



## THE CHANGING SCENARIO OF MECH WOMEN: - A STUDY

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### ABSTRACT:

Jalpaiguri district is mainly a tribal based area 18.87% scheduled tribe people out of total number of scheduled tribes of West Bengal exist at present here. The tribal people of the district of Jalpaiguri can be divided broadly into two groups one of which is the early living resident group the Indo-Mongolians like- Mech, Rabha, Garo, Toto etc. and second is tribal settlers they were Santan, Oraon, Munda, Ho etc. Many authors have described the meches differently. They have their own social system and ethnic culture. But their life is changing with time. In my article I have tried to explore the present condition of mech women. Though some development are seen in their present status but the overall condition has not yet been sufficiently improved due to various reasons. I have studied two different type of villages and tried to find out the proper image of their present reality.

**KEYWORDS:** Mech tribe, social custom, women, education, economy, problems.

### INTRODUCTION

The tribal residents of the district of Jalpaiguri can be divided into two groups. One of which is the early living resident group they are Indo-Mongolians. They are known as son of the soil. These Indo-Mongoloid tribes, who came into settle in this fertile land. Most of them continue to live on even today. The Indo-Mongoloid tribes are- Mech, Rabha, Garo, Toto etc. The second is the tribal settlers. They are mainly of Astitri or Drabir Origin like Santal, Oraon, Munda, Ho and such tribal groups of people.

According to the 1951 census it is seen that 97% of the total Mech reside in sub-hilly regions of the district, Jalpaiguri. The remaining Meches are found in the district of Coochbehar and Darjeeling.

Bodos the Indo-Mongoloid tribes were subdivided into four classes namely Mech, Koch, Rabha and Garo. Meches and Kiratas belong to Asur dynasty.<sup>1</sup> They were Mlecchas and abbreviated into Mech. The Bodos of jalpaiguri and Terai call themselves Mech because they settled on the bank of the river mechi.<sup>2</sup> (Grierson, Linguistic Survey of India, vol.iii, part ii, 1903). Buchanon Hamilton describes Mech as a tribe of Kamrupa.<sup>3</sup> Hodgson describes that the Meches have come from Morong ( Nepal) and country of Kichoks in Nepal.<sup>4</sup> The Bodos debouched from Patkoi Hills into Assam in 1228 A.D. Then they spread to Goalpara, Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar under the name Mech or Mes.<sup>5</sup> Sundar says that the Mech and Kachari are the same people. They have distinct Mongolian features.<sup>6</sup> In this way many authors have described the Meches differently. According to O'Malley the Koch, Mech and Bodo or Bara, basically Tibeto-Burman, all are clans of the same tribe and that there was free mixing of Aryans and aborigines.<sup>7</sup> The Meches lived side by side with their other branches, namely the Garos, Rabhas, Koches and also with the Rajbansis for centuries but with very little culture fusion. They were conservatives and rarely went out of their forest habitations and hence had hardly had any chance to carry the effects of other cultures. After the establishment of the Tea Estate in this area, they were

engaged as labourers. But they did not accept the culture of Europeans, South Bengalis and the Other Tribal groups who swarmed this place.

Meches are amiable, intelligent, docile and free from prejudices, they are honest, truthful in deeds and words. They are steady and industrious. They are void of all violence towards their own people and their neighbours. They are free from arrogance, revenge and cruelty. To their women they have great respect. To wine, not enslaved. To power, they have no temptation. They consider all equal. They are good husbands, good fathers and not bad sons. They are hospitable to their own people and never averse to stranger.<sup>8</sup> Once upon a time shifting cultivation, which is called *Jhum* cultivation, was the main occupation of those people. Spinning, weaving, fishing etc. were also very common among them. Nowadays these people are settled agriculturists and practice of shifting cultivation has totally been abandoned by them. Now many *Meches* who live in forest *basti* as labourers. A few of them are also employed in different types of jobs such as police, teaching, business and some other posts of services.

A Mech man could marry more than one woman. Some Meches have two or three wives. Actually the number depends on the ability of the man to keep them.<sup>9</sup>

Meches of the Jalpaiguri district are divided into two sub-tribes called Agnia-Mech and Jati-MECH. Which are practically endogamous, or an Agnia-Mech cannot marry a Jati-Mech without forfeiting his position in his own clan.<sup>10</sup>

Considering the above condition of the Mech society I would examine through my field survey, the present socio-economic status of Mech women. My area of survey is two different type of village. One is agricultural village and the other is forest village. I have seen many socio-economic differences among the women of these two areas.

The literacy percentage is gradually increasing in the tribal people. If we noticed the census report then it will be clear to us.

Year	Total	Percentage of Literacy Jalpaiguri	
		Male	Female
1961	19.22	27.07	13.85
1971	24.01	31.96	14.04
1981	29.87	38.48	20.44

( Amal Kr Das and Ramendranath Saha, West Bengal Scheduled Casts and Scheduled Tribes Facts and Information, CRI, 1989, p. 228).

From the above statistics it is clear that the percentage of literacy among the tribal women of Jalpaiguri district gradually increase. So it can be said that the Mech women are not out of this development.

Mahakalguri is a medium size village located in Alipurduar-II. The population and literacy of Mahakalguri G.P. according to census of 2011 is given below---

Particulars	Toatal	Male	Female
Total No. of Houses	442		
Population	1,917	1,014	903
Schedule Tribe	363(18.9%)	189	174
Total Literacy rate	1,228(64.1%)	702	526

(<https://www.census2011.co.in>, Villages and Towns in Alipurduar-II Block of Jalpaiguri, West Bengal)

Government Pre Primary, Government Primary, Govt. Middle and Govt. Secondary Schools are available in this village. Now in this area Mech tribes are more educated than general caste people. Madhyamik, Higher Secondary and few number of graduate female are seen here in almost all families. Rekha Narjinary the member of *Jillaparisad* has passed Higher Secondary Examination and Malati

Narjinary and Bijli Narjinary are the member of Panchayet of this area who have cleared Madhyamik Examination. Malati Narjinary the member of Panchayet said that now it is seen that the daily labours also try their best to educate their girl child. She has two daughters the elder daughter has completed her graduation from Alipurduar College and the other one reads in class twelve in Mahakalguri Mission Girls" High School.

Among Meches marriages were usually settled by mothers. Bride price called "Jan" was always charged by brides parents. It amounted from rupees ten to fifteen. Nobody could marry outside his own tribe and a contravention was punishable<sup>11</sup>. Now their marriage ceremony are almost like Bengalis. In negotiation marriage inter caste marriage is never possible. Rarely do they marry outside their own tribe. But if anybody marries in his/her own choice in that case they are liberal now. With the advent of modern education and through the contact of modern culture they accepted this type of marriage now in this society<sup>12</sup>. Presently the custom "Jan" which means bride price is seen among them as a symbolic continuation of their ethnic custom.

Usually the age of marriage of girls is eighteen or above eighteen. Child marriage is abolished from their society.<sup>13</sup> But once upon a time the usual age for marriage was twelve for a female among the Agnia Mech and among the Jati Mech it was between 12 to 20 <sup>14</sup>. Divorce is allowed but the accessions are few and far between. Divorce is completed in this way- a betel leaf is taken, one half of it is held by the wife with her right hand and the other half by the husband with the left, before an assembly of elders of the village. The top Man of the village tears away the mid-rib and the leaf is thus torn into two halves. Thus the divorce is granted<sup>15</sup>.The system of traditional divorce does not exist in their society now. Presently time the educated Mech people follow the divorce laws and women are concerned about their rights. Widow re-marriage is allowed by the society and polygamy has been noticeably reduced among them.

Many inhibitions are imposed on Mech women during pregnancy. Charu Chandra Sannyal had written in his book that on the third day of every fortnight of the moon, the women must bathe in the afternoon, put on a washed cloth, take some sun dried rice, dub grass, a few basil leaves and some water in her hand and sprinkle them round every hut of the house and on the yard from the *Bathau* plant up to the hut of the *Mainou* ( i.e.the goddess of wealth, Laxmi, represented by a decorated bamboo pole). This must continue up to the day of the delivery, This custom is called "Doi-gothar-Satno( Doi gather i.e. holy articles, santo i.e. sprinkle). It is believed that the custom will ward off all evils spirits and ensure safe delivery<sup>16</sup> .Most of the educated Mech people don't believe these superstitions now. So many restrictions during pregnancy have been disappeared. They don't go to the "ojha", "gunin" etc rather than consult the doctors in case of any complexity or problem during this period.<sup>17</sup> ( Rekha Narjinary, Member of Jilla parisad, Mahakalguri). During my field survey I noticed that in these household having some education they have one or two child. According to Malati Narjinary member of Panchayet there is no difference between Girl child and boy child. So both the girl and boy child get equal importance and opportunity from their parents.<sup>18</sup>

It is noticed that educated *mech* women are involved in different type of jobs, like teaching, working in I.C.D.S., and health centre etc. Few women in this locality( Mahakalguri G.P.) started a self help group, named "*Bibar*" i.e. flower. Though they were not successful and after one year it was closed. But it is a good sign that women in this locality try to earn some money for their better livelihood. Those who have no education are engaged in field work like agricultural labour, some are engaged in rearing. Few christen *mech* women involve in sericulture. But this type of work yields less income compare to the toil. So they are only interested in sericulture if there is Government grant.

Many mech women are economically independent, many are trying to earn some money but till now a large number of them live in poor economic condition. These people have no savings. Their family is depending on their daily income.

In forest village the condition of the people is different from the people of agricultural village. I collected some data from my field survey in Mech Basti which is under Rajadanga G.P., Mal Block. This *basti* is located in Apalchand Forest. The *Mech* people who live in this forest village have surname "Saiba". Almost all women in this area are uneducated. Their children are the first generation learners.

There is a primary school in Mech Basti - F.V. Primary School. 25% to 30% students are from mech community in this primary school. Sologhariya Junior High School is there, its distance from the village is seven kilometers and there is Rajadanga H.S. School, ten kilometers away from the Mech Basti.

Mrs. Anjali Saiba, of this locality told that the girls are facing problems to continue their study because there is no mode of transportation available. She also informed that the elephant corridor is a major problem for the school going girls as the road to school passes through the elephant corridor, the girls often face wild elephants while returning from the school. As the income of the families in this area is meager, the girls are unable to continue their study.<sup>19</sup>

The women of this locality collect firewood from the forest and sell it to market. Some of them work as agricultural labourer. In every household there are some domestic animals. These domestic animals reared by women of the household. It is one of the main sources of their income but sometimes the wild animals hunt the domestic animals away from their house. Some of the women make country lequir to earn money which is also hindered by police raid.<sup>20</sup> So it is clear that they have no proper work hence have no stable income.

When there is no work available in the field the *Mech* women of the area may collect *Salh* leaf from the forest and make various items with it. The women would economically benefited if the LAMP (Larze-sized Multipurpose Co-operative Societies) supports them by providing access to market.<sup>21</sup>

The nearest health centre is situated seven kilometers away from the Mech Basti. There is no doctor and according to the inhabitation medical service rendered is very poor. In this circumstance in any problems they have to go to Mal subdivisonal Hospital covering a distance of twenty five kilometers. There is no ambulance hence the patient specially the pregnant women suffer a lot to get the minimum medical service.

From the above discussion it is clear that changes do indeed occur in the socio-economic condition of mech women but the change is not uniform. The extent of change varies from place to place. The condition of the agrarian village in on the better side of development owing to its favorable geographic location than that of the forest village. Therefore it is quite natural that the socio economic development or advancement is more ostensible among the women of the agrarian village than the women of the forest village. Though my study the picture which comes to the fore that the inhabitants of the forest village are deprived from many basic needs. Neither they have permanent employment opportunities nor do they get access to basic health care. They face immense hardship to get education after primary stage. All these obstacles have crippled their life. Subsequently in these circumstances the women of the area are in receiving end.

It cannot be said that there is no substantial change or development took place in their livelihood. But the overall development of a community is possible, only when the indispensable amenities of life are available to every member of that community. If some people get access to development and moved forward towards light of progress and the rest remain static in the shadow of underdevelopment then true development of that could not be achieved.

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