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Famines in Nadia District, 1875-1943: A historical study

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Abstract

From the very dawn of human civilization, people have repeatedly faced the fury of natural disasters. Among these, famine stands out as one of the most devastating. While famines often arose from natural causes like floods, excessive rainfall, crop failures, droughts, etc. In the Indian subcontinent, colonial policies played a crucial and aggravating role. Alongside natural factors, British rule with its oppressive taxation, exploitative governance, indifference toward disaster management, and policies that forced farmers into cultivating commercial crops and prioritized railway construction collectively created fertile ground for recurring and catastrophic famines. These crises deeply scarred Bengal, particularly the important district of Nadia. The devastation was not limited to the tragic loss of thousands of lives or destruction of property. It profoundly disrupted the district's entire social fabric, economy, culture, and demographics. The purpose of this article is to present a historical analysis of the various famines that struck Nadia district between 1875 and 1943 and to shed light on their socioeconomic, cultural, and political impacts, as well as the responses they provoked.

Keywords: Famine, hunger, epidemics, migration, disaster, relief

Introduction

That Bengal is suffering from a famine of almost unprecedented magnitude is an indescribably tragic fact ^[1]. Famines are marked by widespread scarcity that often leads to high death rates caused by starvation or hunger-related illnesses. The history of famines as well as of regular hunger is full of blood-boiling tales of callousness and malevolence ^[2]. The term 'famine' originates from the Latin word *fames*, meaning hunger or an extreme shortage of food. Various factors can trigger famine, such as inadequate rainfall, heavy taxation, insect infestations, and floods. Additionally, in India, famines have sometimes been worsened or caused by political and economic decisions made by the ruling authorities. Simply put, famine refers to a large-scale shortage of food grains. This crisis is usually preceded by malnutrition, widespread starvation, outbreaks of disease, increased death rates, and halted population growth.

Droughts are often seen as the main underlying cause of famines since a lack of water causes crops to fail, leading to food shortages in the affected areas. These droughts are typically the result of failed monsoon rains ^[3]. Amartya Sen defines famines as "a particular virulent manifestation of starvation causing wide-spread death" ^[4]. Before the British arrived, Bengal and the rest of India had already experienced several kinds 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 ^[5]. Many have attributed famines to natural causes like droughts, floods, and food shortages, or to environmental and cultural factors. However, the harsh reality is that the devastating famines in India during British rule were largely the result of oppressive colonial policies, relentless exploitation, and the growing burden of debt on the people. The impact of British colonialism was far more destructive than anything experienced in earlier periods.

The British government did very little to stop the terrible famines or to plan long-term solutions. The relief efforts they made were small and not enough to help the people. This Bengal famine is something more than an isolated incident. It is a danger signal, warning us of long-range measures which are needed as well as immediate relief ^[6].

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Instead, the British focused more on taking economic advantage of the region. They paid very little attention to the serious problems caused by famine. Between 1875 and 1943, Nadia district experienced several famines of varying severity. These famines pushed the people of Nadia into extreme hardship, exposing them to disease, epidemics, hunger, and even death. The government's relief measures were very limited compared to the actual need, and even what little aid was arranged often failed to reach ordinary people in time. These people thus uprooted from their homes and without any resources migrate to the towns in search of food and flock to the gruel kitchens ^[7]. In Nadia district, the famine situation was especially severe during British rule. That is why studying Nadia between 1875 and 1947 is very important. Although many studies have been done on famines in India and Bengal, Nadia has not been studied enough as part of local history. This article aims to explain the famines in Nadia during this time and how they affected the daily life, society, economy, politics, and culture of its people. It is well known that British India faced many terrible famines during this period.

Historical Background of Nadia District

Through the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the Battle of Buxar in 1764, and the acquisition of Diwani rights in 1765, the East India Company firmly established its rule over the Bengal province. Consequently, as an important part of Bengal, Nadia district repeatedly became a refuge, free from British battlefield control. 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 ^[8]. 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 British district of Nadia was formed as early as 1787 ^[9]. Mr. F Redfearn was appointed as the first collector of Nadia, with Mr. G. Cherry as his assistant ^[10].

Nadia district is an ancient and culturally rich region in the Bengal province. 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 ^[11]. 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 ^[12]. Nadia or Nabadwip hallowed by the memory of Lord Krishnachaitanya who was born here on 18 February A.D. 1486 ^[13]. Situated in the Gangetic and Bardhaman region, Nadia district was not only a prosperous agricultural area but also well-known for its healthy climate, rich cultural environment, and excellence in education and learning. 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' ^[14].

Although Nadia was a fertile region blessed with rivers and known for its rich agricultural output and vibrant cultural life, it was still vulnerable to famines caused by natural disasters like heavy rainfall or drought. The economy of Nadia district mainly depended on agriculture, farming life was highly uncertain. The main crops grown included paddy, jute, and wheat. Farmers usually cultivated under the *Baghchas* or *Bargadar* system, where they were required to pay high revenue from whatever income they earned from their harvests. After the introduction of the Permanent Settlement in 1793, this system gradually became a burden for the farmers. If crops failed because of natural disasters or if market prices dropped, the farmers were left with nothing to sustain themselves for the rest of the year. Yet, despite these hardships, they still had to pay the same fixed taxes. As a result, many farmers became trapped in growing debt to landlords and moneylenders. Faced with repeated natural disasters on one side and relentless exploitation on the other, the peasant society of Nadia became deeply vulnerable. Government reports from the period describe widespread poverty and malnutrition among the district's people, and there are even accounts of families forced to abandon their homes to escape famine.

The Famine of 1876-1878 and Its Impact on Nadia

The Great Famine of 1876-78, referred to as the Southern India Famine or the Madras Famine of 1877, occurred primarily due to successive monsoon failures between 1876 and 1878. During the famine of 1876-78, the main areas affected were in southern and southwestern India, which suffered the most severe consequences compared to other regions of the country. Natural disasters like drought, floods, and storms were the direct cause of the famine, but there were also significant contributing elements such as rural poverty, agricultural backwardness, and a lack of irrigation infrastructure.

Nadia district itself was not officially declared a famine-affected area. However, as part of the larger Bengal province, Nadia still felt the indirect impact of this famine in various ways. One major factor was the large-scale export of rice from Bengal to the famine-stricken regions of the south and southwest, which created a food shortage within Bengal itself. At the same time, the prices of essential goods rose sharply, putting them beyond the reach of ordinary and marginalized people. Adding to these difficulties, a severe drought occurred in Nadia district during this period, which reduced agricultural production. Altogether, these events combined to create a deeply alarming and crisis-ridden situation for the people of Nadia. A prolonged drought from 1875 led to crop failures and food scarcity by late 1876. ^[15] Nadia district was mainly agricultural. In the early 1870s, Nadia's rice cultivation became increasingly dependent on erratic monsoon rains ^[16]. In these years, successive floods and droughts destroyed the principal crops, leading to acute scarcity of food ^[17]. This resulted in a food crisis in Nadia district. Official records state that over 30% of the district's population faced starvation and migration ^[18]. Though not officially declared a famine in Nadia, saw food prices more than double in the Krishnagar and Ranaghat subdivisions. A seer of coarse rice rose from ¾ anna to over 2 annas within four months. The colonial administration did establish some relief projects, but these were poorly timed, limited in scope, and mostly centered near towns ^[19]. That's why relief

supplies arrived very late in Nadia.

In 1877, the Board of Revenue report claimed that there could be no famine in Bengal with the current crop production. Because the production of Aman rice in 1876 was normal which helped to reduce the terrible death rate of the famine. In this context, the contribution of the local people and the local landlords is particularly noteworthy. Although there was no famine in Nadia at this time, various diseases were prevalent and from that emerged a terrible situation like an epidemic. The continuous export of food and inadequate relief measures by the British government greatly intensified hunger and food scarcity in Nadia district, all to protect its imperial interests. Although tragic, this famine later prompted the establishment of Famine Commissions and the formulation of the Indian Famine Codes.

Nadia during the Famine of 1896-97

One of the most devastating events in Bengal, particularly in Nadia district, was the famine of 1896-97. Like many other provinces of India, Nadia too endured its cruel and terrifying impact. The years 1897 to 1900 proved to be a period of severe scarcity for the whole of Northern India, including Bengal (Bankura, Nadia, Murshidabad Khulna, and also Madras), and famine was declared in 1897 and again in 1900 ^[20]. The famine of 1896-97 affected the district much more severely. As usual the Kalantar, in which nothing but aman rice is grown, suffered the most ^[21]. The famine of 1896-97 in India was mainly caused by drought. Nadia district was no different. Because of the drought, a huge amount of crops were destroyed at that time. Besides one of the causes of the famine was the failure of crops production ^[22]. Even though the railway was extended in this region, the old transport system was never improved. So, when heavy rains broke the river embankments and floods came, places like Kaliganj, Nakashipara, and Karimpur became cut off from one another.

The loss of crops caused food shortage and hunger. The prices of daily goods became much higher. 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 ^[23]. The average outturn of the aus rice during the preceding nine years was under 10 annas, and in 1895 it was 9 annas: in 1896 the outturn was only 6 annas ^[24]. Though relief was arranged for the famine-stricken people, it came too late and was far less than what was needed. The Famine due 1897 was said to be "the interse and most widely extended yet Known and the relief operations failed to produce the desired effect ^[25]. Many times the poor in remote villages did not even get this help.

The portion of the district which was first affected was the Kalantar, in which a test work was opened as early as 15th November. During January relief works had to be opened in thanas Karimpur and Daulatpur ^[26]. The total area affected covered 1,182 square miles, with a population of 625,840. The distress was intense over 503 square miles with population of 266,777. Relief works were open from the middle of November 1896 till the middle of September 1897 ^[27]. According to collector of the district, the famine of 1896-97 was far more severe in this district than was that 1873-74 ^[28].

The Famine of 1943, Nadia's Catastrophe

Bengal was visited in 1943 by one of the worst famines that history has ever recorded ^[29]. The 1943 famine was the worst disaster in colonial Bengal. Because it happened in the Bengali year 1350, people also called it the 'Panchasher Manvantar'. The Famine Enquiry Commission of India (1945) said that about 15 lakh people died in this famine. WR Aykroyd believed that the above figure counted only those who died on the streets. In reality, the number of deaths may have been 30 to 40 lakhs. Like all other districts of Bengal, Nadia too suffered terribly in this tragic and dreadful famine. With the spread of armed conflict in South-east Asia in 1941, the import of rice from Burma was stopped wholly and in the country the demand for food increased considerably on account of the presence of the fighting forces and the large number of refugees fleeing from areas which fell to Japan ^[30].

The partial failure of aman crop in 1941 added to the difficulty of the situation ^[31]. The year 1943 witnessed another widespread failure in agricultural production which, coupled with the visitation of a devastating cyclone in some parts of lower Bengal, created a food crisis of a Nadia district, between East and West Bengal and close to Calcutta, was badly unprecedented nature ^[32]. It became a transit place for refugees, food hoarders, and black market traders. The prices of food and daily goods went very high, and common people suffered greatly. After Japan took Burma, between January and July the price of rice in Nadia towns rose from 6 to 27 rupees. Traders hoarded rice and sold it in the black market. The food prices began to rise steeply from November 1942 and continued till August 1943 when they soared far beyond the reach of the average consumer. Rice in the district was quoted at Rs. 40 to Rs. 50 per maund, a situation which forced the common people to starve ^[33].

Soon the village markets, especially in Krishnagar and Shantipur, became empty of grain.

Every day deaths were reported from Nabadwip, Karimpur, Ranaghat, Kaliganj, and Nakashipara. The government relief was very poor, and even that showed clear inequality between rich and poor, men and women. 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 ^[34].

Relief was not only less, it was also very late. In Kaliganj and Hanskhali, people died of hunger in August, but the government started relief only at the end of October. In August reports of sale of children in the famine and flood-stricken areas of Burdwan and Nadia became known to the public ^[35]. Instead of giving food, the government made schemes, which was useless, because starving people had no strength to work. In Ranaghat and Chapra blocks, common kitchens started but soon stopped for want of food. People of Nazirpur, Shikarpur, Tehatta and other places walked miles to reach relief centres. Many were refused help because they could not prove they were poor. Many others died on the way. The Bengal famine was essentially a rural phenomenon ^[36].

The famine of 1943 changed the society and culture of Nadia district completely. Everyman in his own village surroundings remembers with grief and sorrow the occurrence of a number of cases that have hit the society very hard and deep ^[37]. It also changed the district's

population and the base of human relations. Many who survived left their homes and went to places like Burdwan, Calcutta, and Assam in search of work and food. The starving people left their homes in the villages and came to urban areas, especially to Calcutta in search of food. In this way, lakhs of families in Nadia sold their land, houses, and cattle. Unable to carry the burden of zamindars' debts for generations, they moved to the cities. These common people became separated from the land. As a result, the farming system of Nadia broke down completely. The famine of 1943 leaves its deepest and longest scar on human society [38].

Conclusion

Between 1875 and 1947, the famines turned this district into a land of death marches, hunger, malnutrition, disease, and epidemics. Alongside this suffering, the backbone of rural social traditions and networks of mutual economic dependence was left crippled. These famines cannot be explained only as the outcome of food shortages or natural calamities; they were also tied to the colonial government's relentless pursuit of imperial interests. Yet, amidst this cruel reality and unbearable pain, the solidarity, cooperation, and tireless struggle of Nadia's people against famine remain a lasting and unforgettable chapter in the district's history.

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