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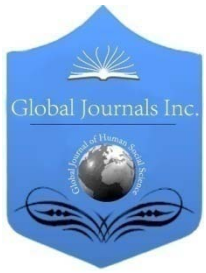

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Abstract- The Rajbangsi's constituted the most predominant section of the local Hindu population in the Northern districts of colonial Bengal. A large section of them possessed a substantial amount of land commonly known as Jotedars, Zamindars. Unfortunately, a very small section belonged to this landlord class showed much interest in the field of tea plantation industry in spite of having land on a large degree. Interesting to say, other Indians had to set up a large number of tea estates on the land owned by the Rajbangsi landlord once. Instead of assuming initiative in this economic field the Rajbangsi jotedars and other affluent personalities of the same community remained aloof them from the tea plantation industry. This factor actually drew me to make a study in this field of the economic history of colonial Bengal.

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Absentee of Rajbangsi Entrepreneurship in the Tea Plantation Industry: A Case Study of the Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling Districts in Colonial Period

Supam Biswas [σ] & Kalidas Roy [σ]

Abstract- The Rajbangsi's constituted the most predominant section of the local Hindu population in the Northern districts of colonial Bengal. A large section of them possessed a substantial amount of land commonly known as Jotedars, Zamindars. Unfortunately, a very small section belonged to this landlord class showed much interest in the field of tea plantation industry in spite of having land on a large degree. Interesting to say, other Indians had to set up a large number of tea estates on the land owned by the Rajbangsi landlord once. Instead of assuming initiative in this economic field the Rajbangsi jotedars and other affluent personalities of the same community remained aloof them from the tea plantation industry. This factor actually drew me to make a study in this field of the economic history of colonial Bengal.

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I. Introduction

The Rajbangsi's constituted the most predominant section of the local Hindu population in the Northern districts of colonial Bengal. Numerically they were the third largest Hindu caste in Bengal. Whatever might have been their actual origin, there is no dispute about the fact that the Rajbangsis were the early settlers in North Bengal. They were a socially homogenous community, in the sense that there was no sub – caste among them [1]. Economically agriculture was their basic occupation and their representation in other professions was not very significant. A large section of them possessed a substantial amount of land commonly known as Jotedars, Zamindars [2]. However, a distinct change took place in the economy of Northern Bengal with the migration of upper caste gentry into the traditional Rajbangsi areas. With the passage of time these migrated people became the land lord of this area. This example might also be coined regarding the Bengali Hindu and Muslim entrepreneurs adverted here from various part of undivided Bengal [3]. They had to set up a large number of tea estates on the land owned by the Rajbangsi Jotedars once. Instead of assuming initiative in this economic field the Rajbangsi jotedars and other affluent personalities of the same community remained aloof them from the tea plantation industry [4]. So many factors were responsible for it. The reason behind this lack of any entrepreneur in the Rajbangsi society, who could have led to some positive changes in the economic structure of their society or in the society at large, is to be investigated in this essay of its utmost capacity.

In regard to the history of the entrepreneurship in the tea plantation industry in both Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling district the European tea planters came first. They were the pioneer in this economic venture indeed. The Indian also did not set them aside from this scenario. Among the Indians in regard to the tea plantation industry in both Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling district the Bengalis came from various parts of undivided Bengal ranked first [5]. The total number of Indian public limited companies having registered offices in the Jalpaiguri District was 89 [6]. According to Prof. Binoy Sarkar,-"moneys are flying in Jalpaiguri, if you can catch it." He further commented that "the most prosperous town of the Bengalis, across the whole of Bengal, outside Calcutta is none other than Jalpaiguri. The Court Bar Library did not consist of the minute details of the legal sphere; rather it consisted of discussion and debate on share market" [7]. So this statement undoubtedly elevated in front of us about the sound economic base of Jalpaiguri town which came into force with the entrepreneurial activity of the Bengali tea planters. Astonishingly we find the absentee of Rajbangsi entrepreneurship on a major scale in this field who are historically 'the son of the soil'. References should be made to some Rajbanshi jotedars such as Raikot family of the Jalpaiguri town and Bhojnarain Singha of the Terai region. Late Prasanna Deb Raikot promoted the following companies and proprietary estates assiduously on his Zamindari lands like Baikunthapur Tea Co. Ltd. (1916) with Bhandarpur and Shikarpur Tea Estates (1917) and Karala Valley Tea Co. Ltd. (1919) [8]. Bhojnarain Singha allowed late Biraj Kumar Banarjee of Jalpaiguri to set up the Bhojnarain Tea Estate on his Zamindari land [9]. However, such examples

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are very meagre. Perhaps being traditional they were in general conservative and were not inclined to venture much beyond their known periphery. Secondly, due to the avaibility of land, the condition of poor Rajbangsi peasants was comparatively better than that of their counter parts in other areas in Northern part of North Bengal. It is true that the Rajbangsi Jotedar's and the populist personalities belonged to the same community had surplus money earned in heterogeneous way either from cultivation, business transactions or from money lending professions. But very little of the surplus appropriated through extraction of produce rent – cum – trade – cum – usury was used for cultivation 10. Nor was their savings were coined for the growth and development of the tea industry of this region.

Naturally question should be raised that where these surplus money were used and of course in what way instead of building entrepreneurship in the tea plantation industry? As we know that most of the Rajbangsi Jotedars maintained an extravagant style in their daily way of life. Their standard of living was very high. Some of them used to keep elephants, horses and even five or six house wife's as a sign of luxury life style. In the occasion of various festivals like *Durga Puja, Manasha Puja* they used to arrange fairs and other compatible items for providing amusements to the endemic rural people. All the expenditures were met from his own repository funds [11]. Baring this they also invested the surplus money to purchase jotes from others. But they were never seen to invest the surplus money in tea industry. Perhaps they were not interested to go ahead from their own periphery. In this context the observation analysed in Jalpaiguri District Gazetteer is worthy to be mentioned. It has written that "the local population of Rajbansis, Mahamadans can make a living too easily by cultivation to have any incentive to learn a trade" [12]. Most importantly when the tea gardens came into existence, the population of the Duars region were very scanty. The local people had plenty of land and were engaged in food cultivation. They loved easy life. So, local people were not available for the arduous job of tea plantation[13].

So what emerges from the foregoing discussion is that owing to have copious cultivable land no initiatives had been taken from this community in tea industry at all. The Rajbangsis were always prone to stativity. As all primitive communities, they were tied to family profession and were normally disinclined to change professions. This situation remains continued for a long time. Total abstention from the non – family professions was the basic norm of the Rajbangsi milieu until the external caused some important change to be introduced in their attitude towards new professions [14]. This attitude of the Rajbangsi community can also be further explained by uttering two local proverbs such as-

"Uttam krishi Madhyam Ban
Dhik Chakri Vekkha Nidan"

(It meant that agriculture is their main profession. Trade and commerce belonged to the second category of their occupational status. They staunchly disdained Government service as a mode of occupation and beggary is the last option for living.)

"Dhane Dhan Aar Odhyek Gai
Jat Kinchit Sona Rupa Aar Sokole Chai"

(It meant that rice is the foremost paramount property to them. Cows belong to the second strata as a medium of property. Next come Gold – Silver and all the rests are like ashes to them.) [15]

It is true that with the settlement of upper caste Hindus a tendency developed among the better off section of this community to emulate the culture and social values of the upper caste Hindus. Those among the Rajbansis who were jotedars or rich farmers, came under the cultural influence of the upper caste landlords or other Jotedars of the area, as they were closer to this group in terms of secular status. The well - off Rajbansis thus began to migrate to towns, send their children for higher education, and take up subsidiary occupations like Government jobs, besides the family occupation of cultivation. It was this section of Rajbansis who felt the urge to change their existing cultural practices and lifestyle 16. This situation literally to say had to retreat the whole community to become an entrepreneur not even in tea industry but in other industrial fields also. The British Colonialists were also highly responsible for the backwardness of the Rajbansis. The upper caste Hindu gentry nurtured antagonistic attitude towards them. In fact the protagonists of the Bengal Renaissance could not go out of their social orbit to regenerate those [17]. Moreover, in the beginning of the twentieth century we could not find the emergence of any educated gentry class among the Rajbangsis especially in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar district. What changes had been done pertaining to their social and economic status took place only in Rangpur [18]. Hence we may say with confidence that lack of proper knowledge, proclivity to family occupation and of course inability to cope with modernisation drift less the whole community from the industrial field. This grotesque mentality, innocuously to say, made them unable to become an entrepreneur even in the tea plantation industry as well.

W.W. Hunter opined that the wet climate of North Bengal has compelled the local Rajbangsi populace to pour into a sedentary lifestyle. In this context the old proverb prevailed in the society is deserved to mention here –

Saner (Srabaner) Baro
Bhadorer Tero
Er Majhe Je Joto Paro

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(You can toil only from the twelfth day in the month of Srabon to the thirteenth day in the month of Bhadro. Because Srabon and Bhadro being the main rainy weather. After this month's there is only the period of absolutely rest.)[19]

So form this aforesaid interpretation we can say with confidence that the wet and temperate climate of this part of North Bengal have turned the Rajbangsi people to become inactive and unconcern as well. Prof. Amlan Dutta, a doyen in the economic history of Bengal gave his narration in this way. He argued that the scarcity of natural resources cannot be held responsible for the absentee of Rajbangsi entrepreneurship. Rather, as he puts it, failure in one area of life brings in failures in other areas just in the way the saying "nothing succeeds like success" goes. So it might be presumed that the successors of the former Kingdoms in North Bengal were not indeed ready to compete with the changing scenario in the post – independence period.

"Chayay Chayay Hat Jao
Gotay Gotay Mach Khao
Bhojaner Agat Maierr Pachat
Meen Gorur Bhin Bathan Haiyai Thak" [20]

Moreover, it also appears that most of the Rajbangsi Jotedars and local Muslim peasants of the permanently settled parts of the Dooars region was said to have organised protest movement against the transformation of jote lands into tea plantation. Most of the jotedars who took the initiative in this field were either Rajbangsis or local Muslims such as Gayanath, Narahari Barman, Tariq Muhammad and so on. However, the participation of the Rajbangsis and local Muslims were very limited in the Terai region of the Darjeeling district whereas it reached its apex in various parts of the Jalpaiguri Dooars. In the Terai region, the participants were composed of only a few Nepalis and Rajbangsis [21].

As we know the people migrated in this part of North Bengal from Gujrat and Rajasthan penniless but with the passage of time they turned them as a big industrialist in this field. So can we presume the presence of a certain racial inertia to play the most crucial role in this situation for the Rajbangsi people? Just as geographical features of a place can positively influence a particular aspect of life or society in there; ca a wet, humid climate render the inhabitants of a particular place sedentary? Could these be considered as the primary reasons that we are still waiting for a success entrepreneur to emerge among the local Rajbangsi populace? It is very unfortunate to say that the wave of globalization has hit not only the tea plantation industry but also the all flakes of our country after 1991 and the whole country seems to be eager to exploit this unforeseen chance to start or expand their business or industrial ventures, whereas this rapidly prospering field of trade and commerce is not represented by even a single Rajbangsi entrepreneur.

Another reason highly responsible for the absentee of Rajbansi entrepreneurship in tea industry was the migration of large number of outsiders to different districts of North Bengal. The attractions of this regions were the abundance of land, possibility of good business, job opportunities in Government offices as the local people were not in a position to compete and the lure of tea gardens which provided job facilities for the 'Babus' as well as the labourers [22]. The Census figures between 1891 and 1921 in Jalpaiguri district showed us that the large influx of people led to a growing demand for land and a rise in land prices. The local people being tempted and lured by the spiralling prices began to sell their land and in course of time became subservient to a new class of immigrant landed gentry consisted of educated upper caste Bengali middle class people and Marwari [23]. This reason, according to the survey carried out by me, definitely wiped out all the possibilities in the creation of the Rajbangsi entrepreneurship in the tea industry in colonial period. However, this change in the ethnic composition of the land holding class in village economy began the commercialisation of agriculture, particularly in tea plantation and the introduction of railways in the northern part of North Bengal.

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