

Abstract

The present study intends to explain, from historical perspective, the occurrence of natural calamities such as – earthquakes, cyclones, floods, droughts and famines which took place in the northern part of the colonial Bengal between second half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century. The northern part of Bengal during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was comprised of the princely State of Cooch Behar; and the districts of Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Malda, Pabna, and Bogra which collectively formed the Rajshahi Division. The study tends to focus on the causes and impact of the natural calamities that had occurred in this part of Bengal and their subsequent influences on ecology, population and economy. The environmental condition and social relations of production prevailed in northern Bengal had been manifested critically during the time of natural hazards. Moreover, the distinctiveness of northern Bengal in terms of climatic disorder, river-influence and rainfall, endemic inequalities in food-consumption, the proportion of mortality along with the over-all demographic pattern influenced and shaped by these natural calamities - invokes the priority of analyzing these crucial issues, yet to attain any serious historical interventions on the part of the professional historians.

The present work has been divided into five main chapters excluding the Introduction and Conclusion. The first chapter entitled ‘Historical Geography and Demography of Northern Bengal’ seeks to historicize the geographical transformations and ecological vulnerabilities during the colonial periods in northern Bengal. The chapter also intends to explain the demographic transformations of northern Bengal shaped by the environmental factors and natural disasters occurred during the period of the study. Apart from the geographical and demographical changes the chapter will also focus on the political construction of the northern Bengal districts which had gone through several territorial and administrative adjustments and transfers of lands among each other even in the first half of the twentieth century. In order to analyse the geographical characteristics, the river system, change of river course and formation of new lands seemed to be the most decisive factor for the geographical construction of the region. Northern Bengal had a great variety of topographical structures which extended from the Darjeeling Himalayan ranges to the riverine inundated agricultural

tracts. The second chapter entitled ‘Cyclone, Society and Economy: Disaster and Damage in Northern Bengal (1864-1899),’ focuses on the occurrences, spread and effects of the cyclones from 1864 to 1899, on society and economy of northern Bengal and side by side examines the genesis and dissemination of meteorological knowledge during the second half of the nineteenth century. The cyclones under the period of study had originated in the Bay of Bengal and travelled to the northern districts of Bengal, and few were caused by local depressions. The third chapter entitled ‘Earthquake, Vulnerability and State: Northern Bengal in 1897 and 1934’ describes the impact of the Earthquake of 1897 and 1934 in the society and economy of northern Bengal. The chapter also examines the growth of geological knowledge as part of disaster mitigation process in colonial India.

The fourth chapter ‘Rivers, Floods and Contagion: A Historical Survey on Rainfall, Embankments and Disease in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century North Bengal’ is broadly divided into four parts. The first part deals with the famine of 1787 caused by the devastating flood which was instrumental to the change of course of the river Tista. The second part has described the causes and occurrences of floods took place in north Bengal from 1850s to the 1920s and the state of society, economy and market amidst the destructions of life and property. The third part of the chapter highlights the constructions and role of embankments, drainage and irrigation in connection with the occurrences of floods and examines the colonial ideology of construction and maintenance of these means to eradicate the severity of floods. Finally, the last part is related with the diseases and epidemics caused by water-logging, embankments and contagion which had aggravated the sufferings and impoverishment for the people. Thus the chapter provides a detail analysis of floods and other collateral damages it brought about in form of destruction of lives, production and property in colonial north Bengal.

The fifth or the last chapter titled ‘Drought, Scarcities and Famines: Ecology, Subsistence and Economy in Northern Bengal (1866-1909)’ intends to draw the impact of drought or shortage of rainfall in the economy, ecology and society of northern Bengal. The present chapter has been divided into three major parts viz. the first part explores the hitherto uncharted history of 1873-74 Bengal-Bihar famine in northern Bengal; the second part seeks to unearth the specific and distinctive aspects of the famine of 1896-97 along with a comparison of other parts of Bengal; and the third part deals with the scarcity of 1908-09 which was limited to some particular areas of northern Bengal. However, the main objective

of the chapter is to critically examine the ecological and environmental changes which took place in northern Bengal in terms of variations in rainfall, short and long lasting drought and their impact on the human-nature relations in form of agricultural production and subsistence, which in turn had influenced the complex social-ecology of survival and livelihood, depended on State's and private charity and relief. Famines had brought into all these elements together in a single fold which was characterized by a consistent tension existed between market, politics and society. The study concludes with the remarks on the assessment of the extent of impact of the natural disasters on the society and economy of colonial northern Bengal.