultivate lac in their own Falash, Kusum and Kul trees and sell it in the weekly market to earn cash.

The role of outsiders as the middlemen and paikars (wholesale dealers) in these markets is quite significant. With the expansion of motorable roads and railways, the channel of exporting of local items and of importing of various imported products like kerosene oil, mustard oil, mill-made cloth, "luxury" items etc. has become more smooth. (Sinha et al: ibid; Sinha: 1963).

It may be mentioned here that Barabhum provides the neighbouring districts of Bengal and Bihar with the major bulk of agricultural and non-agricultural labour.
MAP OF WEST BENGAL SHOWING DISTRIBUTION OF SCHEDULED TRIBES (ACCORDING TO 1961 CENSUS)

MAJOR SCHEDULED TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF WEST BENGAL REPRESENTED IN TERMS OF TOTAL SCHEDULED TRIBAL POPULATION OF THE STATE (1961 CENSUS)

NOTES
LESS THAN 5.5%
5.5% TO 10.0%
10.5% TO 15.0%
MORE THAN 15.0%
DISTRIBUTION OF KORA POPULATION IN DIFFERENT DISTRICTS OF WEST BENGAL (1961 CENSUS)

MAP SHOWN WITH DEEP AND LIGHT SHADE THE CONCENTRATION OF KORA DISTRICT WISE

POPULATION ABOVE 11,000

**" " 7,000
**" " 5,000
**" " 2,000
**" " BELOW 2,000

Burdwan.... 11,919
Midnapur.... 11,449
Bankura.... 8,122
Purulia.... 7,501
Jalpaiguri. 5,563
Birbhum.... 5,514
Hooghly.... 4,651
W.Dinajpur .. 2,822
Malda .... 2,478
24.Parganah.. 1,772
Murshidabad. 694
Darjeeling .. 287
Howrah.... 100
Coochbehar 86
Calcutta ... 57
Nadia...... 13

TOTAL POPULATION 62,029