

Agricultural Practices and Livelihood Status of Toto Community of Alipurduar District of North Bengal, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture is the main back bone of any rural society, especially for the tribal communities who are closely associated and dependent on natural elements. The 'Totos' are one of the primitive tribal communities of Madarihat Block of Alipurduar District of West Bengal. The population is very minimum because they have an opinion of family planning to not to put excess pressure on nature. The first survey was carried out in 1989-1994, and then successive survey was carried out in different census year. The census record reveals that the population growth rate was very low as they maintain the faith – fear – belief system. They learnt agriculture from other communities, but a major section is fallen under agricultural labour category. This paper focussed on the types of agricultural practices performed by the Toto Community and their livelihood depending on these agricultural practices. Like other rural communities, they have shifted from the slash – burn cultivation technique to the shifting cultivation. Recent developments in the agricultural sector influenced them to cultivate cash crops to some extent. The quantity of production is limited although in near future it will increase and may be a new gateway for self - development process.

Introduction

Alipurduar District is the newly formed district of West Bengal. It becomes 20th district of West Bengal on 25th June, 2014. It consists of six blocks namely Kumargram, Kalchini, Alipurduar – I, Alipurduar – II, Falakata and Madarihat – Birpara and one Municipality, i.e. Alipurduar. Before 2014, the Totopara village is one of the villages in Madarihat – Birpara block which distinguished by the presence of Toto population. The Totos are a primitive Mongoloid isolated tribal group and have been identified as one of the endangered tribes of India. They have a very distinct socio-economic and cultural peculiarities that have acted as constraints as their expansion and survival. However, with intervention of govt. and different NGOs, the negative growth rate of Toto population has been checked and in at present showing negligible escalation.

Study Area

The village is located in the Madarihat block of Alipurduar District. The grass root level survey was conducted in the Totopara village (J.L. No. 33) in the month of February, 2016. Out of a total of 50 villages in the block the village is situated as a wedge in the extreme N-E section of Madarihat Block. Extending between 26^o49'31" N to 26^o52'26" N and 89^o17'48" E to 89^o19'57" E longitudes, with an area of nearly

8.87 sq.km. the village is bounded by Bhutan in the northern side and Kalchini Block in the East.

Objectives

- To study the distinctive character of the Toto community from their close attachment with nature.
- To examine their livelihood status based on their socio-economic condition and their agricultural practices.

Materials and Methods

The present study is based on both primary and secondary data. The main source of primary data was questionnaire and the sample size for this study is 228 out of 342 households, i.e. 66.6 % collected from six different hamlets, viz. Pujagaon, Subbagaon, Mitrangaon, Panchayatgaon, Dhumchigaon and Mondalgaon. The collected data has been compiled and analysed using statistical and cartographic techniques. In terms of secondary data, the main source is Census of India (1991, 2001 and 2011) and simultaneously other references like the reports published by Department of Agriculture, West Bengal, and Backward Community Welfare Department of West Bengal have also been used for this study.

Relief

The maximum elevation of the village is around 2600 feet at the north western part, whereas, the lowest elevation found in the eastern side which is 700 feet. The slope of the area gradually declining towards east and south – east direction. The north – western part of the village is resemblance with a denudational hill whereas, the eastern part of the village is similar like a plain area, but in between these two physiographic divisions, the area indicates an intermediate fan formation in the vicinity of the settlement area.

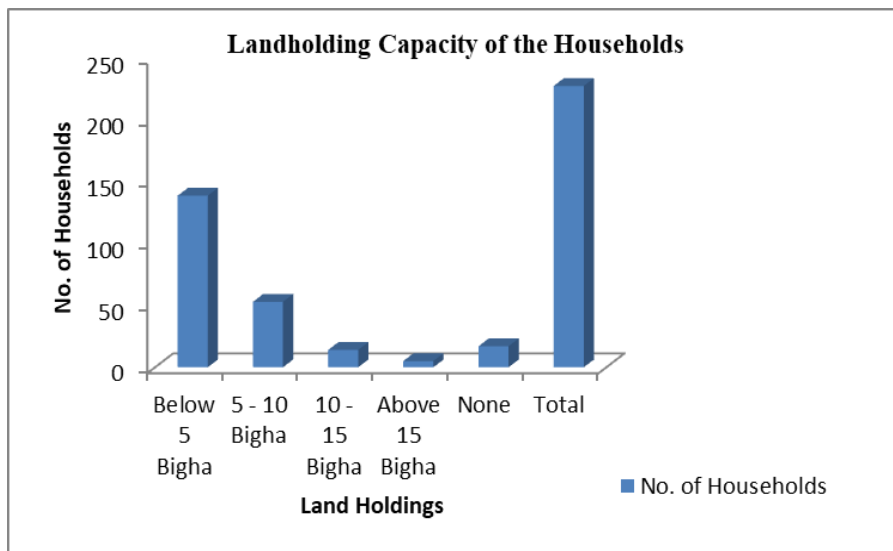
Soil

Broadly the village has two different types of soil. The northern, north-western part, where the elevation is higher, the area is composed of coarse – loamy soil, because of the bed material brought down by different Jhoras and Nalas in the area. The southern, and south – eastern part of the village have fine – loamy soil which is developed by the deposition of the fine materials coming down from the high elevation areas and preferable for the agricultural practices. However, the soil is predominantly sandy and hence porous with low water holding capacity. Except these two different categories few patches surrounding the river banksides are consists of alluvial soil which is fertile enough with nutrients for crops like, paddy, potatoes, wheat, maize, etc.

Landholding in Totopara Village

Individual land ownership was introduced in Totopara in 1969 and the District Collector possessed more than 1,600 acres of the total area leaving only 347.43 acres of land to then 89 Toto families. However, the Totos still continued to cultivate in around 400 acres of the residual land at the south-eastern direction of the Totopara village. The original 347.43 acres of land under the Totopara could not remain free from outside encroachers as many non-Totos, especially the Nepali speaking Gorkha identity holder people (Gorkha) could be found in Totopara. They have come to this place and permanently settle down there. More than 72 acres of Toto land have been already gone into the hands of non-Toto groups, especially the Nepali speakers good with agricultural management in hilly slopes.

The plots of the land are very fragmented with 139 of a total 228 households owning plots which are less than 5 bighas. 53 families owned landholdings between 5 – 10 bighas, while 14 families had holdings between 10 – 15 bighas. Only 5 households are there who possess more than 15 bighas of land in their assets. The remaining 17 families were landless.

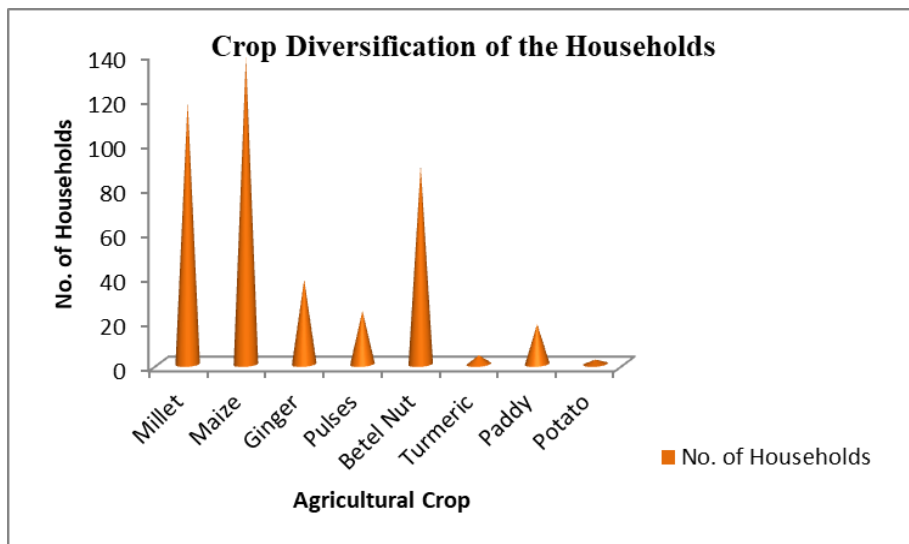


Source: Based on Household Survey, 2016

Agricultural Crop Diversification

A wide variety of crops are grown by the inhabitants of Totopara. The dominant crops, in order of importance are Maize, Millet and Betel Nut. Out of a total household of 228, 138 households grew maize in large quantity. 118 households

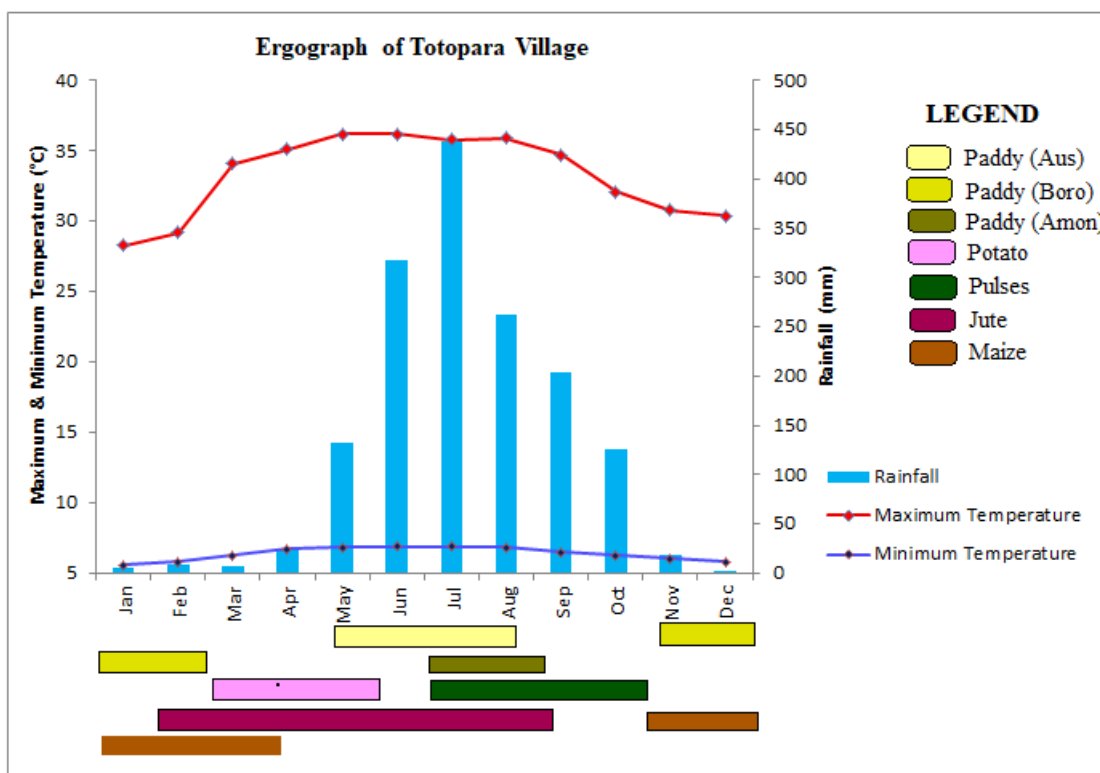
give preference to cultivate Millet as primary crop, whereas, Betel Nut is a primary crop for 89 families. Crops grown in modernisation were Ginger (38 families), Pulses (24 households), and Paddy (18 households). Only 4 households cultivate Turmeric and 2 households produce Potatoes.



Source: Based on Household Survey, 2016

Totos cultivate crops in bench terraces instead of contour trenches which are relatively at higher altitude. Terrace farming is beneficial to prevent soil erosion. They store rain water to practice rainwater harvesting. Earlier they used traditional way of farming with bullock (*pi'ka*), plough (*holo*), wooden beam (*ja*) and hinge (*tong*). Farming crops in the clayey soil at Torsha basin is seemed to be preferred by them. However, majority of those fertile lands have been taken from Totos by the non-Toto communities. Nowadays, instead of using bullock and plough, some Totos prefer modernised agricultural tools and techniques; using dibble, axe, big knife,

spade and sickle for instance. Furthermore a tendency of imitating and getting influenced by other communities has also been noticed. Holding big knife or *khukuri* (traditional Nepali weapon) and dressing like Nepalese, is one of the significant examples. Even a few Totos do speak Nepali, especially the young generation. Although, their hand-rotating grinding machine made up of stone, wooden husking bowl and wooden beam (*sing* and *dibrung*) are still in use. Totos did not permit their land for any tea plantation. In this way, the Totos are serving for both forest and agricultural biodiversity.

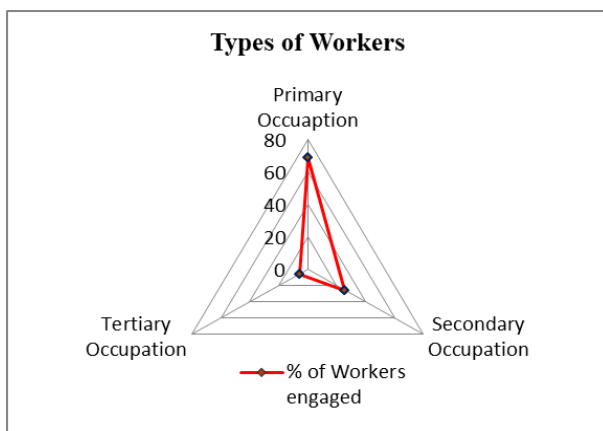


Source: Based on Data by Agricultural Meteorological Office and Agricultural Department

Occupational Structure

Being a closely knit agrarian community the main occupation of Toto community falls in the Primary sector. A majority of the households depended on agriculture and animal husbandry. Out of a total 307 working persons surveyed from 228 households, 68.7 % were engaged in

primary sector and they were chiefly engaged in selling Arecanuts from their plantation, small shop keepers and owners of orange orchards etc. nearly 25.7 % population of the surveyed households are engaged in Secondary sector. A very negligible population of the working population i.e. 5.5 % were engaged in the tertiary occupations which included various jobs like, daily wage earners and bank employees.

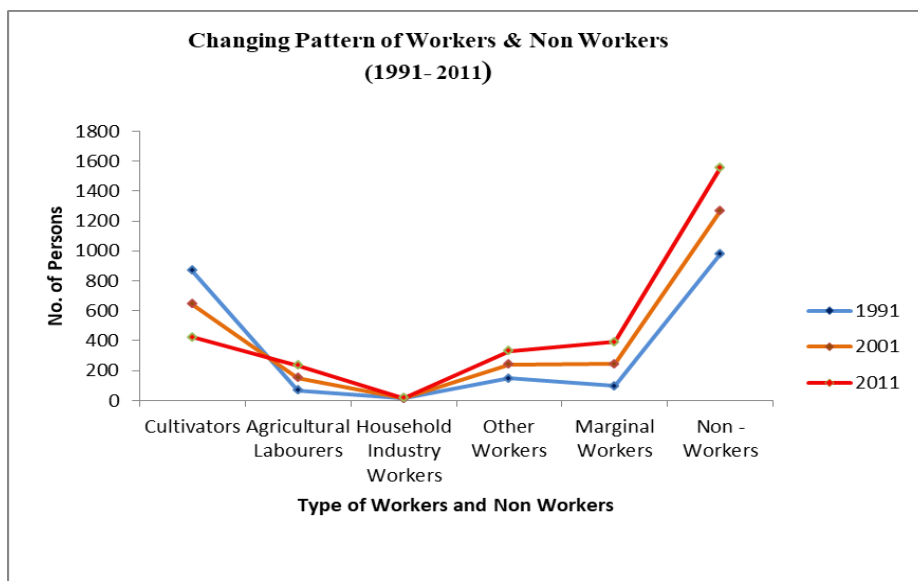


Source: Based on Household Survey, 2016

Changing Pattern of Workers to Non- Workers in Totopara

A comparison of the changing pattern of workers and non- workers from 1991 – 2011 demonstrate a significant change in occupation. While the percentage of non-workers remains almost constant in the two decades, there is a marked

increase in the category of Marginal Workers showing a growth of almost 9 % from 4.4 % in 1991 to 13.2 % in 2011. A similar growth, but on a much slower rate is apparent among the cultivators and household industry workers between 1991 and 011, while there is a sharp decline among the workers in the other category.



Source: Based on Census Data, 1991, 2001 and 2011

Conclusion

Agriculture is an integral part of Toto community. The inhabiting landscape of Totopara is not suitable for intensive farming. Despite having all the natural and economic

constraints Totos cultivated the barren land and transformed it into habitable condition. Totos only focus to cultivate crops which will be sufficient for their living. They do not try to amplify the quantity of any crop for commercial purposes. It has been found that the elder generation do try to hold on to

their beliefs and cultural aspects despite living with non-Toto communities for a long period of time, however the youngsters are much flexible in adapting other cultures. Most of the residents are not educated and the young generation children seem to drop out from schools. During this survey, it has also been noticed that two Toto families were converted into Christianity by the missionaries for the sake of good fortune. Other families did not support them and tried to preserve their own rituals. A few educated Totos have understood these

circumstances and proactively trying to protect their cultural beliefs. All the development in Totopara has been initiated with the funds from Governments or NJOs. Other communities are always trying to deceive this illiterate tribe, either by taking their land or converting them. All these will lead to the path of existential crisis for Totos. The Totos are indigenous tribe only found in West Bengal. In order to protect their authenticity, serious and immediate action from the Govt. is highly required.

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