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Livelihood, Socio-economic Structure, Population and Health: A Case Study of District Birbhum in the Colonial Period

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Abstract:

Social development is a continuous process. But it is a known fact in history that colonialism became a hindrance to proper developments. This paper is a case study of a rural district named Birbhum now located in the state of West Bengal in India. During the colonial period, it was under the Bengal presidency. In the rural society of Birbhum people were divided into several castes and classes. Though a majority of the people were simple, they had no aim for higher material benefits and mainly confined themselves to the villages but tried to live life happily. During the colonial period, economic oppression changed the socio-economic structure of this district. Famine conditions were regular. Rural indebtedness increased. Malnutrition and diseases made the people weak not only physically, but also psychologically became backwards. The absence of proper education was another cause of backwardness. Among all those miseries epidemics often visited the district as apocalyptic warnings and massive death rates were recorded. This paper aims to disclose the true condition of the rural people in this district of Bengal under the British Raj which is evident from several government reports and literatures of the study period.

Keywords: Colonialism, British rule, social structure, population, epidemic

Introduction: This paper is based on a case study of a small rural district named Birbhum situated in the south-western part of West Bengal state, India. During British rule, the district was formed in 1787 under the Bengal Presidency. The society of the Birbhum district was traditionally based on cast systems like other parts of India. After the British colonisation, the people of this rural area faced drastic changes in every sphere of their lives. The intention of the British rule and administration was motivated by economic interests. Therefore several shreds of evidence of scarcity and poverty in the Birbhum district were there in the Colonial period. The Permanent Settlement came into effect on March 22, 1793, a landmark in the history of the Bengal Presidency as a whole. It was the demarcation between two ages that is from mediaeval structure or 'mode of production' to

colonial 'mode of production' in Bengal. As a consequence of British rule transformation in socio-economic structure was manifested in this rural district. For assessing a society, it is important to study social entities like livelihood, behaviour, habits, psychology, education etc. Another important area of study is demography. Particularly in the colonial period demographical changes in district Birbhum commemorate the virulence of different epidemics which occurred frequently throughout the colonial period. Through a case study of district Birbhum from the perspectives of livelihood, socio-economic structure people's habits, population and health it can ascertain the nature of colonialism, as well as the actual conditions of the majority of the population in a rural society under the British rule.

Methodology: This paper is based on the sample sources from the study period i.e. from the second half of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century. The source materials used for this study are Govt. Reports like- Reports of Revenue Department, Administrative Reports, Reports of Survey and Land Settlements. Sanitary Commissioner Reports, Census Reports. Journal and vernacular newspapers of the study period also have been used as corroborative sources. The details of the sources have given here in the endnote. The motivation for this study has come from some accomplished modern literatures which are given as references at the end of this paper.

Results and Discussion: For the Report on the Condition of the Rural Population in the Birbhum district in 1888, an enquiry of four villages, viz, Dholla, Durgapore, Baleya and Gangmuri was elected as typical of the various parts of the district and a *Canoongoe* (govt. tax collector) was deputed to prepare lists of the inhabitants of each, containing detailed information as to the profession, property, liabilities and means of livelihood of each individual.¹

Name of villages in Birbhum district	No. of families, Census returns 1881	No. of Population, Census returns 1881	No. of families in existence in 1886-87	No. of population in existence in 1886-87	No. of person each man had to support
Dholla	a)93	326	a)84	316	3
Durgapore	b)163	619	b)140	440	3
Gangmuri	c)203	904	c)186	745	3
Beleya	62	271	179	674	3

- The difference was due to the ravages of malarious fever
- 12 families migrated to Rampurhat as they had no means of subsistence
- At Gangmuri, many persons died of malarious fever

Based on: Report on the Condition of the Lower Classes of Population in Bengal, 1888

Livelihood: The inhabitants were divided into five classes viz, cultivators, agricultural labourers, common labourers, artisans and mendicants. The cultivators had fairly large holdings and small families. The labourers got good wages when there was any work to do and were not worked for low wages at any time. According to the Report of 1888, It was clarified that "Still, when the income and expenditure is to be estimated in figures, it is found that in almost every case the expenditure turns the scale- and this though the last two

years have been prosperous, the rice harvest of 1886 having been 14 annas and that of 1887, 12 annas. The estimates now submitted are based upon the statements of the people themselves, and these cannot of course be relied upon implicitly. With the best intentions, a ryat who keeps no accounts cannot be expected to remember his exact profits from his cultivation, and much less can a labourer remember how many annas he has earned, what his children have brought in, or how much his wife has made by picking up sticks. The probability, therefore is that the people are better off..... The excise and trade returns, and all similar external gauges, indicate a very great increase in comfort among the people during the last two years. Of the poorer cultivators and labouring, classes, however, it does not appear that they have been able to do much more than live even in these good years. The Dholla returns show that the majority are in debt (even including the ryats with large holdings) in spite of the bumper rice harvest of 1887. They have not yet recovered from the bad season of 1884 and 1885; marriages, funerals, and festivals help to keep them back.”²

About one-third of the families were cultivators. The average holdings were 6 acres in Gangmuri, 4 in Durgapore, and 5 in Dholla and Beleya. Of the 30 families of cultivators in Dholla, only 3 held less than 10 bighas and 8 others from 10 to 13. Families average no more than two adults and one child. The cost of living was estimated for the cultivator (food for one adult- cooked rice and puffed rice or *muri* twice a day, salt, oil etc.) in a month 1 annas, (16 annas= Rs.1) and yearly expenditure including clothing and miscellaneous expenses including food was total Rs. 30 (For food Rs. 22, 13 annas and the rest for the clothing and others per year). A child cost half as much only. From 1 acre a ryat (*the term used for peasant/cultivator*) got about Rs. 6-12 only. So that it would require about 11 acres for the support of a man, his wife and child. Of the 30 cultivator families in Dholla, there was only one who had this quantity of land. The cultivator did not pay ready money for labour, but he employs labourers by the year, who worked his land under his supervision. At the time of harvest, these labourers were given the produce. The produce of an acre to be worth Rs. 21, the labourers got Rs. 7, the *zamindar* about Rs. 4 and miscellaneous expenses for seed, repairs etc., Rs.1 and the cultivator Rs. 9. Thus the average holding of 5 acres gave Rs. 45. But the cost of living of the cultivator- father, mother and one child- was estimated at Rs. 75 per year. The balance of Rs. 30 was made from the *rubbee* crop sugarcane, vegetables and other petty sources of income. The poorest cultivators no doubt live on less than Rs. 30. The cost of living for the wife was probably lower as much as Rs.30, except in rich families. The total income from their land for all the cultivators in the four villages did not quite cover their cost of living. They had, however, additional sources of income in their garden produce, fish from their tanks, fruit and fuel. The sources of income were not estimated with any degree of accuracy for the mass, as they vary for each individual. In the Dholla village, many of the cultivators had a cow. Brass utensils were in general use, but these articles lasted a long time, and the annual expenditure on them was small. In the four villages, only Rs. 30 was spent in 1887 in it. It was not possible to ascertain what quantity of silver and gold ornaments were in the possession of the cultivators. Besides their own living, the cultivators had to provide themselves with houses and tools and spend money on marriages, funerals and festivals. The houses were poor thatched edifices, with cost but

little, and last a long time with petty annual repairs. To set himself up in tools, including plough and cart, a cultivator had to spend about Rs. 16-8. When once they were brought, they were kept in order by the village artisans for a fixed yearly contribution. For a good pair of bullocks, the average price was Rs. 40. The cost of marriages, funerals and festivals varies indefinitely according to the means of the individual. Such expenditure was rarely done except a borrowed money, the rich man hampering considerably, the poor man a little. 18 of the 30 cultivation families in Dholla village were in debt. The indebted were not by any means the smaller landholders in every case. Marriages and extravagances, as well as bad crops in 1884 account for the indebtedness. In the four villages taken, 30% of the cultivators were in debt, the average indebtedness being Rs. 150, or about two years' net income.

In Birbhum district there was a large class of agricultural labourers who were regular permanent servants. The cultivators took them on by the year to do the bulk of the work of cultivation under their own supervision, and pay them for the produce. During the year before the crop ripens, these labourers live upon advances of grains given by the cultivators, which were deducted with 25% interest from the labourer's share. Few of the labourers were free from debt. They were assisted by their women and children in the work, being mostly low cast men. They depended upon the cultivators who advanced them on what they required. The cost of living for agricultural labourers was estimated at Rs. 24 per year. It was noticeable that in Dholla village, their families average 5 persons each against the cultivator's 3. In Gangmuri 50% of the agricultural labourers held land of their own, on an average of 2 acres, but in the other villages, they did not. Even in Gangmuri 40% of them were indebted for the advance of grain to the cultivators.

Non-agricultural labourers were a class that worked chiefly at house-buildings, carrying and other miscellaneous odd jobs. They also worked in the field, when there was any unusual demand for labour for any agricultural process. As a rule, they were paid from 2 *annas* a day to 2 *annas*. The labourers in Dholla stated their daily wages in most cases at 2 *annas* 6 *pie*, and estimated that they were in employment for nine months of the year and upwards.

The artisans generally had fixed clientele. Each of their customers called them for any job for which they were wanted and paid them a fixed quantity of grain a year, generally 30 seers or a *maund* of paddy. In Dholla they had from 25 to 30 customers each. Besides this, they generally had little land. They were in much the same position as the cultivators. But about 50% of them were more or less in debt.

There were also in every village the mendicants. They were mostly old people, past work from age or disease. They were supported by chance charity.³

Poverty is mainly caused by scarcities and scarcities are caused by limited resources and mal distributions. It is the universal problem of every age in human history. Nature gives us the resources but it is in the hand of mankind who can use it. Birbhum a small district in the British Empire has its own story of scarcity.

People: The general style of living in the Birbhum district was poor. The ordinary dress of men consisted of a *dhuti* or waistcloth, the quality of which differed according to the circumstances of the wearer.⁴ In the villages of Birbhum, well to do families like *zamindars* and moneylenders had houses with brick building. The rest of the villagers had houses made of mud walls and thatched roofs. Houses were built very close to each other. The rooms were seldom well ventilated. Over and above this, in general, the addition of a little pond by the side of the kitchen for the convenience of the ladies made the atmosphere of a dwelling place unhealthy and obnoxious. The illiteracy rate was very high in Birbhum.⁵

➤ The literacy rates were, (In percentage):

1901	8.97
1911	9.09
1921	11.82
1931	8.13
1941	14.92

Based on Census Report-1901, 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941

Strange enough the literacy rate decreased from 11.89 in 1921 to 8.13 in 1931.

About the general character of the people, it was remarked by B.B. Mukherjee, the Settlement Officer of Birbhum that, the largest numbers of people were lazy. He also remarked that it was probable that part of this idleness was due to lack of proper nutrition which could supply the necessary energy, a part of it due to lack of education, due to social condition and environment, and another part was due to lack of ideas and enterprise and lack of system which could take them by the hand and assist them to some extent to newer methods. The next characteristic was their hopeless passive fatalism. The third characteristic was mutual distrust. It was less common among the illiterate than among the semi-literate or the literate. The fourth was their ignorance. They knew next to nothing of what was happening a little way off from the village they live in and often not a quite accurate account of a political struggle that was being carried on which a shopkeeper or a tout might have gathered from some old monthly or weekly magazine. The general nature of the people was one of the uncomplaining pursuit of routinised duty of life- daughters following mothers and boys their fathers with almost meticulous perceptible. The people of the district as a whole were simple, kindly, courteous, toughly affectionate and human in their family circles, devoted to the religious and social ideas as they understand them. In these ideals, they were conservative to a degree and often separate into groups on differences that seemed to others to be puerile.⁶

On the other hand, the Santhals of the district were almost guileless, people who still adhere to the clan system of social organisation. They were primarily engaged in agriculture and poultry or pig rearing. They were lovers of open-air life and lived away from civilization. Their women were clean and industrious workers and their huts had a spotlessly clean appearance from the outside. The aged and the children invariably spent the whole day under the sky generally in the peculiarly made beds and quadrangular seats of

bamboo and ropes swinging or singing under the largest shady tree in the neighbourhood. The girls at work or on their way back to their homes after the day's labour with blossoms of flowers available nearly stuck to their hair singing in chorus their songs. At the end of the day in their homes, or on days of festivals, in which they participate with great zest. The Santhal men either with cocks for cock-fight or with a drum to the beating of which girls of varying ages danced in rows with their gala dresses and sang songs in chorus. They were generally jolly and incomparably merrier than the group of lower Hindu society of the same or slightly superior economic status. Their respect for the elderly men of their clan was marked. The treatment of their womenfolk was remarkably free from brutality of any kind, while the children enjoyed a joy ride on the shoulder of the father, elder brother or a grandfather and sometimes tied up comfortably on the back of a mother a sister or a grandmother.⁷

Socio-economic Structure: In the Colonial period, a details description of the social class structure was mentioned in the Census report of 1872. According to the Census of 1872, in Birbhum, the Hindu population was 83.05%, the Muslim 15.92% and the remaining 1.03% of the population was aboriginal tribes, particularly Santhals. As the Hindu caste structure was the most complex one, the Census of 1872 divided them into several categories, most important were like:

Superior Cast- *Brahman, Rajput*

Intermediary Castes- *Kayastha, Baidya*

Pastoral Castes- *Goala*

Food preparing Castes- *Modak*

Weaver Castes- *Tanti*

Agricultural Castes- *Aguri, Sadgop, Kaibarta, Tamuli, Barui*

Artisan Castes- *Kamar, Kuror, Sonar, Sunri, Sutradhar, Teli, Kulu*

Professional Castes- *Napit, Dhoba*

Semi-Hindunised Castes- *Bagti, Bauri, Muchi, Dom, Hari, Mal*

Tribes- *Dhangar, Santhals*

and religious castes like *Vaishnav*.

These castes were the major as their population was more than 2000. Apart from these many other castes were also there but their population were less than 2000 in Birbhum at the time of the first Census.⁸

Based on the Census of 1901, O'Malley wrote, that 69% of the population was supported by agriculture. 11.7% by industries, 1.5% by the professions and 0.4% by commerce and in the agricultural population 28% were actual workers.⁹ In 1931 the Hindu population in the district was 67.17%, Muslim 26.6% and tribal 6.02%.¹⁰

1. From the Settlement Report of Birbhum (1924- 32), the following data shows the socio-economic condition of the people of Birbhum:
2. Comparative statement showing the interests in land of certain castes in the police station- Suri, Khoyrasol and Dubrajpur of District Birbhum, 1932:

Category of Castes		Population	Proprietor	Tenure holders	Raiyats	Under raiyats
High Castes	Brahmins	6.48	72.25	56.73	15.08	4.85
	Kayasthas	1.66	10.66	6.96	2.47	1.21
Middle Castes	Muslims	21.29	5.39	15.16	24.39	22.53
	Sadgop	9.86	1.65	7.16	19.14	17.14
	Kulu & Teli	3.05	.14	1.74	4.34	4.00
Untouchables	Bauri	11.42	.24	.15	2.01	5.94
	Bagdi	9.13	-	.24	2.37	9.15
	Dom	6.73	-	.06	1.64	4.5
	Hari	2.80	.1	.08	1.00	2.61
	Mal	2.02	.05	.02	.62	1.60
Tribal	Santhal	4.34	.04	.009	1.06	1.91

Index - Percentage of interest hold

Based on –B. B. Mukherjee, page-71

The Settlement Officer B.B. Mukherjee made the following comment on the basis of statistics. “The figures are interesting. They show for example that though the Brahmins in population came to only 6.48 per cent they had 72.25 per cent of interests of proprietors, 56.73 of tenure holders, 15.08 interests of raiyats and 4.85 interests of under-raiyats. So also of the Kayasthas, the share in the landed interests is larger by far than their proportion in population would justify them to expect. As we go down the scale we find that the landed interests held are lower than what the population would warrant and though not strangers to the higher type of landed interests, the interests held the lower type preponderates. For example, the Bauri- a caste inseparable associated with the agricultural occupations - is 11.42 per cent of the population and yet represented by 0.24 per cent of interests of proprietors, 0.15 of those of tenure-holders, 2 per cent of those raiyats, and 5.94 per cent of those of under-raiyats. These figures don't represent the sum total of the earning of the Bauri from agriculture for as share in produce on ‘krishani’ system and as an agricultural labourer he gets more added to his income.”¹¹ The position of Bagti, Dom, Haris, Mals and Santhals was far worse. They were the castes which provide the bulk of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers.¹²

The social structure based on the caste system was hierarchical in nature and this hierarchy of castes was also depicted in the economic structure. The higher castes were more economically prosperous. The middle casts were divided into two categories, one related to agriculture, and another was artisans and some other professionals. They were economically belongs to the middle class. There was a different category of middle class i.e., the business classes. The last was the low castes and tribal economically belong to the lowest category and the most depressed class in society.

The employment on a large scale of ‘schedule Caste’ and ‘scheduled Tribe’ sharecroppers and agricultural labourers with a very low standard of living was the general

characteristic of Birbhum. The schedule caste and tribes population “inseparably associated with agricultural occupations”- were confined to *burga* cultivation and *kishani* system (wage in kind or attached agricultural labour) and could not work their way upwards to higher rights due to poverty.¹³

The economic and social low class and castes people were neglected and exploited by the other high and middle class and castes in the Colonial period. They were neither protected by their fellow natives nor by the British government. On the other hand, after the Santhal Rebellion in 1855, the government, become concerned about them. Mr M.C. Alpin, ICS, was deputed to enquire into the condition of the Santhal population outside the Santhal Parganas, operation for a survey and preparation of a record of rights were commenced in the Rampurhat sub-division of the district Birbhum.¹⁴ In the Santhal areas of Birbhum, the proceedings for the settlement of fair rents under Section 112 of the Bengal Tenancy Act were confirmed by the Governor-General in council.¹⁵ But the collector of Birbhum stated that there was a tendency on the part of some landlords to use unscrupulous methods in dealing with the Santhals tenants.¹⁶ But the high and middle-class people never stopped exploitation upon them. In Birbhum they become a more deprived class who acted generally as agricultural labourers and very few of them had their own private land. Land alienation and indebtedness was come on in the Santhal tracks of Birbhum.¹⁷

Santhals in West Bengal were dispossessed of their lands owing to their ignorance and thriftlessness. A Bill was accordingly drafted in the time of Lord Garmichael with the object of placing restrictions on their lands passing into the hands of persons not belonging to aboriginal tribes and was passed into law in the time of Lord Ronaldshay under the title of Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Act 1918. The Act applied in the first instance to the Santhals of Birbhum, Bankura and Midnapore.¹⁸

Population and health: After the introduction of Permanent Settlement in 1793, the Government needed demographic information about Bengal. But the earlier estimate of the population of Bengal was mostly guesswork. It was Dr Francis Buchanan Hamilton made first a laborious attempt to calculate the population of the six districts of Bihar and North Bengal between 1807 and 1814 and came to a conclusion of the population of Bengal province was 50 million.¹⁹ This figure was quite close to the first Census of Bengal Report in 1872, by H. Beverley. Before the first Census of Bengal, W. W. Hunter observed in 1868 that “at present, we have no reliable means of ascertaining the population of a single district of rural Bengal.”²⁰ It was the first Census of 1872, the population was methodically calculated and from that time demographical structure of Birbhum was available. But in 1868, the Civil Surgeon of Birbhum Dr Sheridan reported to the Sanitary Commissioner that, the population of Suri was 6,500 and of the district 743,684. In this regard Dr Sheridan wrote, “These figures have been obtained from the collector's office I cannot say on what data they are based, I believe, the population has been calculated on an average of four and a half people in each house.”²¹

The first Census Report of Bengal 1872 claimed that the population of West Bengal increased in the 19th century. The cause was given to the establishment of peace and order in the north-western district, the borderland between the *Subah* of Bengal and the tribes of Chotanagpur and by an extension of cultivation. It was also claimed that in Birbhum the population had very sensibly increased in the last 20 years.²²

During the period when the first Census was taken, the Burdwan Fever was confined to Burdwan and Hooghly but not extended to Birbhum. It was in the time of the next Census of Bengal in 1881, the catastrophic effect of fever in Birbhum was evident and almost 3, 50,000 people perished. In Birbhum only one *thana* that of Nalhati, shows an increase in population since 1872 and some of the *thanas* suffered to the extent of a decrease of 18% to 14%.²³ The district of Birbhum was decadent until 1891 owing to the ravages of fever. The population decreased by 7% between 1872 and 1881 and in the succeeding decade increased by less than 1%. In the latter year there was a fall of nearly 4% in the Sadar sub-division which suffered severely from fever, but an acceleration of 10% in the Rampurhat sub-division to the north. In the next 10 years 1891 to 1901, conditions were generally favourable and the district added 13 % to its population, the two sub-division sharing nearly equally in the increase.²⁴

In 1906-1908, Birbhum suffered from a wave of fever and an epidemic of cholera. In these three years, deaths exceeded births by 41,000. In the decade 1901 to 1911, as a whole, there was an excess of 18,689 births and the Census shows an increase of 33,193 or 3.7 %. The growth of population was shared in by all *thanas* except Suri and Dubrajpur in the west of the Sadar Sub-division. Here the soil was not as fertile as it was to the east and heavy mortality was caused by cholera and smallpox in 1908. Owing to the loss in these two *thanas*, the average increase in the Sadar Sub-division was only 1.6 % whereas it was 6.73 % in the Rampurhat Sub-division. The latter was one of the most progressive tracts in West Bengal and was then more populous by 29% than it was in 1881, whereas the population of the Sadar Sub-division had increased by only 11%. As in 1901, the Muraroi *thana* in the extreme north, which benefited from the immigration of the Santhals, had grown most rapidly, but it was closely followed by Rampurhat and Nalhati, which were prosperous agricultural areas traversed by railway.²⁵

From 1911 to 1921 almost every part of the district lost equality. The Sadar sub-division suffered severely from floods, there was malaria and the district was hard hit by influenza. The aboriginal tribe was suffered more severely than Bengalis in the epidemic of Birbhum.²⁶

From 1921 to 1941, the overall condition of the district was good as reflected by the increase in population. But the famine of 1943 and epidemic in 1944 took a heavy toll and sapped vitally as a result of which it took about four years to restore and excess of births over deaths.²⁷

In the Census Report of 1872 and 1881, it was stated that the overpopulation of the district was caused by the excess birth rates than death rates. Mr Beverley's observation was

that the abnormal excess of children in India.²⁸ The Census Reports gave socio-cultural explanations like religion²⁹ and early marriage³⁰ for the excess birth rate in India as well as Bengal. But on the other hand, the mortality among the children in the first year of the life was the ratio 35% or 350 in 1000 birth as reported in the Census of 1881.³¹

➤ Population return of Bengal 1872-1951:

Year	Population	No.of person per square mile	Percentage of variation of population	Total square mile	Sources based on-
1872	853,785	490	-----	1,344	Census of Bengal, 1872
1881	794,428	456	-7.0	1,756	Census of Bengal, 1881
1891	796,267	458	+0.5	1,753	Census of Bengal, 1891
1901	879,934	502	+13.6	1,752	Census of India, 1951, vol-VI & A. Mitre, Birbhum, pp-xix, xvii
1911	922,412	539	+3.7	1,752	
1921	831,465	489	-9.4	1,753	
1931	925,614	544	+11.3	1,699	
1941	1,027,054	601	+10.6	1,743	
1951	1,036,098	612	+1.8	1,754.2 1,742.9	-According to Surveyor General of India -Director of Land Record and Surveys, W.B.

Epidemics affected most of the poorest section of the people in society. The vast number of death was no doubt due to poverty, scarcity and famine. The classes chiefly affected were the very poorest cast such as Chamars, Haris, Doms, Bagdis and Dhangars, who were notoriously filthy in their habits and who leave for the most part in an atmosphere poisoned by mephitic and malarious exhalations.³² A village struck by epidemics underwent a profound through brief disordering of the rhythm of daily life. The pool of labour services was greatly reduced by the epidemics and its effect was felt in the agricultural sector which aggravated the economic crisis following the endemic. Many British officials had the opinion that diseases were one of the causes of famines. As the disease was seen in the body of a person whose vitality had waned, so also in the nations that was on the verge of extinction. The outbreak of various diseases appeared to be exacerbated. The physical and mental strength of people living with malaria slowly disappeared. The skill of hard work and enthusiasm for action was gradually decreased. Laziness, despair, disgust in life gradually came and took their place. Several villages got wiped out due to malaria. A huge number of people got expired. Those who were alive were not living with full enthusiasm and they were awaiting death. Apart from malaria, cholera, smallpox and other epidemics recurrently took place in the colonial era in this unfortunate country.³³ The relatively well to do families lost interest in village life. The main cause of it was the epidemic mostly malaria and cholera, lack of opportunities for education and poverty. On the other hand, the condition of the poor people of the village was even more measurable, e.g. in one family out

of five members, three were affected by cholera, they had to share the same bed or *chatai* because they even had no provision of another bed or *chatai*.³⁴ This was the actual scenario of the then village life. According to Public Health Report from 1925 to 1946, smallpox death was more prevalent among infants and children.³⁵ Death due to smallpox was also more prevalent among the Muslims of Birbhum. Because the Farazi Muslims of Murshidabad had great influence over Birbhum and they opposed vaccination.³⁶

Conclusion: The majority of people of Birbhum in the colonial period lived in mere subsistence. In the new land tenure system, few higher cast people held a maximum of land and spend a comfortable life. The majority of the poorest section of the population became easy victims of famine conditions caused by mostly natural calamities and sometimes by states maladministration. Rural indebtedness was very high among this poorest section of people who also belonged to the lower casts. The most immediate impact of poverty and lack of education were reflected on human behaviour, habits and psychology. As a consequence, the village people became ignorant about all their basic needs. Particularly ignorance about sanitation and hygiene had a greater consequence. Water borne diseases like cholera frequently took the form of endemics or epidemics in Birbhum due to a dearth of pure drinking water. Malnutrition was closely linked with poverty and increased rates of morbidity and mortality due to malaria were recorded for the entire period. Even people were not able to provide separate rooms or beds to segregate patients infected with contagious diseases like cholera or smallpox. As far as the population returns of the pre-independent India as well as Bengal was concerned even in the case of a small district like Birbhum, the excess death rate over birth rate was evident and the epidemics and endemics were one of the major cause of this excess mortality rate. Diseases and epidemics was part of human life but how man combat this situation depends on several factors in the society. Particularly the economic condition has a direct relation with the health of the people The condition of people in this rural district of Birbhum, exposed the total failure of governance to give minimum facilities of welfare to its subjects.

Note:

1. Report on the Condition of the Lower Classes of Population in Bengal, Revenue Department, No.205G dated Suri, the 30th May 1888, From- C.J.S. Faudler, Esq. Officiating Collector of Beerbhum, To- The Commissioner of the Burdwan Division. Page-1-3, WBSA
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Hunter, W.W. (1876). A Statistical Account of Bengal: District of Bardwan, Bankura and Birbhum, Vol-IV. London: Trubner & Co. P-344
5. Mukherjee, K. P. (Aug.1937). In A West-Bengal Village, Visva-Bharati Quarterly, pp-179-187
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