

1.

Introduction

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Geographical Background :

Birbhum, the northern-most district of the West Bengal, is located between $23^{\circ}32'30''$ and $24^{\circ}35'00''$ north latitude and $88^{\circ}01'40''$ and $87^{\circ}05'25''$ east longitude (Fig. 5). It forms a part of rarah region situated between the hilly tracts of Chotanagpur of Bihar in the west and the Gange-tic delta in the east. The district is bounded by Dumka (San-tal Pargana) district of Bihar in the west and north; Murshi-dabad and Bardhaman districts in the east and the river Ajoy makes its southern boundary between Bardhaman and Bihar (Fig. 1a).

Physiography :

The western part comprising the police sta-tions of Khoyrasole, Rajnagar, Dubrajpur, Suri, Md.Bazar and Rampurhat is a continuation of the heavily dissected plateau of Chotanagpur. The entire area is broken up by a succession of undulations. In the western part, the land is comparative-ly higher than 50 meters. The height gradually decreases and a number of spurs running eastward and south-eastward are se-perated by fairly deep valleys. The more important rivers flowing from the north are Mayurakshi or Mor and the Ajoy. The spurs, in most cases, are redissected by a number of tri-butaries running in this section more or less parallel to the

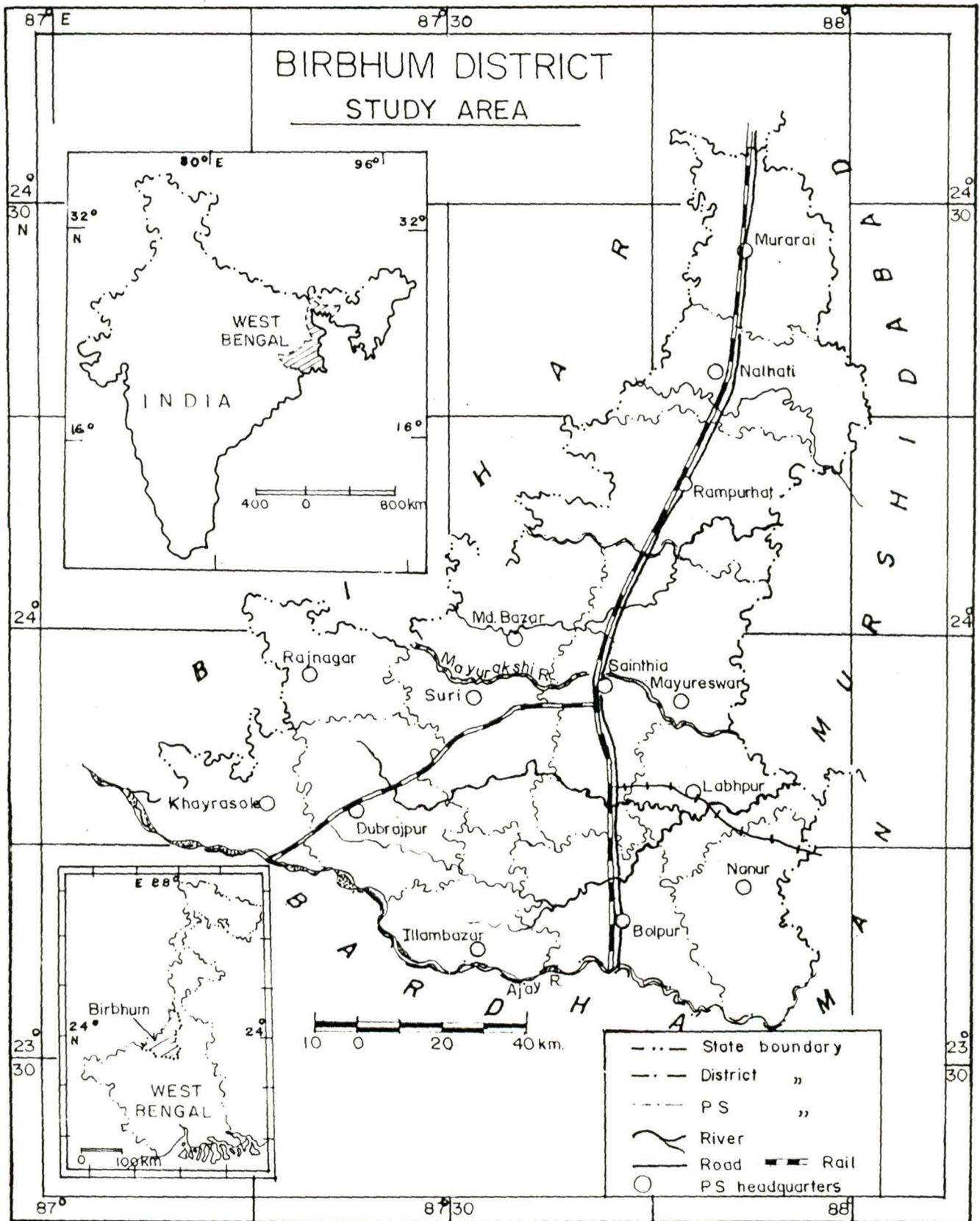


Fig- 5

main rivers. The Mor has two major tributaries, namely Dwarka in the north and the Bakreswar in the south. The Ajoy on the other hand has the small but now notorious Hingla in the north and the Kunur in the south (Bagchi, 1979)¹. Between these two rivers there is a number of drainage channels known by the generic name of 'Kandar' (O'Malley, 1910)². In the northern part there are some swamps. There is a large number of tanks in Birbhum around which settlements have developed because of irrigational facilities (Majumdar, 1975)³. However, due to the negligence of the landlords, most of them being absentees and the apathy of the population, many of them have silted up and some of them have become so dry that they have been let out for cultivation (O'Malley, 1910)⁴.

Climate of this area is characterised by an oppressive hot summer, high humidity and well-distributed rainfall during the monsoon. The cold weather starts from the middle of November and continues upto the end of February, followed by summer from March to May. Monsoon lasts from June to September. The highest rainfall occurs in July. December to January is the coldest period.

Soil in this area is generally clay in the south-eastern part of this area. The soil is alluvial with dark clay or clay and sand, while the soil of the western part is mostly laterite which is very poor for crop production. The clay soil being retentive of moisture is suitable

for winter paddy, sugar cane, wheat, gram, pulses, oil seeds and potato.

Forest in this area covers 15.2 thousand hectares, distributed in scattered patches in between the barren or fallow land along the western fringe of the district in Nalhati, Rampurhat, Md.Bazar, Suri, Rajnagar, Khoyrasole, Dubrajpur, Illambazar and Bolpur police stations. In the forests lower grade Sal tree is predominant and together with bidi leaves, Mahua flower, pial fruit, grasses and fodder plants provides means of livelihood for the forest people (Majumdar, 1975)⁵. The Permanent Settlement Act is the cause of deforestation because with the enactment of this act, more land came under cultivation on reclaiming the forest lands which had a serious effect on the economy.

Besides forests, there are some other resources which are economically valuable. They include fine-grained granite of Rajmahal. Trap rocks, sometimes used for making mile-stones, and railway ballast are found in Dubrajpur, near Panchra. A small portion of the Raniganj coalfield extends across Ajoy into Birbhum. Calcium Carbonate concretions (locally called Ghooting or ghusites or Kankar which is converted into lime by burning) which are fairly rich in lime content, are reported to develop in the soils at various places in Trans- Ajoy coalfield. Kankar is found by segregation of calcareous material into irregular lumps. The calcareous material is mixed with a certain amount of argillaceous or

burning of Kankar produces a hydraulic lime or natural cement. Large deposits of clay is found in the district, especially around Md.Bazar and this is economically valuable. The chalk and limestone quarries and the stone quarry provide employment in this district.

Agriculture :

Agriculture is the major occupation of the people in this district, having 76.4 per cent of the workers engaged in agriculture. The cultivators and the agricultural labourers comprised 10.7 per cent and 10.8 per cent of the total population and 37.9 per cent and 38.4 per cent of the total working force in 1981. However, agriculture suffers from many constraints. The net cropped area is 74.1, and 10.5 per cent of the total land is under non-agricultural use; 0.2 per cent is permanent pasture; 7.4 per cent is culturable waste and 3.4 per cent is under forest as the table-2. The forest land play an important role in tribal economy. For instance, the western part of the district consists of undulating up-lands broken up by wedge-shaped depressions, composed of white laterite soil which does not admit cultivation of paddy. In the eastern part the light sandy loamy soil is suitable for paddy (Mitra, 1954)⁶. Paddy is the principal crop followed by wheat, pulses and oil seeds, sugar cane, potato and fibre crops. Paddy is cultivated on 323.5 thousand hectares of land;

Table-2

Land use of Birbhum District

Land Use Category	Area in '000 ha	In % to the total area
Total area	451.4	
Net cropped area	336.0	74.1
Land put to non-agricultural use	47.3	10.5
Barren and unculturable waste	0.8	0.2
Permanent pasture and other grazing field -	0.1	0.2
Misc. tree and groves	7.2	1.6
Culturable waste	33.3	7.4
Fallow land (other than current fallow)	1.6	0.4
Current fallow	9.9	2.2
Forest	15.2	3.4

Source: Census of India, West Bengal, Part-XIII A
Birbhum District, 1981.

pulses take up 44.8 thousand hectares of land while wheat is cultivated on 40.0 thousand hacteres (table-3).

Table-3

Distribution of cropped area in Birbhum District.

Types of Crops	Area in '000 ha
Paddy	323.5
Wheat	40.0
Pulses	44.8
Oil Seed	1.9
Fibre Crops	0.9
Sugar cane	3.9
Potato	7.1

Source : Census of India, West Bengal, Part-XIII A
Birbhum, 1981.

The paddy is grown in the kharif season and continues till rabi season, depending on the availability of irrigation water. The other crops are not much significant in acreage. In Kharif season, only a few crops are grown except paddy. Wheat, pulses, oil seeds and vegetables of different varieties are grown in the rabi season (Majumdar, 1975)⁷.

Problem of soil erosion is a serious one in this district, hampering the production of crops. Physiographically, the district can be divided into two zones. The western border of Rampurhat subdivision comprises some hillocks where danga land is scanty and whenever dry cultivation is attempted, the erosion of top soil becomes heavier. Uncultivable land is a common feature in this zone. To the south-east these upland ridges and their ramification fade out, the valleys become shallow, and gradually merge into broad alluvial plains of the Gangetic delta (Majumdar, 1975)⁸.

The irrigation system is not well-developed in the district. Because of the porous nature and low water retaining capacity in most part of this district, irrigation is necessary in years of scanty rainfall. In general, irrigation is practised from rivers, tanks, wells, taps, tube-wells canals, springs and nalas. Before the construction of the Mayurakshi barrage and the Hingla barrage, irrigation was a great problem in this regard. A large portion of the cropped area is now commanded by the Mor River Project. In this district 50.5 per cent (1981) area is irrigated. The deep tube-wells numbering 88 have come to the

aid of agriculture. Besides, there 4,915 private shallow tube wells and 646 shallow wells including ring-wells. The Lift Irrigation scheme has further added to the irrigation prospects in the district. There are altogether 112 of them working under the supervision of different Government departments. The number of tanks providing irrigation water is smaller in number affecting cropping intensity. As a matter of fact, there are 7416 tanks which are perennial and 17320 seasonal. According to 1981 census, 50.5 per cent of the total cultivated area were irrigated by these sources. The percentage of irrigated area (shows in table-4) varies from 60 per

Table-4

Percentage of cultivable land and land under irrigation to total area of Birbhum district.

Police Stations	Cultivable land	Irrigated land
Muraroi	85.1	42.3
Nalhati	87.2	48.2
Rampurhat	79.4	61.6
Mayureswar	84.6	74.1
Md.Bazar	72.4	36.4
Rajnagar	74.7	2.1
Khoyrasole	85.4	4.3
Dubrajpur	74.1	24.6
Suri	81.0	52.7
Illambazar	73.4	37.3
Sainthia	83.6	80.1
Bolpur	76.6	72.3
Labhpur	77.6	54.1
Nanur	75.4	84.9

Source: Census of India, (1981), West Bengal, Part-XIII A, Birbhum District.

cent to 85 per cent in Rampurhat, Mayureswar, Sainthia, Bolpur, Nanur police stations, and in the remaining police stations except Rajnagar and Khoyrasole (2 per cent to 4 per cent) the percentage of irrigated area varies from 25 per cent to 54 per cent.

In this district, the major percentage of people are small farmers. The percentage of small holdings comprising less than 0.5 hectares of land represents 33.9 per cent of the total agricultural holdings which decreasing to 0.3 per cent in case of 20.0 to 30.0 ha holding size. The 30ha land is the highest holding size found

Table - 5

Land holding pattern in Birbhum District (1980-81)

Holding size (in ha)	Number	Area	% of number
Below 0.5	81,385	21957	33.9
0.5 - 1.0	53,879	41,927	22.5
1.0 - 2.0	62,480	96,914	26.0
2.0 - 3.0	27,521	68,153	11.5
3.0 - 4.0	7,202	25,206	3.0
4.0 - 5.0	4,379	20,142	1.8
5.0 - 7.5	2,569	16,049	1.1
7.5 - 10.0	381	3,146	0.2
10.0-20.0	63	1,012	0.3
20.0- 30.0	2	53	0.0

Source : Estimates of Area and Production of Principal crops in West Bengal, Directorate of Agriculture, Govt. of West Bengal, 1984-85.

in negligence percentage.

In spite of having some environmental, technological, and other problems, agriculture in this district is an important occupation. The terrain, in general, is not favourable for cultivation; soil erosion is a constant feature; supply of water mainly depends on rainfall which is uncertain. All these act as negative factors in agriculture for which it can not provide job throughout the year.

People :

The district covers an area of 4545.0 sq. km. with a population of 2556105 in 1991 distributed in 2,229 inhabited villages and 7 towns under 14 police stations. There are also 239 uninhabited village. The tribal people represent 6.9 per cent of the total population. There are 32 tribal communities. They are Asur, Baiga, Bedia, Bhumij, Bhutia, Chakma, Chero, Garo, Gond, Gorait, Hajang, Ho, Karmali, Kharwar, Khond, Kora, Korwa, Lohara, Magh, Mahli, Mahali, Mal Pahariya, Mech, Mru, Munda, Nagesia, Oraon, Pahariya, Rabha, Santal, Souria Paharia, Savar. Among them, the Santals comprise 89.9 per cent, Kora 6.4 per cent, Oraon 0.9 per cent, Mahali 0.7 per cent, Mahli 0.6 per cent, Souria Pahariya and Bedia 0.4 per cent each and the remaining tribes comprise 0.4 per cent.

The Santal population, whenever present, in most cases are found concentrated at the periphery of an

inhabited village, making a separate locality, known as 'Majhi Para', dissociated from the higher castes living in the village. There are, however, exceptions and the Santals are found to live side by side with the other castes in the villages. In the western part of this district several villages are occupied exclusively by the Santals and in the upland tract they have settled down in the late 18th century.

The tribal population of the district are classified by language into three major groups, consisting of (a) the Austro-Asiatic, (b) the Dravidian, and (c) the Tibeto-Chinese. The Santals are the most numerous of the first mentioned group (Chottapadhyay, 1963)⁹ while Guha (1944) considers them as a race belonging to the Negritos.

The present generation does not know where their fore-fathers came from. It is a race whose tradition is thin and poor while having no written documents (Hunter, 1883)¹⁰. The legend goes that a wild goose coming from the great ocean, alighted at Ahiri-Pipri and laid two eggs, out of which were born a male and a female human being who were the original ancestors of the Santals. They migrated to Hara Dutlee, where they were called Kharwar. Chai Champa, the second country in the district of Hazaribagh (Bihar) where they remained for several generations (Datta Mazumdar 1955)¹¹. When Chai-Champa could not hold them, they migrated to Silda from where they journeyed to Sikar and lastly came to Nagpur and from Nagpur to the north upto Sir. (Hunter, 1965)¹².

From both Buchanan, Hamilton and Sir William Hunter, it would appear that the Santals entered the Santal Parganas from Birbhum, i.e. they were in Birbhum before they penetrated the central and western portion of the Santhal Parganas. It must be kept in mind that in those days Birbhum included a very large part of what is now known as the Santhal Parganas district (Robertson, 1915)¹³.

The Santal villages are developed in the forests and the plain tract. Every settlement has a characteristic pattern. They make their home in linear form on both sides of the road. It may develop sometimes into nucleated pattern. In most cases they live in huts made up of mud wall and roofed with straw. Some make buildings. They do not wear their traditional dresses. The males wear trousers, shirts and the females saree. All these things are mentioned detail in a later chapter.

Growth of Santal Population :

The Santals in this district are gradually increasing in number. In 1874, there were 6,954 heads which has increased to 1,30,507 in 1981. The growth rate among them in most of the decades with wide variations (table-6).



1. A TYPICAL SANTAL VILLAGE

Table - 6

Growth Rate of Santal Population in the District
of Birbhum (1872 - 1981)

Year:	Population	Decadal Growth (%)
1872	6954	X
1881	726	-89.6
1891	21770	+2898.6
1901	47221	+ 116.9
1911	56087	+ 18.8
1921	57180	+ 1.9
1931	64079	+ =12.1
1941	60920	- 4.9
1951	78440	+ 28.8
1961	93426	+ 19.1
1971	104722	+ 12.1
1981	130507	+ 24.6

- Source : Compiled from⁽ⁱ⁾ Census of West Bengal.
(1951). The Tribes Castes of West Bengal.
(ii) Census of India (1961). West Bengal
District Census Hand Book, Birbhum.
(iii) Census of India (1971) West Bengal,
Series 22, Part VA.
(iv) Census of India (1981). Series 23,
West Bengal, Part IV (iii).

For instance, at the end of the nineteenth century (1881-1891) the growth rate was the highest, being +2898.6 per cent which decreased gradually in the subsequent decades with a record of decline in 1941. After this again the population went on rising in volume, the rate of growth

doubling in the last decade (1971-81) as the fig.5 shows. As mentioned else where, this however does not give a clear picture since the administrative boundary of the district changed several times during this period.

Secondly, and the important reason behind the growth of population is migration and this has been discussed in detail in another chapter. Lastly, the natural growth is another important cause behind the growth of the Santal population.

Growth Rate of Santal Population in BIRBHUM DISTRICT, 1881-1981

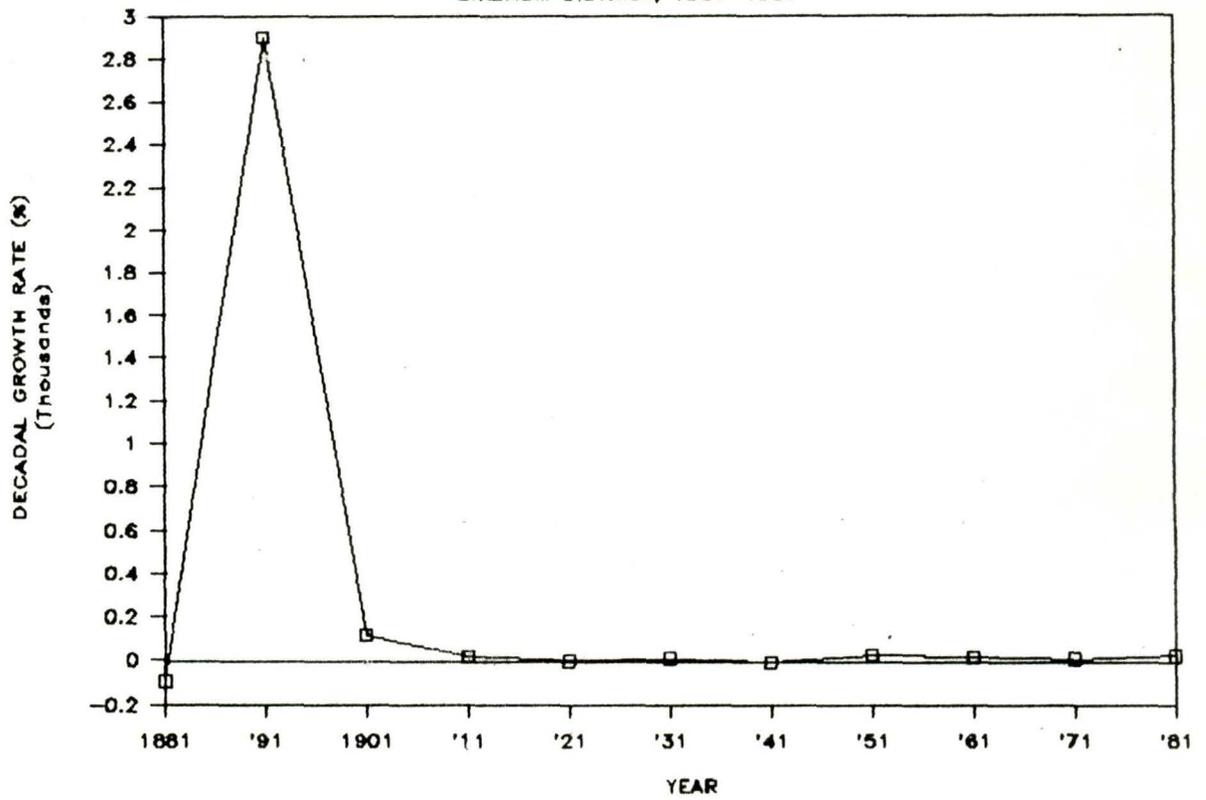


FIG - 6