

# Poverty, Famine and Migration: A Study in Colonial Bankura

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## Abstract

*The impact of colonial rule and exploitation that affected the economy and land displacement in different parts of India has also affected Bankura, a district of West Bengal. The land reform that started in the tribal-dominated district of Bankura at the beginning of British rule resulted in a change in the lifestyle of the tribal and lower caste people of the district. A landless peasant class emerged in the Bankura district like all over India. Changes in the land revenue system, the breakdown of tribal land and traditional Mandali system and rampant indebtedness had brought the people of the district under the grip of poverty. Added to this were the effects of several crises and famines. As a result, large-scale seasonal migration to the neighbouring districts began in Bankura in search of alternative livelihoods from the nineteenth century. The impact of this poverty and famine in the Bankura district during the colonial phase and the emergence of the migration trends based on that source have been discussed in the following article.*

**Keywords:** *Bankura, Santhal, Migration, Famine, Seasonal.*

Bankura, the fourth largest district of West Bengal, is located in the western part of the state. This district is a part of the Burdwan Division. It is situated between 22° 38' and 23° 38' north latitude and between 86° 36' and 87° 46' east longitude. It has an area of 6,882 square kilometres. On the north and northeast, the district is bounded by the Burdwan district, from which it is separated mostly by the Damodar River. Bankura is a part of Southern *Radh* and embraces the cross sections of two cultural streams of Indo-Aryan and native Aboriginal elements.<sup>1</sup> Bankura district has been described as the "connecting link between the plains of Bengal on the east and the Chota Nagpur plateau on the west."<sup>2</sup> The areas to the east and northeast are low-lying alluvial plains, like predominating rice lands of Bengal. To the west the surface gradually rises, giving way to an undulating country, interspersed with rocky hillocks.

Pre-colonial Bankura was once a part of Jungle Mahals. After the colonial intervention in the eighteenth-century, a process of transformation started in Jungle Mahal areas. The Adivasi and semi-Hinduised population are concentrated largely in the Bankura district, especially in the southwestern part. W.W. Hunter<sup>3</sup> states that Bhumij, Dhangar, Kharia, Kol and Santal are the aboriginal tribes of the district. They are found mainly in the South and South-west parts of the district. Throughout the nineteenth century wastes and jungles were being brought under cultivation. "It is reported that about 40 million acres were reclaimed between 1793 and 1857 in Bengal".<sup>4</sup> The zamindar and jotedars played an important role in the land reclamation in Bengal districts. The Adivasi people were in search of land as they had given up their nomadic habits.

Therefore, since British law favoured the settled cultivator, the advent of their rule compounded the Santal land crisis. M.C. McAlpin has given a detailed account of the rapid loss of land by the tribals to the non-tribals in the districts of Bankura, Birbhum, Midnapur and Balasore. This land transfer from the tribals has been defined by him as 'intact' (if the Santals paid rent through the headman or Majhi) and 'broken' (rents paid individually) according to his definition.<sup>5</sup> Thus, when the landlord ceased to take his rent through the Majhi and recognised each Santal as a separate raiyat, the first and most important step in the disintegration land system took place.

**Table No- 1**  
**Condition of Santhal's village in Bankura District.**

Thana	Number of Santhal Villages (approximate).	Number of Villages examined.	The number was found intact.	Number found broken.
Bankura (including Chhatna)	145	Unknown	Nil	All are believed to be broken (145).
Gangajalghati (including Saltora)	90	Do	3	Practically all (87)
Indpore (outpost)	56	32	8	24
Khatra	125	84	20	64
Raipur	475	202	26	176
Simlapur(outpost)	119	84	29	55
Onda	48	22	Nil	22
Taldangra(outpost)	100	71	29	42
<b>Total</b>	-----	-----	115	615

Source: M.C.Mc Alpin, Report on the Condition of Santhals, 1909 pp.17-18

British land revenue policy directly or indirectly affected the lower-class people of district Bankura. Not only the loss of land but also, the indebtedness of rural people was also a most pathetic phenomenon under the colonial reign. McPherson, a settlement officer of the Santhal Parganas maintains that around the end of the nineteenth century, 'the result of all this continuous assault and encroachment on village land; there are very few villages...in which the mahajans has not obtained a footing....the Mahajan is now, in nine cases out of ten, the co-villagers, and intending vendor and one knows how very little pressure is necessary on the part of the Mahajan to convert an indebted raiyt into an intending vendor'.<sup>6</sup>

Survey and settlement officer W.W. Robertson<sup>7</sup> also mentioned in detail how these mahajans got a hold over land and became a dominant force in the agrarian society of Bankura District. Robertson has shown that the jotedar-mahajan trapping was trapping the peasants in loops of credit and wresting away the land from them. This type of case happening not only in Bankura but also in the different parts of Bengal. The same picture can be found in the different settlement reports of other districts.<sup>8</sup>

The poor farmer fails to meet the high rates of interest charges by money landers or mahajans and falls into their traps in the form of credit bondage. Survey and settlement Officer F.W. Roberson quoted from the District Collector report of 1920, wrote that,

"The average cultivator is heavily in debt. He hands over a greater part of his harvest to his Mahajan to meet existing obligations and, as he is usually unable to maintain himself, he has to borrow again a few months after. He pursues his career of borrowing and repaying from year's end to year's end, always adding to his burden and never making any advance towards release."<sup>9</sup>

The indebtedness of the people also resulted in rapid land transfer. In Bankura, the Santhals, Bagdis, Doms, and Haris cleared the jungles, and this led to the extension of cultivation, but the *ryots* lost their land and became *sanja* tenants paying produce rent or produce-cum- cash rent.<sup>10</sup> In 1927, the collector of Bankura wrote, "Mr Robertson has shown in his report what serious evil the *sanja* or produce rent is to the welfare of the district. It keeps the cultivator under an ever-increasing load of debt...The serious dimensions already attained by this evil can be gauged from the fact that one-fourth of settled ryoti land is held either on produce rent or on produce rent supplement by a cash payment. Both of these kinds of rent are steadily increasing..."<sup>11</sup> Under this system, land transfer was increased in the Bankura district.

Table No- 2

## Land Transfer in Bankura District (1930-40)

Year	Mukarrari <sup>2</sup> land transfer	Bargadar land transfer
1929-30	6807	1756
1930-31	6348	2323
1931-32	6994	2052
1932-33	7281	2561
1933-34	7356	2904
1934-35	9576	3358
1935-36	9172	3409
1936-37	8070	3094
1937-38	8230	3041
1938-39	9757	1028
1939-40	8216	--

Source: Annual Report of the Registration Department, 1929-40. See EPW, 25.01.1986, Vol.22, No.4

From the above statistics, we show that a huge proportion of land transfers happened mainly due to debt and poverty, which also proceeded with agricultural labour. Sunil Sen shows that during the land transfer process “Much land was also sold”, “and in such cases, the expropriated owner-cultivators swelled the rank of agricultural labour”<sup>13</sup>.

Given the agro-climatic, social, and economic circumstances of the Bankura district, it is no wonder that a vast section of the population particularly the rural people normally lived under the dark shadow of dearth and hunger. William Wilson Hunter wrote, “Drought is the only natural calamity to which Bankura is subject, and the Collector reports that the district suffers in this respect every second or third year.”<sup>14</sup> Bankura district is a drought-prone area with poor soil quality, high rain off of rainwater, inadequate storage and low moisture retention capacity of the soil and poor irrigation facility. Most of the people of the district directly or indirectly depend on agriculture from the time of immortality to now. Depending on the rice crop and the absence of a proper irrigation system, failure of monsoon rain creates agricultural drought conditions frequently. This geo-economic condition creates severe poverty, an inoccupation condition in the district, particularly in the southeastern part of the district.

Bankura is considered a drought-prone area with poor soil quality and characterized by high rain-off of rainwater, inadequate storage and low moisture retention capacity of the light-textured soil. One out of every four years may be termed as the agricultural drought year spelling great hazard to rain-fed paddy cultivation in the region where almost the entire cultivated area has no assured irrigation facility. The cropped areas of the district of Bankura, in most cases, are unirrigated. In the years of 1901, 1902, 1907, 1920, 1925 the major drought conditions occurred in the district.<sup>15</sup> In Bankura district Gazetteer (1968) the author points out that, “The fact that the level of agricultural overcrowding in Bankura is lower than the neighbouring districts is attributed, among the other season to this high rate of emigration.”<sup>16</sup>

The census reports also suggest that during the time 1901 to 1921 when food scarcity in the district occurred frequently, the 'poorer classes' deserted their villages and sought employment in the neighbouring district. The following is a chronological list of natural calamities that visited the district.

Table no: 3

## Years of Natural Calamities in Bankura District

Famine	Scarcity	Drought	Flood	Earthquake	Cyclone
1866	1885	1901	1905		
1874	1909	1902	1914	1934	1942
1897	1910	1907	1917		
1928	1911	1920	1922		
	1913	1925	1935		
	1915		1941		
	1927				
	1932				
	1936				
	1937				
	1940				
	1944				

Source: A. Mitra, Census 1951, West Bengal District Handbooks Bankura, Calcutta, 1953, p.xiv")

The most terrible famine that visited Bankura during the last half century was that of 1866. This famine was popularly known as "*Bahattore Manantwar*". The main cause of this severe famine was the failure of the winter crop high price rate of the crop of 1865. "According to official reports, there was plenty of food in the country, but the supplies had been cornered and hoarded due to a combination of dealers".<sup>17</sup> Sunil Sen observed, "In Bankura, the agricultural labourer with 'stationary wages' were severely hit as food prices rose; in the villages, the price of rice rose from Rs. 2 per maund in 1862-63 to Rs. 5 in 1865-66."<sup>18</sup> W.W. Hunter wrote in the context of famine 1866 in Bankura, "In ordinary years Bankura exports small quantities of rice to Hugli and Midnapore. In 1865 these exports were much larger than usual, on account of the deficiency of the crop in Midnapore and Manbhum. The price of rice throughout the whole of 1865 was higher as compared with previous years."<sup>19</sup>

The famine affected a large area of the western and southwestern portion of the district bordering on Manbhum. Even the weaver class of the Bishnupur suffered miserably. Mc.Alpin points out that the famine of 1865-66 was a changing point in the socio-economic condition of the Santhals. O'Malley wrote, "Distress was already noticeable in some parts by the beginning of 1866, and in February there was a violent outbreak of cholera at Bishnupur, which was promoted by, if not directly due to the extreme scarcity of food. The people were paralysed by panic and poverty-stricken to such a degree, that they could not even pay the cost of burning their dead and threw down the corpses outside the town."<sup>20</sup>

The small and marginal peasant and agricultural labourers were hardly affected by these chronological famines and scarcity in the Bankura district. As famine was the consequence of agrarian failure, the agricultural labourers suffered the loss of employment and income. The frequent occurrence of famine and scarcity was attributed to a sharp decline in the availability of food in the region. The high rate of food grains, the decline in employment among agricultural labourers and artisans, poverty of rent-paying tenants, cause considerable land transfer in the affected region.

The tropical sub-humid southwestern lateritic tract of West Bengal was much known for the tract of forest, which was once the resource base for the local people. In the life and economy of the Adivasi and marginal lower-class people, the forest had a profound role. Colonial policy first made inroads into the tribal areas through the Forest Acts (1865 and 1878) making it difficult for the Santhals and other tribes to freely enjoy the customary rights over forest resources. In the name of 'conservation', the colonial government diminished the traditional rights of these people and restricted access to some of the forest produce. The state reservation of forests sharply affected the subsistence activities of these people, and any sort of breach was regarded as poaching. For no fault, they were termed as criminals and large numbers were thrown into jail.

The contemporary periodical, *Bankura Darpan*, wrote on the destruction of forests on 1st December 1893, that "the cleaning of forests is one of the reasons why the land in places in like Bankura loses its fertility. Leaves of trees form natural manure, and this manure is not only received by the land in the immediate neighbourhood of forests but is distributed far and wide by streams and rainwater. Another reason why forests in Bankura and the neighbouring district should not be destroyed is that the soil is kept firm and compact by the roots of trees to be fit for agriculture and is easily washed away or deprived of its fertilising earth by the denuding

action of rainwater if forests are cut down.”<sup>21</sup> The environmental degradation and disruption of the ecological management system of the *Adivasis* and poor non-Adivasi people were losing the capacity to produce crops. Since the nineteenth century, drought has become a common phenomenon. This failed crops the district had been suffering from chronic famine for years together. Ultimately, these marginalized people were forced to migrate to Assam or other adjoining regions that could provide opportunities for occupation for survival.

The low income rate and lack of alternative income sources were creating the ultimate poverty condition. The prime cause of migration is absolute poverty from which the Santhals and other poor tribal and non-tribal people are driven by the simple urge to survive. They were hardly affected by the colonial land policy and indebtedness. Most of the migrants belonged to medium to large family size groups consisting of 5 to 10 members. Most of the migrants are agriculturists as their first occupation. According to the statistics obtained in the census of 1951, 81.75 per cent of the total population was supported by agriculture, which is considerably higher than 60-70 per cent, which prevailed in the census of 1901. This statistic reveals, to a huge extent industry has declined in Bankura and how large populations have been drowned back to agriculture.<sup>22</sup>

The second occupation of the migrants was the collection and sale of firewood, earth cutting, road laying and other manual work. Some wage labourers owned land, but the average size of holding was too small, Infertile, and unirrigated. The agricultural labourers and marginal farmers, mostly the tribal, have been suffering from social injustice for generations at the hands of elite rural societies. The *Jal, Jami and Jungle* (The water, land and forest) were the main sources of living for the tribal and semi-tribal people. When agricultural activities are generally ceased, the tribals and semi-tribal poor have no other job to take up in their villages and thus survival becomes a challenge for them.

The colonial intervention on land the people change the economy of the district. The landlessness of the peasants, the constant famine and the deprivation of the people of Bankura district had caused problems for the people of Bankura district. The lower-class people of the district chose migration to the contiguous and another district for their survival. Poor peasants, landless labourers and artisans were by far the migration-circulation-prone group in the district. The prolonged hunger of the marginalized people of the district was an important cause for migration. This migration of people of Bankura district has been reflected in the census report. The table shows evidence of a large amount of emigration in the district from 1891 to 1951.

**Table -4**

**Immigration and Emigration from and outside the State, 1891-1951**

Years	1951	1941	1931	1921	1911	1901	1891
Actual Populations	1,319,259	1,289,640	1,111,721	1,019,941	1,138,670	1,116,411	1,069,668
Immigration	30,350	20,850	14,645	11,761	13,932	11,195	2,878
Emigration	59,238	35,368	29,661	29,000	56,000	22,112	11,060

**Table-5**

**Emigration to the Contiguous districts and other districts of Bengal from Bankura**

Years	Emigration to Contiguous Districts		Emigration to other Districts	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1891	32,940	35,135	9,973	5,912
1901	54,198	53,028	10,691	6,489
1911	50,000	54,000	9,000	6,000
1921	50,000	57,000	9,000	6,000
1951	33,500	40,162	11,884	8,701

Source: A. Mitra, Census 1951, West Bengal District Handbooks Bankura, Calcutta, 1953 p.222

The tribal seasonal migration was linked to land ownership and agrarian relations in the Jungle Mahals during the colonial rule. At the beginning of the nineteenth century coalmines and railways developed under the patronage of the British East India Company. The plantation activities in northern India also added a new dimension to the economy. All these enterprises involved a large flow of labour from the Jungle Mahal districts. The Bankura district also turned into a reservoir of labour. The contractor or *arkathis* recruited labour for the following purposes. Different reports suggested that persons from Bankura immigrated into the Sundarbans area

to settle on 'the newly cleared lots' there. The immigration of labourers for the cultivation of new lands in Sundarbans continued till 1875-76.<sup>23</sup>

Most of the Adivasi and semi-Adivasi people are pushed out by poverty and pulled out by better employment opportunities. The purpose and stress factors cleared the socio-economic condition and the causes of migration from and to rural areas landlessness, and seasonal unemployment. Another important aspect of the migration is the economic status. Migrants of the Bankura district come from an agricultural background. Frequent natural hazards and low fertility of the land compelled the tribal people to move out from their native villages to the prosperous zones to avail of alternative means of livelihood. The socio-economic background of the respondents plays an important role in the attainment of their occupational positions. Occupation is one of the major factors in migration. Migration in a sense is a search for economic stability.

Under the colonial reign, migration also increased because of the inequality of capital observed in many places. With the increase in the jute industry, port-based industries, tea, the demand for workers from these centres increased. Not only from Bengal but workers are also brought here from outside Bengal. From the beginning of the 19th century, there was a huge migration of workers from Bihar, Orissa and the United Provinces to the metropolitan cities of Bengal<sup>24</sup>. Other industrial centres in Calcutta also became important centres of workers. From the 1880s onwards, Bengalis and Oriyas arrived to grab new job opportunities.

The implementation of the new rules and law not only affects the Adivasis people like Santhal, but many non-Adivasi marginal Hindu groups, like Bauries caste, even non-tribal people like, Lohar, Doms, Bagdis who were partly or permanently involved with agriculture are suffering severely. They also lost their land, bounded by *mahajani* debt, and the traditional occupation declined. O'Malley wrote that "The Telis, however, it may be mentioned, are now no longer oil-pressers but cultivators, the actual oil pressure is Kulus, but they prefer to call themselves Telis."<sup>25</sup> As Bankura was a drought-prone area, people had no alternative employment source besides agriculture. There was no alternative way to emigrate eastward to seek agricultural work or for coal mines and tea plantations.

It needs to be mentioned that up-country-level migration in search of work became a noticeable characteristic in the last quarter of the 19th century. In the tribal-specific area, the Adivasi peasantry transformed into migratory labour was an essential part of the livelihood under colonial rule. Bankura district has been described as the "connecting link between the plains of Bengal on the east and the Chota Nagpur plateau on the west". So, like the Chota Nagpur region, the exodus of labourers was a natural consequence in Bankura district, which once belonged to Jangalmahal. The southwestern region of the Bankura district is predominantly tribal-dominated and forested. With the advent of the colonial capital, the demand for workers increased, and the Santals, Bauris and Bhumijis of the Bankura district became the suppliers of that labour. These workers took part in the newly developed coal mines, tea gardens, jute mills, port areas, and other construction. The inadequacy of Bankura agriculture and the lack of year-round work forced today's agricultural labourers to migrate from neighbouring areas.

According to B. Foley, there was no migration from the east of this district, but the rest of the district was comparatively poor, and the people migrated at the beginning of the winter and the period of February to June.<sup>26</sup> The eastern part of the district was fertile and like the district of Burdwan, and no labour was obtainable from here in 1906. But the rest of Bankura was full of Jungle was a huge density of population of 426 per square mile. The land was extremely poor, and the chief crop was the winter rice. So, labour became excess in agriculture and left the district when no work was at their disposal and migrated to another place of work. The Census Report of 1911, observed that,

"It has long been the practice for the aboriginal tribes or semi-Hinduized caste of aboriginal descent, such as Santals, Bauris and Bagdis, to emigrate to other districts in the cold weather when their harvest are reaped, and to return at the beginning of the hot weather or later. Many, moreover, work in the coal mines in the Burdwan and Manbhum districts, as well as in the mills along the river Hooghly. This exodus has been facilitated by the railway, and since 1901 the number of those who have left their homes for employment elsewhere has increased by 20 per cent, the actual number of male emigrants rising by 20,000."<sup>27</sup>

Migrant workers in this district meant those who depended on wages in return for labour in the agricultural fields of neighbouring districts in search of work. Sometimes they went to the mining industry or tea gardens in search of work for low wages. There were two streams of migrant workers, one was temporary or seasonal, one that went mainly for agricultural purposes in Bardhaman and Hooghly districts or worked in coal mines in the Raniganj area. The other clause was largely permanent. In this case, the labourers used to go to work in the tea

gardens of Assam. The dishonesty of the arkathis was also one of the reasons for the migration of labourers to Bankura, especially from coal mines and tea gardens. In the years of famine and hardship, the infestation of arkathis would increase.

B. Foley mentions two stages of migration of farm labourers. He pointed out that labourers from Bankura, Raipur and Khatra Onda police station areas used to travel towards the end of November or early December for work like harvesting crops and preparing land. They would go back to the end of February or early March and return by the end of June. When the planters and miners were searching for labour at cheap and declining wages, the missionaries helped them to find the labourers from the Adivasi-concentrated areas of Chota Nagpur, Santhal Parganas and other areas<sup>28</sup>.

According to the Royal Commission of Labour in India, Midnapore and Bankura were the only areas in Bengal supplying labour to the metropolitan area. Bankura had a labour surplus in the winter months.<sup>29</sup> However, the trend shows that in the metropolitan areas, the tribals and low-caste Hindus of Bankura were not very interested in factory work. The Adivasis and lower-caste women and men of Bankura were uncomfortable in agriculture work and were not willing to go much to the chatkal (Jute factories) or port areas of Kolkata. Ranajit Das Gupta argued that, up to the mid-1890s, more than half of the jute mill workers were Bengalis, but after that, the composition of jute industry labour changed, and the migrated labour from outside of Bengal filled the jute factories. So it is that while the absolute number of workers born in Bengal increased, their proportion in the growing jute labour force steadily declined.<sup>30</sup>

According to the census report of 1921 four main tribal groups, Santals, Oraons, Mundas and Bauries constituted only 0.7 per cent of the jute labour force. The Santals and Bauries employed in jute mills were only 290 and 399 respectively.<sup>31</sup> The settlement officer of Bankura district observed in 1917-24, that 'The Santal is attached to his home and will not leave it except for reasons of dire necessity.'<sup>32</sup> Landless agricultural labourers in Bankura district were more attracted to agriculture and mines in neighbouring districts of Bankura. Even the Santals did not want to go to Kolkata for fear of disease. The Santal, Bauri workers were very skilled in cutting coal. W.J Culshaw also observed that "Farther to the north many Santals all work in the coal-mine round Asansol, while to the South labour is drawn to the great Steel town of Tata Nagar. In this area migration to industrial centres is rare; the Santals regard the conditions in industrial towns as highly dangerous to health and they affirm that nothing will induce them to go there Each village organizes its party of migrants, who go to work for the same masters year after year."<sup>33</sup>

Thus, migration became a phenomenon for subsistence and survival, which had been affected by landlessness, rural indebtedness, and the transformation of ecological dependencies. The subsistence level had been endangered in such a critical manner that the poor labourers had to give up even their alternative diet, which they had to procure and consume on the most distressful days and a more vulnerable situation. Thus, the ecological frontier between humans and nature had been artificially constructed through colonial exploitation which made drought, famine and crisis so frequent that seasonal migration became obligatory to restore livelihood.

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