



THE DOOARS AND INDIA'S FREEDOM STRUGGLE: TEA GARDEN WORKERS, TRIBAL RESISTANCE AND THE QUEST FOR JUSTICE

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Abstract: The Dooars region of North Bengal, located in the Himalayan foothills, played a pivotal but underrepresented role in India's freedom struggle. Dominated by tea plantations and rich tribal cultures, the region witnessed a unique convergence of colonial exploitation, economic suppression and political awakening. This article examines how the tea garden workers and tribal communities resisted the oppressive conditions imposed by British planters and administrators. Facing low wages, inhumane living conditions and long working hours, these communities organized themselves through labour unions and local movements. Their participation in major national movements reflected their growing political consciousness and alignment with the broader nationalist agenda.

The study also highlights the significant contributions of women, who actively participated in protests, strikes and underground activities. Influenced by national leaders and leftist ideologies, the people of the Dooars transformed local grievances into a powerful anti-colonial movement. Though often absent from mainstream historiography, their grassroots mobilizations were instrumental in challenging British authority.

By uncovering the history of resistance in the Dooars, this article seeks to reposition the region within the wider framework of the national movement and emphasize the vital contributions of marginalized communities in shaping the nation's destiny.

Key-words: *Tea Plantations, Tribal Communities, Tea Garden Workers, Freedom, Struggle, Exploitation*

I. INTRODUCTION

India's freedom struggle is one of the most defining chapters in its history. Recognized as a mass movement, it touched every corner of the country. While prominent regions such as Bengal, Punjab and Maharashtra are often highlighted for their active involvement in the national movement, the role of the Dooars region in this struggle remains relatively underexplored. Although the movement was predominantly concentrated in major urban centers and larger regions like Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Delhi, rural and remote areas like the Dooars in North Bengal also played a significant role in resisting British colonial rule.

The Dooars, located in the foothills of the Himalayas in the northern part of present-day West Bengal, has a rich history of resistance, with its unique geographical and socio-economic conditions shaping its involvement in India's fight for independence. The people of the Dooars, particularly the tea garden workers, tribal communities, and local leaders, actively participated in the freedom struggle. Known for its lush tea plantations, scenic beauty, forests, rivers, rich biodiversity, and cultural heritage, the Dooars—home to indigenous communities and migrant workers—became a melting pot of anti-colonial sentiments by the early 20th century. This region, covering the districts of Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and parts of Kalimpong and Coochbehar in West Bengal, played a pivotal role in India's freedom struggle against British colonial rule.

The tea plantations, which were the backbone of the Dooars' economy, became centers of resistance against British exploitation. The British had set up these plantations in the mid-19th century, bringing in workers from places like Chotanagpur Plateau, Bihar, Odisha, and Jharkhand. These workers, along with local tribal groups such as the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas etc. faced harsh working conditions. They were paid very low wages and lived in poor conditions. Their growing discontent fuelled waves of protests in the region.

In addition to the tea workers, the tribal communities of the Dooars also played a major role. The British tried to control not only the economy but also the traditional ways of life of these communities. The tribal leaders resisted these efforts, organizing revolts and demanding that their cultural practices be respected. Their struggle was different from the urban protests, but was still a crucial part of the larger freedom movement.

The major national movements such as the Swadeshi Movement (1905-1911), Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934), and Quit India Movement (1942) also resonated strongly within the Dooars. Local leaders, inspired by figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose, encouraged people to join India's freedom struggle. Because the Dooars is located near Bhutan and Assam, it was a strategic area for political activities and secret meetings.

Though often absent from dominant historical narratives, the Dooars played a vital role in India's fight for independence. From labour protests in the tea gardens to tribal uprisings and the influence of national movements, the people of this region contributed greatly to the freedom struggle. Their story shows that even the most remote areas were important in India's journey to independence.

II. Objectives of the Study

- To explore the role of the Dooars region in India's freedom struggle
- To analyse the contributions of tea garden workers and tribal communities in resisting colonial oppression
- To examine the impact of national movements on the Dooars region
- To analyse the rise of political consciousness among marginalised communities
- To shed light on the role of women in the freedom movement
- To address the historical neglect of the Dooars in mainstream historiography

III. Database and Methodology

This paper, *"The Dooars and India's Freedom Struggle: Tea Garden Workers, Tribal Resistance and the Quest for Justice"*, is based on both primary and secondary sources. The study follows a qualitative historical methodology. It focuses on the contributions of tribal communities and tea garden workers of the Dooars in India's freedom struggle, and it highlights grassroots movements that have often been neglected in mainstream historiography.

IV. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE DOOARS

The Dooars, covering approximately 3400 square kilometres, is situated in the foothills of the eastern Himalayas in the northern part of West Bengal. The Dooars region, often referred to as the gateway to Bhutan, holds immense historical and geopolitical significance. It is the entry point to Bhutan from India. The name "Dooars" derives from the word "door," as the region serves as a passage between India and Bhutan. Spanning across the northern part of West Bengal and Assam, the Dooars has always been a region of strategic and economic importance due to its fertile land, which is ideal for agriculture and proximity to the Himalayan trade routes.

Prior to British annexation in the 19th century, the Dooars region was under Bhutanese control. However, the Anglo-Bhutanese War of 1864 -1865 resulted in the Treaty of Sinchula (1865), which ceded the region to the British Empire. This marked the beginning of British colonial exploitation of the area, particularly through the establishment of tea plantations. The British quickly realized the economic potential of the Dooars due to its favourable climate for tea cultivation and by the late 19th century, the region was transformed into a major tea-producing hub.

The British brought in large numbers of labourers from different parts of India, primarily from Chota Nagpur Plateau, Bihar, Odisha, and Jharkhand. Many of these labourers belonged to tribal communities such as the Adivasis (Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, et.). These workers, lured by promises of better wages and opportunities, soon found themselves trapped in exploitative practices, including low wages, poor working conditions and high taxation, which fuelled discontent among the local people. This discontent laid the groundwork for the emergence of nationalist sentiments and political consciousness in the region.

Due to British economic policies, the indigenous people of the Dooars faced severe hardships. The introduction of land revenue systems in the late 19th century forced many farmers into debt, leading to widespread land dispossession. For instance, in 1901, approximately 40% of agricultural land in the Dooars was owned by British tea planters, leaving local farmers with small land to cultivate. Additionally, the oppressive working conditions in the tea gardens, where labourers often worked 12 to 14 hours a day for meager wages averaging ₹2-3 per day, exacerbated the economic strain. The British imposed high taxes, including a cess on agricultural produce, which further impoverished local communities. Reports from the 1930s indicate that labour strikes were common, as workers demanded better wages and working conditions. This led to widespread discontent among the people of the Dooars. This discontent gradually evolved into political consciousness, with the people of the region actively participating in various phases of the Indian independence movement.

V. Role of Tea Garden Workers and Tribal Communities in National Movements

Although initially disconnected from mainstream political developments due to its remoteness, the Dooars region gradually became aware of the nationalist sentiments across India. With the establishment of tea plantations, British officials and their oppressive practices triggered resentment among the local population. The role of tribal communities and tea garden workers in India's freedom struggle is one of the most significant aspects of the history of the Dooars. The indigenous communities, including the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, etc., were brought to the region by the British Planters to work in the tea plantations under extremely harsh conditions. By 1930, tea estates in the Dooars were employing approximately 300,000 workers, primarily from tribal backgrounds. The economic exploitation and social marginalization of these workers laid the groundwork for their involvement in the national struggle against British colonial rule.

The Dooars became strategically and economically significant after the British annexed the region in the mid-19th century. The tea industry in the Dooars was a cornerstone of the British colonial economy, producing over 15% of India's tea by 1940. The colonial administration quickly realized the potential of its fertile lands for tea plantations, transforming the region into one of the major tea-producing areas in India, with tea production soaring from 28 million kg in 1875 to over 200 million kg by 1930. British exploitation, however, was not limited to land and resources. It extended to the manipulation and marginalization of the indigenous people, leading to social and economic inequalities.

British plantation owners controlled vast areas of land, where they established tea gardens to export high-quality tea to Europe and other parts of the British Empire. However, the success of the tea industry was built on the backs of cheap labour provided by the tribal workers, who were subjected to inhumane conditions.

Tea garden workers in the Dooars were often paid extremely low wages averaging ₹2 per day and forced to work long hours in gruelling conditions. They lived in overcrowded, unsanitary quarters provided by the plantation owners, and access to healthcare and education was minimal. The workers were subjected to strict discipline, with any form of dissent or protest being met with severe punishment. This exploitative system grew widespread discontent among the labourers, who increasingly saw their plight as part of the broader struggle against British colonialism.

As the tea industry flourished, the indigenous population faced increased marginalization, with their lands being systematically taken over by the British for plantations. The displacement of these communities led to several localized rebellions against both the British administration and the zamindars (landlords) who collaborated with the colonial regime. These movements were early indicators of the desire for autonomy and rejection of British-imposed economic systems.

The British introduced oppressive taxation policies and expanded their control over local resources. Indigenous people such as the tribal communities and Adivasis were often displaced from their lands, while large tea estates were established. The labourers, largely composed of Adivasi workers brought in from central India, were subjected to gruelling working conditions. This exploitation became a driving force behind the growing resentment and subsequent participation of the Dooars people in the national freedom struggle.

The tribal people of the Dooars, particularly the Adivasis (Santhals, Oraons, and Mundas) had a long history of resistance to external control. They saw the British as another oppressive force trying to take control of their lands and livelihoods. Although these early resistances were localized and sporadic, they reflected a deep-rooted sense of defiance against foreign rule.

One such example was the Sanyasi Rebellion (1763-1800), although predominantly centered in Bengal, its impact was felt in the Dooars. The rebellion was led by wandering ascetics (Sanyasis) and peasants who opposed British economic policies. Another significant event was the Santhal Rebellion (1855-1856), which saw the Santhal tribe revolt against oppressive British policies and zamindars, significantly impacting the Dooars. Though largely crushed by the British, the rebellion planted seeds of dissent in the minds of the locals. In the early 20th century, labour unions began to emerge in the tea gardens of the Dooars region, providing a platform for workers to organize and demand better wages, working conditions, and rights. The formation of labour unions became a powerful force in mobilizing workers against colonial exploitation. These unions played a crucial role in politicizing the tea garden workers and linking their struggles to the national freedom movement. By the 1930s, unions like the Indian Tea Workers' Union were formed, representing the interests of tea garden workers and becoming powerful forces in mobilizing them against colonial exploitation. By 1945, nearly 75% of tea garden workers in the Dooars were organized under various labour unions. These unions, many of which were influenced by the freedom struggle, organized strikes and protests that often overlapped with nationalist demonstrations. The unions spread political awareness, educating the workers that their fight for better conditions was part of the larger freedom movement.

One of the key demands of the labour unions was the recognition of the rights of tea garden workers as full citizens of India, rather than as mere labourers. The unions also pushed for reforms in the tea industry, including fair wages, decent housing, and access to education and healthcare for the workers' families. While many of these demands were not met during the colonial period, the labour movement in the Dooars helped lay the foundation for post-independence labour rights activism in the region.

The growing political consciousness among tea garden workers in the Dooars also led to the spread of leftist and communist ideologies. These ideologies resonated strongly with the oppressed workers, who saw their struggles for better working conditions as part of a larger global struggle against capitalism and imperialism. Communist leaders often worked alongside nationalist leaders to mobilize the tea garden workers for strikes and protests, and some sections of the movement adopted more radical methods of resistance.

The interaction between the labour movement and leftist ideologies was particularly significant during the Quit India Movement, when some sections of the tea garden workers engaged in sabotage and guerrilla-style resistance against the British authorities. During this period, an estimated 30,000 workers participated in various forms of protest, leading to increased repression by British authorities. The involvement of leftist leaders in the freedom struggle in the Dooars helped radicalize the movement and brought attention to the intersection of class and national oppression in the region.

VI. Early Resistance and the influence of Nationalist Ideas in the Dooars

The roots of resistance in the Dooars region were planted during the early 20th century when the Indian National Congress (INC) started spreading its message of anti-colonialism and self-rule. As the Indian National Congress (INC) began organizing the freedom struggle across the country, the message of self-governance and resistance to British rule also spread to the Dooars region. By the 1920s, approximately 80% of the workforce in the Dooars consisted of tea garden workers, making them a significant part of the socio-economic fabric. The educated middle class, political activists, and Congress leaders from neighbouring Bengal played an instrumental role in mobilizing the people of the Dooars. The arrival of political leaders in the region brought the national discourse closer to the tea gardens, and workers began to associate their exploitation with colonial rule.

The socio-political atmosphere of Bengal also played a crucial role in influencing the people of the Dooars. The Swadeshi Movement (1905-1911) emerged as a response to the partition of Bengal (1905) and made a significant impact on the region. Leaders like Rabindranath Tagore and Aurobindo Ghosh encouraged people to boycott foreign goods and promote indigenous industries. In 1905, the first occasion of burning foreign clothes took place at Dinbazar in Jalpaiguri Town, symbolizing local resistance. Durgadas Chakraborty, Adyanath Mishra and Ananda Biswas were arrested by the police. It led to the determination of a section of the people to uphold the banner of swadeshi. Though the region was primarily agrarian, this movement saw participation from both local traders and tea garden workers.

One of the most remarkable features of the Swadeshi movement in the Dooars was its ability to mobilize a wide range of people, from tea estate labourers to tribal populations. The idea that the British were profiting from the resources and labour of Indians while oppressing them ignited a sense of patriotism among the people of the Dooars. Many locals stopped purchasing British goods and there were efforts to resist economic exploitation through the promotion of local industries. By 1911, nearly 50% of the local markets reported a significant decline in foreign goods due to these boycotts.

The nationwide Non-Cooperation Movement, launched by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920, found resonance in the Dooars region as well. The call for boycotting British institutions, courts and schools spread throughout Bengal, including the tea estates and small town of the Dooars. Local leaders, inspired by Gandhi's message, mobilized people to reject British authority and adopt indigenous practices. During the movement, many tea garden workers refused to work for British owned estates and participated in strikes and protests. Another important aspect of the movement was the 'No Tax Campaign' at Alipurduar. Nalini Thakur was a key figure in the campaign that succeeded in developing mass contacts. In Alipurduar alone, participation in the No Tax Campaign surged to over 3,000 people, marking a significant show of defiance.

In particular, the Civil disobedience Movement of the early 1930s saw active participation from the Dooars people. While the region did not witness large scale violent uprisings, there was widespread defiance of British laws. People refused to pay taxes and workers in the tea gardens went on strike, demanding better conditions and aligning themselves with the nationalist agenda. The civil disobedience movement unified different sections of society in the Dooars bringing together workers, peasants and local leaders in the struggle against colonial rule. A civil disobedience committee was also formed in Jalpaiguri during the movement. Khagendranath Dasgupta was the president and Brindranath Dasgupta was the secretary of the committee. Several arrests were made in the district of Jalpaiguri. A procession was organised violating section 144. This led to the arrest of Purnachandra Roy, Ananta Roy and Sachindra Basu of Jalpaiguri. Despite police repression, Independence Day was celebrated at Jalpaiguri with much enthusiasm. Some volunteers raised the national flag and distributed unauthorised leaflets during the celebration of Shivaratri festival.

The Quit India Movement of 1942 was one of the largest mass uprisings in India's freedom struggle. The people of the Dooars responded to Mahatma Gandhi's call for "Do or Die" with widespread civil disobedience. The region witnessed several protests against the British authorities. People in the tea estates, towns and villages took part in demonstrations and many were arrested for their involvement. In Alipurduar the movement spread rapidly. The movement was led by the veteran leader Nalini Pakrashi and his associates Subodh Kumar Mitra, Haridas Chatterjee and Sunil Sarkar. Kalchini, Falakata, Madarihat and Kumargram became the centres of activities of the congressmen under the leadership of Lalit Roy, Gopal Roy etc. Thus, the Quit India Movement in Dooars was marked by widespread unrest and a heightened sense of nationalism. The tea workers played a prominent role in the Quit India Movement. Strikes were organized across the region's tea estates, with workers refusing to work for the British managers. The protests also saw local leaders from the Congress and other freedom organizations actively mobilizing the masses. Villagers and tribal communities joined the strikes, and in several instances, there were clashes with British authorities.

The tribal resistance became even more violent. Many tribal communities in the Dooars took up arms against British rule, attacking police stations and government properties. Historical records show that from 1942 to 1944, there were over 30 recorded incidents of armed resistance from tribal groups in the region.

The involvement of the tea garden workers in the freedom struggle was not limited to organised political movements. Many workers also provided support to underground revolutionary groups, offering shelter and resources to revolutionaries who were fighting against the British Colonial rule.

VII. Women's Participation in the Freedom Struggle

Women in the Dooars also played a crucial and inspiring role in the freedom struggle of India. Despite living in a predominantly patriarchal society that often limited their participation in public life, women in the region played a vital role in the independence movement. Many women from the tea garden worker communities joined protests and strikes, challenging British rule and fighting for their rights. For instance, the Tea Garden Workers' Strike of 1941 saw women take the lead. They organized picket lines and participated in demonstrations demanding fair wages and improved working conditions. Historical accounts estimate that more than 5,000 women participated in rallies across various tea estates, reflecting their political consciousness and activism in the 1941 strike. Women particularly from the Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts were highly active, showing their awareness of socio-political issues. Their involvement not only

demonstrated their commitment to the freedom movement but also highlighted the intersection of gender and class struggles during this period.

Women in the Dooars, particularly those from the tea gardens and tribal communities, actively participated in the freedom struggle. They organized protests and participated in underground resistance activities. They led several strikes and marches, boldly challenging both British authority and the patriarchal norms of their communities. Their participation added a new dimension to the freedom struggle in the region. The formation of the Dooars Women's Association in the late 1930s empowered women to advocate for their rights, leading to increased awareness about social and economic injustices.

Notable women leaders from Bengal and the nearby regions, such as Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das Gupta, visited the Dooars to inspire local women to join the movement. Their visits galvanized local women, encouraging greater participation in the freedom struggle.

VIII. Conclusion

The role of the people of the Dooars in India's freedom struggle highlights that the quest for independence was not confined to the major cities or prominent political leaders. It was a movement that echoed in the remote regions of the country where ordinary people, tea garden workers, tribal communities, local intellectuals and grassroots revolutionaries joined forces to challenge British rule.

The Dooars region, with its distinctive geographical landscape and cultural richness, played a crucial role in the national movement against colonialism. Despite often being overshadowed by other parts of India, the inhabitants of the Dooars displayed remarkable courage and resilience throughout their fight for freedom. Their contributions, though frequently overlooked in mainstream narratives, were integral to shaping the broader contours of the freedom struggle.

From the early resistance of indigenous tribes who fought to protect their land and culture, to the political mobilization of tea garden workers advocating for their rights and welfare, the Dooars became a hotbed of revolutionary activity. Women, too, played a pivotal role, boldly confronting gender barriers and participating in protests and movements, thereby redefining their place in both society and the struggle for independence. The people of the Dooars not only fought for India's independence but also for their own dignity, rights and freedom from oppression, making their role in the freedom movement profoundly impactful.

Today, the story of the Dooars stands as a powerful reminder of the diverse, inclusive, and grassroots character. It illustrates how people from various backgrounds—irrespective of their social, economic or cultural differences—unite to achieve the common goal of freedom.

As we reflect on this vital chapter of history, it is essential to remember and honour the sacrifices made by the people of the Dooars. Their courage, resilience, and indomitable spirit not only played a crucial part in securing the nation's freedom but also laid the foundation for future generations to advocate for justice and equality. By recognizing their contributions, we can foster a more comprehensive understanding of India's struggle for independence, ensuring that every voice – especially those from the margins – is rightfully remembered and celebrated.

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