

Impact of British Rule on Socio-Economic Conditions of Burdwan District During Colonial Period

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ABSTRACT

The establishment of British authority had huge and long term impact on socio-economic and political lives of the people of India in general and Bengal in particular. Burdwan was one of the important districts of Bengal proper which also experienced the same kind of changes as an impact of British rule with minor variations to that of the other districts of Bengal. During 19th century, the district was comprised of six sub- divisions out of which Budbud and Raniganj sub-divisions experienced the process of industrialization with the establishment of 'Coal industry' at Raniganj and 'Bengal Iron Works Company' at Kulti in Burdwan. Burdwan Sadar, Katwa and Kalna Sub-divisions were mainly dependent on cultivation which were agriculturally developed sub-divisions in terms of crop productions. The district also experienced the cultivation of Indigo and the export of indigo production. Burdwan district was comparatively better cultivated and economically developed than the other districts of Bengal during the period of study.

Introduction

The Eighteenth Century India witnessed the changes in socio-economic and political fields. Since ancient times, the people of different communities regardless of caste and religions were living in the Indian sub-continent. Bengal is considered to be one of the important provinces of India in terms of social, economic and political developments. Bengal was one of the world's fertile areas.¹ After the victory of the 'Battle of Plassey' in 1757; the English East India Company (EEIC) established the colonial rule in India and the British its authority continued up to 1947 A.D. During Colonial Period, Bengal became the centre of politics of the British Empire in India and Calcutta was then the capital of this Empire. As the Capital City, Calcutta has experienced huge changes in the administrative system than other districts of Bengal during the period of study.² Burdwan is the oldest district of the 'Rarh Banga'.³ The district of Burdwan is important in the context of education, culture and political consciousness. Burdwan district was also prosperous in agriculture, industries and mineral resources. Burdwan was also the most productive district within the whole of Bengal province during pre colonial and colonial period.⁴

The word 'Bardhaman' is derived from 'bridh' which means 'the increasing or Prosperous'.⁵ According to historians, the Bardhaman district has been named after the name of 24th Jain Tirthankar Mahavir Bardhaman. During 16th Century, Mughal Court Poet Abul Fazl mentioned in his book 'Ain-i Akbari' that, there were three parganas of Rarh Banga. These were Sharifabad, Salimabad and Mandaran. Sharifabad did cover the most of the part of the district Burdwan, Salimabad covered the most of the part of Hooghly district and Mandaran is currently comprised of most of the part of the Asansol Sub-division and its adjoining areas. Though, the boundary of the areas of Burdwan district has changed in terms of time because of administrative reforms and geopolitical reasons.

After the 'Battle of Plassey', the East India Company started to earn more profits. The highest collection of revenue

was the main aim of the Colonial Government. The primary step of the Colonial Government was to make the rate of revenue accurate and expedient. On 27 September 1760, the East India Company took possession of land of the districts of Burdwan, Medinipur and Chittagoan from Bengal Nawab Mir Qasim.⁶ At that time, Burdwan was known as Burdwan 'Chakla'.⁷ In 1765, Dewani was granted by the Company. With the right to Dewani, the East India Company started to manage the administrative system with the collection of land revenues. As a result, the British Empire was consolidated in India. In 1773, the English East India Company divided the whole Bengal into Five divisions for the administrative purposes. Burdwan Division was the second largest divisions among these divisions. In 1784, James Rennel prepared the outline a map of Burdwan division. He has shown in his map that, there were six districts under the Burdwan Division. These were – Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura, Hooghly, Purulia and Nadia districts. He has also shown that, the areas of Burdwan district was fixed at 5174 square miles during the period of study. Burdwan was one of the first districts of Bengal which was captured by the British hegemony.⁸

Burdwan district is bounded on the north by Santhal pargana, Birbhum and Murshidabad districts, on the east by Nadia district, on the south by Hooghly and Bankura districts and on the west by Manbhum (presently a large section of it is located in Jharkhand).⁹ The British Government divided Burdwan district into six sub-divisional regions and 22 thanas for the administrative purposes and revenue collections. These six sub- divisions of the district were - The Burdwan Sadar or Head Quarters sub- division, Katwa sub- division, Kalna Sub-division, Budbud sub-division, Raniganj Sub-division and Jahanabad sub-division.

As far as demographic conditions of Burdwan is concerned, Hindus comprised about 82.5 percent of the total population and while Muslims comprised about 17.1 percent of the total population of the district and remaining 0.4 percent of the total population of the district were other Castes as per the

first Census report of 1872.¹⁰ There were several castes within the majority community (Hindu) of Burdwan district. These were Bagdis, Baoris, Kayasthas, Brahmans, Sodgops and Aguris. W.B.Oldham has mentioned in his report that, the representation of the Aguris and Baoris were not that too well represented. Aguris were mainly involved with the expansion of agriculture, trade and commerce of the district. The Aguris were also known as Ugra kshattrio. The Muslims of the district lost their previous powers and they had worked in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors as labourers during colonial period.

As per the Census of 1872, there were three upper most castes in the Hindu society of the district of Burdwan who were not massively engaged in the primary mode of production. W.W.Hunter in his work 'A statistical Account of Bengal' provides a list of 82 Hindu castes in Burdwan district and also mentioned their occupations.¹¹ The Census Report of 1872 also describes that, the Bagdis, Doms, Hadis belonged to aboriginal groups. In the Report of 1891 has described that, the Bagdis, Bauris and Chandals as agricultural classes and the Chamars, Muchis, Doms are known as village menials or artisans.

The Census report of 1892 gives us an idea about the social base of the occupational division of the people of Burdwan in the 19th Century. Brahmans, Vaidyas, Kayasthas, Kshattris Baniyas and Baniks were emerged in the district as professional classes. The Brahmans consisting of priests, teachers, landholders, government servants and clerks. The Kayasthas of Burdwan district were divided into three classes. During this period, the upper class which were comprised of landholders and rich men. The middle class comprised of agriculturalists who cultivated their lands and they also involved indoor occupations. The lower class which were comprised of kayasthas who cultivated lands with their own hands. The Kayasthas were wealthy class of the community and also known as trading castes.¹² Sudras were the lower castes of the community and the Sudras of Burdwan were divided into twelve sub castes.¹³

On the basis of mode of production, Burdwan district was primarily divided into two regions e.g., agricultural region and industrial region. Land sharing in the north and north-western side of the district was non-cultivable, boulder and inaccessible. The Coal mines of Asansol and Raniganj were located in this region. The population of this particular region had been increased due to expansion of 'Iron and Coal Industries' of the district. The population of the district has increased by 69.7 percent from 1872 to 1921. During colonial period, a large number of people at the western side of Burdwan district (i.e.-Manbhum, Bankura and Bihar) came and settled at Raniganj and Asansol regions for the purpose of the work at Coal Mines. In this context, the Statistics of expatriates were noticeable. The Census of 1951 provides an idea the increase in the population of Burdwan which was increased by 90.4 percent as per the Census of 1921.

As per the Geographical location, Burdwan district is surrounded on South, South-east and the centre with the flow of river Damodar, river Ajay and Bhagirathi river. Therefore, the land of this region was suitable for cultivation and farming.

Naturally, the density of the population of this region was more than to other parts of the district. There was abundance of rice cultivation due to the warm and wet seasonal climate at the south and south-eastern part (Kalna, Katwa and adjoining areas of Burdwan Sadar) of the district. J.C.K. Peterson writes in record 'Bengal District Gazetteers-Burdwan' that, "the increase in prosperity is due to the introduction of new crops like potatoes and Jute. But, The most important cause is the rise in the price of rice."¹⁴ Rice was the most important crop of the district.¹⁵ Burdwan district is also known as the 'Crop store' of Bengal.

During Colonial period, the British Government took initiative to spread education among people of the district. The people from different communities responded to the introduction of modern and scientific education. There were initiatives by individual people for the promotion of education. By the initiative of Governor-General Warren Hastings, Munshi syed Sadaruddin established 'Buhar Jaliliya Madrasah and Library' in 1775 at Buhar for the development of education among the Muslims of the district.¹⁶ Maharaja of Burdwan financed two Persian schools. Maharaja Tejchandra established a college in Burdwan in 1817.¹⁷ In 1818, James Stewart opened 10 schools in Burdwan to spread the western education among the people of the district. The private schools of the district were maintained by the Maharaja of Burdwan during the period of study.¹⁸ In 1838, William Adam has mentioned in his third report that, there were 93 Persian schools and 80 Arabic makhtabs in Burdwan district during the nineteenth century. He has also shown in his third report that, Burdwan was one of the most educated districts of Bengal during British rule.¹⁹ The Hindus and Muslims reacted to the changes that were brought by the enactment of Permanent Settlement, Lakheraj lands²⁰ and the proclamation of Queen Victoria in 1857.

During Colonial period, the influence of British policy in socio-economic, political and cultural lives of the people of Burdwan district was immense. From the year 1762 to 1770, the East India Company kept occupying the Zamindari of the district and they gave the ownership of the Zamindari of the district to Burdwan Raja Tilakchand. After the death of Maharaja Tilak Chand in 1770, the Zamindari of the district handed over to his son Tejchandra. During the period of Tejchandra (1771-1832), Naba krishna Deb was appointed for two years to collect the revenue of the district.²¹

After the transfer of Dewani to the hands of the Company, there was a huge change in the collection of land revenues. The land settlement system was introduced for revenue collection instead of Cash money. As a result, the condition of the big zamindars of Burdwan district started decaying. They introduced 'Land Revenue Settlement' to bring the balance of state's income and expenditure. There was nothing surplus left in the hands of the zamindars of the district due to the high rate of payable to the Government.

In 1793, Governor-General Lord Cornwallis introduced 'Permanent Settlement'²². In many ways, the Permanent Settlement of Cornwallis affected the socio-economic and political conditions of the people of Burdwan district. Through the 'Permanent Settlement', all rights of ryots and other

categories of the peasantry had become vulnerable and all surplus productions of them had gone to the Zamindars. Under Regulation I of 1793, Maharaja Tejchandra entered into an agreement with the Government to pay regularly the revenue, amounting to sicca Rs. 40, 15,109 and also sicca Rs. 193721 for pulbandhi or repairs of embankments.²³ In Burdwan, there was a high amount of Lakheraj lands at Katwa, Kalna and adjoining areas of Burdwan Sadar. All Lakheraj lands were included in exhibition of rent and were transferable and fixed for under privileged people. By the 'Permanent Settlement', a large account of Lakheraj lands had also gone from 'Aimadars'²⁴ to Zamindars. The Permanent settlement had a big role to play in the social and economic changes of the lives of aimadars, small ryots and middlemen of the district of Burdwan. Their conditions became worse than before. Though, at that time, the big ryots improved their economic condition and they also became stronger at the society of the district. In 1793, Burdwan collector has shown that, small ryots had given high rent compared to the big ryots of the district. Reverend Lal Behari Dey in his book 'Bengal Peasant Life' described the condition of the cultivators of Burdwan. He said that, agricultural labourers were employed by a section of the peasantry in the district. According to Colebrook's data in 1794, the big ryots were also known as small capitalists of the district.

The period after the permanent settlement in 1793 marked a record sale of lands in Burdwan and it is also said that the Maharaja Tejchandra of Burdwan introduced 'Pattani Settlement' in order to save his estate.²⁵ In 1799, Maharaja Tejchandra introduced 'Pattani Settlement'²⁶ in Burdwan district. After the introduction of Pattani Settlement, a number of middlemen had also increased rapidly. As a result, the exploitation of ryots undergone increasingly intense in Bengal in general and Burdwan district in particular. The pattani settlement was one of the most important factors in the indigenous cultivation of indigo of Burdwan. There was a lot of lands needed for the farming of indigo. But, at that time, it was not possible to fulfill. This was possible only through transferable Pattani settlement. In 1820, Hamilton has mentioned that, there were big ryots or Jotedars for each every 16 families of the district and their amount of land had between 30 to 100 acres. These ryots used to cultivate some part of their lands by themselves and rest of the lands were distributed as sharecroppers among the small ryots of the district. In this way, the peasants of Burdwan district had become depressed and frustrated due to that. From 1831 to 1833, many Europeans came to India with the extinction of the exhaustive trade order of East India Company. And they were interested in the production and export of Indigo cultivation. During that period, there was a wide spread of Indigo cultivation of the district. Indigo became the principal article of export to England during this particular time.²⁷

In 1859, the British Government passed a law to protect the interest of the ryots. The peasants of the Burdwan district were affected by the Act of 1859. Under this Law, 12 years of holding title of a farmer is acknowledged as the saleable right and the rights of peasants were protected against the zamindars. By the Act of 1859, the rights of sharecroppers were denied against the big peasants. During the British rule,

the numbers of share land and share farmers have increased in Burdwan district rapidly. In the Colonial era, the small peasants were engaged under the big ryots in the agricultural production of Burdwan district. In 1885-86, the greater part of the Rarh Bango is affected by drought due to the lack of necessary rainfall.²⁸ Under Colonial rule, the economic condition of the peasants of Burdwan district were worse comparatively from other districts of Bengal due to the impact of British policy of 'Land Settlement' and the natural hazards.²⁹ The cultivators, the agriculture labourers and men of the lower strata of the society of Burdwan district were not rich and prosperous during colonial period.

Agriculture was the main driving force of economy of Burdwan district during colonial period. The British Government took initiatives to increase the agricultural production of the district. In 1881, they dug the Eden Canal from Kanchannagar to Jamalpur for the development of agriculture production in the district. The Indian national leadership observed that, "In Burdwan district, within the agricultural classes, it was the condition of the agricultural labourers which came in for severe condemnation, they had suffered from insufficient food from year's end to year's end."³⁰ Thus, the outlook of a man was hinted and the poverty was not condemned. In 1829, Dwarkanath Tagore organized the Union Bank in association with European merchants.³¹ In 1898, the Lyall Famine Commission has shown that, the lower state of the agricultural population was still steeped in extreme poverty and did not have enough food in normal years. In Burdwan district, the Damodar project was taken by the British after 1935 to use the Damodar river for irrigation purposes which increased the agricultural production of the district.

The peasant community was more affected by its relations with zamindars and moneylenders. The Commissioner of Burdwan stated in his experience that: 'In many parts of Bengal, especially of Burdwan division, it is difficult to draw a distinction between a moneylender and an ordinary ryot. Any ryot who saves a little money and there are many who do so lends it in small sums to this neighbours so that almost every well to do ryot is a moneylender.'³²

Coal Industry at Raniganj and Iron-Steel Industry at Asansole was also very important and which played vital role in the development of economic condition of the district. In 1774, S.G. Hitley appointed as a Collector at Chhattonagpur and palamou under the British Government. He was the first man who discovered the Coal mines at Raniganj in 1777 with the cooperation of J.Samar and Rodfarn. In 1816, Mr. Jones had written a report to the Company that, The Coal of Raniganj region is equal standard of the produced coal of England. Beginning in 1820 at Raniganj, Coal mining spread to other coalfields until by the beginning of the 20th century the number of coal mines rose to over 300 employing over 85000 workers. Coal mining in India started in the Raniganj by Coal fields of Bengal in 1820. In 1823, they started the Coal lifting at Chinakuri of Burdwan for business. In 1832, the total production of Coal was 4 lakh tons. 'The Car and Tagore Company' was also known as 'The Bengal Coal Company' after 1843. 'Bengal Coal Company' was the largest company in India during Colonial period. Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-

General of India first established railways from Bombay to Thane in 1853. After 1854, Burdwan district was facilitated by the construction of railways. It had influenced on the socio-economic conditions of the people of entire India. The railways of the district themselves were big purchaser of Coal.³³ After the establishment of railways in India, the demand for coal rose in all parts of the country.

In 1855 the new railways was laid from Howrah to Raniganj. In 1874, the Barakar Iron Works started its production of pig iron. According to Mr. G.A. Stonier, the output of coal in the Bengal Coalfields rose from about 3 lakh tons in 1857 to over 10 lakh tons in 1880. In 1881, 'The Barakar Iron Works Company' was also known as 'The Bengal Iron and Steel Company'. By the initiative of British Government, 'The Board of Directors' decided to set up the railway lines to spread the communication among the districts of Bengal in 1895. The Labour Commission Report of 1896 has shown that, the wages of agricultural labourers in Burdwan district, where wages were not particularly high by the standard of Bengal.³⁴

The Bengal Coal Company operated 37 and 160 coal mines in 1881 and 1901 respectively. At the time of the Partition of Bengal of 1905, the people of Burdwan district took initiative in the settlement of Swadeshi industry of the district. The important centres of Weaving industry of the district were at Katwa, Kalna, Manteswar and Memari. In 1908-09, two thousand people of the district have been worked in the weaving industry for everyday. Raniganj was only one Coal Mine of Bengal which established by initiative of both the Indians and Europeans.³⁵ Board of Directors decision was also to expand the economic development of Burdwan district. The Bandel- Katwa Rail line was established in 1912 during colonial period. By 1914, the production of coal rose to nearly 165 lakh tons.³⁶ The growth of Commercial agriculture had a deep impact on the economy as well as peasant community of the district. During the First World War, 'The Raniganj Coal mines' provided 6.5 million tons of the total exported coal of India.³⁷ In Burdwan district, Katwa, Kalna and Nadunghat were of considerable important centres of Bengal during Colonial period. Among these centres, Katwa and Kalna were formerly regarded as the important ports of Burdwan district. Raniganj, Asansol and Burdwan became the new centres to trade owing their rise to the development of the mining Industry under Colonial rule.³⁸

The British Government of India created 'The Industrial Commission' in 1916. The Commission had to protect both of the Owner and Labour of the industry. Before the formation of 'Industrial Commission', the people did not want to invest the money in the Industrial sector. After Industrial Commission; the People expressed interest to invest in the development of industry.³⁹ The Indian Industrial Commission (1916-18) had expressed itself in favour of protectionist policies for developing modern industries in India. The period during the First World War, the McLeod Company established three

Narrow Gauge Rail Lines to connect the Burdwan district with the neighbouring districts of Bengal. These were- Burdwan-Katwa Rail line (57 km), Raina –Bankura Rail line (97 km) and Katwa- Ahmadpur Rail line (51.92 km). By the initiative of British government, Howrah- Burdwan Main line, Khana-Saithia Loop lines, and Howrah-Burdwan Cord Line were established in 1917.

After the First World War, the Indian business community had to protest with renewed self-confidence against the encroachment of the Foreigner.⁴⁰ In 1919, a new company, called the Bengal Iron Company was incorporated to take over the assets of the 'Bengal Iron and Steel Company'. The Bengal Iron Works Company was reconstructed and came to be known as of 'Indian Iron and Steel Company (IISCO). In 1930s 'The Steel Corporation of Bengal' was one of the important factories of the district. During Colonial Period, it was one of the largest pig iron production companies of Bengal. The years between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century were the most hopeful ones for the growth of the Indian industry in a colonial context.⁴¹ The Government of India Act of 1935, increased the opportunities of Indian entrepreneurs to influence the formulation and the execution of the policy of the provincial government. The Economic policy of the Government of India, throughout the period from 1900 to 1939, remained geared to the purpose of preserving the British imperial order.⁴²

Conclusion

The coming of the British had great impact on the socio, economic and political fields in 18th century India in general and Bengal in particular. Bengal was one of the richest areas of India as far as 18th century India is concerned. Burdwan district which is the important part of Rarh Bongo was also one of the advanced districts in terms of socio-economic and political parameters. Burdwan was prosperous in agricultural, industrial and mineral resources in both pre colonial and colonial era. However, before the colonial period there was practically no utilization of the mineral resources of the district. The district was inhabited by both Hindus and Muslims communities and other communities also. Burdwan was one of the industrially and agriculturally developed districts of Bengal and with the coming of Britishers a lot of changes had taken place in socio-economic and political lives of the people of Bengal. The introduction of some of the industries had part great impact on the socio-economic fabric which had far reaching impact on economic and social lives of the people of the district. During the early part of 20th century, the construction of new roads and the laying of the railway tracks created new modes of communication which also facilitated the process of industrialization of Burdwan district. The impact of British rule specially the introduction of Permanent Settlement had great impact on the economic lives of the people of the district during the period of study.

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22. Permanent settlement: Revenue settlement on the basis of ten years time period done by Lord Cornowallis in 1793. It was a grant contract signed between the East India Company and individual landlords of Bengal's Zamindars and Talukdars.
23. Peterson. J.C.K, 'Bengal District Gazetteers, Burdwan', op.cit, p.37.
24. Aimadars: Aimadars were the landed aristocracies of Burdwan who were granted Aima (Rent free land grants) on and around Ajoy-Bhagirathi Rivers of Western part of Bengal. A large number of aimdars settled in Burdwan district during colonial period.
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