
Socio-Economic Development in the Issue of Agriculture System in Dinajpur in Colonial Phase

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Abstract: *The article has deeply discussed about the socio-economic conditions of colonial Dinajpur in the issue of agricultural system. Because the since ancient times Dinajpur is considered as an agricultural main region and most of the people of the region depended on agriculture for their livelihood. The socio-economic status of the region is inextricably linked with agricultural activities. The main goal of this dissertation is to highlight the history of how farming was done in undivided Dinajpur, and the economic and social status of the people at that time depending on this farming. First the history of the origin of colonial Dinajpur is presented, then the geographical location and soil diversity of the district is discussed as soil is an important factor in agriculture along with geographical location. Then there is a briefly discuss about the agricultural system of Dinajpur district, how the farming was done in the region at that time and what were the main agricultural crops of the region. After this, the economic and social conditions of Dinajpur in British India are discussed, what was the main economic source of the people of this region, it is also discussed. Finally a conclusion is given on the discussion.*

Keywords: *Agriculture, Cultivation, Colonial, Dinajpur, Jotedar, Zaminder etc.*

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Introduction

Socioeconomic status is an economic and sociological combined total measure of a person's work experience and of an individual's or family's economic and social position in relation to others, based on income, education and occupation. The socio-economic condition of India was largely dependent on agriculture in ancient and medieval times. The socio-economic status of modern India is still dependent on agriculture. Till now agriculture, with its allied

Socio-Economic Development in the Issue of Agriculture System in Dinajpur in Colonial Phase

sectors, is the largest source of livelihoods in India. 70% of its rural households still depends primarily on agriculture for their livelihood, with 82% of farmers being small and marginal.¹ India has been a major agricultural country since ancient times. Due to the geographical diversity of India, some parts experience different climates, thus affecting the agricultural productivity of each region differently. India has been dependent on the monsoon cycle since ancient times for large crop yield.² During the medieval times India was predominantly an agricultural country. The people produced sufficient to meet their requirements and were self-sufficient, except during famines, or other natural calamities.³ In the first half of the seventeenth century, the British East India Company came to India to trade and the company later entered into Bengal with a monopoly on the trade of spices, cotton, silk, blue dye, tea, *saltpeter* (gunpowder, rock salt used in meat preservation and medicine) and opium. Dinajpur was a significant district in the production of agriculture products at that time.

The rich, traditional Dinajpur district was formed in 1786 AD. According to Mr. Hamilton Buchanan's description of 1807-1808, there was a triangular district of 5,374 square miles. The district was then divided into 22 police stations. Malda district was formed in 1813 AD with 2 police stations of Dinajpur district, 4 police stations of Purnia district, and 2 police stations of Rajshahi district. Bogura district was formed in 1821 AD. Three police stations were added to the newly formed Bogura district from the southeastern part of Dinajpur district. In 1897, Purnia was separated from Dinajpur district and formed as a separate district.⁴ According to the census of 1872 AD, the number of population of Dinajpur district was 1501924 . According to Hunter's account in 1874 AD, the total area of the district was 4095.14 square miles and the number of villages were 1654.⁵

Dinajpur is an agricultural district. Most of it is located in the plains. According to the geologists, the land to the south and west of the district was undulant. These undulant regions are known as Barind regions. The northern and southern parts of the district are sloped and foresty. As a result, the flow of rivers coming from the Himalayas is smooth and simple. The main rivers of the district are Karatoyas, Atrai, Mahananda and Jamuna. Mahananda has three tributaries Nagar, Tangan and Punarbhaba. A tributary of the Kulik river was the Dhepa-Punarbhaba's tributary. And there was also a branch of Atrai, named Kankara river. Besides, innumerable small and big *beels*, ponds and big lakes are the eternal blessings of agriculture and nutrition in the district. Dinajpur district had an elevation of 84 feet above sea level. The rivers and tributaries of the district flowed towards the Ganges. Due to heavy rainfall and navigability of rivers and tributaries, thousands of *bighas* of land in the district were flooded

Socio-Economic Development in the Issue of Agriculture System in Dinajpur in Colonial Phase

year after year and carried a lot of silt. Again, in the absence of rain, thousands of *bighas* of crops were destroyed by drought in the heat of the sun and brought a terrible curse on people's lives. Besides, there was a long straight embankment called the Mukdam Bnad, running from Gazole on the Malda border to Raiganj. This embankment dates from Muhammadan times. Its object was partly to keep out the water of the Nagar river, which almost annually overflows its banks and renders many thousands of acres unculturable, and partly to serve as a highway through the low-lying country on the south-western border.⁶ Despite all this, the silty and *khiar* soils of the river-rich district were the ultimate resource.⁷

Rice was the main cash crop for the economic development of the agriculturally dependent Dinajpur district. 82 percent of the total arable land was under paddy cultivation. According to the natural features and nature of the land, Dinajpur is located in the Doab region between the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. Although alluvium is formed, the nature of the land changes in some parts due to natural causes. The soil in the southern part of Greater Dinajpur is alkaline and most of the northern part is silty. Moreover, the district has a type of mixed soil with a high proportion of sand. This soil is also known as silt. Again, due to the high amount of mud in the ancient alluvium, this soil is known as Kshiar or Khar in Dinajpur region. This soil class division has also created fundamental differences in the agrarian economy and socio-economic relations of northern and southern Dinajpur.⁸

Irrigation as an agriculture practice can scarcely under normal circumstances be said to exist. The channels of the rivers and streams are too deep to lend themselves readily to this practice and irrigation channels and wells are unknown. The people too are averse to the trouble involved. They can hardly be blamed for this as in normal years the rainfall is plentiful enough and irrigation is unnecessary. In dry years some attempt is made, especially in the southern part of district, to utilise tanks for purposes of irrigation, the water being raised either by triangular mat basket (*chhenai*) swung by two men from ropes tied at the corners, or by hollowed out tree trunks with a weight at one end (*jat*) which are forced down into the water and allowed to spring up so that a stream of water is projected from the weighted end.⁹

The lands are cropped. Needless to say, paddy was the main crop of this land. Dinajpur was known as '*Ratnakhani*' of Rajshahi division for its paddy production.¹⁰ Winter rice is by far the most important crop and covers some 68.7 per cent of the net cropped area. Autumn rice, though comparatively unimportant, is nevertheless grown on a considerable scale. Some 10 per cent of the net cropped area is sown with this. Boro or summer rice is

Socio-Economic Development in the Issue of Agriculture System in Dinajpur in Colonial Phase

only grown on a very small scale, though in abnormality. The winter rice crop has been a poor one and a good deal of land areas when is put under this crop in order to supply the deficiency of food-grains, reaped in May.¹¹ The principal crops of importance are winter rice (*haimantik*), autumn rice (*bhadoi*), jute, rape and mustard, sugarcane and cold weather crops such as pilses, tobacco and vegetables.¹²

The only other crops worthy of mention are pulses such as thakuri, arahar and matta. Birganj, Ranisankoil, Raiganj, and Kaliyaganj are the thanas in which they are principally grown. Thakuri and mattar are sometimes sown in the standing winter rice about the end of October and ripen after the rice is cut, but the general practice of turning the cattle and goats loose to graze over field immediately after the winter rice is cut restricts this practice to a great extent and indeed acts as a serious check on the growing of such cold weather crops generally.¹³

Besides, the principal cultivated fruits are plantains, mangoes, jack fruits and pineapples. Of plantains there are many varieties, such as the *chini champa* and *malbhog*. The best varieties mangoes are the *gopalbhog*, *fuzli*, and *lamba bhaduri*. Jack fruits are almost as common in every village as plantains. Probably for this reason they, like the plantain, have little market value, though the fruit is freely eaten by all classes. Pineapples are generally cultivated but are rather poor.¹⁴ The crops exported to Dinajpur were mainly paddy, rice, jute, mustard, tobacco and leather; salt, sugar, kerosene, cloth, iron, betel nut etc. were imported from abroad.¹⁵ As a result of export of agricultural crops, the socio-economic condition of the farmers was good at that time. In the middle of Nineteenth century, with improved communications and the consequent rise in the price of food-stuffs, especially rice, the condition of the people underwent a change for the better. Major Sherwill writing about 1860, says “The social condition of the agricultural class has greatly improved of late years by the enhanced value of rice and all other agricultural produce.....”¹⁶

The total of paddy land in Dinajpur was 9 lakh 96 thousand 6 hundred acres or 69.6 percent. Of this, *Aman* paddy land is 6 percent and *Aus* is 10 percent. *Boro* acquired a very little land. The area of the part was 92,000 acres, linseed and mustard 90,000 acres, sugarcane 25,000 and tobacco 9,600 acres. The uncultivated land (excluding rivers, *beels* and private shale forests) was 500000 acres.¹⁷

Table-1

Quantity of cultivable and uncultivable land in Dinajpur 1912

Socio-Economic Development in the Issue of Agriculture System in Dinajpur in Colonial Phase

Description	Area
Area of the District	3,946 Square miles
Total paddy land	998,700 Acres
<i>Aman</i> paddy land	68.70%
Aus paddy land	10%
Boro paddy land	Very few
Jute cultivation land	92,000 Acres
Linseed and mustard land	90,000 Acres
Sugarcane cultivation land	25,000 Acres
Tobacco cultivation land	9,800 Acres
Uncultivated land (excluding rivers, beels and private shale forests)	500000 Acres

Source: District gazetteer-1912, Appendix-11, Cont, P-xxix, A-Mitra, Census 1951, West Bengal, District Hand Books, West Dinajpur.

An accurate estimate of the rate at which cultivation in the district has extended is impossible, as the cultivated area has never been properly ascertained. The Revenue Survey of 1861-63 took no account of cultivated area and the figures given in the annual reports are more or less guess work. It is probable that between the beginning of the last century and the time of the Revenue Survey there was little progress made in this direction as the Revenue Surveyor speaks of large tracts being covered with dense tree and grass jungle infested with wild animals. After the famine of 1873-74, prices of food-grains began to rise and agriculture at once began to assume a more attractive aspect. As the local cultivators were ill suited to the hard work involved in clearing heavy jungle, the manager of a Wards estate made the experiment of importing Santals from the Santal Parganas. The experiment was attended with such success that many zamindars imitated his example and since then these settlers have been migrating into the district in ever increasing numbers, with the result that these extensive jungle tracts have to a great extent been brought under cultivation, and the cultivated area of the district has been increased by about one-third. It must not be supposed that these Santal settlers retain possession of all the jungle lands they have cleared. The general practice is for the zamindar to settle the lands to be cleared with them for a period of years at a very low rent. At the expiry of the period, the lands having been brought under cultivation and having greatly gone up in value in consequence, the rent is raised to the level of that of similar lands in the neighbourhood, whereupon the Santals promptly move on to

Socio-Economic Development in the Issue of Agriculture System in Dinajpur in Colonial Phase

some other spot where uncultivated waste lands are to be had, while the native Bengali cultivators take their place.¹⁸

The district is almost entirely agricultural. In the Census of 1911 it was found that no less than 1,538,033 or 91 percent of the total population were dependent on agriculture.¹⁹ In this census it is clear that the socio-economic condition of the colonial Dinajpur was mainly dependent on agriculture. The majority of population lived by agriculture and succeeded in making a fairly comfortable living out of it. Dinajpur was one of the principal rice-producing districts in the province, and a large portion of the crop was available for export.²⁰ Even the grocery store owners and artisan class professionals in the district cultivated some land themselves as a means of supplemental income for the general family needs or if they were sufficiently cooperative, they planted it through *Barga*. A very small number of the population worked in trade or government offices. The population pressure of this district was not as high as in other districts of the country. According to the Agricultural Census Report of 1960, the average size of agricultural farms in the district was also quite large compared to the country as a whole. The area of cultivated and uncultivated farms in the district is quite large and the averages were 5.5 and 4.1 acres respectively. Almost all the cultivators had an average of 3.45 acres of cultivated/uncultivated land as owners/*adhyars*.²¹ This district was one of the few districts that produced large amount of rice. There was a sufficient surplus of exportable rice after meeting the local demand. It was generally seen that a farmer in this district cultivated paddy on almost all his cultivable land except some vegetables around the house. Crop loss due to natural calamities was quite a rare occurrence in this district. Severe famines were known to have occurred in 1761-70 (Sixty-Six *Manvantar*), 1873-74 AD and in 1943. The residents of this district did not like to go out of the district even temporarily in search of livelihood even if they were not in much financial distress. Especially if there was a fair supply of rice and cloth, there would have been no skilled or unskilled professional workers in this district due to the tendency to avoid labour. Most of the workers used to come to this district from outside and still more or less that system can be said to be in operation.²²

Although there was no dearth of land or lack of food, the inhabitants of the district were not financially comfortable in the early nineteenth century. Paddy was the only cash crop here. As the price of rice in the region was low, opportunities to export rice were also limited. Although there was no shortage of food in Fosse, the farming community had little cash and luxuries were out of reach. A large part of the district was covered with forests.

Socio-Economic Development in the Issue of Agriculture System in Dinajpur in Colonial Phase

Farmers avoided the hard work required to clear forests and expand plantations as the returns from agriculture were not at all what they expected. In addition, the widespread prevalence of child marriages and various *Palaparban* festivals had to burden the peasant society with debt, and later the debt burden on their descendants would increase without reducing this indebtedness among the current generations. As a result, most families ended up in extreme poverty. Later some improvements in communication were made and with it the increase in the price of all food grains, especially rice, eased the financial woes of this class and brought some financial relief.²³

Regarding the financial condition of the agriculturists in the district, quoting the report of Major Sher Will, surveyor of Dinajpur district, published in 1860 AD, the account mentioned in the Gazetteer of Dinajpur District (published 1912) shows that due to the increase in the price of all kinds of agricultural products, especially rice, the agrarian community began to prosper. Even in most cases the profit figure of the ryot class were almost doubles. The fortunate landlord class enjoyed more of the benefits. A general improvement was observed as many fallow lands and forest lands were brought under cultivation. Due to the prosperity of the ryot class, the rigor in the payment of land rent also decreased. As a result, the number of people willingly giving up their own land or changing the ownership of land has also decreased. Apart from this, the incidence of public rebellion also decreased. Of course, despite this apparent affluence, none of them are rich or wealthy. According to Sher Will, the subjects of this country were relatively exploited or oppressed by the zamindar, but they had a fair chance of living a prosperous and independent life. Just as the subjects of Europe had to suffer in winter or crisis, in this country also the subjects had to suffer from food shortages or hardships. Yet they did not starve even if they did not work for weeks or months. Their meager needs were easily met by Pulses, Rice, Salt, Oil, Tobacco ; they did not need anything else. During the winter months of *Agrahayana*-Poush they used to suffer a little, or during the rest of the year they did not require much clothing.²⁴

The severe disparity in the economic stratification and discriminatory lifestyles of the families living in the villages of the district before and after the forties of the twentieth century is still largely present today. Apart from the large zamindar class, there were many wealthy peasant families called *jotdars*, each of whom owned hundred acres to thousands of acres of land. This *jotdar* class became a sort of aristocracy in the countryside. They managed the cultivation of large farms by peasants or by employing *adhiyas*. Some of them had elephants as a symbol of nobility. The younger members of these families earned university

Socio-Economic Development in the Issue of Agriculture System in Dinajpur in Colonial Phase

degrees and employed themselves in the city in the law business or some other financial profession and lived in the city with houses. Of course, with the help and cooperation of many such families, educational institutions, schools, madrasas and hospitals were built. In rural areas, they also worked as moneylenders and sold the surplus agricultural products of the district to the market.²⁵

Even the relatively small *jotdars* owned a hundred bighas or more. Their place in financial and social status was a step below the large landed class. A report by F, O, Bell in 1934-40 suggests that although these peasants could not send their children to obtain a university degree, they would probably try to teach their children by sending them to high schools, if only for a few days. At the end of high school education, they at least supervised the accounts of the family paddy-rice business or worked as teachers in village educational institutions.²⁶

Even before the partition of India (1947) *Adhiyas* were a special class. The Adhya caste was called *Bhagachashi*. Generally, the poor and landless cultivators cultivated the lands of the *jotdars*. The *Adhiyas* cultivated themselves with one or two ploughs. If it was possible for someone to take more land with the help of small farmers, they used to borrow grain and cash money as advance for 6 months of the year at the expense of big farmers. They used to earn a small income by cultivating the land at the expense of the *jotdars*. But the sad thing is that most of the poor landless cultivators were Adhyars who were able to sustain their families with their own bullocks and ploughs, so it was difficult to make their ends meet and the financial condition was very dire. Instead of investing all kinds of labour in the land, under the Adhi system, the farmer got half of the crop. In almost all cases the Adhyars provided their own cows and ploughs. There were different arrangements between *jotdars* and *adhians* regarding the supply of manure. At the time of crop sharing, if the *jotdar* gave grain, seeds and fertilizers, 50% of the profit was shared equally between the *jotdars* and the *adhians*. Generally, straw was divided equally. But if you give all the manure of Adhia, all the hay will be taken. Many a times the *Adhiyars* were forced to borrow money from the *jotdars* to buy cattle and in lieu of that money. They had to repay the loan with the crops after bringing home the crops. Sometimes the *jotdars* provided cattle to the *adhians* but in return the *adhians* had to bear all the responsibility of feeding and caring for the cattle.²⁷

In the final report on the survey of the district in 1934-40, F. O. Bell noted that 4 (four) out of 5 (fifth) of the *Adhiar* classes had the amount of cultivated land required for the

Socio-Economic Development in the Issue of Agriculture System in Dinajpur in Colonial Phase

maintenance of a family. As a result, they were forced to collect land for cultivation. Too many 100 people are shown as owning more than 10 acres of land in this report.²⁸

During the colonial period various types of factories were set up in Dinajpur based on the agricultural system. The men and women of the cultivator families worked in these factories and became financially prosperous. Rice-husking was at one time a fairly important industry when large quantities of cleaned rice were prepared by local grain-dealers at the principle grain marts for export to Calcutta and elsewhere. The paddy was sometimes boiled before husking and sometimes simply dried in the sun. The cost of production varies from 10 *annas* a maund for boiled to 11 *annas* for unboiled rice. The manufacture of jaggery or gur from sugarcane is carried on an extensive scale, almost throughout the district. It is also made on a commercial scale in the Birganj, Pirganj and Patnitola police stations and is exported by boat to Faridpur, Dacca and other eastern districts and by cart Rajshahi and Malda and also other items such as mustard oil factory, jute press were for business.²⁹

The socio-economic condition of the peasantry has been deteriorating since the First World War. They were hit hard especially by falling crop prices. According to statistics, from 1920 to 1930, the annual average of reliable crops in Bengal was 72.4 crore. In 1932-33 AD it went down to 32.7 crore. As a result, the free purchasing power of farmers has come down from 44.5 crore to 4.4 crore. 90 percent reduction. At the same time, the debt burden of farmers in British India was increasing. In 1911, the debt burden was Rs 300 crore, in 1938 it gradually rose to Rs 1800 crore. The amount of debt burden of farmers in British India from 1911 to 1936 is given in Table-2.³⁰

Table No. 2

Debt burden of farmers in British India from 1911 to 1936

Year	Debt
1911	300 crore rupees
1924	600 crore rupees
1930	900 crore rupees
1935	1200 crore rupees
1938	1800 crore rupees

So this debt-ridden agrarian economy crippled the agrarian society. Due to the abnormal rise in the cost of living of the peasants, they gradually became indebted, lost their freedom and became slaves. From 1911 to 1931, the number of landless laborers increased by 49 percent

Socio-Economic Development in the Issue of Agriculture System in Dinajpur in Colonial Phase

in these 20 years. By 1940, that number had risen to 29 percent of the total agricultural population.³¹

Another reason for the plight of farmers during the British rule was natural disasters. Dinajpur district was prone to drought, flood and crop failure. Every two years, due to the effects of the drought and the short-sightedness and mismanagement of the government on the occasion of this drought-flood, on the one hand a lot of people were killed and on the other hand, there were food shortage. - Statistics of famine and drought in Dinajpur from 175 AD to 1940 AD are given.³²

Table No. 3

Famine, drought, flood in Dinajpur from 1865 to 1940.

Year	Description
1865	Famine (small)
1866	Famine (small)
1873	Famine
1874	Famine
1891	Drought
1892	Flood (9 th July)
1897	Earthquake, Drought
1901	Drought
1902	Flood
1904	Drought
1908	Drought
1910	Flood
1912	Flood
1913	Flood
1918	Flood
1922	Flood
1926	Drought
1938	Flood
1940	Drought

Source: Director, Of Meteorology, poona, A. Mitra, Census-1951, West Dinajpur; Page-102.

Socio-Economic Development in the Issue of Agriculture System in Dinajpur in Colonial Phase

In the twentieth century, the socio-economic decline of Dinajpur began. During this time, due to drought, epidemics, exploitation of zamindars, excessive export of agricultural crops, the plight of the farmers started. After 1943, the price of paddy and rice in Dinajpur started rising, as a result of which the socio-economic condition of the district started deteriorating.³³

Conclusion

The agricultural system was an important topic in the socio-economic field of Dinajpur. From time immemorial, the importance of the agricultural system in the socio-economic life of Dinajpur and India had been immense. Because based on the agricultural system, the socio-economic condition of Dinajpur and India had survived in the ancient, medieval and modern eras. During the Mughal period the socio-economic condition was dependent on the agricultural system but the socio-economic condition of Dinajpur was not so developed. Since the beginning of the Company's rule in Dinajpur, there had been a recession in the socio-economic sector at an early stage due to the dissatisfaction in the agrarian society, but there had been a considerable improvement in the agricultural system in Dinajpur since then. As a result, socioeconomic mobility was largely noticed. During the colonial period, the production of agricultural crops in Dinajpur increased considerably. Because the amount of cultivable land in Dinajpur increased during this time, the amount of crops also increased naturally. Employment was increased centering on agricultural crops.. Agricultural trade took place during the colonial period. As a result, it can be noticed that during the colonial period, the socio-economic condition of Dinajpur changed considerably due to the agrarian system, i.e. there was prosperity in the socio-economic field.

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Socio-Economic Development in the Issue of Agriculture System in Dinajpur in Colonial Phase

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