



Socio-Economic Condition of the People of Birbhum District during Colonial Bengal

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Abstract: The main objective of this study is to research and focus the baseline socio-economic information for the people of district Birbhum. District Birbhum was one of the northernmost districts of Burdwan division of Bengal during the period of study. The district derived its name from the word 'Bir' means jungle. The district was not too developed than other developed districts of Bengal in terms of socio-economic parameters during the period of study. The people earned livelihood through agriculture. During the year 1900, near about 70% of the population were engaged in agriculture. There were no otherwise earning sources for living except agriculture. Most of the inhabitants of the district were Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Animists. Most of the inhabitants of the district were living below poverty line. Being compelled of the economic condition of the district the people of the district had been going to other states to earn their alternative sources of income as day labor/worker in a factory for their living during the period of study.

Keywords: Agriculture, Bengal, Birbhum, District, Socio-Economic.

District Birbhum was the northernmost district of Burdwan Division during the period of study which is situated $23^{\circ} 33'$ and $24^{\circ} 35'$ north latitude and between $87^{\circ} 10'$ and $88^{\circ} 2'$ east longitude.¹ As per as the available statistics is concerned which had prepared by L. S. S. O' Malley for the district, the total population for year 1872 stood as eight lakh fifty one thousand two hundred thirty five (851235). Similarly the population for the year 1881, 1891 and 1901 were seven lakh ninety two thousand thirty one (792031), seven lakh ninety eight thousand two hundred fifty four (798254), nine lakh two thousand two hundred eighty (902280) respectively.² The district experienced the decline of the population from 1872-1891 because of the ravages of fever and the epidemic known as *Burdwan Fever* which broke out in the district.³ As per the *Chronicle of Beerbhoom* as it is noted in Appendix D to W.W. Hunter's, *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, the name Birbhum has derived its name from the Santali word *Bir* meaning jungle.⁴ According to statistical report of the Census of the 1901, the average population density in the district was five hundred fifteen (515) persons per square mile.⁵

Birbhum is a part of the Rarh area of Bengal. The soil and landscape is very much akin to the Rarh areas of Murshidabad, Burdwan, Bankura and Midnapore. The western portions comprising Khayrasol, Rajnagar, Dubrajpur, Suri, Mahammad Bazar and Rampurhat thenas are at the base of the heavily dissected plateau of Santal Parganas projecting south-southeast part. As far the Census of 1901 is concerned

69% of the population were engaged in agriculture, 11.7% were engaged in different industries, 1.5% in different professions and 0.4% in commercial and trading activities.⁶ It is also evident from the same Census report that 28% of the agricultural population were the actual workers. Out of the total industrial classes 60% were workers, among whom there were near about 12,000 fisherman and fish-dealers, 18,000 were rice-pounders and 5,000 cotton-weavers and also supported by the other occupations were 48,000 general labourers.⁷

The predominant language in the district was the dialect of Bengali classified by Dr. Grierson as Western Bengali, which principally differs from Standard Bengali in having a broader pronunciation. The number of persons using it in Birbhum is reported to be 575,000. Santali was spoken by the Santals settled in the district, the number of persons returned as speaking it in 1901 were 47,455.⁸ The Kora language is spoken by the Koras, who state that they came from Singbhum and are now found on the borders of the Santal Parganas. This dialect belongs to the Munda family and as spoken by them, it was almost pure Mundari.

According to the agriculture statistics of the provincial Government in 1903-04, out of the total district area of 1,752 square miles, 1,197 square miles or 68.56 per cent of the land was under cultivation.⁹ Out of the total cultivated area only 3.08% land comprised the double cropped area. Rice was cultivated in 83.33% of land under cultivation.¹⁰ 3.25% of land comprised mulberry orchard. On rest of the land cash crops like sugarcane, oil seeds and flax were grown.¹¹

During the revisional survey and settlement operation of 1924-32, 68.11% of lands were actually under plough, 2.12% comprised current fallow and 29.77% of land were uncultivable.¹² Rice was grown on 93% of land under plough, sugar on 1.10%; gram on 1.15% and wheat on 1.09% of the land under plug.¹³ During Ishaqhe's Crop Survey of 1944-45 it was found that out of the total area of the districts of 11,15,520 acres, 8,15,517 acres were under cultivation, meaning there by 73.10% of the land were under cultivation.¹⁴

It is also evident from the Census of 1901 that Hindus were numerically six lakh fifty seven thousand six hundred eighty four (657684) in 1901 while Muhammadans numbered two lakh one thousand six hundred forty five (201645), Animists numbered forty two thousand nineteen (42019), Christians were eight hundred nineteen (819) and the other religions were one hundred thirteen (113).¹⁵ The census of 1901 also provides us the information that, out of two lakh one thousand six hundred forty five (201645) Muslims in the district, one lakh eighty two thousand five hundred forty five (182545) or nine tenth of the community were Sheikhs.¹⁶ The Pathans numbered eleven thousand nine hundred eighty one (11981), Saiyids numbered three thousand eight hundred sixty seven (3867) and the Jolahas numbered one thousand nine hundred seventy four (1974).¹⁷ Large number of Muslim population were also to be found in Nalhati and Illambazar police station.

A considerable population of the Hindus of the district belonged to the castes, such as Bagdis, Bauris, Haris, Doms, Mals and Muchis. Aborigines gradually lost their

distinct tribal character and became absorbed in Hinduism. Among these low classes races of animistic beliefs were still very noticeable, such as the worship of Manasa and Dharmaraj. According to the Census of 1901, Bagdis were 88,342, Sadgops were 84,324, Santals were 47,221, Muchis were 41,282, Doms were 40,666, Brahmans were 39,825, Mals were 38,697, Bauris were 36,235, Hadis were 27,634 respectively.¹⁸ The Bagdis were from aboriginal descent, were believed to have been among the earliest inhabitants of the district. The Sadgops were believed to be the oldest Hindu settlers in the district. The Santals of the district were a branch of the well-known tribe of that name. The Muchis were the shoe-makers and leather-dealers of the district, while the Doms were basket-makers, cultivators, laborers and drummers. The Brahmans of the district were mostly Rarhi Brahmans and they were Zamindars, tenure-holders, occupancy ryots, pleaders, mukhtars, money-lenders and Government servants.

The Muslims of the district were also classified conventionally. The Ashraf-Atraf dichotomy was also prevailed in the district on the lines of other districts of the Bengal. The Muslim society of the district under the period of study was also divided into four conventional categories, e.g., Ashraf, Athraf, Ajlaf and Arjal. The Muslim rulers controlled the western part of the district for last few centuries and the large sections of the district were controlled by the great Hindu Chief called Bir Raja.¹⁹ It is evident from the Birbhum district gazetteer which was prepared by L. S. S. O' Malley, that three fourth of the area of the district were covered by jungle while the remaining one fourth was cultivated. The soil of the small part of the district was engaged in cultivation but it is evident from the same report that the greater portion was saline and unproductive.

During the beginning of the period of study undertaken, the district could be divided into two ethnic and cultural zones – one mainly the non-tribal and other tribal.²⁰ Each zone nevertheless content a very small part of other ethnic groups. The eastern zone and the central zone of the district was considered to be non-tribal one. It is evident from the contemporary sources that about 80% of the population of the district lived in non-tribal zones with the majority of Hindus, considerable majority of Muslims and a little of tribals.²¹

With the advent of the British, the Muslim Rajas of the district lost their power and authority who lived at their capital place at Rajnagar. It was also observed that the most of the Muslim zamindars were affected by the Permanent Settlement.²² The Nagar Raj, the only old Zamindar family was destroyed by Permanent Settlement but the large numbers of Zamindars of a new type replaced them. There were several groups within the Muslim community which were the product of the new economic structure and which also existed outside the power structure, were those of ordinary ryots, artisans, various groups of Zamindari servants, different labour classes, vagabonds etc. It is evident from the contemporary sources that the Muslim village society was comprised of Muslim aristocrats, Mullas, Maulvis.

According to the report prepared by L. S. S. O' Malley, that the Shaikhs of the district who comprised of the nine-tenth of the total population of the district were Sadiks and

Akbaris. Mr. O' Malley also referred one particular ethnic community who were known as Zadupatias.²³ The Pathan Zamindars of the district had already collapsed under the impact of the Permanent Settlement and they tottered to their feet in the consequences of famine and rebellion.²⁴ The enactment of Permanent Settlement and the purchase of Birbhum Zamindari resulted in the creation of large number of small states. Large number of officials who were engaged to the Birbhum Zamindary also tried their faith in the newly created socio-economic structures. They were the superior royts, revenue officers and abkari farmers, zamindari amlas, legal practitioners and the agents of foreign merchants.²⁵ The Hindus and the Muslims of the district also tried their luck in the newly constituted power structure which also provided some of the newly produced class structure including superior royts, thana officials, Government amlas and other classes.

The Hindus and the Muslims were predominantly majority communities who lived with solidarity and had long amicable relationship in between them. Birbhum was largely dominated by the people from different classes, castes and creeds. As far as the Muslims of the district is concerned, Pathans, Syeds, Sheikhs, Zolhas were predominately majority communities within the Muslims of the district. The Muslims of the district including the Pathan rulers had mutual relationship with the other communities and they were equally tolerant to each other. On the other hand Bagdis, Sadgops were predominately majority communities within the majority Hindu community of the district. The information provides by L.S.S.O' Malley is a great example of the fact that how the general masses of the district had important place in the socio cultural fabric of the district. O' Malley and Ashok Mitra had provided us with the information that Jadupatias were an important community within the district. With the expansion of British Colony and the construction of bridges and Railway lines the new cities, towns and suburbs started emerging in the peripheries of the district. During the mid-nineteenth century, few rice mills were established and similarly few coconut oil mills were also established in Sainthia. Tantipara become an important production Centre of Tassore and Tant Silk. The district was pre dominantly dominated by handicraft industries.

The famous economist Bhabotosh Dutta has traced the process of urbanization in the district with the laying of Railway tracks in Bolpur in the year 1859. It was identified as a new era in the process of urbanization in the district.²⁶ The census report of 1901 provides the information that the area concerned with the municipalities of the district had the population not less than five thousand (5,000). It is also been said in the same report that, "As far as possible to treat as town places which are of a more or less a urban character." During the early part of twentieth century the towns like Suri, Rampurhat, Dubrajpur, Bolpur completed the first phase of urbanization. The contribution of the Zamindars of Hetampur and Kundala were immense in the development of the towns like Suri.²⁷ It is also been observed that Rs 25,000 (twenty five thousand) and Rs 10,000 (ten thousand) were sanctioned by the Zaminders of Hetampur and Kundala for a water project in the district. The socio-culture development of the district has been reflected in the writings of the periodicals like '*Bhumilaxmi*', '*Birbhum Barta*', and '*Birbhum Bani*' etc. During the period, Sainthia

started emerging as an important trading town in the district. The economic life of the district was disturbed by drought, famine and communicable diseases. The outbreak of Burdwan fever in the district affected the economic life of the district.

The prevalence of Cholera, Diarrhea and Influenza had too affected the socio-economic life of the district. As per as the Gazetteer of O' Malley, the towns like Rampurhat and Suri had some smaller Hospitals. Similarly some hospitals with OPD facilities were also established in Bolpur, Nalhati, Hetampur, Kirnahar, Labpur etc. The local Kabirajas were also played some important role in the treatment of the locals. Some of the important Kabirajas of the district like Nabinchandra Mukhopadhyaya of Nalhati, Kanaichandra of Hetampur, Gayanath Sen of Rampurhat also played great role in providing medical facilities to the general masses of the district.

The district had a great composite culture which was the product and counter product of the mutual relationship between the two majority communities. The Pathan Rajas of the district were greatly influenced by the Sufi tradition which ultimately produced an atmosphere of mutual toleration in the district. This is quite evident from W.W. Hunter where he quoted, 'Asadullah added to the number of troops and caused numerous tanks to be dug in the capital, by which means the miseries resulting from the scarcity of water were in great measure avoided.'²⁸ It is also been observed that the other Zaninders of the district also established charitable Hospitals, Schools and dug several ponds for the benefit of general masses. The Zaminders of Labpur, Sultanpur, Hetampur, Kundala were pioneers for the philanthropy in the district. On the lines of the other areas of the district, socio-cultural life of the district was also influenced by the festivals and the other activities.

Conclusion: Birbhum was the westernmost part of the district of Bengal proper. The district was inhabited by different groups in terms of socio-economic and religious categories. The westernmost part of the district was largely comprised of 'Bir' means jungle. Hindus and Muslims are two predominant communities who were mostly engaged in agriculture during the period of study. During the later part of 19th century, with the introduction of the western education people tried their best to get employment which resulted in the marginal shift of their dependence from agriculture to employment in the other sectors. The district experienced the same kind of political development with the other districts of Bengal. The district also experienced great atmosphere of social unity in the course of political developments during the period of study. The district experienced the emergence of some newly educated elites who have contributed in nationalized politics.

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