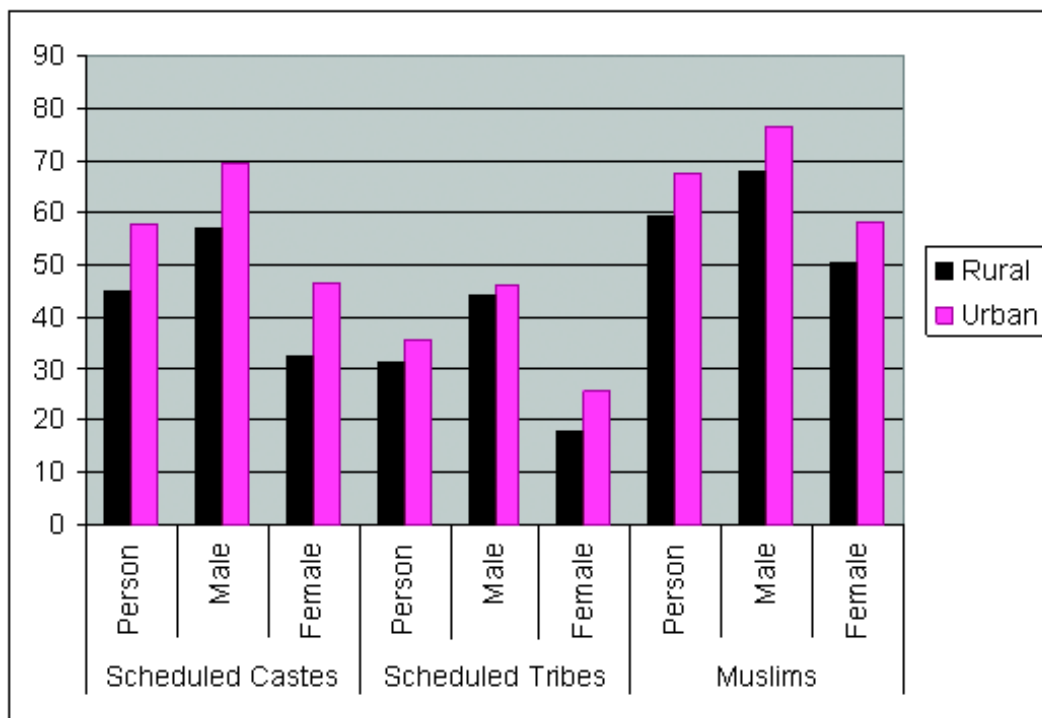


Chapter VI Inter-group disparities

The presence of a significant number of people belonging to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the Muslim community in the district, who are generally more disadvantaged than others, makes it important to focus on various forms of inter-group disparities. We noted in Chapter 1 that according to 2001 Census, the share of SC population in Birbhum was 29.5 per cent as against 23 per cent in West Bengal and the share of ST was 6.7 per cent as against 5.5 per cent in West Bengal. These two categories of the disadvantaged population together constituted 36.2 per cent, which is higher than the corresponding percentage share for West Bengal (28.5 per cent). Muslims, who constitute 35.1 per cent of the total population of Birbhum, are largely concentrated in the rural areas. While 8.6 per cent of Birbhum's total population lives in urban areas, only 4.3 per cent of the total Muslim population lives in urban areas. In other words, while the share of Muslims in total population is 35.1 per cent, their share in urban population is only 17.6 per cent. Low share of Muslim population in the urban areas indicates that a large section of the community does not get the opportunity to enjoy better amenities of urban life.

In 14 out of 19 blocks, two-thirds of the population are socio-economically disadvantaged, i.e. they belong to either of the three communities – SC, ST and Muslims. In five blocks the share of the population belonging to these groups exceeded 80 per cent. They are Nalhati-I, Nalhati-II, Murarai-I, Murarai-II and Rampurhat-II. Curiously, these are the blocks which have very high population density. High population density lowers the per capita availability of agricultural land. In a high population density area not many people can productively engage in agriculture.

We also observed in Chapter II that in the rural areas of Birbhum, there is not much difference in the rates of literacy between Muslims and others. In urban Birbhum, however, they differ significantly. The groups that really lag behind others in terms of literacy in both rural and urban areas of the district belong to the scheduled tribes.

Figure 6.1 Literacy rates among SC, ST and Muslims

Economic disparity then and now

In 1933 Professor Hashim Amir Ali and his student-colleagues Tara Krishna Basu and Jiten Taluqdar studied a cluster of villages near Sriniketan. In an article titled “Rural Research in Tagore’s Sriniketan”, which appeared in *Modern Review* in May, 1934, Professor Ali wrote:

“When all this mass of data was taken up for analysis and the population classified into economic groups it was found that such grouping on a purely economic basis corresponded remarkably closely with the social groupings according to caste and religion. As soon as we saw what caste a particular family belonged to and noted whether that caste was among the high, middle or low castes of Hindu society or whether it was a Mussalman or a Santhal family, we could, with a fair degree of certainty, indicate what its economic status was likely to be. Considering this close correspondence, there was no way but to analyse village society not as homogeneous whole but as consisting of five heterogeneous economic groups. The economic level of the high castes was higher than that of the middle castes. Third in order followed the Mussalmans, also with a distinct economic level, but following closely the *Nabashaks* while the low castes such as Hadis, Doms, Muchis were far below, only Santhals occupying a still lower position”.

Professor continues

“...in these villages we do not have to ask a man’s occupation; we have only to know his caste or his religion and we know his economic position”.

Is this remarkable correspondence between economic position and the position in the caste-community hierarchy that was so typical of the village society in Bengal seventy five years ago only a thing of the past?

Three researchers from Pratichi Trust¹ have studied the same cluster of villages recently. They find that land remains a prime source of livelihood for most of the households in the village, although fifty seven percent of the households in the village do not have any cultivable land. Marginal and small farmers constitute 71 per cent of the landholders (Table 6.1). Landlessness is more among the SC (56.5 per cent) and ST (89 per cent) households than among the caste Hindus (23.6 per cent)². Few SC households own more than 2.5 acres of land. However, 14 out of 55 caste Hindu households have more than 2.5 acres of land. The Teli community in Binuria village has a very special history. Earlier they had the thriving business of oil pressing and thus managed to acquire land with the profit from oil pressing business. Later, when the oil pressing business was on the decline, they could still thrive on earnings from land.

Table 6.1: Cultivated landholding status of the households

Size of landholding	Number of households				
	SC	ST	Caste Hindus	Muslim	Total
Landless	48 (56.5)	54 (88.5)	13 (23.6)	1 (50)	116 (57.1)
Up to 2.5 acres	35 (41.2)	6 (9.8)	28 (50.9)	1 (50)	70 (34.5)
2.6 – 5 acres	2 (2.4)	1 (1.6)	10 (18.2)	-	13 (6.4)
5.1 – 7.5 acres	-	-	3 (5.5)	-	3 (1.5)
Above 7.5 acres	-	-	1 (1.8)	-	1 (0.5)
Total	85 (100)	61 (100)	55 (100)	2 (100)	203 (100)

Source: Rana et al.

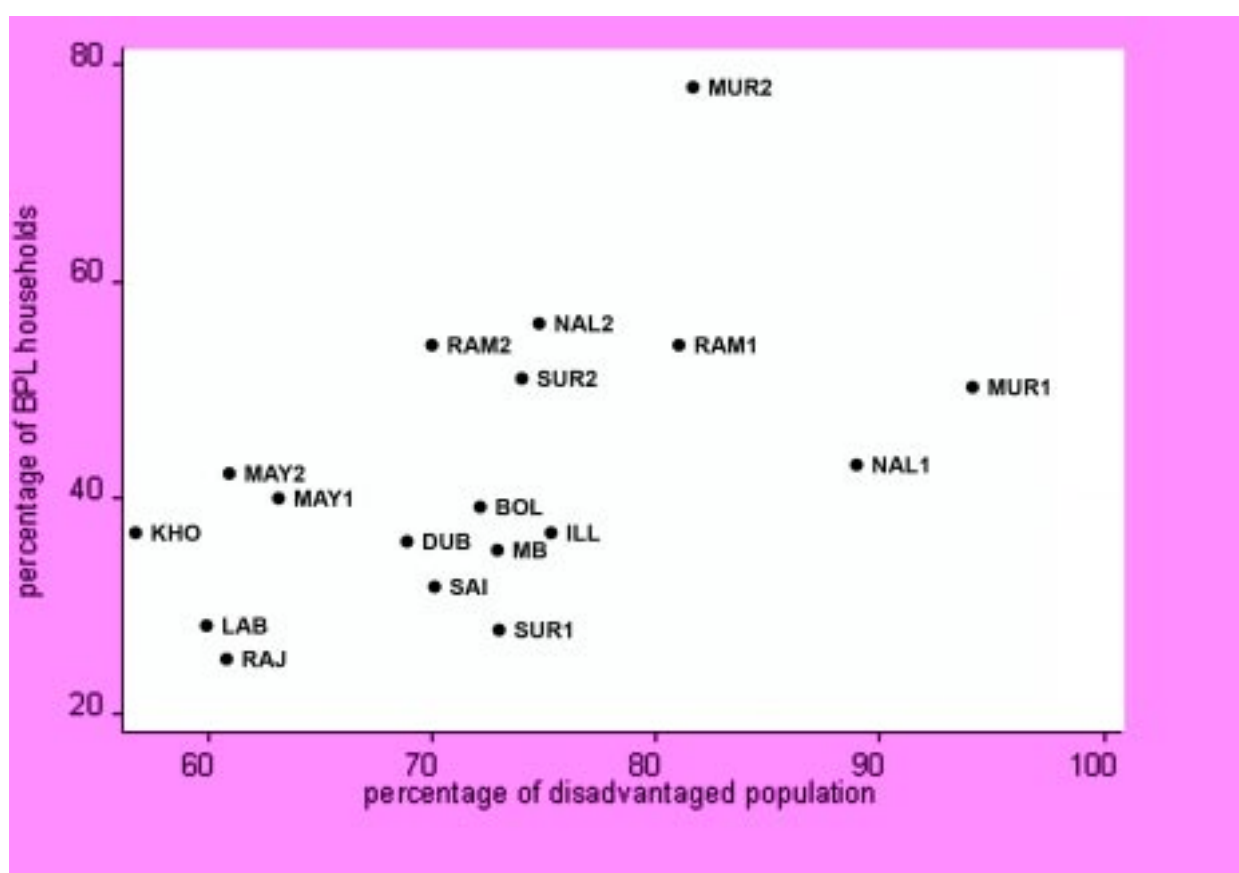
Thus, it appears that the caste Hindus, despite constituting only 27 per cent of the total households, own 77 per cent of the total cultivable land, while the SC community forming 42 per

¹ Kumar Rana, Abdur Rafique and Arindam Mukherjee, *Pratichi Village Studies – I: Binuria, A Village in Perspective*, mimeo.

² The number of Muslim households is insignificant in the case village.

cent of the total households own only 17 per cent of the cultivable land. Land ownership by the ST households is extremely low – only 4 per cent, though their share in the village population is 30 per cent. In other words, in terms of possession of the most important asset in rural society, i.e. land, the relative positions of different social groups have not changed much in the past seventy five years. This points to the lack of opportunities for upward social mobility that a large number of people belonging to the socially disadvantaged groups face even today. One kind of response of the state has been designing various schemes for the people below poverty line (BPL). For the benefits to reach the poor, first identification of who is poor is very important. From the data on the percentage of BPL household in the blocks, we can examine if they are associated with the percentage of disadvantaged population across blocks. It seems that the two are highly correlated, with a correlation coefficient value of 0.54. This is reasonable and in the expected direction. We present the scatter diagram below (Figure 6.2) showing this correlation.

Figure 6.2 Correlation between percentages of BPL households (2005) and disadvantaged population (2001) at block level in Birbhum



In what follows we present two cases of successful interventions in helping groups of disadvantaged people to earn their livelihood in a sustained way.

Collective effort to restore greenery

The famous jungle of Ilambazar in Birbhum that was on the verge of extinction 12 years ago has come back to life. The villagers living inside the jungle of Ilambazar now firmly believe that a single live tree can help them earn more than a dead one. The people living in 32 villages situated within the jungle used to cut trees illegally and sell those as timbers and firewood. But the situation has undergone a dramatic change over the past 12 years. The Forest Department formed 12 ‘Bonosamrakshan committees’ comprising the villagers and made them understand how their survival was linked with that of the jungle. Now the villagers have realised that by selling thalis made of Shaal tree leaves and Toshor Ghuti (mushrooms) – abundantly available in the forest, they can take care of their livelihood. They have recognised this as a better option compared to the risky and illegal tree-felling. About 1,800 hectares of the jungle area have been demarcated into 12 zones. Twelve such committees have been constituted and deployed to save the jungle. Residents of 32 villages are involved in these committees. Two persons from each village are deployed to help the forest guards. A large number of those who have benefited from this effort belong to the Scheduled Tribes.

[Source: *The Statesman*]

SHGs success in providing livelihood security through Tasar culture

Tasar culture is a forest based economic activity attuned to the nature. The laterite soil of the western part of the district where agriculture is less suitable, Arjun trees are abundantly grown, and these are needed for rearing of Tasar silkworm. The steady demand for Tasar products in and outside the country has gradually opened up immense opportunities for expanding the production base. Most of the workers engaged in Tasar culture belong to the disadvantaged groups, in general, and Scheduled Tribes in particular. A large number of them are women.

The Directorate of Sericulture in association with the district administration developed both on-farm and non-farm activities under ISTP, RSVY, NREGS. Several schemes have been taken up under these

projects for economic plantation of Arjun by involving SHGs in vested land or land leased in by the SHGs. One such plantation is located at Saporajpur (Laghata) mouza of Labhpur No.1 Gram Panchayat in Labhpur block. In 2005 the plantation was handed over to two SHGs, namely, Tarasankar Smriti SHG having seven women and three men members, and Sidhu Kanu SHG with all ten male members. All the members of these two SHGs belong to the ST community. They were given training on Tasar rearing, maintenance of Arjun garden and were provided with the necessary implements. Rearing started with a modest number of Tasar layings at the beginning. But in the most recent crop season, i.e. November to January, the two groups reared 2500 disease free Tasar layings under the technical supervision of the departmental staff. The layings were supplied by the government. The group members were able to harvest 146,560 Tasar cocoons and earned Rs 129,150. Thus the members earned a good amount of money in three months' time by taking up Tasar culture as a spare time activity.

For marketing their cocoons they got help from Kalipur Resham Shilpa Samabaya Samity Ltd – a Sericulture Cooperative Society in Karidhya in Suri-I block. The Society bought the entire harvest of cocoons for their members who are engaged in reeling, weaving and production of Tasar fabrics. The Society reportedly earns profit. Tasar culture, with concerted efforts from the Sericulture Directorate, the district administration and the Panchayats, can be an economically viable production activity that can bring benefits to a large number of people, especially to the disadvantaged groups living in rural areas where there is little scope for agriculture.