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Famines in Nadia District in Colonial rule 1770-1874: A Historical Analysis with Socio-Economic and Political Impact

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Abstract

During the British colonial rule, famine in India and Bengal was a very cruel reality, marked by a terrible disaster in the socio-economic and political fields. Nadia district, as an important part of the Bengal province, was repeatedly affected by this famine. Natural disasters have long been a familiar companion of Bengal. Rain-fed agriculture, severe droughts, floods due to overgrowth, etc. are not new phenomena, but the excessive taxation and revenue policies of the British government created the backdrop for frequent famines in Bengal. In this article, I will analyze the major famines that occurred in Nadia district from 1770 to 1874 AD and shed light on their socio-economic and political impact. The history of famine is not only about the statistics of crop loss or death, but also about more than natural disasters and creating critical situations in human life.

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Introduction

The word 'famine' is derived from the Latin word 'fames' which implied hunger or a condition of 'extreme general scarcity of food' are resulting in excess mortality from starvation or hunger induced illness. Famine can be imposed in various ways. Sometimes famine is generally caused by a lack of rainfall, excessive taxes, insect attacks, floods, etc. Another important point is that famine-like events have also occurred in India due to the political and economic policies of the government. Simply, famine is a widespread scarcity of food grains. This phenomenon is usually preceded by malnutrition, starvation, epidemic, increased mortality rate and stagnant population growth. Droughts may be considered as the root cause of famines. Drought or scarcity of water leads to crop failure and finally the failure of the crops in turn leads to a scarcity of food in the affected region. Droughts are themselves usually caused by the failure of monsoons. ^[1] Amartya Sen defines famines as "a particular virulent manifestation of starvation causing wide-spread death." ^[2] Before the arrival of the British, Bengal and India were familiar with various types of famines. Famine was not a new phenomenon in many parts of a subcontinent like India.

Agriculture here was heavily dependent on rain and the vast, unirrigated, dry areas far from rivers were subject to severe drought, and the vagaries of the monsoon were notorious. ^[3] Various explanations have been given that these famines were caused by natural disasters such as droughts, floods and food shortages, or by environmental or cultural reasons. But in fact, the main reasons for the terrible famines in India during the British rule were the policies of unlimited exploitation, oppression and increasing indebtedness imposed on the people. The impact of the colonial period was extremely disastrous, much more than in previous times.

The British government did not take any measures to prevent these terrible disasters or take any long-term preventive measures. The rehabilitation measures that were taken were inadequate and insignificant in nature. In fact, the government during this period gave more importance to economic exploitation. Very little attention was paid to the problems arising from the famine. Unfortunately, the situation of the famine-stricken Nadia district was very critical during the British rule. Therefore, a research work on the Nadia district during the British period (1770-1874) became very important for the study. Although there have been many basic studies,

researches and discussions on famines in the context of India and Bengal, Nadia district has not been specifically highlighted as a part of regional history. Therefore, the main purpose of this article is to shed light on the famines that occurred between 1770 and 1874 as an important part of the Bengal province and to make a historical analysis of how they affected the general public life, society, economy, politics, and culture - of the people of Nadia. It is a well-known fact that British India was devastated by a rash of famines. According to the report of the Famine Commission, in a period of 90 years from 1765 when the British East India Company took over the Diwani of Bengal to 1858, Bengal experienced 12 famines and four severe scarcities. ^[4]

Nadia District in the Context of Famine

Nadia district was an ancient and traditional place in the province of Bengal. It takes its name from the town of Nadia or Nabadwip situated at the present on the west bank of Bhagirathi, but the administrative headquarters and chief city of the district (all though not populous) is Krishnagar. ^[5] Nadia or Nabadwip hallowed by the memory of Lord Krishnachaitanya who was born here on 18 February A.D. 1486. ^[6] Being located in the Gangetic delta region, this region was not only a fertile agricultural region, but also a cultural and educational center. The district of Nadia forms the north-eastern portion of the Presidency Division, and lies between north latitude 24 deg 11' and 22 deg 53', and east longitude 89° 22' and 88 deg 9'. It extends over an area of 2,793 square miles. ^[7]

The district was separated from Rajshahi and Pabna to the north by the Padma River and from Murshidabad district and West Burdwan and Hooghly districts to the west by the Bhagirathi River. The district was a tributary of the river. Geographically located in the Gangetic delta region, Nadia district was relatively densely populated. It was a rich agricultural region. The whole district is a network of moribund rivers and streams, but the Bhagirathi, the Jalangi and Mathabhanga are the three which have been for more than a new century, and still are distinctively known as the 'Nadia Rivers'. ^[8] Despite being a fertile, agriculturally rich region surrounded by rivers and a vibrant cultural center, natural disasters such as excessive rainfall or drought have made the region prone to famine.

The East India Company consolidated its political and economic power in Bengal with the victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the civil gains in 1765. Lord Warren Hastings created the post of Collector in 1772 to facilitate revenue collection and appointed English officials. Nadia was the first district to be established under an English Collector. ^[9] In 1787, a proposal was made to create a separate Collectorate for Nadia as per the proposal of the President of the Board of Revenue. The proposal was approved by the Board of Revenue and submitted to the Governor General in Council of 13 March 1787, and accepted in they are entirely at a meeting of the Council held on 21st March. In accordance with these orders Mr.F. Redfearn was appointed as the first collector of Nadia, with Mr.G.Cherry as his assistant. ^[10]

During the British rule, Nadia district, like many other parts of Bengal, was repeatedly hit by famines. Notably, the famine of 1770 AD, the famine of 1776 AD, the famine of 1770 AD, the famine of 1860 AD, the famine of 1866 AD, the famine of 1874 AD, the famine of 1880 to 85 AD, and the famine of 1897 AD. During the period under discussion in this article, i.e. from 1770 AD to 1900 AD, a total of 6 famines occurred in Nadia district. These famines that occurred in the soil of

Nadia district had a devastating impact on the general population. Although Nadia district was mainly dependent on agriculture, agricultural life was full of uncertainty. The main crops cultivated were paddy, jute and wheat respectively. The farmers here cultivated under the Baghchas or Bargadar system and were forced to pay revenue from the income they earned from the crops. When the Permanent Settlement was introduced in 1793 AD, this system gradually became a trap for the farmers. Because if the crops were destroyed due to natural disasters or if the prices of crops fell in the market, the farmers would have nothing to eat throughout the year, but they had to pay taxes at the same rate.

As a result, they were caught in the net of debt of the landlords and moneylenders, which kept increasing. On the one hand, the burden of adverse natural disasters and the exploitation of the landlords and moneylenders combined made the peasant society of Nadia completely vulnerable. Various government reports mention the malnutrition and poverty of the people of Nadia district. There is even mention of fleeing due to famine. In 1855 AD, a government report mentions that Nuddea is among the districts most affected by periodic scarcity; the land revenue collection remains high irrespective of monsoon failure. ^[11]

Great Bengal Famine 1770 in Nadia District

The first major disaster of British-ruled Bengal, namely Nadia district, was the famine of 1769-70 AD. The famine of 1770 is known in history as the 'Great Bengal Famine'. Which is also known as the 'Chhiyattorer Manmantor' (In Bengali Calender 1176 Bangabda). Although no record is available about the impact of this famine and the damage caused by it in Nadia district specifically. However, various contemporary accounts show that the extent of the famine in this district was extreme. The main causes of this famine were continuous drought, crop failure and the excessive collection of rent by the East India Company. Due to the lack of relaxation in the company's revenue policy, the farmers faced an extreme food crisis. The year before this famine, i.e. in 1768 AD, a severe drought began in Bengal, one of which was Nadia district. As a result of the drought, a large amount of crops were destroyed throughout Bengal by 1769. Again, at this time, the Maratha invasion of Bengal began. Added to this was the British government's policy of collecting full taxes. Tyranny in non-payment. According to government records, the collections were rigidly enforced despite crop failures. ^[12]

This overall situation had a serious impact on the public life of Bengal. It was state that Bengal lost about a third of its population in the famine 1770, ^[13] due to famine-related deaths, food shortages, starvation, malnutrition, on the other hand, due to high rates of revenue payment, British exploitation policies, etc. Many people fled from villages and cities to other places. Many villages became deserted and arable land became uncultivated. From Hunter's description, it is known that this famine consumed the western part of undivided Bengal. Half of the people of Burdwan, Bishnupur, Nadia, Purnia, etc. died. Many people fled from their lands because they could not pay the British rent. Many landlords lost their landholdings. One of them was the landholding of the royal family of Krishnanagar in Nadia district. By 1785, about 1500 villages in West Bengal had become crematoriums. And the abandoned lands had become forests. Patuas, weavers and marginal farmers were forced to leave their professions and migrate elsewhere. With no cremation or burial facilities, the smell of rotting bodies spread throughout the rivers and fields.

In local folklore, "No one had anything to eat in the fields along the river"—this phrase captures the horror of the famine. Therefore, the famine of 1770 caused the deaths of ordinary people and other animals in Nadia district. And those who survived were left destitute and destitute. This famine of 1770 AD destroyed the socio-economic environment of Nadia district as a whole.

Famine 1866: Destruction and Impact

After the Great Bengal Famine Crisis of 1770, Nadia district again faced a terrible famine. Although this famine mainly occurred in Orissa. However, it affected various parts of South Bengal, one of which was Nadia district. In 1864, Nadia was hit by a major cyclone and suffered a lot of damage. The cyclone of 1864 had done great damage to the District, sweeping completely across it.^[14] The following year, i.e. in 1865, a severe drought began in Nadia. At the end of October 1865 the collector reported that the outturn of the rice crop was expected to be less than half that produced in ordinary years, and that the prospects of the winter crops were very bad. By the beginning of 1866 prices had risen to double the ordinary rates and distress had commenced.^[15] As a result, the production of Aman rice decreased dangerously. As a result, food shortages began. The price of food increased abnormally. The price of rice increased threefold within two months, and the poor simply could not survive.^[16] The lives of the local people and the farming community of Nadia were endangered.

Tehatta and Karimpur areas of Nadia district were directly affected by this famine. Due to limited access to food imports and inadequate communication facilities, the villages were in dire straits. In March the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society addressed the Lieutenant-Governor on the subject. One of these, the Rev. T. G. Linoke, stated that "a certain measure of rice, which some years ago cost three or four pice, now sells at thirteen or fourteen pice, which alone is sufficient to account for the present distress of the poor. Were I to tell the instances of how long many must go without food, and what sort of materials they contrive to convert into food, you could not believe it, for it is really incredible and yet it is true nevertheless." Another missionary, the Rev. F. Schurr, of Kapasdanga, declared that "respectable farmers are so much reduced in circumstances that they cannot employ nearly so many day-laborers as they used to do in former times, and consequently the laboring classes are reduced to the point of starvation."^[17]

In 1858, there was a change of power in India. Although power was transferred directly from the hands of the Company to the British government in 1866, the government failed to understand the general causes of the famine. However, instead of adequate relief, the government provided limited and meager relief. Twenty thousand rupees were spent on road construction and other government projects to employ hungry workers. In certain parts of Nuddea, no rice could be bought even by money, as hoarding had begun unchecked.^[18] But the misuse of the Work for Food scheme and inadequate relief measures gradually increased the mortality rate of the common people.

A concerted effort was made to alleviate the suffering of the people by collecting donations from the local people of Nadia and by holding meetings and gatherings in Krishnanagar, Ranaghat and other towns. In May, public meetings were held at Krishnanagar, Ránághát, Bangáon, and Chuádángá, and subscriptions raised for the relief of the sufferers. Relieving depots were opened at several places in Krishnanagar, where

uncooked rice was gratuitously distributed. Small sums of money were sent out to the Subdivisions to meet cases of immediate want; and the Relief Committee determined to import rice from Kushtiá and Calcutta for local sale, this course being thought more beneficial than sending money, which would only have the effect of raising the selling price of grain in the different localities.^[19]

Famine 1874: An Unheeded Scream

After 1866, Nadia district faced a terrible famine in 1874. This famine is actually known as the Bihar famine of 1873-74. Although its real epicenter was Bihar, various districts of Bengal, especially Nadia district, were affected by this famine. However, official documents show that the death rate in Nadia district was comparatively low during this famine. Nuddea suffered loss of crops but not of lives, thanks to proactive relief deployment.^[20] In 1871/72, Nadia was hit by devastating floods. By 1874, drought struck again. Both of these conditions greatly reduced crop production and made food shortages inevitable. The 1874 famine stands out because, despite crop failure, the mortality was negligible—thanks to timely public intervention.^[21]

In this situation, the government was alert and took preventive measures, which largely controlled the impact of the deaths. Relief camp was established in Krishnanagar and Ranaghat subdivisions of Nadia district and an attempt was made to eliminate the food crisis by exporting rice from Burma, i.e. Myanmar. Relief and rationing systems were introduced with the spontaneous help of the local landlords and jotdars of Nadia district. Either the royal family of Krishnanagar formed a relief fund on their own initiative and arranged for its distribution and arrangements were made for food distribution without labor. Lord North Brooke took the initiative to import rice from Myanmar and actively stockpile food. In the end, Nadia district was largely controlled from the horror of death.

Taking the whole district, the early rice probably gave an average outturn, while the outturn of the winter rice did not exceed one-third of what it usually yielded. The area affected covered 528 square miles and comprised the whole of thanas Kaliganj and Nakashipara, three-fourths of Tehata and Chapra, and one-fourth of Kotwali, the last-named being the tract adjoining the Nakashipara thana severe distress was, in fact, practically confined to that portion of the district which is known as the Kalantar.^[22]

In contrast to the famine of 1770 or 1866, the administrative response to the famine of 1874 was systematic. Relief camps were organized and relief was distributed, especially in various parts of Nadia district. The first Famine Commission was formed in 1878 and relief work was started through food wages. However, the common people were severely affected by the famine. Thousands of small-holding peasant families and sharecroppers had to mortgage their land and take loans from moneylenders. As a result, indebtedness increased permanently.

Socio-Economic and Political Impact

Each famine left a deep scar on the socio-economic and even cultural life of Nadia. Repeated floods and famines discouraged cultivation. Much arable land remained uncultivated. The death of people in succession became an obstacle to the social and economic progress of Nadia district. Land ownership was also transferred. Many farmers, both small and large, lost their land and were caught in the net of loans from moneylenders. When Nadia district was gradually

considered as a cash crop production area, there was no end to the misery of the common people. Further, under colonial agricultural reforms, many agricultural areas were converted to export crops rather than food crops. New colonial rules restricted access to forests that the native population had previously used for supplemental food in times of shortage.^[23]

Public health and education were also affected in Nadia district. Food shortage and malnutrition became a daily companion. One disease epidemic after another started. Famine and epidemic went hand in hand. The dreadful famines were typically followed by various infectious diseases such as bubonic plague, influenza, malaria, smallpox, typhoid, pneumonia, etc. which killed a large section of population already destabilized by starvation.

Railway transportation multiplied the scale of such diseases as people migrated in search of food and work from the affected regions. The long-term consequences of these famines were quite dramatic.^[24] The average life expectancy of the people decreased. The famine changed the lives and livelihoods of the people. Because many people became destitute, they flocked to the cities in search of food; some even migrated to Kolkata as construction workers.

Conclusion

The history of famine in Nadia district from 177 AD to 1874 AD is not only a natural disaster, but its consequences depended largely on political and administrative decisions. As a result, these famines are a blatant reflection of man-made and administrative failures. The excessive taxation and exploitation of the peasant community destroyed their foundation economically. Not only the increase in mortality or population decline, but also the indifference and deprivation towards the common people, the peasant community, gradually forced the people of Nadia to organize various peasant uprisings by instilling consciousness among the then Nadia residents.

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