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SOCIAL MORPHOLOGY OF ORANGE VALLEY TEA GARDEN, DISTRICT DARJEELING, WEST BENGAL

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Abstract

Caste-based segregation of houses is one of the most distinctive characteristics of the spatial organisation of Indian villages. Indian society is hierarchically organised along caste lines; however, the actual arrangements in the social hierarchy vary significantly across regions. The existing caste-based hierarchical arrangements of society in Indian villages are often reproduced as spatial patterns of the houses there. However, regional culture, space relations, and biophysical factors are also vital in shaping the social morphology of villages. As a result, there are regional variations in the social morphology of Indian villages. Against this backdrop, this paper analyses the spatial organisation of houses by caste and religion in a small mountainous settlement, the Orange Valley Tea Garden, located in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The study is based on primary data collected through a pre-designed interview schedule. The study shows that, unlike many other regions of India, caste is not the only basis of the spatial organisation of houses in the village under study.

Keywords: Social structure, Village community, Spatial organisation, Caste, Tribe, Religion.

Introduction

The village has been the basic unit of Indian social structure since the ancient times, and the country has often been defined as the land of villages. As per the Census 2011, over 69 per cent population of India lives in villages. Indian villages are organised on the basis of their social structure and spatial setting. Caste and ethnicity form the basis of social structure of most of the Indian villages. Therefore, the patterns of inter-caste and inter-ethnic communities' relations are clearly observable in their physical space, i.e., the form or pattern of houses, streets and other buildings. In other

words, the morphological pattern of a village is nothing but the spatial expressions of the existing social relations therein. Another unique feature of Indian villages is the spatial segregation of people based on caste and religion. Once a particular pattern of social morphology develops in a village, it starts influencing social relationships. However, the social morphological pattern of Indian villages varies from region to region depending on the prevailing social structure and geographical environment.

Several studies have analysed the hierarchical nature of Indian society on the

basis of caste and how the spatial imprint of the prevailing caste structure is visible in Indian villages. Mandelbaum (1970) has observed that in Indian villages, there exists a Brahmin-untouchable ritual continuum in which the untouchables have been confined to the periphery of the settlements in the south, southeast and sometimes in the north to maintain the supposed purity of air and village environment. Similarly, Singh and Khan (1993) have observed that the dominant castes in the village occupy the best part of the village for their residence and place the lower castes in 'inferior geographical spaces'. In his study of a Muslim Rajput-dominated village Hameed (2000) has pointed out that the Muslim Rajputs, together with Brahmins and Baniyas have occupied the best sites of the village while *Dalits* ('*Bhangi*' and '*Chamars*') have been located in congested areas along the southern periphery of the village. Similarly, Hamid (2000) has also observed that even though the *Dalits* (*Jatav*) numerically dominate the village, it is the Brahmins who occupy the best sites. There are several studies like Spate and Deshpande (1952), Cohen (1961), Chatterjee and Das (1964), Beteille (1965), Schwartzberg (1965), Mukerji (1969), Mandelbaum (1970), Singh (1977) and Singh and Khan (1993) which have found caste-based segregation of houses and orientation of the rural settlements where untouchables have to live at a respectable distance from those who have higher social status. Thus, the layout of the villages generally reflects its social structure. In fact, religion, clan ties and the caste system play a very significant role in the social hierarchy of rural settlements (Sharma, 1967).

Perhaps the most reflective study from geographical point of view on the social morphological aspects of Indian villages has

been made by Singh (1972). He has developed two models to explain the social morphology of rural settlements in the middle Ganga Plains. These are religio-ritual model and secular dominance model. The religio-ritual model is based on the *jati* system, i.e. the caste system, while the secular dominance model is based on economic distance and economic dependency (i.e., the *jajmani system*). In this system, the service castes render services to the landowning peasant castes and the high castes and for that they have been entitled to traditionally fixed shares of the agricultural produce. These models are based on the empirical study of social relations and social morphology of settlements in the Indo-Gangetic plains.

It is worthwhile to mention that there are marked differences in the social structure and social relations between the rural areas of the Darjeeling Himalaya and that of Indo-Gangetic plains. Caste is the most defining element of the social structure of villages of the Indo-Gangetic plains, and caste relations are characterized by multiple hierarchies (Gupta, 2000). On the other hand, Darjeeling Himalaya is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual area. The society in the area is made up of various social elements drawn from diverse origins. Social diversity is perhaps the most powerful manifestation of the area (Khawas, 2002). However, social diversities do not always form the basis of inequality in resources and power. As a result, the spatial organisation of houses in the villages is found to be less segregated. There are differences in the physical terrain and economic bases of these regions. In mountainous areas, scarcity of space is an important factor in the development of village morphology. The morphology of the landscape and the relief (or the topography) of the settled area have an imprint on the morphol-

ogy of these settlements (Shahi, 2022).

Thus, the social morphology of Indian villages is dynamic. The forces of globalisation and modernisation have also affected the village settlement morphology in recent decades. In the light of above, this study focuses on the social morphology of a mountainous village 'the Orange Valley Tea Garden', located in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal.

Objectives of the Study

Major objectives of the study are:

- to analyse the spatial distribution of households by caste, and
- to identify the factors responsible for socio-spatial segregation of houses in the village under study.

Study Area

The Orange Valley Tea Garden is nestled in the Bloomfield Tea Estate in the Darjeeling Pulbazar CD Block of the Darjeeling Sadar sub-division of the Darjeeling district. It is located at 27° 2' 56" N latitude and 88° 13' 10" E longitude (Fig. 1). It is a typical mountainous settlement located between a height of 1524 to 1829 metres. The village has been named the Orange Valley Tea Garden because of its abundant orange trees and tea gardens, for which the climate is highly suitable. The total population of the settlement is 389 persons, consisting of 90 households. The settlement is spatially organised into four hamlets: *Tala Gaon*, *Mathilogaon*, *Jamuney Dhura* and *Tindhurey*. Of the 90 households, 54 earn their living by working in the tea garden, and five make their living by carpentry and as drivers of cars. Others are engaged as teachers, business persons or office clerks. The Orange Valley Tea Garden (Darjeeling) is

famous for its tea garden.

At least one person from every household can be found working in tea gardens. Most of the households own a small patch of agricultural land where they grow leafy vegetables, beans, peas, potatoes, cauliflowers, cabbage, etc. Cardamom cultivation is also prominent. Garden-dwellers generate extra income by selling cardamom and oranges in the market. There is no disparity between the male and the female members as everyone works and brings earnings to the family. The area lacks essential health and educational facilities. There is a dispensary and a primary school run by the tea garden. For higher level of educational and health care facilities, people of the village have to travel to the main town of the region, i.e., Darjeeling.

Database and Methodology

This study is based on primary data collected through field surveys conducted in 2020. To find out the social structure of the Orange Valley Tea Garden village, a door-to-door survey has been carried out with the help of a duly prepared interview schedule. All the ninety households have been surveyed. Global Positioning System (GPS) has been used to collect spatial data about ninety houses and other buildings. With the help of GPS, the location of all the houses and buildings have been determined and given a unique ID. The location of all the houses have been marked on the map with the help of Google Earth. Polygons have been drawn on Google Earth to demarcate the boundaries of the village and of each house. It has been exported in Keyhole Markup Language (kml) file format. Quantum Geographic Information System (QGIS) has been used to prepare the final map of the village.

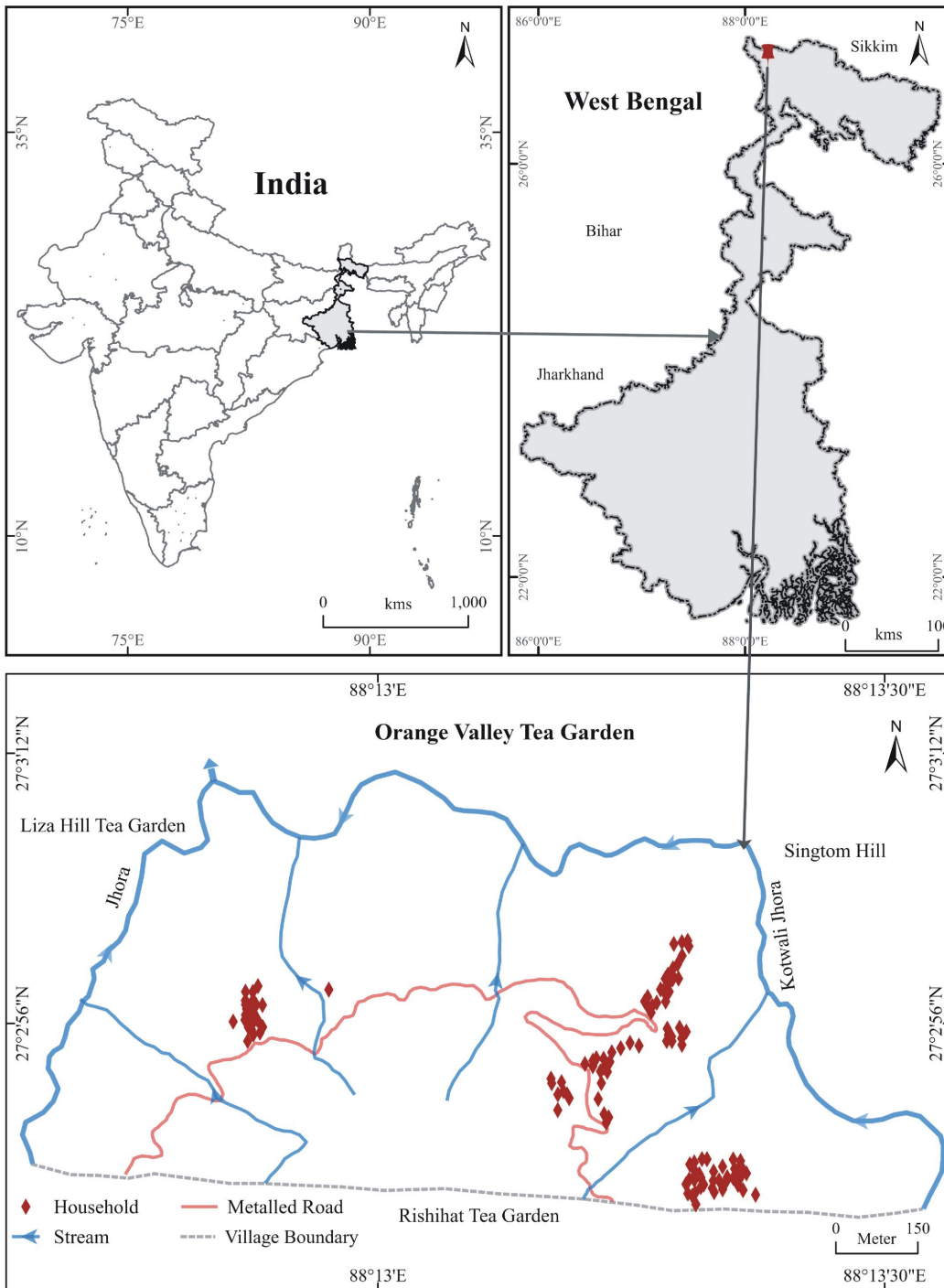


Fig. 1

Results and Discussion

Social Structure of the Village

The Orange Valley Tea Garden is a small settlement with ninety households comprising seven different castes/tribal groups. The Rais dominates the village, followed by the Limbu or Limboo (Scheduled Tribe), Damais (Scheduled Caste), Mukhias, Tamangs, Chettris and Kamis (Schedule Castes) (Fig. 2). Traditionally, Rais enjoy the status of chief, and they are professional swineherds. At present, they cultivate maize, kodo and wheat in their fields. The Chettris are traditionally a caste group of administrators, governors and military elites. Limbu tribe is considered to be one of the earliest inhabitants of the village. They call themselves 'Yakthungba', meaning 'Hillman'. The Limbu women are engaged in making *Dhaka sarees* and animal husbandry. Their religion is called *Yumanism*, which gives them a distinct identity. Mukhias are also known as 'Sunuwars'. They

call themselves 'Koinch' and have their own language, 'Koinchlo'. They are professional stockmen. The word Tamang stands for 'Horse Trader' in the Tibetan language. Tamangs are traditionally engaged in the occupation of the cowboys. Damais have been considered to be the untouchable caste. The term 'Damai' is derived from the word 'Damaha', which means the chief musical instrument of the 'Damais'. Traditionally, they have been musicians who led the marriage procession. Kamis are considered to be the lowest among all of the caste groups. The term 'Kami' is believed to have been originated from 'Kamuannu', meaning thereby to earn or make things. They have been traditionally blacksmiths by profession. Now, they are engaged in making statues and utensils.

Religion-based Segregation of Houses

Religious affiliation is one of the main bases of social morphology of urban and rural

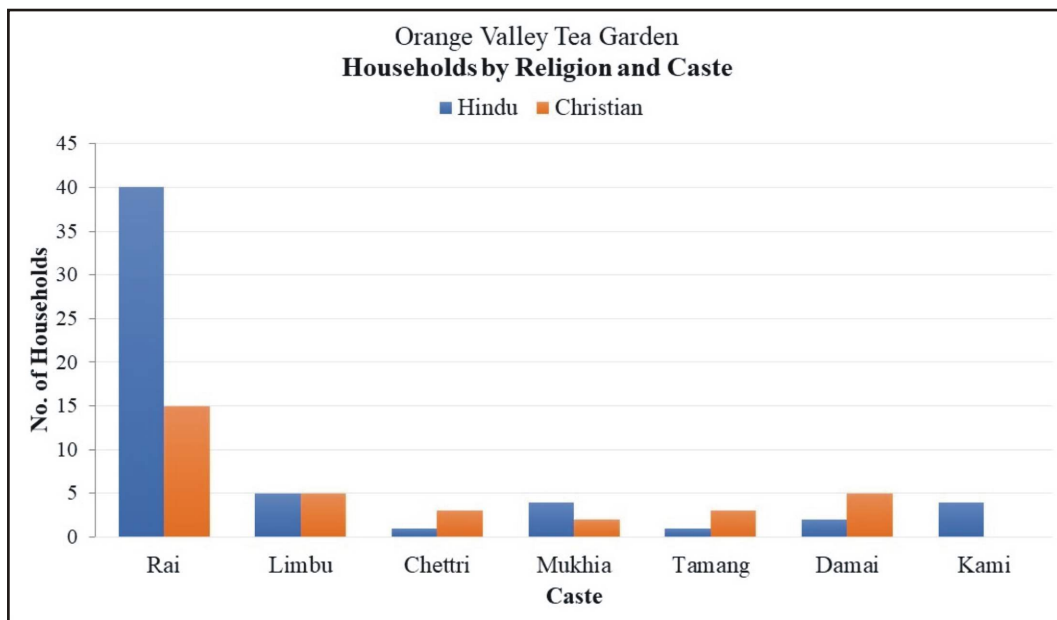


Fig. 2

settlements in India. Religion-wise, the Orange Valley Tea Garden is inhabited by Hindu and Christian households. Out of the ninety households, thirty-three households follow Christianity, which roughly accounts for 37 per cent of the total households. Hindus share the remaining 57 households (constituting 63 per cent of the households), almost double the number of Christian households. In the Orange Valley Tea Garden, a semi-compact pattern of settlement has been developed, wherein houses are concentrated along the main road. However, there is no religion-based segregation of houses in the village (Fig. 3). Irrespective of religious differences, houses of specific caste are found together. It implies that religious differences do not matter when it comes to

residential segregation. Instead, there is a caste-based segregation of houses. Families prefer to live in localities inhabited by their own castes.

Caste-based Segregation of Houses

Settling of different caste groups at one place is one of the fundamental features of the social structure of the Indian village communities. The Orange Valley Tea Garden village is inhabited by seven different caste/ethnic groups (Fig. 4). Except Kamis families, other six caste/tribes, follow Christianity. The highest concentration is that of the Rais. There is no sharp residential segregation between the low and the high castes. However, the houses of the lower castes are generally located

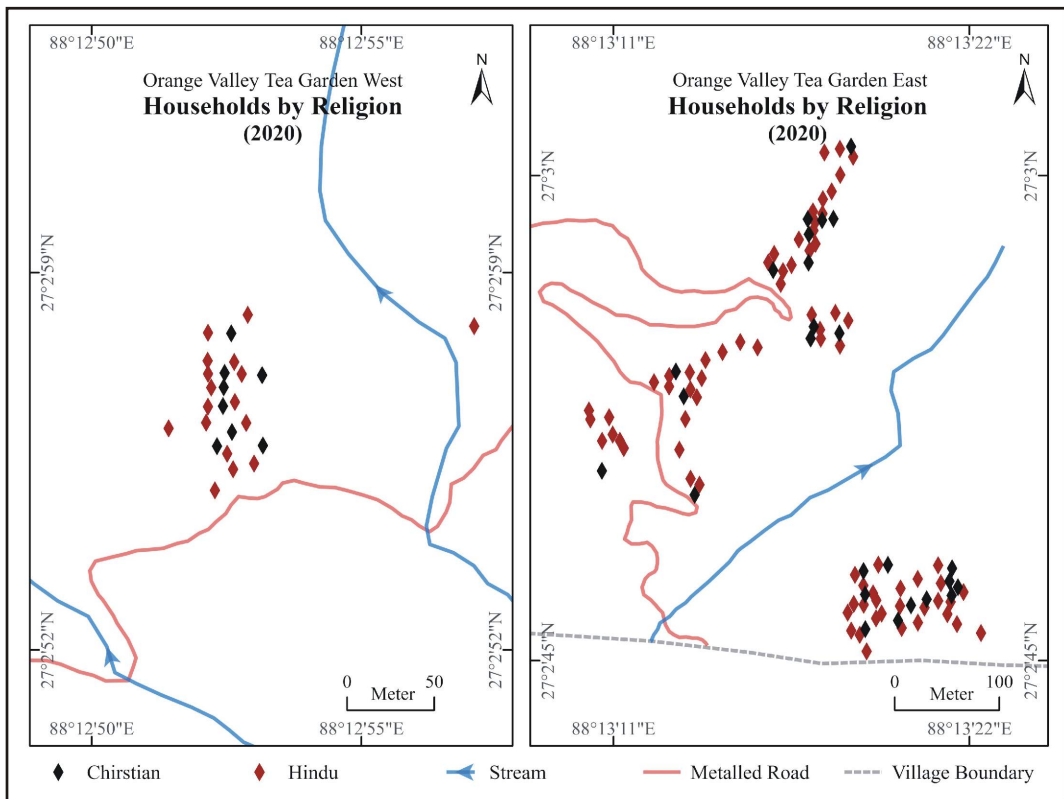


Fig. 3

towards the periphery of the valley slope, where the terrain gets steeper. This locality is near the *jungle*; therefore, they live under the threat from wild animals like cheetahs. The houses of the other castes are located just adjacent to the main road or where the amenities are available. The area where the school and community hall are located is surrounded only by communities like Rais, Limbus and Tamangs, who enjoy high status on the social ladder. There is a clubhouse in the eastern part of the village.

All four households of Tamang and six households of Mukhia are dispersed. The Damais, which have seven households, are

found in a cluster in the eastern part of the village, whereas the ten households of Limbus, are scattered in different parts of the village. Thus, higher caste families have built their houses in all parts of the village.

Out of the four households of the Kamis, three are located together in the western part of the village, and one resides in solitary in the southernmost part. Lower castes prefer to live in a close-knit unit or away from the main settlement. However, one house of the Damai caste is located amongst the houses of the Rais caste. The head of that household is a clerk in a bank who has happened to entail such a privilege of having house in the area of other

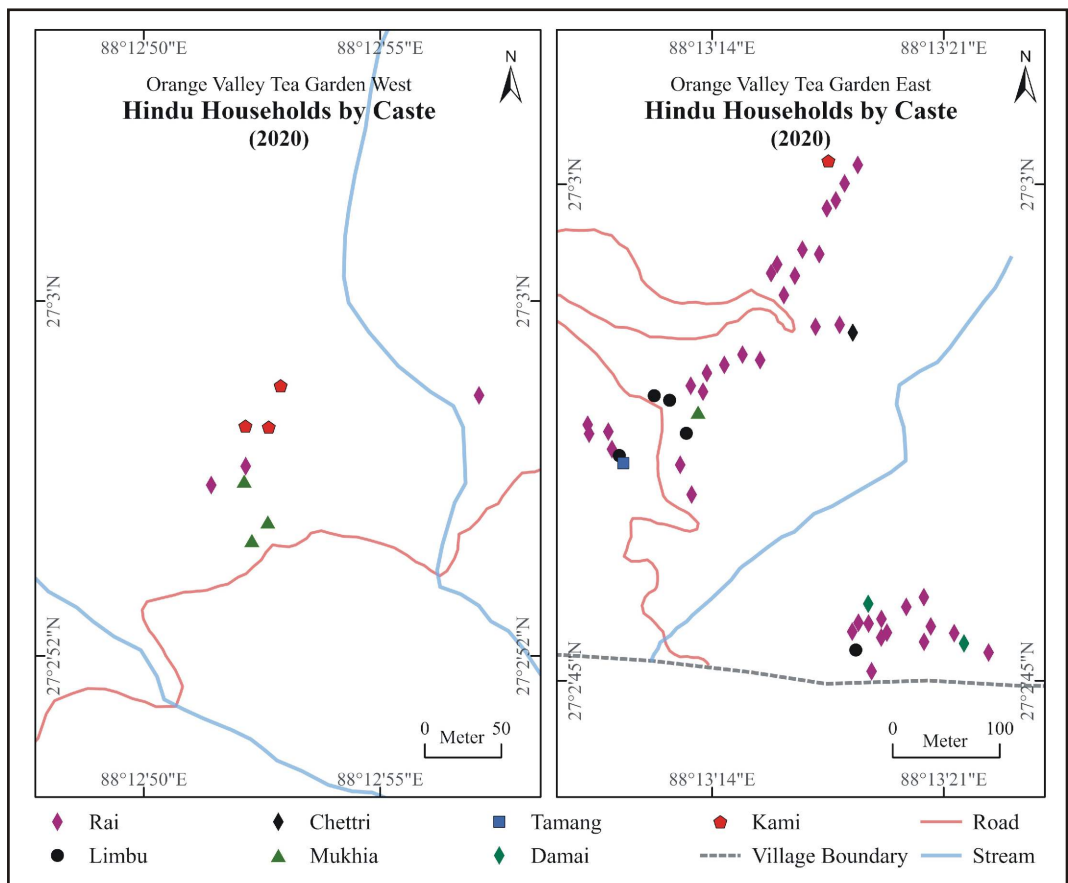


Fig. 4

caste group by moving up in the class hierarchy. It indicates that how modernisation and education have played a significant role in reducing the social distance between people. People with higher education and secure job enjoy higher status in the society. Families are now increasingly being differentiated on the basis of their economic status and not on the basis of caste or religion.

In the village, one can observe the limitations created by the natural environment. Several small streams dissect the area covered by dense tree growth. It has brought people of different castes to live nearby on account of the fear of the attack by the wild animals. Also, people are not economically dependent on one another as circumstances have forced them to follow one occupation, i.e., as labourers in the tea gardens.

Overall, the village has a mixed settlement/household pattern based on caste. Unlike many other villages of the country, scheduled caste families of the village do not strictly reside away from the main settlement. However, the school, community hall, and gymnasium are located in the core area of the village, where scheduled castes (Damais and Kamis) do not have their houses. The segregation of dwellings is on account of scarcity of space as well as unequal socio-economic status.

Fifty-seven households are followers of Hinduism. The highest number is that of the Rais, i.e., 40 households, followed by the Limbus with five households. In the western part of the village, the Kamis, Mukhias and Rais live together. The elongated settlement below the road in the north-eastern part of the village is occupied only by the Hindus belonging to the Rai caste. They inhabit the central part of the village. However, the

settlement above the road is socially mixed, with houses of Limbu, Mukhia, Tamang and Rai castes (Fig. 4).

Christian households constitute 37 per cent of the total households in the village. Six major castes follow Christianity. Most of the Christians are from the *Rai* caste. Next to them, are *Damai caste* and the *Limbu* tribes. It is interesting to note that the Rais constitute the highest number of households in both Hindu and Christian religions, but most of them adhere to Hinduism (40 households). As evident from Fig. 5, caste-wise segregation of the houses among followers of Christianity is less noticeable than those of Hinduism. However, like Hindu Rais, the houses of Rais following Christianity are most scattered, probably due to their higher numerical strength.

Conclusions

The Orange Valley Tea Garden is a recent village and it is still emerging. The village was originally occupied by Rais caste however, with time, new caste groups began settling in different parts of the village, wherever space was available. Though many castes occupy the village, there is no evidence of social discrimination among people in their everyday life. Therefore, the social segregation of houses is not as sharp as we find caste-based segregation in the villages of Indo-Gangetic plains. The social structure in the north Indian villages is principally based on caste-based hierarchy. While the social structure in the Darjeeling district is characterized by predominance of tribal communities. These communities are culturally different, but inter-community relations are not hierarchical. Further, as most people work as labourers in the tea gardens, they are not economically

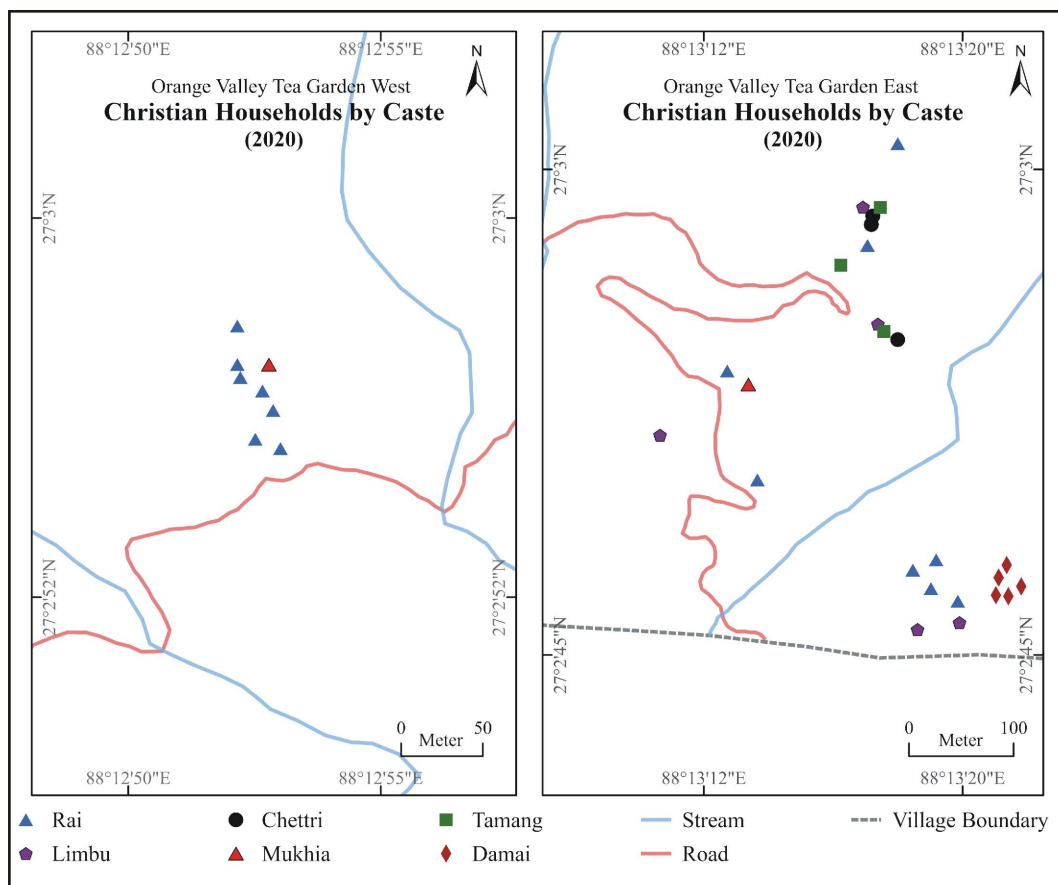


Fig. 5

interdependent on one another. Thus, the economic autonomy of all the social groups of the village is one of the most important reasons for the lack of strict segregation of their houses on the basis of castes. The segregation of dwellings could be partly due to natural restrictions (i.e., the scarcity of flat space to construct houses) as well as socio-economic status of the households. People generally construct their houses wherever space is available. Still, one could observe a distinct spatial pattern in the organisation of houses of various caste groups. While higher caste families construct their houses in any part of the village, the scheduled castes families

usually reside near the periphery of the valley slope, adjacent to the jungle, where the terrain gets steeper, and there are threats from wild animals. The absence of scheduled castes' houses in the core area of the village, where the school, community hall and gymnasium are located, implies that they need to travel longer distances to access these modern facilities. In the north Indian plains, where the social segregation of houses is based on caste, the segregation pattern is precise and conditioned by the nature of inter-caste relations in the settlement. In the case of Orange Valley Tea Garden, the role of caste and religion in the spatial segregation of houses is limited.

Instead, it is the physical terrain, social and economic structure of the population that has mainly shaped the spatial distribution of its houses.

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