

Famine in Colonial Period: Its nature and Impact in a Bengal District: Murshidabad

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Abstract: The word “Famine”, derived from the Latin word, famines affected more severely different regions of India during the British rule. We are aware that natural calamities including drought, crop failure, flood etc. cause famines. Thus the aim of our present study is, therefore, to give a complete and analytical picture of famines in Murshidabad during the British rule. Before the establishment of the East India Company's rule in Bengal, Murshidabad had been one of the prosperous and richest places of India. The famine of 1770 was an appalling spectre on the threshold of British rule in Bengal. The permanent settlement was introduced by Cornwallis in 1793. The imperialist policy made peoples endless sorrows, sufferings, poverty, exploitation and permanent oppression. During famine of 1866 in India Murshidabad district was not so affected like Nadia and Burdwan. In the famine year of 1866.Famine of 1874 affected most of the districts of Bengal. But the people of Murshidabad were not so heavily affected by the famine of 1874. The Bengal famine of 1943 stuck entire Bengal province. Murshidabad was one of the most severely affected districts by this famine. Each and every Subdivision of Murshidabad district was affected.

Key words: Famine, Battle of plassey, rehabilitation, committee report.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The word “Famine”, derived from the Latin word, called, ‘Fames’ means ‘hunger’. Southard in ‘Encyclopaedia of social sciences’, defines famines as “a state of extreme hunger suffered by population of a region as a result of failure of accustomed food supply”. AmartyaSen, in his work, ‘Poverty and Famines: An essays on the entitlement and deprivation’, (1981), defines famines as “a particular virulent manifestation of starvation causing wide-spread death”. B.M. Bhatia, in his work, ‘Famines in India’ (1991), defines “Famines, under modern conditions has come to signify an abrupt sharp rise in food prices which renders food beyond the reach of the poor who suffer starvation”. Rural indebtedness has always been an important feature of agrarian economy of India, however, it was from the mid of 18th century that the problem of rural indebtedness started becoming noticeably serious. From this time onwards, the British

The importance of in-depth study of famine and rehabilitation measure can hardly be underestimated. Indians were acquainted with famines before the advent of the British in India. But famines affected more severely different regions of India during the British rule. We are aware that natural calamities including drought, crop failure, flood etc. cause famines. But the main cause of the devastating famines during the colonial rule was the British policy of exploitation, repression and oppression inflicted upon the Indian people. The British Govt. did nothing to prevent the recurrence of this human tragedy and did not adopt any long term programme to prevent occurrence of famines. However, they adopted some rehabilitation measures. But these were too inadequate to cope with this problem. These steps were very trivial to improve the misery of the common people. As a matter of fact, the government was interested in its colonial issues and it paid too little attention to the problems arise out of famines. Unfortunately, Murshidabad had been worse than any other district in Bengal in this respect during the entire period of the British rule. So a research work on the famines in the district of Murshidabad during the British rule is very significant to study.

Thus the aim of our present study is, therefore, to give a complete and analytical picture of famines in Murshidabad during the British rule. Before the establishment of the East India Company's rule in Bengal, Murshidabad had been one of the prosperous and richest places of India. But after the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the acquisition of the Dewani by the British (1765), Murshidabad was reduced from an abundantly prosperous and flourishing capital of a vast province to one of the poorest districts of Bengal by the English.²

The famine of 1770 was an appalling spectre on the threshold of British rule in Bengal. The first famine of which there is any detailed record is that of 1769-70, which was a calamity of the first magnitude in this and the neighbouring districts. The famine did not rage with equal fury in all districts. Ducarel, Supervisor

of Purnea reported that two lakhs of people perished in that district. Nadia also suffered in an extreme degree from the Famine.³The following account is taken mainly from the Statements made at the time by Mr. Becher, Resident at the Darbar of Murshidabad.

In the beginning of February 1770, the Resident, in conjunction with the authorities of Murshidabad, arranged to have rice distributed daily in the city at six places, at half a seer to each Person. The Government in reply, informed him that he might be assured of their concurrence in measure for the relief of the poor and earnestly recommended his taking every steps towards that purpose.

The East India Company replaced the old system of revenue collection by the new men and measures with disastrous effects upon the economic and the social balance in the countryside.²The devastating catastrophic famine of 1769-70 fell upon the Bengal society which had been already strained by the Company's pressure for revenue. After the fearful famine of 1769-70 which caused heavily mortality among those who cultivated the mulberry trees and reared silk worms they put forward several further demands. They asked that three-fourths of the total value of the contract should be paid them at its commencement in January, and the rest on the first day of May.⁴ there was a partial failure of crops in Bengal in December 1768 on account of the failure of rains. In the early months of 1769 there was a high prices. But the September Crop, which is far less important than the December harvest, was also scanty. The Calcutta Council was not aware of the existence of any scarcity of grain. To these difficulties was then added a great natural calamity, the famine of 1769-70. There was an incredible mortality among the cultivators who formerly engaged themselves in rearing silk worms. The NaibDewan Muhammed Reza Khan, reported that as a results of the famine many artisans had died for want of food, many had deserted, and those who survived were incapable of working.⁵Both Mr. Becher, the English Resident at Murshidabad and Charles Grant left vivid descriptions on the deplorable condition of the people of Murshidabad. But instead of making any arrangement of famine stricken people, the East India Company and its officials intensified their brutal policy of exploitation and oppression by enforcing extra-repressive measures for collecting revenues at higher rates. The Court of Directors itself accused both Mr. Becher and Mohammad Reza Khan, the NaibDewan, of monopolizing the principal articles of food and forcing the cultivators to sell even the seed required for subsequent sowings.

While discussing the creation of the office of the Supervisor we have seen that its immediate reason was the desire of the Company to verify the universal complaint among the zamindars that there were crop failure in 1768-69 and 1769-70 for which the ryots were not in a position to keep the rent-demands made on them and that since 1765 the NaibDewan Reza Khan had gone on increasing revenue demands to such an extent that the revenue demands as it stood in April 1770 was impossible to meet. Cultivators were actually fleeing from their homes, the previous year, living their field uncultivated to escape from the excessive rent-demands made on them by the Zamindars, who in their turn, had no any other option than to enhance their demands as they had been asked to pay revenue at enhanced rates. Coupled with these, there were two crop failure in 1770 itself. The famine raged in all its fury between June and November 1770. According to report of the Resident of the Murshidabaddarbar, in this miserable conditions mens has eaten the flesh of dead bodies and six out sixteen were died in mostly affected areas. Becher reported that in June rice sold at 6 to 7 seer per rupee in Murshidabad and for days together there were no purchasers at that price. But ultimately there were buyers even at that price. Conditions deteriorated further in July when only 3 seer of the rice was available per rupee. In Murshidabad per day 500 mens has been died⁶. While the Government was not ready to slacken its revenue demands to relieve the miseries of the victim of the famine, a public charity was instituted at Murshidabad.

The Company contributed a sum of Rs.-40000

Nawab Mubarak-ud-daullah - Ra-21000

Muhammed Reza Khan - Rs-15250

Raja Roy Durlabh - Rs-6000

Jagat Seth- Rs-5000

As this sum was too small, an additional sum of Rs 65193 was spent in charity, making a total of Rs 1, 52,443. But at the same time the sale of Bakhargunge rice in Murshidabad, had been given the East India Company a profit of Rs -67593. An advance of Rs. 1,24,806 was made from the treasury at Murshidabad for the purchase of this rice in Bakhargunge.⁷

After severe drought for a long period, excessive rainfall flooded the vast areas of the district during the last half of July, 1770. Many people gathered in city of Murshidabad for safety and security from the natural calamity. As a results 'The overcrowding at Murshidabad bred diseases, small pox added to the horror of famine. It spread rapidly and devastated the homes of poor and the rich alike.'⁸. The drought which caused successive crop failures was so severe that all the tanks and water courses were dried up. There were frequent dreadful fires which destroyed thousands of lives and impoverished almost all the families. There was an outbreak of small-pox in Murshidabad.

There was some attempt at relief of the poor and infirm on the part of the administration. It was the policy of the Government to extend agricultural loans to the cultivators in year of scarcity to enable them to buy

seed and other necessary cultivation related articles for continuing crop production. The Nawabi administration also opened a charity house at Murshidabad to feed about three hundred destitute people and for poor scholars of a madrasah at Motijheel, for the cost of which a fund was created by him. Muhammed Reza Khan and some leading nobles and merchants contributed in the works of rehabilitation programme during the 1770 famine³. On the 24th December, 1770 the President and Council wrote to the Court of Directors that the Famine had entirely ceased.

The permanent settlement was introduced by Cornwallis in 1793. The imperialist policy made peoples endless sorrows, sufferings, poverty, exploitation and permanent oppression. This policy for the first time in Indians agrarian history removed the peasantry of their ownership of land and made the Zamindars and talukdars the actual owner of land. The newly created classes including zamindars, talukdars made the peasant subject to misery because of their continuous exploitation and oppression. The economy of Bengal was destroyed. Heavy taxes and revenues imposed by the East India Company upon the manufacturer and merchants of Murshidabad declined their economy. Within a very short period of time silk industry, the main industry of Murshidabad was about to ruin. British govt. never took any steps and made any preparation to save the people from the famines. So the famines including the infamous that had been taking place up to 1943 must be examined by scientific method.

The famine of 1866 affected the east coast of India from Orissa northwards, an area covering 180,00 miles and containing a population of 7,500,000; the impact of the famine, however, was greatest in Orissa, now which at that time was quite isolated from the rest of India. In Odisha, one third of the population died due to famine. West Bengal also affected in this famine. During famine of 1866 in India Murshidabad district was not so affected like Nadia and Burdwan. In the famine year of 1866 the district of Murshidabad lay just outside the limits of extreme suffering. The neighbouring districts to the south, Nadia and Burdwan, experienced all the severity of the dearth; but in Murshidabad itself no lives were lost from starvation, and Government relief was never required. In Murshidabad Govt. did not open any relief fund as people of the district were not so affected by famine in that year. However, Roy Dhanpat Singh and some of the richest persons of Murshidabad and Berhampore had arranged distribution centres for the poor persons. Rani Swarnamayee had opened 8 LanggarKhanas (food distribution centres). Each LanggarKhana could feed 1800 children and women.¹⁰

Famine of 1874 affected most of the districts of Bengal. But the people of Murshidabad were not so heavily affected by the famine of 1874. However, scarcity of food was the main cause of famine in this year. Cost of various types of crops became very high. Situation remained under control without any major food distribution. In response to the demand of Road Cess Committee, the Govt. granted Rs 75000 to the Board of Cess Committee, which was devoted to constructive works.

Next devastating famine took place in 1897. One of the causes of the famine was the failure of crops production. The partial failures of crops, and the same conditions as to rainfall, but prices at the latter end of 1896 and in 1897 were much higher than in 1874. Numerous poor people and beggars crowded the cities and towns for food. Barancha and Bharatpur were the most affected areas of Murshidabad during the famine of 1897. Relief funds and food supply centres had been opened in Murshidabad. 8, 84,000 people were benefited by these relief funds and food supply centres. The district administration had to spend Rs.66000/- for this relief work. On the other hand, 7, 20,000 people were benefited by different Samities which spent Rs.46000/-. Most of the people who benefited from this relief fund were weavers of cloths and silk-thread makers. It should also be noted here that sent Rs.10000/- to the district relief fund ¹¹.

The Bengal famine of 1943 was a major famine in British India during Second World War. The official Famine Inquiry Commission reporting on the Bengal of 1943, An estimated 1.5 million People died in Bengal, the deaths occurring first from starvation and then from diseases which included cholera, malaria, smallpox, dysentery, and kala-azar.¹² Other factors, such as malnutrition, population displacement, unsanitary condition, and famine in during Second World War in British India people died in the famine and then from diseases, which included cholera, malaria, smallpox, dysentery, and kala-azar. and other factors, kala-azar. such as malnutrition population displacement, unsanitary conditions, and lack of health care further increased disease fatalities. Millions were impoverished as the crisis overwhelmed large segments of the economy and social fabric, accelerating a trend toward economic inequality.

The Bengal famine of 1943 stuck entire Bengal province. Murshidabad was one of the most severely affected districts by this famine. Each and every Subdivision of Murshidabad district was affected. Most affected Sub-division was Kandi. 'A sample survey of the after effects of the Bengal famine of 1943'. Prasanta Ch. Mahalanabish's Committee reported that the Kandi sub-division includes mostly affected areas. Murshidabad district relief fund had been formed in August of 1943. In Kandi sub-division 75 food supply centres had been opened. Some of these centres had been maintained by some local resource persons and various types of foods were distributed by different samities. Most of them were landlords of both the Hindu and Muslim communities. Maharaja of Lalgola was patron of these samities, NawabBahadur of Murshidabad was

the President, Raja Kamala Ranjan Roy vice President and Shrish Ch. Nandi, Maharaja of Kasim bazaar was the Secretary of these Samities.¹²

The famines that had taken place during the colonial period left deep impact upon the socio-economic and even cultural fields of Murshidabad. It beyond doubt the famines badly affected growth of population and hindered the economic growth. Cultural progress was also deeply affected. The famines of 1770, 1866, 1874, 1897 and 1943 caused devastating harm; but at the same time it created awareness among the people of affected areas including Murshidabad about the causes of recurrence of the famines and about measures to prevent them. It also reflected response and reaction of different sections of the society. Famine deaths disproportionately affected the very young and the very old (though no age-group escaped completely). Mortality was and no area escaped entirely: urban areas experienced a temporary inflow of famished and disease-carrying rural poor, and an outbreak of cholera increased the urban death toll.

We have to assess the works and achievements of Famine Commission which was formed by the British Government. One of the members of the Famine Commission Mr. Romesh Dutt, who attended as a delegate from Lewisham, moved the following Resolution : “That this meeting deplores the succession of severe famines which have caused the deaths of millions of people in India in recent years, and considers it necessary to prevent the recurrence of such severe calamities by moderating the Land Tax, extending irrigation works, and relieving as far as possible the annual burdensome drain on the financial resources of India which impoverishes the people of that country.”

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