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Ethnic Unrest and Political Militancy: A Tale of Junglemahal

Dipak K Midya*

Abstract: *The Junglemahal region of West Bengal, once a peaceful area, has been the breeding ground of political militancy in recent past. Under the demographic and socio-economic backdrop of the region, I have tried in the present study to find out the reasons for developing political militancy particularly among the indigenous people. I attempted here to understand the probable relation between various social, economic, political, ritual, psychological and cultural aspects of human life that bring in social or ethnic unrest which might give rise to the extremist movement. The study further highlighted the importance of good governance to fulfill the basic needs of the unprivileged people.*

Keywords: *Junglemahal, indigenous people, ethnic unrest, political militancy.*

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic unrest and political militancy have been dominant socio-political phenomena at Junglemahal in West Bengal. Junglemahal is, in fact, a media-construct nomenclature. The term perhaps has its origin from the very term 'Jungal Mahal' used for Chotanagpur during the advent of the British rule in India. It stands, however, for a socio-cultural region, not for an administrative unit by any means. The region encompasses the forest areas of Paschim Medinipur, Purulia and Bankura Districts of West Bengal. It is predominantly inhabited by the tribal and other economically and educationally backward communities. The region is witnessing more and more people getting involved in political militancy.

The population of the vast area are, indeed, comprised of the *indigenous people* who form the most disadvantaged and marginal section of the Indian Nation-State for decades. They belong mainly to the Santal, Sabar (also called Lodha) and Bhumij ethnic groups, who are the erstwhile forest dwelling tribes. Some of them still continue to reside in the dwindling forest. Ethnicity appears to play a significant role in protecting their traditional cultural values. The tribal people of this region live invariably with the Mahata who are basically an agricultural caste people. Various political

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parties at Junglemahal and the Maoists are found to make their own deeds in accordance with their respective agenda which more often than not confront the tribals. Under this circumstance, some sort of ethnic unrest is found to developing particularly among the tribals of Junglemahal in recent times and there have been a number of incidents of political militancy in which the tribals become attached in one way or other.

Given the above situation, the present study aimed at finding out the reasons of developing political militancy particularly among the tribal and other economically backward people of Junglemahal. I have also tried in the study to understand the probable relation between various social, economic, political, ritual, psychological and cultural aspects of human life which bring in social or ethnic unrest, in one hand, and political militancy, on the other.

Conceptual Dimensions

Ethnic unrest is one of the burning problems of recent times. Unrest simply refers to a state of trouble or discontent, especially among a group of people (*Chambers Universal Learners' Dictionary*, 1994: 830). When the discontent or contradiction is manifested at the collective life of an ethnic group it may be called ethnic unrest. Aristotle was perhaps the first person to refer to social unrest while discussing the causes of the political revolution. The universal and principal cause of the revolutionary feeling, for him, is the desire for equality or the varying desires of section of people for equality and perception of inequality. Inferiors revolt, he argued, in order that they may be equal, and equals that may be superior (Aristotle, n. d.: 212).

Social unrest is an essential dimension of socio-cultural order, which exists beyond the habitual way of life. Its manifestation may be seen as 'a departure from order as un-order, dis-order and out-of-order' (Stanage, 1974: 229). One of the earliest references to the problem appears in Ralph Linton's (1943) work. To him, the impact of European culture upon the small primitive societies of the world during the past centuries has frequently led to the appearance of nativistic movements wherein the primitive societies have reacted, sometimes violently against dominations of the European, and engaged in organized attempts to revive or perpetuate certain aspects of their native cultures in the face of this pressure to change (Linton, 1943). In his attempt to analyze various socio-political movements occurred in India particularly in her post-independence phase, S. K. Datta Ray expressed his reservations over whether concentration of power in the hands of one set of people could serve a heterogeneous society like India. For him, the Constitution of India, which is unitary in nature, scarcely represented the ethno-cultural diversities of the country. This resulted into

apprehension of a kind of threat to the identity as well as individualism of the minority and underprivileged communities. All the tribes of the tormented North-East, and other ethnic and religious communities, for him, felt isolated in the land in which power is concentrated in the hands of people who speak Hindi and worship Hindu Gods (Datta Ray, 1980: 8). A. Gidden (1984:158), M. Kelly (1994) and A. Swain (1997) have also made significant contributions in this particular field of research.

Unrest may be, according to A.K. Danda (2006: xx), time-specific, geo-specific as well as ethno-specific, including age and gender specific. Unrest erupts when people are not free to take their own decisions and to protect and maintain their own values and culture. Development and expression of mind need a world free from any fear, pressure and oppression – a free space. In the words of Rabindranath Tagore:

...Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;

(Tagore, 1910: 27)

Ethnic unrest, thus, becomes manifested when an ethnic group apprehends a threat toward their identity, culture or their very existence. In India ethnic unrest poses one of the greatest threats to her national integration as well as sovereignty. K.R. Malkani (1980), H. Rahman (1980), Datta Ray (1980), Sumit Sarkar (1983), R.D. Munda (1988), S. Krishna (1996), S. K. Chaube (1990, 2006), J. Sarkar (2006), D. K. Midya (2006), R.K. Das (2006) and S.R. Mondal (2006) have made important observations on this dimension of social reality in India. It is imperative in this regard to define the term 'ethnic'. The term 'ethnic' implies certain quality or affiliation with respect to hereditary and cultural considerations. It is used to denote an ethnic group or community where, Handelman (1977) argues, the members interact regularly having common interests and organizations at a collective

level. However, Anthony D. Smith defines an ethnic group categorically in terms of six main features: (i) a common *proper name*, (ii) a myth of *common ancestry*, (iii) shared *historical memories*, or better, shared memories of a common past or pasts, (iv) one or more *elements of common culture*, (v) a *link with a homeland* (not necessarily its physical occupation but may be a symbolic attachment to the ancestral land), and (vi) a *sense of solidarity* (1986:

Ch. 2). This definition stresses basically on two points: first, the importance of shared myths and memories, and the subjective identification of individuals with the community; and second, the orientation to the past. Schermerhorn's definition incorporates the entire gamut of the concept. To him, an ethnic group can be defined as a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared

historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood (Schermerhorn, 1996: 17).

This very notion of ethnic group leads to origin of the concept of ethnicity, which means the quality of belonging to an ethnic group or community (Chapman *et al.*, 1989: 15). The very concept is expressive of various sociopsychic and cognitive perceptions of reality, and used with diverse connotations (Shils, 1968; Barth, 1969; Schermerhorn, 1970, 1996; Francis, 1976; Van den Berghe, 1981; Horowitz, 1985; Danda, 1991a). Ethnicity in Indian situation becomes a dominating theoretical issue for many scholars (Roy Burman, 1989, 1999; Dutta, 1990; Danda, 1988, 1991a, 1991b, 1993; B.P. Mahapatra, 1999), whereas others have attempted to relate it with empiricism (e.g., Sinha, 1974; Roy, 1990; Midya *et al.*, 1993). The very term makes sense, according to Tonkin and his associates, only in the context of relativities and processes of identification (Tonkin *et al.*, 1996: 23). Ethnicity is particularly expressed when peoples of two or more cultures inhabit the same social system. In the present study, therefore, ethnicity became an important research tool to comprehend the identity perspective of the ethnic groups inhabiting the same socio-political system at Junglemahal

STUDY AREA AND METHODOLOGY

The present study was undertaken in four villages of different ethnic composition under the jurisdiction of Jhargram Sub-Division in Paschim Medinipur District of West Bengal in India. Keeping in mind the criteria like ethnic composition, politico-economic situation, and distance from the sub-divisional town of Jhargram, four randomly selected villages were studied for the present purpose. The villages were:

1. Bhimarjun – a Bhumij village located at the north-western-most part of the district under Banspahari Police Station.
2. Amlatora (JL No. 177) – a biethnic village dominated by the Santal. It is under Jamboni Police Station.
3. Kushboni (JL No. 943) – a Mahata dominated biethnic village under Binpur Police Station.
4. Sangram (JL No. 179) – a multiethnic village dominated by the Sabar. It is under Jamboni Police Station.

All the villages are located within the Maoist trouble-torn area of Junglemahal. So the villages were witnessing Maoist movement with various severities and the counter-insurgency programmes with equal

cruelties. The source of data for the present study was intensive fieldwork which was conducted in the four villages during February 2008 to March 2010. However, political instability with violent movement and regular killings in the Maoist activities and counter-insurgency programme in the area were the inescapable impediments toward staying in the field and conducting fieldwork as well.

The study used a mixture of observational tools and interview methods. It was started with taking of household census data at its initial stage. Family Survey Schedules (FSS) were used for production of household census data. The FSS was devised to obtain information on age, gender, caste/tribe, clan, marital status, age at marriage, marriage distance, number of offspring, educational status, occupation, occupational shift, income and expenditure pattern, dietary habits and leisure time activities. The data provided an idea about population number as well as their socio-economic and ethnic profile. In taking household census data, the respondents were in most cases the Head of Family (HoF) or, in his absence, his wife or other elderly member(s). For understanding the working condition in the day-to-day life, the randomly selected respondents were interviewed. A number of case studies were recorded in order to educe various aspects of ethnicity, economic pursuits and socio-ritual spheres in different ethno-political setups. It was supplemented at times by interviews preferably of elderly member(s) in isolation and/or in group-situation. The informants for the purpose were selected through purposive or sometimes by random sampling keeping in mind the nature of the information required. Life history was another method in use. Various types of questionnaires were employed in the study. In making questionnaires, the main points of concern were: (a) Did the socio-economic-political and demographic conditions of the tribal population of the region have any bearing upon ethnicity of the population suffering from? (b) Were the tribal people enjoying their democratic rights supposed to do? (c) Did their miserable socio-economic conditions as well as multiethnic instability, as found in day-to-day Junglemahal life, bring in them ethnic unrest? (d) Did their ethnic unrest lead them ultimately to political militancy? (e) What type of intervention was required to change the situation?

FINDINGS AND ANALYSES

Ethnic distribution of the village communities under study by family is given in Table 1. Bhimarjun was a uniethnic tribal village inhabited exclusively by the Bhumij. Kushboni had a small biethnic population comprising of two communities, where the Mahatas outnumbered the

Santals. Sangram and Amlatora were inhabited by the tribal as well as non-tribal population. In Sangram the Sabars were the main inhabitants who numbered nearly two-third of the entire village population. This was a multiethnic village whose occupants were basically forest gatherers and landless day-labourers. Amlatora had a biethnic population where the Santals outnumbered the Mahatas. The major share of agricultural land in Amlatora was, however, in the hands of the Mahatas. All the four villages were under severe political disturbances involving killings and counter-killings of poor tribal people by the rival groups.

The villages of this region are, on the whole, small in terms of number of families and population (see Tables 1 and 2). Population figures of the villages (Table 2) showed that everywhere, except the Santals in Kushboni, the males slightly outnumbered the females. Gender ratio was, therefore, not balanced in the villages, which was unlikely for tribal villages. Distribution of the tribal population by age and sex in Bhimarjun (Fig. 1), Sangram (Fig. 2) and Amlatora (Fig. 3), for instance, illustrated a great disparity in sex-wise distribution particularly in the age groups below 15 years. This was reportedly for the healthcare measures taken were relatively less in cases of illness of girl children. This led to higher death rate at the after-birth stage and thereafter in case of girl child. However, having a considerable number of persons at the age over 64 years (Figs. 1, 2 and 3) suggested that the life span of the communities was longer.

Table 1
Distribution of the Ethnic Groups by Family

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Village</i>	<i>Police Station</i>	<i>Ethnic Group</i>	<i>Families No. (%)</i>
1	BHIMARJUN	Banspahari	Bhumij	114 (100.0)
2	AMLATORA	Jamboni	Santal	54 (80.60)
			Mahata	13 (19.40)
			Total	67 (100.0)
3	KUSHBONI	Binpur	Santal	8 (32.00)
			Mahata	17 (68.00)
			Total	25 (100.0)
4	SANGRAM	Jamboni	Sabar (Snake Charmer)	59 (66.29)
			Santal	2 (02.25)
			Napit (Hair-Cutter)	5 (05.56)
			Kulu (Oil-Pastler)	2 (02.25)
			Kamar (Ironsmith)	2 (02.25)
			Tanti (Weaver)	2 (02.25)
			Baisnab	5 (05.62)
			Dhopa (Washerman)	3 (03.37)
			Others	9 (10.11)
			Total	89 (100.0)

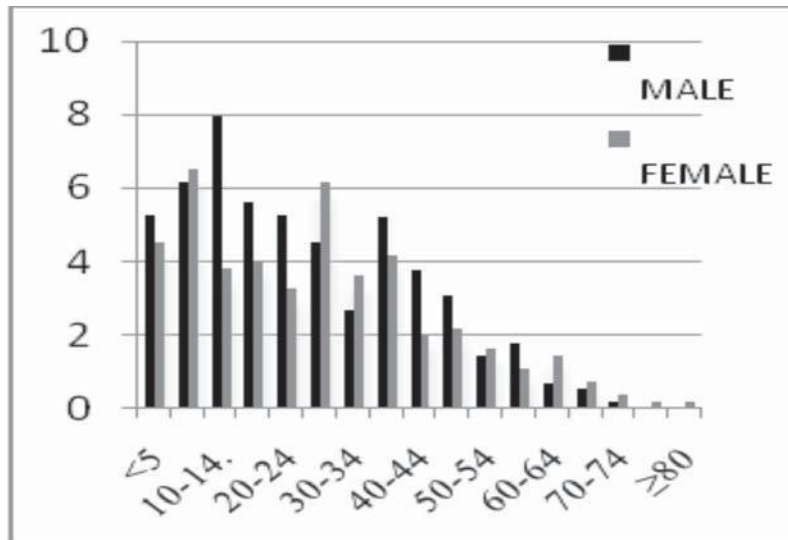
Source: Field data, 2008-10.

Table 2
Distribution of Population by Sex

Village	Ethnic group	Population		
		Male No. (%)	Female No. (%)	Total No. (%)
BHIMARJUN	Bhumij	300 (54.25)	253 (45.75)	553 (100.0)
AMLATORA	Santal	153 (42.74)	142 (39.66)	295 (82.40)
	Mahata	35 (09.77)	28 (07.82)	63 (17.60)
	Total	188 (52.51)	170 (47.48)	359 (100.0)
KUSHBONI	Santal	10 (11.90)	15 (17.86)	25 (29.76)
	Mahata	35 (41.67)	24 (28.57)	59 (70.24)
	Total	45 (53.57)	39 (46.43)	84 (100.0)
SANGRAM	Sabar	114(34.13)	94 (28.14)	208 (62.27)
	Santal	2 (00.60)	2 (00.60)	4 (01.20)
	Napit	17 (05.09)	13 (03.89)	30 (08.98)
	Kulu	2 (00.60)	1 (00.30)	3 (00.90)
	Kamar	2 (00.60)	2 (00.60)	4 (01.20)
	Tanti	3 (00.90)	1 (00.30)	4 (01.20)
	Baisnab	16 (04.79)	14 (04.19)	30 (08.98)
	Dhopa	9 (02.69)	6 (01.79)	15 (04.49)
	Others	20 (05.99)	16 (04.79)	36 (10.78)
	Total	185 (55.39)	160 (44.61)	334 (100.0)

Source: Field data, 2008-10.

Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of Bhumij Population (N=553) by Age and Sex at Bhimarjun

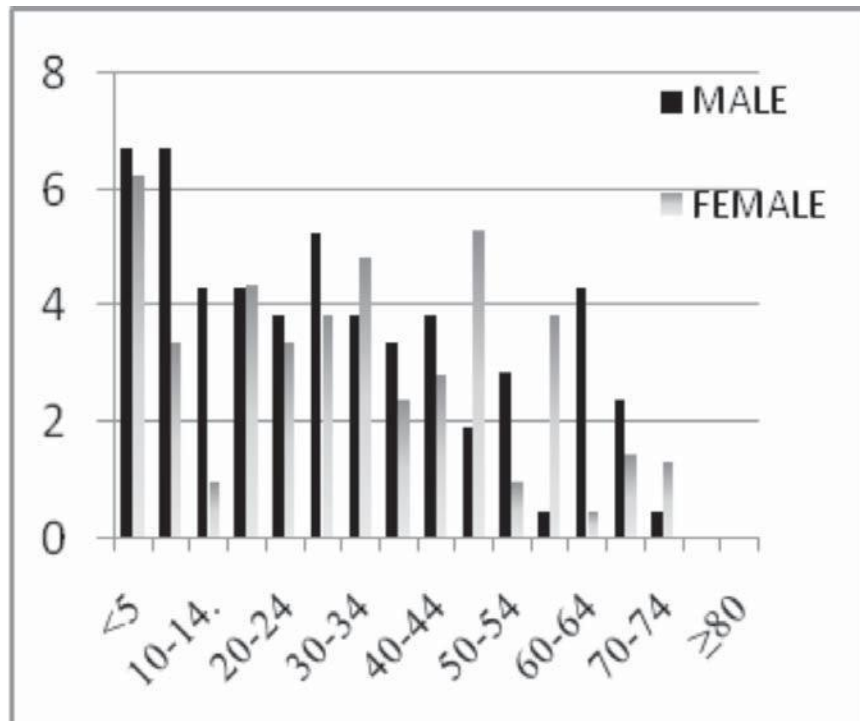


Source: Field data, 2008.

Birth registration system was almost lacking in these villages. Child-women ratio could, therefore, be taken as a rough measure of fertility. Child-women ratio at Amlatora (Table 3), for instance, was moderately low. The population pattern for the villages indicated a growing trend (Fig. 4).

Percentages of illiteracy in all the villages, with the lone exception of Amlatora, were alarmingly very high. These were 61.12% and 60.00% for Bhimarjun and Kushboni respectively, compared to 42.28% in West Bengal and 42.36% in erstwhile Medinipur District (as per 1991 census). This was very higher among the Sabars (65.86%) at Sangram (Table 4). Majority of the literate persons here fell under the lower age groups. Similar pattern was found in all the villages. Only Amlatora could be singled out where illiteracy rate among the Santals (Table 5) came down under 50% (42.71%). What was more alarming was the rate of illiteracy among the females. This was 73.33% and 78.66% in Kushboni and Bhimarjun respectively, for instance.

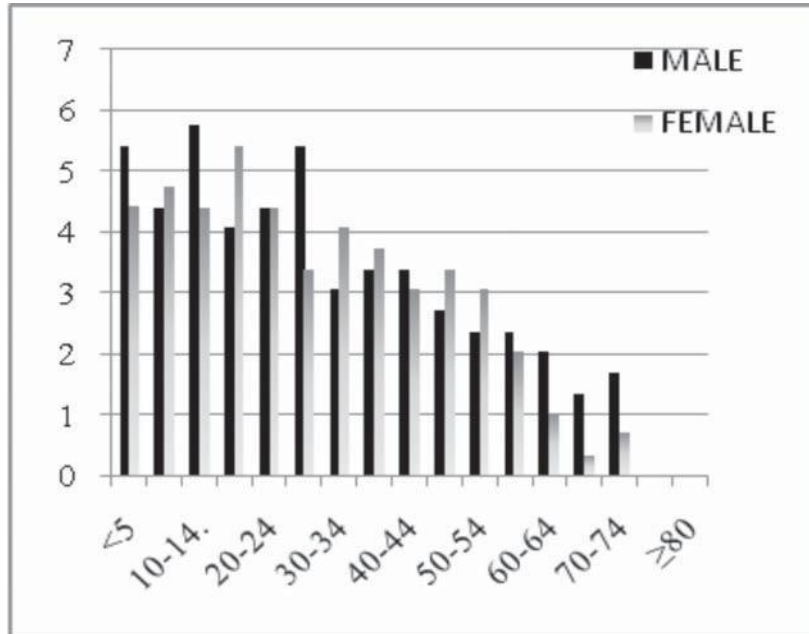
Figure 2: Percentage Distribution of Sabar Population (N=208) by Age and Sex at Sangram



Source: Field data, 2009

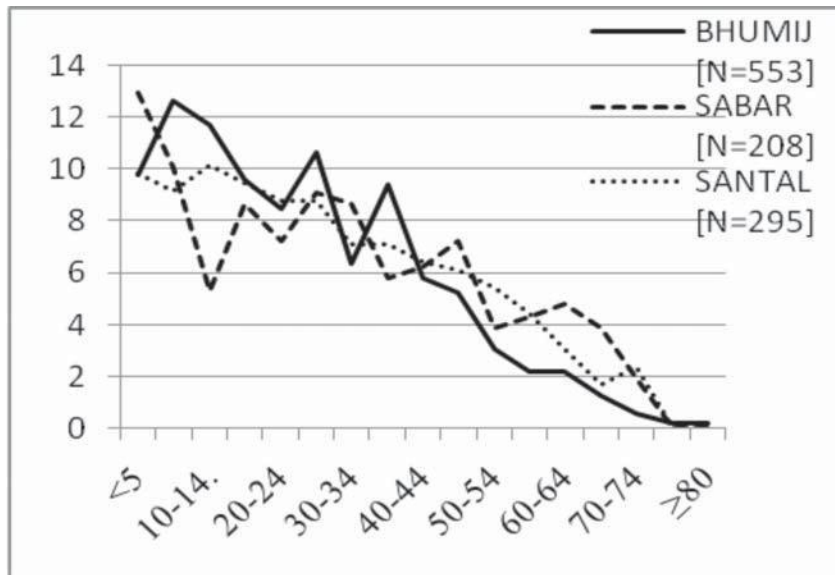
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Figure 3: Percentage Distribution of Santal Population (N=295) by Age and Sex at Amlatora



Source: Field data, 2010

Figure 4: Population Pattern of the Three Ethnic Groups



Source: Field data, 2008-10

Table 3
Child-Women Ratio at Amlatora.

<i>Ethnic group</i>	<i>No. of Children upto 4yrs (A)</i>			<i>No. of Women with the age-group 15-44 yrs (B)</i>	<i>Child-Women Ratio (A/B x 100)</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>T</i>		
Santal	16	13	29	71	40.84
Mahato	03	02	05	18	27.78
Total	19	15	34	89	38.20

Among all the village communities under study, the rate of early marriage was very high (69.01% to 81.27%). Without mentioning the details of community-wise marriage pattern here, it was worth mentioning that the most of the girls (67.13%) were given marriage at an age from 11 to 15 years, while 11% of them at 16-17 years and only 12% at or after 16-17 years. Early marriage for males was also very frequent among all the tribes. The tribes and other backward castes of this region showed no differential pattern in regard to early marriage. Among the poor people, early marriage was the very common practice. Early marriage resulted in pregnancy at a pre-mature age which had been the common cause of teen-age deaths at the time of delivery. Such deaths as well as cases of pre-birth or after-birth death of babies were reportedly very frequent among the Bhumij and Sabars in particular. The bodily structure of the Sabar and Bhumij children and women spoke itself of severe malnutrition. Their life was in standstill even after 6 decades of independence and after more than 33 years of the so-called 'left' rule here.

The villages were basically agrarian in nature though sufficient cultivable land was not available everywhere. The villages have lateritic soil, mixed more or less with sand and gravels. Since Bhimarjun was located on the rubric hilly terrain, agricultural land was almost negligible there. The Bhumij were depending basically on the gathering pursuit in the surrounding forests, where they had to face some sort of multiethnic competition. In Kushboni the agricultural land was not sufficient and that too was of barren type. Here the major share of agricultural land was in the hands of Mahatas. The Santals worked basically as day-labourers in agricultural pursuit in nearby villages. Here dependency ratio for the Santals was 78.54% (Table 6), in contrast to that among the Mahatas (55.55%). A perceptible ethnic tension existed here between the Santals and the Mahatas on account of control over agricultural land and access to forest produces. In Amlatora, on the other hand, though both the Santals and the Mahatas

Table 4
Percentage Distribution of the Sabar Population by Educational Status [N = 208]

Age Group (in Yrs)	Illiterate			L I T E R A T E						Total M+F
				Can Sign Only			I-VII			
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	
< 5	5.77	3.36	9.13				0.48			0.48
5-9	2.88	3.36	6.25				3.36	1.93	5.29	5.29
10-14	2.40	0.96	3.36	0.96		0.96	2.40	0.48	2.88	3.84
15-19	2.40	2.40	4.80	0.96	1.44	2.40	1.44	1.44	2.88	5.28
20-24	2.88	2.40	5.28				0.48	1.44	1.93	1.93
25-29	1.93	2.88	4.81	1.93	0.48	2.40	1.44		1.44	3.84
30-34	1.44	4.32	5.76	0.96	0.48	1.44	0.96	0.96	1.93	3.37
35-39	1.44	2.88	4.32	1.44	0.96	2.40	1.44		1.44	3.84
40-44	0.96	1.93	2.88	0.96		0.96	1.93		1.93	2.88
45-49	1.44	2.88	4.32	0.48		0.48	0.48	0.48	0.96	1.44
50-54	1.93	1.44					0.48		0.48	0.48
55-59		3.36	3.36	0.96		0.96				0.96
60-64	1.93	0.96	2.88	0.96		0.96				0.96
65-69	2.40	1.44	3.84							
≥70	0.48	0.96	1.44							
All Age Groups	30.29	35.57	65.86	9.61	3.36	12.97	14.90	6.25	21.15	34.14

Source: Field data, 2009.

possessed some agricultural land, they also witnessed ethnic tension over cultural practices. Here dependency ratios were as low as 49.75% and 48.55% for the Santals and the whole village population respectively. However, in Sangram dependency ratio among the Sabars as well as for the other communities was low. It does not mean anyway that their economic condition was better off. This was for the number of children in the age-group of 10-14 years and that of girl child in the age group of 5-9 were excessively low. Here multiethnic instability was frequently felt out in the field of cultural values and social norms.

The tribal people in the study area were found not to get at least two square meals a day. Many of them did not, however, possess the Below Poverty line (BPL) cards. They had no proper housing facility. Healthcare measure was not available to them for various reasons. In Bhimarjun there was no health care center in the nearby areas. However, though a health centre was located just ½ km. away from Kushboni at Andharia, health care

Table 5
Percentage Distribution of the Santal Population by Educational Status at Amlatora [N = 295]

Age Group (in yr)	ILLITERATE					LITERATE					TOTAL		
			I - IV		V - VIII	IX - X		XI - XII				FM	FT
< 5	4.74	2.71	7.46	0.68	1.69						0.68	1.69	2.37
5 - 9	1.02	1.35	1.69	3.38	4.07						3.38	4.07	7.45
10-14	0.68	0.68	1.35	3.39	2.37	1.35	1.35	0.34			5.08	3.72	8.80
15-19		0.68	0.68	2.03	1.35	1.02	3.05	1.02	0.34		4.07	4.74	8.81
20-24	1.02	1.35	2.37	1.35	2.71	0.34		0.34	0.34	1.35	3.38	3.05	6.43
25-29	0.68	1.69	2.37	1.69	1.69	2.37		0.68			4.74	1.69	6.43
30-34	0.34	3.05	3.39	2.03	0.68	0.68	0.34				2.71	1.02	3.73
35-39	0.34	2.71	3.05	2.37	1.02	0.34		0.34			3.05	1.02	4.07
40-44	1.02	2.71	3.73	1.35	0.34	0.34		0.68			2.37	0.34	3.72
45-49	1.35	3.05	4.41	1.02	0.34	0.34					1.35	0.34	1.69
50-54	1.02	3.05	4.07	1.35							1.35		1.35
55-59	1.02	2.03	3.05	1.02		0.34					1.35		1.35
60-64	1.02	1.02	2.03	0.68		0.34					1.02		1.02
65-69	1.02	0.34	1.35	0.34							0.34		0.34
≥70	1.02	0.68	1.69	0.68							0.68		0.68
All Age Groups	16.27	26.44	42.71	23.39	16.27	7.46	4.74	3.39	0.68	1.35	35.59	21.89	57.28

Source: Field data, 2010.

delivery system was near-to-absent there. This was for very irregular attendance of the doctors and other staffs, poor stock of medicine, casual approach of the staff, and sometimes for lack of health awareness among the tribals themselves. A health care sub-centre was situated near Sangram and Amlatora. But this sub-centre remained closed most of time.

Even after more than six decades of independence, these villages hardly had adequate facility of safe drinking water and proper sanitation system. The people demanded for safe drinking water, food and shelter on various occasions. But the administration was very reluctant to pay a heed and sometimes found to violate the democratic rights of the tribals to stop their legitimate demands. In this part of the state, the common people had virtually lost their democratic rights for decades. Everything was happening here at the political whims. Peoples' desire and opinion was not taken into consideration in governance at all.

Forest was an inseparable part of life of the ethnic groups concerned. The Bhumij, Sabars and Santals had a patterned relation with forest in their sociocultural, symbolic and economic life from a remote past. They relied on forest for every sphere of their livelihood – for food, fuel, house-building materials, agricultural implements and for performing ritual rites and ceremonies. But the successive forest policies in pre- and post-independent India, on the one hand, and the Wildlife Conservation Act, 1972 and the Forest Conservation Act, 1980 have imposed several restrictions on their access to forest and made their livelihood at stake. The tribal people who had no other avenue to make a living were now denied of their traditional rights over forests. The situation became more alarming with the forest coverage in JUNGLEMAHAL in its declining edge with ever-increasing impetus toward urbanization.

The new forest policy in India (2007) contained many rights and privileges for the poorest people. But they could not really enjoy the rights at all. In West Bengal, government was giving priority to plantation of eucalyptus. This plantation could not serve the rights and privileges of the tribal and other marginalized people since the latter was of no value to them, as they perceive. People make a symbiotic relationship with nature having forests with diverse varieties of plants and animals including birds and insects that a eucalyptus plantation lacks.

Table 6
Dependency Ratio in the Villages

Village	Tribe/Caste	No. of Persons aged (in yr.)			Dependency Ratio
		<15(a)	15 – 64(b)	>64 (c)	
Bhimarjun	Bhumij	189	352	12	57.00
Amlatora	Santal Total Population	86 103	197 241	12 14	49.7548.55
Kushboni	Santal Total Population	0925	1454	0205	78.5455.55
Sangram	Sabar Total Population	59 104	137 208	12 22	51.7260.57

The Bhumij, Sabars and Santals under study were basically uneducated and unskilled people. They could hardly think of their rights to work and education, since they were suffering from severe malnutrition and frequent phases of starvation for decades. Even death of starvation, an issue that caused much political uproar in recent past in West Bengal, was not new to the Bhumij in Bhimarjun and its adjoining areas in particular. These poorest people were suffering from extreme poverty and hunger, resulting in untimely deaths.

The Bhumij, Sabar, Santals and the associated Mahatas had a strong sentiment that they were the earliest settlers or original inhabitants of this region. The forests and the natural resources of the area were their's. They used to living with their own values and culture. But nowadays they apprehended challenges in their economic sustenance and maintenance of culture from the *diku* (the outsiders) or encroachers, as they understood, into their territory, who comprised of businessmen and servicemen including the forest personnel. They, therefore, created a sense of ethnic solidarity and, at the same time, some sort of ethnic unrest developed among them.

The tribal populations of the villages did not have a viable economy outside the forests. They had to walk a very long distance to collect fuel woods from the forests and to sell them for a living. The demographic profile of the tribal population indicated high illiteracy rate, high rates of infant mortality and death at childbirth and high rate of alcoholism causing great deal of impoverishment. The medical facility was insufficient or completely lacking in some areas and the people were reluctant to some extent towards modern medicines. Moreover, listing under the BPL scheme showed great arbitrariness as many really poor people had not been included in the list. The tribals were also not aware of many poverty-alleviating schemes supposed to be running under local governments, such as the *panchayats* and *panchayat samities*. Most of the government programmes, thus, proved to be ineffective in alleviating the miserable life conditions of the tribal people since the most of the government schemes did not reach them. Early marriage resulted in teenage pregnancies and death of teenage mothers at the time of delivery. The girl children were married off at their very early age owing to severe poverty, lack of proper education and of knowledge of reproductive health. Most of the children were either non-school-goers or dropouts in the early primary stage. More importantly, the economy of these tribal people was in the marginal level which did not ensure even two square meals everyday. Many families who depended basically on the Minor Forest Resources (MFR) were living at the mercy of the middlemen who bought MFR at a rate well below the market price. On the other hand, there were some people who were dominating in and controlling the service and trading sectors as well as political meadow. They were basically the outsiders who came to this region after getting jobs or in business works. They, however, came to the position to manoeuvre the political field of the region. The economic control of the region was in their hands. The administrative machinery and the developmental programmes were obviously designed without keeping in mind the indigenous people's socio-economic requirements, identity, ethnic

dimensions, values and culture. So, there was very conspicuous inequality and disparity in resource accessibility and utilization between the indigenous people of the region on the one hand, and the immigrants on the other. As a result, with the passing of time the indigenous people of this region had been alienated from the mainstream politico-economic scenario.

All these conditions seemed to have led the tribal population of the region to the domain of ethnic unrest and brought them in the hands of one or other political or extremist groups in order to having a mere survival. This ultimately had led them towards political militancy in one way or other.

EMERGING TREND

Under an administrative and bureaucratic mindset which viewed the tribals as uncivilized, savage, primitive, inferior and backward or *junglis*, the tribals of this region of West Bengal were being deprived of their basic human rights and requirements. West Bengal Government had the will to change the scenario. But it looked very theoretical and mechanical, since there was hell and heaven difference in policy framing and its execution. One of the major problems lied in the process of deliberation of services to these poorest of the poor (including the lower caste people). It was reported, for example, that a major part of the food grains earmarked for the Public Distribution System (PDS) were being sold in black market, instead of being given to the beneficiaries.

The *panchayats* and *panchayat samities* were basically non-functioning entities. These institutes had failed to deliver because these could not ensure the local (poor) people's participation while designing their plans and programmes. Rather, these became the leaders' den that remained reportedly busy over manipulating funds and preparing the utilization certificates which were the only requirements of the government. As many as 86.12 per cent of the respondents did not know the functioning of the *Panchayats* concerned. Meetings of the *Gram Samsad*, a statutory and mandatory provision under the Panchayati Raj Act in West Bengal, were not held in the sense meant for. However, 90.12 per cent of the respondents believed that the required records of such meetings must had been kept ready in other way. Process of selection of beneficiaries under various schemes was utmost unfair and based on the personal choice of the political leaders in power. Some informants reported that their names were enlisted in the official records of beneficiaries. But they neither knew anything about the scheme nor even received any benefit by any means, though the benefits

had been received on records. The respondents stated that they could not dare to raise their voices over the malpractices due to political grounds. That would only earn, they understood, dire consequences even to the extent of homelessness and/or physical punishment. People had, therefore, been very frustrated, alienated, disinterested and indifferent towards the so-called developmental programmes meant for. They were of the view that the present administrative-political order did not respect and would not protect the indigenous people's rights and culture. They felt that this order could neither meet their daily basic needs, nor even fulfill their expectation. They were in the midst of grave poverty in day-to-day life on the one hand, and getting threats of losing their culture as well as identity, on the other. So, their life was always with discomfort and discontent.

This growing ethnic discontent sometimes led to extremist movement that occurred at Junglemahal in recent times. Deprivation of the basic needs in essence of human existence appeared, however, to reinforcing a section of these indigenous people to be indifferent to the mainstream sociopolitical order and, at the same time, to be attracted to the philosophy of political militancy led particularly by the Maoists. The latter was utilizing the feeling of discontent of the poor tribal masses (and the accompanying Mahatas) since late 1990s. They undertook various pro-people programmes, particularly during the stages of their foundation and emergence at Junglemahal (Midya *et al.*, 2012: 77). The tribals, including the women, were accepting the Maoists as their well-wishers and extended all kinds of cooperation towards them. However, from 2008 the ethnic unrest of the tribals got a remarkable turning point. The tribals and the Mahatas came out with violent movements backed by the Maoists. They floated a mass organization called People's Committee against Police Atrocities (PCPA) and got arms-training to fight guerilla warfare. During this period, the Maoists also changed their strategy. They started armed struggle with popular support from the underprivileged groups. But sooner they were compelling the tribals to do their activities. Though the struggle initially drew in killings of alleged corrupt political leaders, subsequently it became involved with killings of poor tribals in their effort to keep the region under their control. As a result, the tribals became traumatized and were trying to distancing themselves from the movement since they were in no position to resist the Maoists under a situation of almost complete administrative collapse.

CONCLUSION

Having no certainty about at least two square meals everyday, no proper health care mechanism, insufficient housing facility, irresistible threat to

the tribal culture and identity and values, life of the tribals at Junglemahal appeared, however, not much above an animal stage. The elders, who were the guardians of tribal culture, could not show the slightest rays of hope to the younger ones with regard to earning opportunities and preservation of their culture. Here women were found to work hard throughout a day. Under such circumstances, the teen-agers dreamt of bringing in change – a change that could make them free from all hardships. They were found to take arms to ensure their minimal rights under the leadership of the extremist group like the Maoists. Thus, the socio-economic and political context of Junglemahal in fact acted as the causal factors for generating militant activities.

Interestingly, to counter this situation the government only resorted to police deployment and penal action, without giving importance to economic development and creation of a democratic atmosphere. As a result, the marginal people were increasingly taking the side of the extremists and the situation went practically out of control.

Given this situation, the Maoists were trying to entice the disadvantaged people through various pro-people activities in the foundation and emergence phases of their movement during 1996 to 2007. They were then trying to unite the people against the administration, calling for boycotting the Government initiatives, giving leadership in the movement against alleged police atrocities which were partly true, having floated a mass organization called People's Committee against Police Atrocities (PCPC), and pertaining training to the people, especially the teen-agers, to fight the guerilla warfare. Initially, many people became attached to the movement rationally and somewhat emotionally. The Maoist cadres apparently took the responsibility to let the people to get their democratic rights and developmental resources. The local people, even the women, accepted them as their sympathizers who were fighting for the former's cause. But later on, particularly during 2008 onwards, the tribal people were forced to have the Maoists' activities done. The Maoists were then trying to control the region with the whims and guns. With the collapse of administrative set up, the village people were in no position to resist the Maoists within which a few of their own young boys and girls also become involved anyway.

Most of the leaders of the movement against police atrocities belonged, however, to the Mahatas – a self-proclaimed indigenous people living along with the tribals. They were taking decisions on behalf of the tribals. The tribals were, therefore, in a situation that they never witnessed before. They were not always accepting the decisions taken in the name of PCPA, but they had to follow the dictums before guns. They were not in position to

disown or resist any decision taken on their behalf as was spoken. Here, the issues of tribal culture, values or identity were, in fact, non-issues. The movement did not remain by any means, therefore, a tribal movement or rebellion. It became ultimately a clash between the Maoists and the ruling CPI (M) party as well as the State Government led by the party. Here the poor tribal people were used as instruments of resisting contesting forces. So, they became the most vulnerable entity.

Under the above background, a comprehensive development plan is the urgent need of the situation. The plan must ensure active participation of the stakeholders. The administration ought to have a soothing approach toward the tribal and other poor people of the region, who had been facing age-old deprivation and violation of democratic rights, to win over their confidence. The indigenous people of the region should no longer be considered as 'jungli' or uncivilized by any means, rather be treated as our fellow citizens. A situation is to be created so as to enable them to express their views and values, and to practice their culture. Ameliorative measures are to be taken to eradicate poverty and unemployment. The indigenous people should be provided with adequate facilities of food, shelter and education. Administrative set up have to come forward with a mechanism of providing with justified and need-based distribution of resources and protecting the indigenous people's rights over natural resources. The people are to be motivated not to give their children married off at an early age, thereby shrinking the possibility of teen-age pregnancy. Their cultural and value-laden elements are to be cared for and preserved for the sake of human society. The entire Sub-Division along with the adjoining areas of Bankura and Puruliya Districts may be declared as a Special Category Zone or be brought under a master plan, the cost of which is perhaps much less than that of the counter-insurgency programme. In order to generate

employment opportunity, information kiosk may be installed in every *gram panchayat* and *panchayat samiti* offices.

In this sphere, the political mediators ought not to have any direct role as the tribals of Junglemahal are over-sensitive about them. There is urgent need to associate anthropologists in the developmental planning and execution. This is because they know these peoples' traditions, values and culture, and have enough training and experience on others' culture. Tribal peoples have enormous knowledge about the nature and environment and its protection. It requires only to harness the latent prowess of the indigenous people and to utilize that for sustainable development of Junglemahal.

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