

Preface

The present study offers a critical understanding towards the historicity of the occurrences of natural disasters, viz. cyclone, earthquake, floods, droughts, famine, and their subsequent impact on the society and economy of northern Bengal during the periods from second half of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. Disasters during the colonial period deserve to get special attention by the historians as the disasters played crucial role in the transformation of human-nature relationship in the changing atmosphere of natural disorders. Natural calamities which have so far been dealt by the natural scientists, geographers, meteorologists and geologists, should have been deciphered in terms of the historical changes of topography, demography and social-ecology of a particular region where politics and control of water, land and market appears distinctively in comparison with the other regions. Thus regional study in environmental history has fashioned the recent researches on historical interpretations of natural disasters, and in doing so, water appears to be the deciding factor which had formed the central consideration of colonial policies on agriculture, irrigation, embankment, and public health. The historical dimension of rainfall fluctuations, riverine changes, crop production and subsistence vulnerability have been entwined with the complex relationships between the State, market and society. The ecological vulnerability which was aggravated by the calamities were instrumental in bringing out new histories of displacement, rehabilitation, fractured livelihood, and overall socio-economic degradation in the colonial northern Bengal where politics of colonial relief had fraught with the ideologies of further control of revenue and other natural resources. The trauma and sufferings of the indigenous people were further intensified by the loss of human lives, cattle, and lands, hostile market, and by the contradictory relief measures propounded by the colonial State and other agencies. Thus the natural calamities which occurred in colonial northern Bengal during the period of the study had transformed the existed pattern of livelihood and production, and introduced new scope for the reconstruction of the history of ecological vulnerability, environmental transformations and economic changes took place in the society of this region.

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