

Poverty and Epidemic : District Birbhum in the Colonial Period

Nilotpala Ghosh

Abstract:

Epidemics have affected much of human history. The intensity of the epidemics can be measured through the mortality rate. But there were other factors that also stimulated mortality and morbidity among the population in colonial Bengal. The economic condition of the people aggravated the effects of epidemics. It was the poverty that made the people so fragile that when different kinds of epidemics occurred, it became very hard for them to resist. The gloomy picture of British colonialism was disclosed to it. A case study of a small district, Birbhum, in the colonial period reveals those factors which seem responsible for poverty. And for the people who were already afflicted by poverty, the epidemic came as a double blow.

Keywords: *Birbhum, Epidemic, Rural indebtedness, Famine, Malnutrition, Rice, Irrigation, Colonialism*

Introduction:

Epidemics are part of human history throughout all ages. In the colonial period, India as well as the Bengal presidency suffered tremendously from various epidemics. Birbhum, a small district in the Bengal presidency situated in the western part of Bengal bordering the then Santhal Pargana, was no exception to it, though known for its “salubrity” even in the first phase of colonial rule (O’Malley 1910:48). Its healthiness is because of its favourable geographical condition. Its soil is porous; it has good facilities for drainage through its rivers and streams. But from the 2nd half of the 19th century, the condition of public health in Birbhum deteriorated gradually. In this region diseases like cholera, smallpox, malaria, and influenza regularly took the form of endemics and epidemics in the colonial period. From the 1870s onwards, malaria took the maximum toll on lives (based on: Sanitary Commissioner Reports and Public Health Reports for Bengal, 1868–1946). The direct effects of those epidemics and endemics were felt on demography. The Census Reports of Bengal from 1872 to 1951 show very marginal population increases and even a decrease in the district, in spite of high birth rates. Moreover, the British Government did not take adequate measures for rural Bengal; whatever developments in public health during the colonial period happened only for the metropolitans, not extended to rural areas. But there was another factor that had intensified

the mortality and morbidity due to epidemics in the population. That was poverty. Like other parts of India, rural Bengal was also affected economically by colonial rule. The adverse effects of Permanent Settlement (1793) were acute. There were total absence of minimum necessities for livelihood like pure drinking water, irrigation, education, and on the other hand poverty and backwardness were evident. Though Birbhum was as regards natural resources, the richest and most productive, as well as the healthiest district of Bengal, when such factors as famine, scarcity, labour shortages and wages are taken cognisance of, it is at once seen that the natural capability of an area to support its inhabitants can be a taste of the well-being of the people.

Objective:

It is impossible to know the entire history of epidemics without knowing the condition of the people who were affected by the epidemics. An attempt has been made here, using economic perspectives, to identify the factors that exacerbated the catastrophic effect of epidemics on the people of Birbhum who were unable to fight back during the colonial period. In the socio-economic condition based on agriculture, poverty led the people to the verge of economic under-development, the most immediate impact of which was felt on the health of the people. The population suffered from malnutrition and ailments, and because of poverty became easy victims of epidemics and endemics. Here an attempt has been made to find the causes of poverty, which ultimately made people so weak that they lost physical and to some extent, mental strength for any kind of resistance.

Methodology:

This paper is a case study of District Birbhum in the colonial period. Both primary and secondary sources have been used for this study.

Causes of poverty:

There were several causes of poverty; those were Permanent Settlement, price and wage, rural indebtedness, lack of variety of production, natural calamities, scarcity and famine, which ultimately caused malnutrition and under-nutrition and also intensified mortality and morbidity due to epidemics.

Permanent settlement: The Permanent Settlement was effective from March 22, 1793, which is considered a landmark in Bengal history. It was a demarcation between two ages, i.e., particularly regarding production, it was the period of transition from the mediaeval “mode of production” and on the other hand, the colonial “mode of production” in Bengal. The British government claimed that the Permanent Settlement in Bengal was the solution to Bengal’s poverty, but ultimately it showed its destructive power in the famine of 1770. Meanwhile, in most instances, it also became quite impossible to use the *zamindars* as administrative instruments.¹ “It has been said that in Bengal the rich and powerful have been

less restrained, and the poor less protected, than in other provinces, and up to that time this was so in the most literal sense of the word".² Most of the original *zamindars* failed to pay the revenue, and their estates were sold out and split up. Through the operation of Hindu and Muslim laws of inheritance and a vast system of sub-infeudation, the rights to the land had come to be held by many sharers and in many gradations of over and under-holders. Speculators, women, children and others possessed those divided rights as mere property, and no administrative assistance was expected from them. "The idea of property has become stronger and stronger and the idea of obligation attached to the functions of landholders has become weaker and weaker. It may be said that very point about which there could be any doubt has been allowed to settle itself in favour of the landholders and against the public."³ Subsequently, the division of *zamindari* into several estates started. By 1799, a single *zamindari* of Birbhum was fragmented into as many as 222 *mahals* spread over 42 *parganas*. By 1800, the number of registered proprietors went up to 233, and in 1809 it was 321. In the next 40 years, the number almost doubled, reaching 650. In 1856, a large part of the district came under the Santhal Parganas, the number of *zamindars* being 1,884 (eight times the figure in 1800) spread over 24 *parganas*.⁴

The report shows that in Western Bengal, including Birbhum, the landlords received much more than a 25% share of the value of the gross produce, even as much as 50%.⁵ On the other hand, various dues and charges or *abwabs* levied on the *ryats* in addition to this regular rent reduced them to mere sustainability. It was reported that "It has been the ryats's immemorial practice to pay these abwabs and they pay accordingly; they pay because they have always paid, and because in the long run it involves less trouble to pay than to refuse."⁶ As a result, the settlement favoured a small number of landowners while completely ignoring the concerns of the vast majority of oppressed and destitute cultivators.

Price and wage: The high price of food grains, caused by scarcity, was evident throughout the British period. The Administration Report shows that the price was comparatively higher in Birbhum than in Burdwan district.⁷ On the other hand, the agricultural wage was not increased compared to the price. Even in the 20th century circumstances did not improve. Shantipriya Bose and P.C. Mahalanobis show that in 1933-1934 the agricultural wage in Bolpur varied from 2 *anna* 6 *pice* to 5 *anna* 6 *pice* per day and the price of rice was rupees 2.11 *anna* to rupees 3.14 *anna* per *mon*.⁸ In 1939, according to the survey report of Sriniketan Agricultural Department, when labour wage was Rs. 4 *anna* per day, one could easily buy 2 *seer* of rice at per *seer* and retain 1 *anna* for buying other necessary things. But in 1939, whereas he was earning 12 *anna*, he had to spend the whole amount on buying only one *seer*- of rice.⁹ The condition became awful in the period of 1941-1943, the Great Famine. The condition was as follows:

Amount of rice per Rupees:

Year	Price of rice per Rupees	Amount of Rice
1941	Rs. 1	8 <i>seer</i>
1942	Rs. 1	7 <i>seer</i>
1943	Rs. 1	4 <i>seer</i>
1944	Rs. 1	3 <i>seer</i>

Based on: (Sinha 2010:147)

There were two types of labour systems that existed in Birbhum called the *mahindar* and the *begar*. They worked in the village agricultural family with a minimum subsidy. Their wages were only Rupees 2 to 4 per month in the year 1944 in the village near Bolpur. There was another tendency, i.e., free labour called *begar* with only food and clothes and a minimum of stationary.¹⁰

Rural Indebtedness: Rural indebtedness affected most of the population in Birbhum during the colonial period. Most of the money lending investments involved land and agriculture. The money lending business was termed as *mahajani karbar* and *bandaki karbar* in Birbhum. The person related to it was called *mahajan*. Most of the landowners and business classes big, medium and small and even the government *amlas* to some extent, invested their capital in money lending. Because it was the easiest capital investment process, even those who had little capital could earn a fortune through it. Opportunities were also there, as poverty-stricken poor peasants were always in need. W. W. Hunter observed in 1876 that in different loan transactions, the borrowers pledged as security some articles such as ornaments or household articles. The rate of interest was 2 *pice* every month on a rupee, or $37\frac{1}{2}$ % per annum. In lump sum transactions where houses or land were mortgaged, the rate of interest varied from 18% to 20% annually. In the district of Birbhum, cases of mortgages on movable property were very rare, and in such cases the rate of interest went up to 25% per annum. The cultivators received advances in the form of food grains, but such advances were granted for three to four months till harvesting. At harvest time, the lender restored his advance with a 25% interest charge upon the investment. A person buying an estate would consider a fair return of 5% to 6% per annum for the money invested. There were no large banking establishments in the district and loans were chiefly conducted by village shopkeepers who combined rice dealing with money lending (Hunter 1876:381). Although the standard government rate of interest was 12% per annum, the *zamindars* and the other officials associated with *zamindari* like *nayeb*s

and *gomastas* carried on money-lending business at a rate of even 30% per annum (Gupta 1984:76).

Hasim Amir Ali and T. Basu found that most of the villagers were hardly free from debt. It was not only agricultural production that was affected; land tenure too seems to have been affected. The district had a high percentage of people who were indebted. However, in times of crisis, the poor had few material resources to fall back on. The economic crisis caused by diseases disproportionately impacted middle-class families. These families had a high amount of debt. At Ballavpur village near Bolpur, at the time of the survey in 1925, it was found that only 6 out of 24 existing families were free from any debt. Taking the land ownership as an index, Kalimohan Ghosh calculated that the village had a debt (1926) of Rupees 16 per *bigha*. At Raipur village near Bolpur, it was as high as Rupees 28.50 per *bigha* at the time of the survey in 1927. Ali, who resurveyed the villagers served by him in 1933, found in 1956 that agricultural land owned by low castes and Muslim landowners was slowly passing out to the middle and high castes.¹¹

During the time of *Swadeshi*, the people responded to some extent with their limited resources to the misery of the peasants due to indebtedness. In 1902, under the sub-division of Rampurhat, Kulmar and Fatehpur (now in Mallarpur Bazar), an agricultural co-operative society was established. Later, it was registered under the Co-operative Law of 1909. In the pre-independence period, four important central co-operative banks for village agricultural loans were established. At Suri, the Central Co-operative Bank was established. Its working areas were the Suri and the *Sadar Mahakuma* areas. In Rampurhat, the Rampurhat Central Co-operative Bank Ltd. was established in the same period. In 1927, the Rampurhat Central Co-operative Bank was divided into Nalhati and Muraroi Thana, and the Nalhati Central Co-operative Bank Ltd. was established. On November 22, 1927, at Sriniketan, under Visva-Bharati, the Visva-Bharati Central Co-operative Bank Ltd. was established by Tagore's energetic initiative. Bolpur, Nanur and Ilarbazar thana were detached from the Suri Central Co-operative Bank and attached to the Visva-Bharati Central Co-operative Bank (Ghosh 2006:103-104).

On the basis of the Bengal Provincial Banking Inquiry Committee (1923–1930), it can be said that the agricultural classes in Birbhum were dependent on i) professional *mahajans*, ii) non-agriculturalists and other professionals, iii) businessmen, iv) *zamindars*, v) co-operative societies, and vi) agricultural loans approved by the government under the Agricultural Loan Act. This report of the Committee also mentioned that most of the agricultural investments came as a *dadan* from the *mahajans* and very little from the co-operative banks and government approval (Sarkar 2004:212). Thus, the indebtedness condition of the people in the colonial period was responsible for the economic and social backwardness in Birbhum. Banking did not allow for proper investment to boost agriculture and people's livelihoods.

Rice, the cause of poverty: The district once was in good economic condition as a variety of cash crops like sugarcane, cotton, mulberry, indigo, etc. were produced in good quantities. Industries and trade also developed along with these agricultural products, like the sugar industries, cotton weaving, silk weaving and indigo. European companies infiltrated this land to trade in these products. Apart from this, the *luc* industry in Illambazar and mine based industries like the iron industry in 'Loha Mahal' were the most important. For cash crop production and for weaving the European companies gave the *dadān* to the cultivators and weavers. They appointed *gomastas* and *dalal* to organise their trade in this region. But from the beginning of the 19th century cotton and sugarcane cultivation declined and with it cotton weaving and sugar manufacturing also declined. Cheap British cloth and cheap international sugar captured the local market. The British colonial policy of spreading the market for British goods was also the cause of the decay of the *luc* and native iron industries in Birbhum. But silk and indigo production continued up to the first half of the 20th century. The British capitalist policy, structured by colonialism, was the cause of deindustrialisation. Its effect also fell upon the mulberry cultivation and on silk industries (at Gunutia, Tantipara) and Birbhum became merely a rice cultivating land. Indigo cultivation became extinct after the invention of chemical dye. Other products were cultivated on a small scale for local consumption only, and had no economic value.

The revenue survey of the district was adopted between 1849 and 1852. In 1871, the collector returned the area of the district to 1,997 square miles, of which at the time of the revenue survey (1849–1852), 1,362 square miles were under cultivation. Hunter said that "the rice monopolies almost all the cultivated area. No statistics exist, showing the acreage under the different crops; but the collector is of opinion, and speaking at a guess that $\frac{15}{16}$ of the tilled land is under rice." "The collector reported that no improvements have taken place of late years in the quality of rice grown in the district, but that the area under rice cultivation has greatly increased in the last 20 years, large tracts of land formerly covered by jungle having been reclaimed and brought under rice." It was also recorded in the Imperial Gazetteer of 1885 that, "The principal crop in Birbhum as throughout the rest of Bengal is rice." The statistics from the 1910 District Gazetteers also showed the same thing. From the settlement operation of 1924–1932, it is known that in the district as a whole, 68.11% of the total area was cultivated and 31.89% was uncultivated. Of this again, 2.12% was fallow. This was so not because of any systematic fallowing that was observed but for some reason or other for which the land was not cultivated (Mitra 1954: Appendix-II). H. A. Ali and T. Basu linked the underdeveloped condition of the rural areas of Birbhum with the overdependence on rice production: "Rice provides easy means of livelihood but prevents the standard of living much above the bare minimum. It is the rice which feed out peasant and its rice that keep them poor."¹²

Between 1915 and 1928, at Bolpur, 28 rice mills were established, as well as at Sainthia and Ahmedpur. According to the field survey of Prashant Chandra Mahalanobis and Shantipriya

Basu, in Bolpur, it was noticed that the surplus was exported and the peasants got only 3 *pice* per *mon* as profit. Most of the profit goes into the hands of millers, *aratdars* and *forias*.¹³

Natural calamity, Scarcity and Famine: Scarcities were a regular phenomenon in Birbhum during the colonial period. The cause of scarcity here was directly related to the natural calamities. Natural disasters were sometimes to blame for famine. The following data is the proof of it:

1770 famine (disastrous)
1789 drought (severe)
1800 draught (severe)
1806 flood (Ajay)
1813 draught (severe)
1829 distress
1837 distress
1865 scarcity
1867 scarcity
1874 scarcity (severe)
1885 scarcity (amounting to famine)
1902 flood (Ajay)
1911 flood
1912 flood
1913 flood
1934 drought
1939 flood
1940 drought
1943 famine condition
1946 heavy flood
1949 heavy flood

Based on: (Mitra 1954: xxxvi)

Keeping in mind the quality and nature of the soil and also the topography of the district of Birbhum, a well-developed mechanism of irrigation was very essential. There had been very scanty rainfall for years together. Except for the rivers Mor and Ajay, all other streams

remained dry, and they only carried water from the hilly areas down to the planes during the rainy season. The floods caused by the rivers Ajay and Mor brought about a serious plight for the peasants. Apart from causing severe damage to life and property, the heavy layers of sand carried forth by the flood water caused serious damage to the agricultural lands (Gupta 1984:114-115). These calamities were caused by nature, but men were no less responsible for this. In 1863, J. E. Gastrell, writing a report on the district of Bankura and Birbhum, wrote, "There can be no doubt that the jungle has had great influence in decreasing the annual amount of rain and impoverishing the country." (Mitra 1954: iv).

On the other hand, the government did not take adequate steps to improve embankments for the flood-affected areas or irrigation for the drought-affected areas. The devastating floods caused by the rivers Ajay and Mor created an emergent need for regular maintenance of old embankments and also necessitated the construction of new banks, both as a safeguard to the people against inundation and for irrigation in the entire area. As long as the Raja of Birbhum was the only authority in the district, he took all steps for the protection of the embankment, popularly known as *Palbandi*. The proprietors coming to power after the fragmentation of the district into *mahals* and *parganas* were also bound, as per the *kubliats*, to construct new embankments and repair the existing ones. They were responsible for any loss or damage to the embankments. The government, at its end, did not shoulder any financial or administrative responsibility for running *Palbandi*. Consequently, there was not a single embankment in the district. This sorry state of affairs aggravated the plight of the peasants in the district (Gupta 1984:116). A Bill to provide for embankments and drainage by V.H. Schalch, to amalgamate and amend the law regarding embankments, and to issue payment for embankment works (17th December 1870), was passed by the Bengal Legislative Council on the 29th November 1873, and received the Viceroy's assent on the 20th December 1873.¹⁴ But in the case of Birbhum, the report said that, "The effect of the floods within the spill area of the breaches was the beneficial, as the whole of the area was irrigated, and the villagers reaped a good harvest. The low floods also tended to silt up the breaches. The repairs of the Adjai river embankments were of an ordinary nature and call for no remarks."¹⁵

Natural disasters and famine had a wide-ranging impact on people's livelihoods. In 1770, five years after the grant of the *Diwani* to the East India Company, the district was devastated by famine. More than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the cultivable land was returned as deserted in 1771 (O'Malley 1910:64). After the Permanent Settlement, being faced with the taste of paying revenue up to 10/11 of their *hastabund* for the total area, they were compelled to import cultivators so that they might raise crops and deliver the money. "It is not difficult to imagine how the sculpting of the earth took place, encouraging further thriftless denunciation." (Mitra 1954: vi). The land was progressively losing its fertility, as can be seen by the following data:

Yield of paddy per acre:

Year	Yield of paddy per acre
1871	28 <i>maund</i>
1885	22 <i>maund</i>
1924-32	18 <i>maund</i>
1946-47	16 <i>maund</i>

Based on: (Mitra 1954: vi)

In spite of this, the area demarcated for the cultivation of *aman* has largely increased, and the unproductive lands have been left out. The fearful march of soil erosion is very evident (Mitra 1954: vi).

Some grants for famine relief were sometimes arranged by the government but were not sufficient. For the orphans left destitute by the famine, an expenditure of Rupees 2 per month for each, in addition to what could be contributed by the Famine Committee was sanctioned until a permanent arrangement could be made for their support. But the number was too inadequate, as in the Report of 1867-1868, in 22 districts, including Birbhum in the Bengal presidency; only 450 orphans got the allowance.¹⁶ After the Famine Commissioner's Report (1871), the Bengal government proposed to take advantage of the system prescribed by the Road Cess Act, under which the roads and other works to be undertaken were systematically registered. In the event of famine or extreme distress, these works may be undertaken to provide employment for the people. It was proposed that in times of prosperity, a portion of the income should be saved and gradually accumulated so as to be available in times of distress. If the local governments were successful in finding useful work for those who were able to work; the government and the charitable public, including, it was hoped, landholders would be obligated to support them during times of famine and when they became old, weak and helpless.¹⁷ Later, the responsibility passed into the hands of the Union Boards. The Union Boards of Birbhum organised relief programmes for the famine stricken people. A glimpse of the British mentality can be seen from the record: "....in western Bengal the landlords are less prosperous. The fiscal advantages of the settlement were most severely tested during the famine of 1874, when the revenue was collected without any postponement or remission of default, or any failure whatever. Without the relief afforded by Government to the famishing people, there must have been some serious failures in the land revenue and some extensive transfer of landed property and ruin of old families."¹⁸

On account of the scarcity of food, massive famine and spread of the epidemic, there was

tremendous pressure from the political wings upon the government. As a result, the government passed the Agricultural and Sanitary Improvement Act in 1920 during the reign of the Lieutenant Governor, Lord Ronaldshey. It amended the law relating to the agriculture and sanitation systems prevailing at that time.¹⁹ Till 1947, only one major and one minor irrigation work were undertaken in the district, the major being the Bakreswar Canal. The construction of the Bakreswar Irrigation Scheme in the district was sanctioned in 1927 at an estimated cost of Rupees 4, 90,596. The scheme estimated the irrigation of 10,000 acres of paddy in an area subject to scarcity. The project was completed in 1934-35 for a total cost of Rs. 3, 88,000, excluding establishment, tools and plant charges (Mitra 154: xxxvi). The minor irrigation work was known as the Kashinala Irrigation Scheme. This scheme in the district of Birbhum was completed in 1928 at a total cost of Rupees 9,624 for work only. The work was carried out under the provisions of the Bengal Agricultural and Sanitary Improvement Act VI of 1920. The whole cost was advanced by the government. This was maintained by the government at the cost of the benefit parties.²⁰ In 1928, a special investigation was started to provide irrigation facilities in the Birbhum district, which had a sad record of periodic crop failures. Thus, demand for an expansion of irrigation from streams flowing through the districts of Bankura, Birbhum, and Midnapore necessitated certain changes in the constitution of the irrigation department. A new division called the Bankura Division was formed with headquarter at Bankura with three subdivisions at Bankura, Suri and Midnapore. The division was placed under the superintending engineer, South Western circle.²¹ And for Mor, Brahmi, Bakreswar, Kopai and Dwarka, draining started in 1928.²²

The Orissa famine of 1866 affected Birbhum. The Bihar famine of 1874 also affected Birbhum. The famine of 1896–1897 was the last famine of the 19th century of any severity in Birbhum. Since 1901, whenever famine raised its ugly head, it was quickly localised and suppressed, but it seems that W.H. Thompson, writing in 1921, was a little too hasty when he remarked that famine over an entire province was a thing of the past. This was belied in 1943, when the great man-made famine in the famine history of British India.²³

Because of the famine that hit Bengal in 1943, and again because of the cyclone, flood, fungal disease of crops, War and the unavailability of the Burma rice, there was a serious shortage of food grains available for consumption.²⁴ (Sen 1981:53). The high price of the rice was the proof of the scarcity.

The price of rice due to famine condition:

December 1942	Rs. 13 to 14 per <i>maund</i>
March 1943	Rs. 21 per <i>maund</i>
May 1943	Rs. 30 per <i>maund</i>
August 1943	Rs. 37 per <i>maund</i>

● Based on: (Sen 1981:55)

People who were affected most in the Great Famine of 1943 were the fishermen, the transport workers, agricultural workers, huskers, and even craftsmen and non-agricultural labourers, whereas the share-croppers were least affected (Sen 1981:72-73). "The inadequacy of official policy in tackling the Bengal famine has been widely noted and criticized. The Famine Inquiry Commission (1945) provided a detailed analysis of the policy failures both of the Bengal Government as well as of the Indian Government. The famine became a focal point of nationalist criticism of British Imperial policy in India, and official complacency came under particular attack." (Sen 1981:78). According to Amartya Sen, "While it is not possible to say at all precisely how many people were killed by the Bengal famine of 1943, there is evidence that an estimate of around 3 million would be closer to the mark than the 1.5 million arrived at by the official famine enquiry commission." "The difference is largely due to:

1. Continued high 'excess mortality' for several years after the famine caused by famine-induced epidemics the impact of which the commission considered only for 1943 and the first half of 1944.
2. Underestimation by the Commission of the actual extent of under-registration of death in official records." (Sen 1981:215).

The district of Birbhum, which earlier enjoyed the privilege of being the "purchase area" by the Bengal government and where the mortality rate was as low as 60.5%, in 1944 the rate went up to 90% because of the severe food-crisis and outbreak of diseases.²⁵ "The death rate reached its peak only in phase III (No. 1943 to 1944), but the most acute period of starvation had by then passed; epidemics were raging in a famine devastated country. Mortality reached its peak only in December 1943 and stayed up for quite a while longer, but this was mostly the result of famine-induced epidemics, e.g. of cholera, malaria and smallpox. Death directly from starvation and 'famine diarrhoea' had passed its peak in the late summer and autumn of 1943." (Sen 1981:54-56). Professor Sen also opined that, "Regarding the diseases that took most of the toll, they had dual characteristics of both (1) epidemic disease in the region and (2) epidemic diseases in past famine. Gigantic as the famine was, it killed mostly by adding fuel to the fire of disease and mortality normally present in the region." (Sen 1981:216).

Poverty and Malnutrition:

"Malnutrition is the closed and constant companion of poverty."²⁶ Under-nutrition means insufficient food, while malnutrition implies wrong kinds of food. Both were prevalent in the district. Among the poor sections of the community, there was an existence of much under-nutrition as well as malnutrition.²⁷ The negative consequences of a poor and insufficient diet were numerous. The infant, maternal and general mortality rates in India were high, and the expectation of life was low, as also in the case of Birbhum. Among the causes of ill health, disease and death were contaminated water supplies, lack of sanitation, bad housing,

mosquitoes and flies, which carry disease and malnutrition. According to the Famine Commission of 1945, "There is no doubt that malnutrition occupies a very prominent position in the group of evil and lethal agents."²⁸ Various forms of blood-destroying diseases such as malaria and hookworm were frequently seen among ill-nutritioned child and adults.²⁹ "Malnutrition produces states of ill-health and lowered physical efficiency, short of actual disease which are perhaps more widespread than disease itself."³⁰ Where people have been eating between one-third and one-half of their normal food, deficiency diseases such as painless diarrhoea, dropsy and general waste, the loss of muscles and weight and retardation of puberty in females may be prevalent (Mukherjee 1938:157). The Report of the Famine Commissioner of 1901 abundantly shows that mortality due to privation was followed by a further rise in mortality due to cholera, diarrhoea and fever because of lack of immunity among people (Mukherjee 1938:36). Diet deficiency and poverty were the primary causes of a large proportion of disease and inefficiency in India. Malnutrition increases morbidity, as Radhakamal Mukherjee, opined that "among the cultivators it increases the predisposition of diseases, raises mortality, especially infant mortality, and leads to agricultural idleness, indebtedness and poverty, which pursues its heartless course in an ever-widening vicious circle." (Mukherjee 1938:ix).

Lt. Col. D. McCay wrote: "As we pass from the north-west regions of the Punjab down to the Gangetic plain to the coast of Bengal, there is a gradual fall in structure, body weight, stamina and efficiency of the people. In accordance with this decline in mainly characteristics it is of the utmost significance that there is an accompanying gradual fall in the nutritive value of the dietaries, and more especially in the average level of protein metabolism attained by people of Punjab, United province, Bihar and Bengal." (Mukherjee 1938:167). Inadequacy of nutritious food and lack of a balanced diet affected the poverty-stricken people largely in the district. In addition to the insufficiency of food, there were social and religious prejudices against animal slaughtering for food, and all these things affected the mortality rate in the district (Mukherjee 1938:66). In Bengali diets, *ghee*, milk and sugar did not occur at all. The peasants' diets appeared to contain a relatively larger amount of carbohydrates (Mukherjee 1938:65). In Birbhum, the ordinary food of the people consisted principally of rice, pulses (*dal*), vegetables, fish and milk (Hunter 1876:344; O'Malley 1910:46). Fish and meat form such a small portion of the daily diet of the people in the district that, except for the upper few, the majority practically go without them.³¹ A sad scenario was described in the local paper of Birbhum: the quinine was available cheap or free, but how could the strong dose of quinine work on an empty stomach when, for the poor people of Birbhum, even milk was not available at all?³²

With land per head so small, with the lack of variety and number of crops grown and with so few additions to the subsidiary occupations, the condition of the people in the bulk was really poor. Their houses, their diet, their dress, their daily routine of life convinced them

that the standard of life was quite low indeed. With the growth of the population and the restriction of other occupations, the income was inelastic and really small. In addition to expenditure in the changed conditions, the average individual was getting poorer in spite of the high price of paddy at times. And their distress was immediately reflected in their impoverished diet.³³ Scarcity and famine always exacerbated starvation, resulting in acute malnutrition. After the great famine, Birbhum took the longest time to recover from the excess of deaths over births that continued till the end of 1947. On the other hand, the birth rate decreased sharply because of abortions, miscarriages and stillbirths, all of which resulted from acute poverty and malnutrition in the district. The disruption of family life during the Great Famine also affected this birth rate.³⁴

Poverty and Health:

Though the health and wealth of the population were closely connected, the rich and poor suffered alike, but medicine, proper clothing and a better change of air were within the reach of the former, they succumbed to the disease.³⁵ The people of Birbhum were generally unhealthy looking and for the most part, anaemic and attenuated in appearance, and were unequal to much-prolonged labour or hard work. They were, moreover, very poor and generally very idle.³⁶ In the Sanitary Report of 1889, it was remarked that many districts of Bengal province, including Birbhum, were unhealthy, and it was observed that the outturn of crops was below the average label and the price of food grain was consequently higher than the average.³⁷ According to British accountability, overpopulation, overcrowding, and population density were the primary causes of poverty and epidemic mortality rates. The Report of the Leprosy Commissioner mentioned that "The whole empire being, generally speaking, overcrowded and the areas of cultivable land insufficient for the large masses of an agricultural population, shows everywhere the most unmistakable sign of poverty, as the term would be understood by western nations."³⁸ India could not be called a rich and prosperous country. The land-tax forms the mainstay of the imperial revenue, so the *ryat*, or cultivator, constitutes the unit of the social system. According to the Census of 1881, 72% of the population of India was directly supported by cultivation, and in Birbhum the percentage was even higher. According to the Imperial Gazetteer, 90% of the rural population lives more or less on the tillage of the soil (Imperial Gazetteer of India 1908:482).

The colonial government thoroughly failed to eradicate poverty as a whole. Initiatives like irrigation, banking and famine relief were utterly insufficient. It was a characteristic of colonialism that whatever developments were made for their own colonial benefit i.e., to accumulate more revenue or to spread the market for British goods. The government never took adequate measures to suppress malnutrition and under-nutrition. Moreover, it was colonialism that dragged poverty-stricken India into the War and showed its ugly image

when the great man-made famine of 1943 in the famine history took place in Bengal. According to contemporary periodicals, due to a lack of purified water supply and lack of proper sanitation, it was impossible to eliminate cholera and malaria in Birbhum. And when influenza (1918-1919) affected the district, the total failure of the colonial medical intervention was exposed. The Census of 1921 shows a decrease in population in the district. The parallel co-existence of poverty and epidemics were a feature of colonial rule. When the epidemics affected the poverty-stricken area, the result was a maximum mortality and morbidity rate. This mortality and morbidity were higher among those sections of the people who were the main force for agricultural production, ultimately resulting in a low yield of production. Contemporary periodicals estimated that, because of malaria the production of paddy in Bengal was reduced by half.³⁹ The number of agricultural labourers either perished because of malaria or chronic suffering put them in a state where they were no longer able to produce much with their full physical strength. Poverty and epidemics had reciprocal effects on the people of Birbhum during the colonial period. As Timbres (1930) observed, poverty followed the disease: "The economic conditions in these places are appallingly bad. The two conditions of poverty and diseases go together. The peasants say the disease come first and caused poverty, but I cannot help but feel the each follows the other in a vicious circle."⁴⁰

Conclusion:

Under the colonial rule the process of development was too slow and insufficient. The most woeful effect of British rule was their selfish policy of economic extortion. The people of Birbhum were destined to fulfil the needs of the state; they became helpless against the distress and diseases that came more intensively with colonialism. The state exploited much but gave minimum welfare to the rural people. The result of the deterioration of health was generated a prolonged mental and physical impact among the rural people of Birbhum. People lost confidence to fight against natural calamities and diseases; they believed that all of these were their misfortunes. As a consequence, obscurity in every phase of their lives became conspicuous. The loss of determination and confidence caused the people to accept the foreign rule for a long period without complaining or questioning state's responsibilities; on the other hand, the state established its hegemony over this dilapidated rural society for a longer period of time. Flood, drought, famine, malnutrition and epidemics were very frequent. As far as public health was concerned, the condition of Birbhum district deteriorated gradually from the 1850s and though causes of it were various but poverty intensified it. Once prosperous in its resources like agriculture and forest, it became an economically backward and malaria-ridden district. The standard of life and comfort were very low and people aimed simply at subsistence, in contradiction to maintenance, which caused malnutrition and under-nutrition for most of the population. The ruined condition

of rural Birbhum was manifested in every aspect of its socio-economic structure. As wealth and the well-being of the population are closely connected, the people of Birbhum were deprived of both throughout the Colonial period.

Notes:

- ¹ Report on the Administration of Bengal 1871-1872. 1872. part-I. pp-43-44. Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Press.
- ² *ibid.*
- ³ *ibid.*
- ⁴ *ibid.*p-73.
- ⁵ Report on the Administration of Bengal 1875-1876. 1877. Part-1. p-6. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.
- ⁶ Report on the Administration of Bengal 1872-1873. 1873. p-26. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.
- ⁷ Report on the Administration of Bengal 1906-1907. 1908. p-13. Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot.
- ⁸ Basu, S. and Mahalanobis, P.C. 1936. 'Making of Rice at Bolpur'. Sriniketan: Visva-Bharati Rural Studies. No.4. vide: Sinha. 2010. p-146.
- ⁹ Report of Agriculture Department. 1939. Sriniketan File. Santiniketan: Rabindra Bhaban Archive.
- ¹⁰ Basu, S. 1351 Bengali year (1944). *Banglar Chasi*. Visva-Bharati: Loksikhsha Granthamala. vide: Sinha. 2010. pp-146-147.
- ¹¹ Ali, H. A. and. Basu, T. 1960. Then and Now: A Study of Socio-economic Structure and Change in some Village near Visva-Bharati. Calcutta: Asia Publishing House; Ghosh, K. 1926. 'Ballavhpur'. Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati Rural Studies; 'Raipur'. Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati Rural Studies. vide: Sinha . 2004. 'Tagore's Experiment in Health-care: Health and Medicine as an Aid to Rural Reconstruction'. In: Sen, S. and Basu Sarbadhikari, S. (eds.), *Understanding Health and Ecology in Rural Bengal during Colonial Rule*. pp-28-48. Visva-Bharati Annals, New Series-VI. Shantiniketan: Visva-Bharati Research Publication.
- ¹² Ali, H. A. and Basu, T. July 1932-1933. 'Rice and Rural Reconstruction' .*Visva-Bharati News*. vol.-1(11). p-14.
- ¹³ Basu, S. and Mahalanobis, P.C. 1936. 'Making of Rice at Bolpur'. Visva-Bharati Rural Studies .No. 4. Sriniketan. vide: Sinha. 2010. p-150.
- ¹⁴ Report on the Administration of Bengal 1872-1873. 1873. p-93.
- ¹⁵ Report on the Administration of Bengal 1895-1896. 1897. p-216. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.
- ¹⁶ Annual Report on the Administration of the Bengal Presidency for 1867-1868. 1868. p-217 Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Press.
- ¹⁷ Report on the Administration of Bengal 1871-1872. 1872. part-I. p-187.
- ¹⁸ Report on the Administration of Bengal 1875-1876. 1877. part-I. p-39.

- 19 Report on the Administration of Bengal 1920-1921. 1929. part-II. pp-14-15. Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot.
- 20 Report on the Administration of Bengal 1927-1928. 1929. part-II. p-217. Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot.
- 21 ibid. part-II. pp-209-210.
- 22 ibid. part-II. pp-214-215.
- 23 Mitra, A. 1953. Census of India 1951. vol.-VI. p-200. Delhi: The Manager of Publication.
- 24 Famine Inquiry Commission India 1945. P-77. vide: Sen.1981.p-53.
- 25 Mitra, A. 1953. Census on India 1951.vol.-VI. pp-81-83.
- 26 Famine Inquiry Commission Final Report. 1945. p-222. Delhi: The Manager of Publication.
- 27 ibid.p-106.
- 28 ibid.p-108.
- 29 ibid.P-109.
- 30 ibid.
- 31 Mukharjee, Rai Bijay Behari Bahadur (Mukherjee B.B.) Settlement Officer Superintendent. 1937. Government of Bengal Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Birbhum 1924-1932. p- 4. Bengal: Government Printing Bengal Government Press.
- 32 *Birbhum Barta*. 12th October. 1925. Suri. Birbhum.
- 33 Mukherjee, B. B. 1937. p-72.
- 34 Mitra, A.1953. pp-81-83.
- 35 Report of the Sanitary Commissioner for Bengal 1871. 1873. p-28. Calcutta: The Calcutta Central Press Company Limited.
- 36 First Annual Report of the Sanitary Commissioner for Bengal 1868. 1869. p-253. Calcutta: Alipore Jail Press.
- 37 Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Sanitary Commissioner for Bengal 1889. 1890. para-19. p-9. Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Press.
- 38 Report of the Leprosy Commission in India 1890-1891. 1893. P-88. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing.
- 39 *Sasthy Samachar*. vol.-10. 1326 (Bengali Year). p-220. Calcutta.
- 40 Timbres, H., G. January 1930. Report on the Medical Conditions in Birbhum District. P-365. Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati Quarterly.

References:

- Basu, S. 1351 (1944). *Banglar Chasi*. Visva-Bharati: Loksikhsha Granthamala.
- Ghosh, K. 2006. 'Birbhum Jelar Samabaya Aandolan', In: *Paschimbanga Birbhum Jela Sankhya*. W.B. Kolkata: Tattha o Sanskriti Bibhag.

Poverty and Epidemic : District Birbhum in the Colonial Period

- Gupta, R.K. 1984. *The Economic Life of a Bengal District Birbhum 1770-1857*. Calcutta: General Printers & Publishers (P) Ltd.
- Hunter, W.W. 1876. *A Statistical Account of Bengal*. vol.-IV. London: Trubner & Co.
- *Imperial Gazetteer of India*. vol.-VI. 1908. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mitra, A. 1954 . *Census1951: West Bengal District Handbook Birbhum*. Calcutta: Sree Saraswaty Press Ltd.
- Mukherjee, R.1938. *Food Planning for Four Hundred Million*. London: Macmillan and Co. Limited.
- O'Malley, L.L.S. 1910. *Bengal District Gazetteers Birbhum*. Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot. Reprint1996: Govt. of West Bengal.
- Sarkar, S. 2004. Birbhum Jelar Banking Babasthar Sekal o Ekal. In: B. Roy (ed.), *Birbhumi Birbhum: Dittio Porbo*. pp-205-218. Kolkata: Deep Prakasan.
- Sen, A. 1981. *Poverty and Famine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, India: Oxford. 1999.
- Sen, S and Basu Sarbadhikari, S. (eds.) 2004. *Understanding Health and Ecology in Rural Bengal during Colonial Rule*. Visva-Bharati Annals, New Series–VI. Shantiniketan: Visva-Bharati Research Publication.
- Sinha, D. 2010. *Rabindranather Pallipunargatan Proyash*. Kolkata: Paschimbanga Bangla Academy.

Bio Profile of the Author:

Assistant Professor, Department of History

Bankura Christian College

E-mail: gnilotpala@gmail.com