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Rice trade in the ‘rice bowl of Bengal’: Burdwan 1880–1947

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Burdwan district, with its advantageous position in transportation network and good resource endowments, spontaneously responded to the commercialisation of agriculture. Rice received considerable commercial importance in the second half of the nineteenth century. It found access to new markets within and outside Bengal and consequently rice trade flourished. Rice trade was carried on regularly in an organised way in Burdwan and expanded considerably from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The business acumen as well as entrepreneurial activities of Burdwan’s traders and merchants was successfully demonstrated with the expansion of commercialisation of agriculture. The rice merchants and rice millers dominated the rice trade of Burdwan, forming associations for protecting and promoting their business. They carried on their trade independently and successfully, demonstrating their entrepreneurial ability.

Keywords: agricultural resources, transportation, consumption and market, merchants, rice milling

Introduction

Commercialisation of agriculture is an important phenomenon in the economic history of India. It gave a boost to trade in commercial crops and agro-based small scale industry. Commercialisation of agriculture in Bengal is a well-researched

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field. Scholars like Rajat Datta, Binay Bhusan Chaudhuri, Amit Bhaduri, Tirthankar Roy and others have delved into it. Burdwan, a productive district of southwest Bengal, was also influenced by the process of commercialisation. Rice received considerable commercial significance with the expansion of agricultural commercialisation in the second half of the nineteenth century when it was linked to the railway system. Burdwan had the advantage of having a wide network of railroads, connecting the district with the market towns of Bengal including Calcutta and other provinces which meant beneficial access to new markets. Burdwan had a huge surplus of rice and this could easily be transported by railway. Bengali merchants in general, responded with alacrity to the profitable opportunities for investment with the opening up of new markets in the hinterland. Many of them were encouraged by economic profit to become further engaged in mufassil capital investment. In course of time, they invested their profits from trade and agriculture into agro-based industry. The enterprising spirit as well as activities of Burdwan’s traders was successfully demonstrated with the expansion of commercialisation of agriculture. The story of their success helps us to understand how commercialisation influenced the rice trade as well as the rice manufacturing business. An appraisal of the agrarian history of Burdwan would give us an opportunity to recognise the diversities and distinct features of the economy at a local level. A scrutiny of the agrarian changes at Burdwan, such as the differentiation among the peasantry and the predominance of the rich peasants, helps one to explain the nuances of the commercialisation of agriculture at a regional as well as at the national level, in a more advantageous manner. It thus supplements our findings in macro-history and adds to the historiography of commercialisation in Bengal. Thus a study of the history of the agricultural commercialisation of Burdwan would throw some light on how the peasants, traders and merchants of a surplus locality responded to the process of commercialisation and how its surplus food grains could be siphoned off, moving towards the markets in and around the metropolis of Calcutta. The present article attempts to focus on these aspects.

Commercialisation of agriculture can best be understood in the light of two debates. First, was trade forced upon the peasantry or was it a voluntary response to prices and profits? Second, did peasants gain from trade, or did the gains accumulate into the hands of the merchants and moneylenders thereby increasing rural inequality? Tirthankar Roy points out that along with the push from revenues, the pull of higher profits was always intermixed in the commercialisation process. In other words, he attributes commercialisation of agriculture to profitability. B.B. Chaudhuri has also raised doubts over the idea that commerce was

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1 Datta, Society, Economy, and the Market; Chaudhuri, ‘Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal’; Bhaduri, Economic Theory and History; Roy, The Economic History of India, Ch. 3.
2 Roy, The Economic History of India, p. 92.

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forced upon the peasantry in eastern India during the first half of the nineteenth century. However, after 1860, as suggested by Tirthankar Roy, that is, in the second and bigger phase of commercialisation, the profit motive outweighed the revenue factor. Akin to other parts of India, for example, the coastal districts of the Andhra region, the movement in prices of crops induced the peasants of southwest Bengal districts to grow ‘remunerative’ commercial crops. In Burdwan also, there had been a steady rise in prices of food grain since the 1890s and it continued increasing till 1929–30. The peasants responded to the expansion of commercial crop farming, resulting in the growth of rice cultivation. Thus there was voluntary response to profits and prices, including gains. Nevertheless, some groups benefited more than others from commercialisation. In Burdwan, the gains accrued to merchants who were not always distinct from rich peasants. The rich peasants benefited the most from it and it provided them with further opportunities for extending their influence and control within the village community. The weaker and poorer peasant communities hardly received any benefit from commercialisation.

Another important point is that the accretion of money in the hands of the grain merchants had additional consequences for non-agricultural enterprises. Tirthankar Roy comments that commercialisation stimulated modern small-scale industry in India, leading to the growth of towns that had large spot markets and settlement of merchants. These towns saw the growth of small-scale industries such as rice and oil mills, sugar mills, cotton gins, etc., in the interwar period. In coastal Andhra, Tamil Nadu and Punjab prosperity based on rice, wheat, sugarcane and cotton induced many farmers to set up rice and oil mills, sugar mills or cotton gins. A. Satyanarayana holds that the agro-based industry in the coastal Andhra region, which witnessed rapid growth from 1920 onwards, found its way when the large concentration of capital in the hands of individuals, combined with the spirit of enterprise, enabled them to carry on industrial operation on a large scale. Thus commercialisation led to the expansion of agrarian capital through the growth of agro-based industries there. With the expansion of rice trade, there was a rapid increase in the rice mills in coastal Andhra region. C.J. Baker has also discussed that with commercialisation, classes allied with land had investible implications.

4 Roy, The Economic History of India, p. 92.
5 For details, see Satyanarayana, ‘Expansion of Commodity Production’, pp. 198, 237.
6 Peterson, Bengal District Gazetteers: Burdwan, p. 110.
7 Roy, The Economic History of India, p. 89.
8 Ibid., p. 151.
surplus which was propelled into industry in Tamil Nadu. This development was found in the interwar period when less return from agriculture and the Depression forced relocation of capital from rural to urban sectors. However, Haruka Yanagisawa has pointed out that such small-scale factories in Tamil Nadu had already begun from the 1910s as a result of increased demand for their products. The low-cost and better quality of milled rice, together with the consumption of this rice by the people who formerly ate coarser food grain, increased the demand for milled rice and consequently rice mills began to grow. In this respect, interwar Bengal was not different from these regions. It formed a pattern of agrarian enterprise that was beginning to unfold early in the twentieth century. The large scale rice milling industry in Bengal had its real growth since the second decade of the twentieth century, maintaining this trend till the mid 1930s. Although the industry had an early start in Burdwan district, the number of rice mills in Burdwan had increased substantially between 1920 and 1935. The industry had been influenced by increasing urbanisation and the steady growth of an urban demand for milled rice. Though the industry came up first in Calcutta, it dispersed over a wide geographical area in Bengal and more densely to north and southwest Bengal. The investors of Burdwan also responded to it quickly, as was seen in coastal Andhra or Tamil Nadu.

**Agricultural Resources and Crop Pattern**

Trade in rice of a particular locality is intimately connected with its resources for production, transportation, consumption and concentrated markets, activities of the merchants and mechanisation. These are the essential components of the whole gamut of trade and to comprehend it we need to look at each of them. This section talks about resource-endowments for agricultural production like land and water and crop pattern of the district.

The district of Burdwan was well known for its agricultural richness and came to be celebrated as the ‘granary’ of Bengal. The agricultural efflorescence of Burdwan has been referred to in Kabikankan Mukundaram’s *Chandimangal*,

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15 The district, as was finally formed in 1881, was bounded on the north by the Santal Parganas, Birbhum and Murshidabad; on the east by Nadia; on the south by Bankura and Midnapore; and on the west by Manbhum.

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which is said to have been written in the sixteenth century. The productive agricultural value of Burdwan has also been recognised by a British writer in the following words:

That this district continues in a progressive state of improvement is evident from the number of new villages erected and the increasing number of brick-buildings, both for religious and domestic purposes, nor is there any other portion of territory in Hindoostan that can compare with it for productive agricultural value in proportion to its size. In this respect Burdwan may claim the first rank; the second may be assigned to the province of Tanjore in the southern Carnatic.  

The eastern part of the district under the subdivisions of Burdwan, Kalna and Katwa, covering three-fourths of its total area, encompassed by the three rivers—the Ajay, the Bhagirathi or the Hooghly and the Damodar—contains fertile alluvial plains and agricultural riches; while the western part under the Asansol subdivision, covering the rest of the area, consisting of rocky laterite soil bears mineral resources, dotted with coal pits and factories. In other words, the large area of rocks forming Chotanagpur hills constitutes the western part while its eastern portion gradually merges into the alluvial belt of central Bengal, the great rice plain of Bengal. Agricultural lands in the eastern part were well irrigated, extensively cultivated and densely populated. This area was the production zone of the district. Though the onslaught of Burdwan fever devastated the district’s agricultural prosperity in the 1860s and 1870s by decimating the rural population, especially the size of the labour force, the district survived and its agricultural potential revived after the scourge of the epidemic fever ended. The process of recovery from the ravages is said to have started from the 1880s when the invasion of the disease reduced and controlling measures, such as the opening up of dispensaries, filling up of the breeding places of mosquitoes and destruction of jungles by the settlement of displaced persons, combated the fever.  

Two main resources of the district for agricultural production were land and water. Land for agricultural purpose was situated around the villages. Such agricultural lands of Burdwan district were divided into two main classes—sona (high land) and sali (low land). The former stood on the vicinity of the homestead site, while the latter was remotely situated. The sona land was generally of loamy soil and lay above the ordinary inundation level. This was generally two-cropped land (called aus land) which grew a variety of crops, such as aus or autumn rice, pulses, oilseeds and potatoes. The sali land was a formation of rich clayey soil known as metel or entel which became fertile by the diluvial detritus washed

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17 Census, 1951, West Bengal, Burdwan, p. xv; Burdwan Division Municipal Report, pp. 8–9.
down from the higher level. It was water retentive and remained submerged under water during the rain. It was usually one-cropped land, commonly called aman paddy land, which produced mainly aman or winter rice for which the land was best suitable. Most of the cultivated areas belonged to this category of land, where paddy was planted considerably. Besides *sona* and *sali*, there were *diara* lands or alluvial river lands formed by the deposition of river silt on the beds of the rivers. Such lands became fertile every year during the rain by a deposition of silt and required no artificial manures. These were suitable for growing winter and spring crops, such as wheat, barley and oilseed. So far as the soil is concerned, as distinct from land, seven to eight types of soil are recognised in the district. Most common of them are *entel* (clay soil), *doansh* (loamy soil), *bele* (sandy soil) and *pali* (riverside soil). These are of better quality and are well-suited for producing all types of crops, such as paddy, wheat, gram, potato, pulse and linseed. The cultivable lands of the district belonged to these types of soil.

In most areas of India, the availability of water determines the nature of agricultural production. Cultivators in regions and localities without artificial sources of water supply are constrained in their choice of crop cultivation. In most areas, the state of agriculture depends vitally upon the irrigational facilities, which in many parts of India, such as coastal Andhra, Tamil Nadu, Ganges–Jamuna Doab and Punjab, made appreciable agrarian changes. Bengal also witnessed the availability of irrigational facilities. Easy supply of water facilitated expansion of cultivation and production here. The fertile paddy fields of the district of Burdwan could easily receive water for cultivation, as Burdwan had ample sources of water like rivers, streams, tanks, pools, wells and above all rainfall. Water and silt for the river side lands could easily be available from the Bhagirathi, Ajay, Damodar, Khari, Banka and Brahmani and consequently cultivation could be carried on there. Rain water undoubtedly added to the cultivation in the district, but the distribution of rainfall over the season was often unsatisfactory. Artificial irrigation was, therefore, required for important crops and about half the cultivable land received some form of irrigation. The chief source of irrigation of cultivable lands in the villages was the tank. Plenty of tanks were available in the district which far outranked other parts of Bengal. Some of them were the finest in Bengal and most of them well situated for irrigational purposes. This popular mode of watering land covered 90 per cent of the total irrigation of Burdwan. Almost every village of the district had special tanks for irrigating land. These were situated in the fields distant from village sites, acting as reservoirs of water for the cropped fields. Traces of such tanks are found even today in some of the

well-known villages of Burdwan district. Of the other sources of water, govern-
ment canals, wells and creeks were available in the district. But they covered a
small percentage of the total irrigated area, as their numbers were small. How-
ever, canal irrigation could not play any remarkable role in this regard till 1931–32,
as the Eden Canal (opened in 1881) could irrigate only a small area. There were
no regular distributaries from this canal, and therefore the economical distribu-
tion of water could not be properly maintained. Tanks and other sources played
an important role. It was only after the opening of the Damodar Canal (1933) that
the area irrigated by government canals showed an unprecedented increasing trend.
It made headway from the mid 1930s when out of a total irrigated area of 279,700
acres, canal irrigation covered 152,665 acres. The Damodar Canal supplied water
for irrigating lands so far not covered by canal water and provided security in
time of drought in the canal area of Burdwan. The silt laden canal water was sure
to give an impetus to the fertility of the land.

As the process of commercialisation evolved, peasants started producing pri-
marily for sale in distant markets, rather than for meeting their own need for food,
or selling in local markets. Gradually a new marketing system arose. Markets for
agricultural goods in the pre-British period marked some qualitative and quanti-
tative changes. The absence of transport facilities precluded the rapid flow of
commodities, and the prices were largely determined by local factors. The advent
of a new transportation system by railroad brought about a closer integration of
national, regional and local markets. Railways linked numerous agricultural re-
gions with many trade centres and numerous feeder roads brought into existence
by railways were also added. The internal as well as the external markets of the
agricultural produce of Bengal thus tended to widen. Several circumstances tended
to stimulate the demand for rice in the internal and external markets which shall
be discussed in the section titled ‘General Trends in Market’. The expansion of
transport widened the sphere of commodity circulation. The earlier phase of com-
mmercialisation based on indigo, opium and sugar was no longer lucrative after
1860 and it experienced a decline. Gradually cotton, wheat and rice were found
to be lucrative and these occupied an important place in the markets. In Bengal,
the demand for rice increased with the rise of population from the late nineteenth
century and thus rice found new markets. The emergence of new industrial and
plantation sectors created a demand for rice, the staple food crop of the people of
Bengal. Under such circumstances, rice became a major commercialised product.
Burdwan’s response to these changes in market was found to be positive.

23 For details, see Roy, *The Economic History of India*, p. 60.
Unlike Punjab, Bengal did not see major changes in the crop pattern. It remained paddy-based. A variety of crops were planted and produced in the cultivated lands of Burdwan district. Besides paddy, some other crops of the district were wheat, barley, gram, maize, rape and mustard, potato, jute and sugarcane. Potato became commercially a valuable crop in the district and its cultivation gradually increased from the 1870s in the eastern part of the district. Sugarcane was produced in many parts but to a limited extent. Jute was also grown, though in small areas, in Kalna subdivision. But rice was by far the dominant crop of the district as it is found today. It is revealed from Table 1 that rice dominated the cultivated area occupying about 80 per cent of the total cropped area of the district. It was not simply a subsistence crop but the single most predominant commercialised product, increasingly grown for the market. The preponderance of rice cultivation was determined by the provision of artificial irrigation over large areas and the availability of suitable lands as well. The secured irrigation system induced the cultivators to grow it and also encouraged the substantial peasants to invest capital in land. Over a period of time, it claimed an increasing share in the area under cultivation. It may be pointed out that it was not the irrigation alone, but also the prices which determined the crop structure in this region. There was a commercial demand for rice in many places of Bengal, bringing a higher profit to the peasants than any other crop. Rising prices thus encouraged the cultivator of a more profitable and remunerative crop. Rice cultivation was so popular that 34 varieties of rice were cultivated in the district. Burdwan also produced a variety of autumn rice which was consumed by the poor local people. But summer rice or boro, which was coarse and less nutritious was sown in the marginal lands of the district. The gradual decline of the cropped area under winter rice from 1911–40, as shown in Table 1, was caused by fever, famine and flood. Burdwan was intensely malarious in the 1910s and 1920s, causing huge mortality and incapacitating innumerable people and thereby affecting agriculture severely. Influenza and cholera epidemics also added to this calamity.

Impact of Railways Upon Trade

A transportation system always plays an important part in trade and commerce of a given place. This section will discuss the influence of railways on the rice trade of Burdwan. How the railways opened up new trade routes and brought about the integration of local and regional markets are matters which will be addressed in this section. The district of Burdwan could easily carry on its trade in rice along

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27 For details, see Dutta, Economy and Ecology in a Bengal District, pp. 88–93.
28 Seth, Bange Chaltattwa, (in Bengali), pp. 177, 179.
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Table 1
Area in Acres, Cropped in Burdwan District (Decennial Statistics)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rice:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter or <em>aman</em></td>
<td>719,000</td>
<td>840,000</td>
<td>736,000</td>
<td>609,700</td>
<td>572,900</td>
<td>1,031,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn or <em>aus</em></td>
<td>162,000</td>
<td>132,200</td>
<td>121,300</td>
<td>59,400</td>
<td>31,800</td>
<td>54,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer or <em>boro</em></td>
<td>500</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>2,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total rice</td>
<td>881,500</td>
<td>972,500</td>
<td>857,700</td>
<td>669,400</td>
<td>605,400</td>
<td>1,088,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>5,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gram</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>8,400</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>2,700</td>
<td>1,700</td>
<td>17,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maize</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>3,300</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linseed</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td>17,500</td>
<td>6,300</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>2,800</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape and mustard</td>
<td>23,800</td>
<td>20,200</td>
<td>8,500</td>
<td>7,200</td>
<td>7,700</td>
<td>2,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugarcane</td>
<td>27,700</td>
<td>24,000</td>
<td>18,100</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>10,400</td>
<td>12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jute</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>16,300</td>
<td>6,600</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>11,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cropped area</td>
<td>1,128,300</td>
<td>1,178,300</td>
<td>988,700</td>
<td>759,900</td>
<td>669,800</td>
<td>1,180,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Season and Crop Reports of Bengal from 1901 to 1950, relevant years, appendices.

NA = not available.

the existing routes. Prior to the introduction of railways, water was the most convenient and cheapest mode of traffic for the import–export trade of the district. The chief commercial centres were found on the banks of the main rivers. We may refer to Burdwan and Raniganj on the Damodar, Kalna, Katwa and Dainhat on the Bhagirathi, and Shyambazar on the Ajay. Boat traffic was conducted by means of these rivers. It was through the Bhagirathi that considerable river-borne trade was conveyed back and forth from Kalna, Katwa and Dainhat—three ports of Burdwan district, and there was a regular service of river steamers from Calcutta during the rains. The Bhagirathi was available for this district for a distance of 64 miles in length from the north to the southeast direction, the Ajay for 48 miles in length from west to east, and the Damodar for 56 miles in length from west to southeast, although they were not open for navigation throughout the year.

Commodities, such as rice, jute and timber were brought from the villages to the trading marts and from there to the river ports by carts from where they would be exported to Calcutta and other places by boat. Rice from Katwa was exported by boats along the Bhagirathi to the important centres of trade on its banks, namely, Hooghly, Chandannagar, Serampore, Bhadreswar and Naihati. The Damodar was used mainly for coal traffic. The Ajay, falling into the Bhagirathi at Katwa, carried a limited quantity of rice and was not of much importance for the rice trade of the district. Another important route was the Khari whose lower reach below

30 Census, 1951, West Bengal, Burdwan, p. iv.
31 Peterson, Bengal District Gazetteers: Burdwan, p. 5.
32 Statement of Navigable Rivers in Bengal, p. 39.

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Manteswar police station was easily navigable up to its confluence with the Bhagirathi at Samudragarh. A large quantity of rice was transported by country boats along this route from Nadanghat, the principal rice mart of the interior. However, consequential to the silting up of these rivers, boat traffic along the rivers was found to be inconvenient towards the close of the nineteenth century.

Interestingly, a change in the trade route of Burdwan was found from the second half of the nineteenth century with the arrival of the railways and its import–export trade received a new dimension. From the 1880s, the railways appeared to be a safe, easy and faster mode of transport for Burdwan’s goods to and from the east and the west. The primary network of railways connecting all the subdivisions of the district had been laid out within the first 50 years of railroad construction starting from 1851, and thereafter extending further into the first quarter of the twentieth century. The main line of the East Indian Railway ran the entire length of the district from east to west up to Chittaranjan from where it went to Bihar and another line known as Grand Chord, originating from Asansol, passed to Bihar through Barakar. Besides this, the Howrah–Burdwan Chord line connected Burdwan with Calcutta, and the Khana–Sainthia Loop line and Andal–Sainthia Branch line connected Burdwan with Birbhum. Likewise, the Katwa–Bandel line, the Asansol–Chakradharpur section of south-eastern Railway and Bankura Damodar River Railway linked Burdwan with Hooghly, Purulia and Bankura districts respectively. In fact, all the sub-divisional headquarters, rich agricultural tracts as well as the principal centres of trade of the district were connected to the different parts of Bengal, Bihar and Assam. Export trade in rice from Burdwan was carried through these routes from the late nineteenth century. Though boat traffic was also carried on in the district, side by side with railway transport, during the period under study, a very small portion of exportable rice was carried along the waterways, as the boat traffic was found to be inconvenient and hazardous.

The district of Burdwan was well provided for with railroads for bearing grains to the markets in and around Calcutta and also to those of Bihar and Assam. Consequently, old trading centres gradually lost their importance from the late nineteenth century and new trading marts sprang up near the railway stations on the Main, Loop and other railway lines of the East Indian Railway. Thus Asansol, Raniganj, Mankar, Panagarh, Burdwan, Guskara, Bhedia, Saktigarh, Memari, Kaichar, Katwa, Kalna, Dhatrigram and others emerged as busy rice marts and also as centres of trade from where rice could easily be exported to different markets. Some other rice marts also grew up near the railway stations on the Howrah–Burdwan Chord line. Henceforth, surplus rice would be brought from the production zones to the newly arising marts or trade centres by cart and from there it

33 About a decade before the end of colonial rule, Burdwan had about 325 km of railways; for details, see Munshi, Geography of Transportation in Eastern India, pp. 120–21.

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would be exported by rail to different places. An official report reveals that more than 101,392 tons of rice was exported from Burdwan district to Calcutta by rail during 1880–81 to 1885–86, and 175,434 tons during 1895–96 to 1899–1900. In addition to it, a large quantity of paddy and rice was also exported to Calcutta by boat in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (as shown in Table 2). As is evident from Table 2, the railway gradually replaced boat traffic for carrying rice of the district from the 1880s. Actually, the merchants started relying more on railroad for exporting paddy/rice, as it was found to be a safer and faster mode of transport, even though expensive. Therefore, a shift from river-borne trade to rail-borne trade occurred and the latter gradually overshadowed the former.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>By Boat</th>
<th>By Boat and Steamer</th>
<th>By Rail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880–81</td>
<td>8,474</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>22,987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881–82</td>
<td>11,631</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>27,123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882–83</td>
<td>8,387</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>23,647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884–85</td>
<td>587</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>3,092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885–86</td>
<td>1,674</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>24,543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887–88</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>*7,370</td>
<td>*27,595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888–89</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>*7,368</td>
<td>*29,776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889–90</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>*3,536</td>
<td>*40,416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894–95</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>*11,127</td>
<td>*45,721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895–96</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>5,325</td>
<td>21,069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896–97</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>3,326</td>
<td>17,825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897–98</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>5,951</td>
<td>35,077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898–99</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>5,820</td>
<td>58,666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899–1900</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>9,730</td>
<td>42,797</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Report on the Internal Trade of Bengal for the year 1883–84; Calcutta, 1884, Appendix E; Report on the River-Borne Traffic of the Lower Provinces of Bengal from 1884–85 to 1899–1900.

NA = not available.

The absence of an integrated market in the first half of the nineteenth century was due to the lack of an organised transportation network. As a result of the coming of the railways, the old marketing system changed and a newer one evolved. The railways connected the southwest Bengal districts like Burdwan to the internal market (within Bengal Presidency and in India to a much greater extent). There were significant major centres for the marketing of agricultural produce and these were integrated into the regional markets of Bengal and other provinces.


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by a new mode of transportation. Thus Burdwan was connected to the regional markets, drawing the commodities from the interior to national exports. Railways thus took Burdwan to the new industrial and plantation centres where there was a demand for food crop. The railways integrated markets and brought pockets of excess supply and excess demand closer. It linked the metropolis with the rich agricultural tracts of Burdwan and other districts of southwest Bengal, thus facilitating the process of tapping the hinterland for an easy access to rich agricultural resources for surplus extraction. Again, it connected Burdwan with the principal trade centres in the neighbouring districts, and also nearby and distant provinces—Bihar, Assam the north-west region. The internal as well as external market of the agricultural produce of the district thus tended to expand.

Railways quickened the pace of rice trade, removing the need for intermediate points between the producing zones and the port. Besides, the railways had the additional influence of stimulating the progress of road construction and in developing the traffic to be transported over them. Numerous feeder roads started running within the district from the early twentieth century in connection with the opening of the new railway stations like Bonpas, Talit and Saktigarh. The railways remained the main channel of export trade of the district until motor transport appeared as its competitors in the mid 1920s to carry goods to distant markets for export. From that time on, a large quantity of rice, specially milled rice from Burdwan, Katwa, Memari and Raniganj was usually transported to Calcutta and other places by lorry. Though on account of unavailability of furnished data, the volume of traffic carried by motor lorry cannot be estimated, motor transport is said to have played an important part in the export trade of the district. All of this accelerated the movement of rice from the district and thus connected Burdwan with the larger colonial market.

General Trends in Market

Two basic factors for a trade to flourish are demand and supply, playing an important role for the promotion and success of trade. How several circumstances stimulated the demand of rice and its marketability will be discussed in this section. The first question that arises in this context is whether the district had exportable surplus of paddy/rice for trade. We can respond to this question by examining the output of rice and its consumption. But one serious handicap in this context is the fact that the statistics as to the total outturn and consumption

36 Munshi, Geography of Transportation in Eastern India, pp. 127–28.
37 Government of Bengal, General Department (Misc), Proceedings (Progs) 6–7, September 1911, West Bengal State Archives (WBSA).
are not very reliable, not only for Burdwan but also for Bengal as a whole. Statistics as to turnout cannot always be trusted for individual districts owing to uncertainty regarding the areas under cultivation.\textsuperscript{39} The figures adopted by many officers for consumption of rice too, were overestimates. There is no easy formula to find out the consumption pattern of the people of different age groups, classes and professions. It is against this background that the estimate of the Famine Enquiry Commission on consumption of rice has been taken as a standard one. Many scholars in the past have accepted it for explaining the consumption pattern of the people. According to the Commission, the average per capita consumption of rice in Bengal was 3.4 seers per week, or 0.166 ton per year.\textsuperscript{40}

George Blyn has observed that the average growth rate of food crop output was small in India during 1891–1947. Bengal suffered a much greater decline than any other region in India. In rice, the acreage declined and yield per acre fell sharply in Bengal.\textsuperscript{41} Examining the situation in Burdwan, it is observed that with regard to acreage and output of rice in the district from the beginning of the twentieth century till the end of the Second World War, there was no sign of progress. There was rather a declining trend with some sort of stagnation.\textsuperscript{42} Yet the production of rice was more than enough for its people, and there was a huge surplus of rice (as shown in Table 3), which was exported to some districts of Bihar and Bengal including Calcutta.\textsuperscript{43} Table 3 shows that there was a significant decline in surplus of rice between 1911 and 1941. The decline in surplus was caused by a downward trend in rice acreage and output. The occurrence of malaria adversely affected agriculture of the district. It continued to act epidemically and endemically in the district for a long period from the 1910s, decimating and incapacitating the rural population. An official report of 1925 estimated that 72.4 per cent people of Burdwan district were intensely malarious and the mortality rate due to malaria reached 34.5 per cent in the district during 1911–20.\textsuperscript{44} This actually affected cultivation and production of rice in Burdwan.\textsuperscript{45} Besides, influenza and cholera epidemics also severely affected the rural population and agriculture in the eastern part of Burdwan district during the same time. The output of rice was also affected by the notorious floods of 1913, 1916 and 1917, and by the insufficient and scattered rainfall of 1918, 1919 and 1920. Interestingly, while total output of rice was found to have been diminishing from 1911, the consumption figure did not decline proportionately. Rather an upward trend in this figure was

\textsuperscript{39} Report of the Director of Civil Supplies, Bengal, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{40} Bhattacharya, ‘Food Position in Bengal’, pp. 234–35.
\textsuperscript{41} For details, see Blyn, Agricultural Trends in India, chapters V, VI, VII.
\textsuperscript{42} Mukherji and Sanyal, ‘Growth and Institutional Change in Agriculture’, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{43} Hunter, Statistical Account of Bengal, p. 135.
\textsuperscript{44} Bently, Malaria and Agriculture in Bengal, p. xx.
\textsuperscript{45} Mukherjee, Changing Face of Bengal, p. 90; Ganguli, Trends in Agriculture and Population, p. 226; Basu, Lal Behari Day’s Kanchanpur Revisited, pp. 29, 65.
evident from 1921. Although, owing to the ravages of diseases, the population became decimated in the eastern parts of the district, there was an uninterrupted growth of population in the Asansol subdivision due to a maximal immigration of people who consumed a large quantity of rice from the district.

Burdwan had a surplus of rice until the Second World War. An official enquiry of the 1930s also revealed that Burdwan was a surplus district in Bengal and its people did not suffer from a shortage of food crops except under abnormal circumstances caused by natural calamities or events of politico-economic degradation. Accordingly it was used as an article of trade and there was considerable export of rice to the west of the district and rice constituted the main item of export trade.

It is evident that during the period of 1858–1947, there were significant changes in the demand and supply of crops and their marketability in Bengal. These processes had begun before 1858, but they gathered strength in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Markets and trade in agricultural goods existed on a large scale in fairly organised forms in the pre-British period. But the market expansion in the British period marked a quantitative and qualitative break. The British rule made closer integration of global, regional and local markets. The emergence of industrial and plantation sectors created the new sources of demand for rice. The second half of the nineteenth century saw rapid increase in the size of the population based on non-agricultural activity in the mining and industrial area and plantation sector in eastern India. The population of Bengal, Bihar and Assam increased very fast from 1872. The non-food crop areas had increased the demand for import of food grains from the surplus regions.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population as Per Census</th>
<th>Total Output of Rice</th>
<th>Consumption</th>
<th>Surplus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>1,528,290</td>
<td>297,522</td>
<td>253,314</td>
<td>44,208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>1,533,874</td>
<td>371,858</td>
<td>254,239</td>
<td>117,619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>1,434,771</td>
<td>246,148</td>
<td>237,813</td>
<td>8,335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>1,575,699</td>
<td>304,325</td>
<td>261,172</td>
<td>43,153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>1,890,732</td>
<td>309,186</td>
<td>313,388</td>
<td>−4,202</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


46 Census, 1951, West Bengal, Burdwan, p. xviii.
48 Peterson, Bengal District Gazetteers: Burdwan, p. 126.
49 Roy, The Economic History of India, p. 60.
Second, a change was taking place in the nature of the market of some agricultural produce in Burdwan and also in Bengal as a whole from the second half of the nineteenth century with the decline of cultivation of commercial crops, such as indigo and sugarcane. There was a considerable expansion of the market of rice influenced by several circumstances. The growth of population, especially the urban and industrial population, had an impact on it. The period under study saw moderate population growth in eastern India as well as rapid increase in the size of new population clusters based on non-agricultural activity. These included Calcutta itself, the Raniganj mining–industrial area, Serampur industrial area, and north Bengal and Assam plantations. These were new, concentrated sources of demand and consumption for rice production. Developments that were taking place within Burdwan district influenced the internal trade in rice. Industrial and urban development, resulting from the growth of coalmining, iron industries, pottery works, railway workshops and some other small engineering and ancillary industries, took place in the western part of this district, especially in the Raniganj/Asansol subdivision, which emerged as one of the thriving industrial centres of India. All this led to the growth of permanent human settlements and new markets. The industrial area gradually became filled with a throng of busy miners and artisans. The business and industrial prospects of Asansol attracted large numbers of Marwaris from up-country, and thousands of coolies from the districts of Manbhum, Birbhum, Santal Parganas and different parts of Bihar. As a result, the population increased rapidly in this area, the growth rate being 69.7 per cent between 1872 and 1921. These people depended on the industrial economy of the Asansol subdivision and consumed the agricultural surplus from the cluster of villages in the hinterland. This demographic boost and urban development also resulted in an increasing demand for rice, which was their staple food.

Demand for rice also increased in the external market in and around Calcutta, where the increasing urban and industrial population had a similar outcome. The population growth in Calcutta was particularly rapid after 1881—11.4 per cent in 1881–91 and 24.2 per cent in 1891–1901; in the Serampore subdivision of Hooghly,  

52 Roy, The Economic History of India, p. 70.
53 Census, 1951, West Bengal, Burdwan, p. xiii; Government of Bengal, Commerce and Labour Department (Commerce), Proceeding No. 9, April 1930, (WBSA). The demographic picture of the district of Burdwan gives two distinct features. The western part witnessed an uninterrupted growth of population since 1872 whereas other parts of the district saw a decreasing trend owing to the outbreak of Burdwan fever. Consequently the population of the district as a whole was on the wane till 1881 and remained stationary for the next decade. The dreaded Burdwan fever could not strike any blow to the population of western part (Raniganj/Asansol subdivision) due to its dry climate and higher altitude.
the most important industrial centre of the district, the population rose by 40 per cent in 1881–91 and 24 per cent in the following decade; and in the industrial belt of Howrah there was a spectacular growth of nearly 88 per cent in 1872–1901.\(^54\) Such a growth resulted in an increasing demand for food and the supply came from the neighbouring surplus areas. The circumstances thus favoured Burdwan for exporting rice to these places. Rice from trade marts in Burdwan town and Kalna would be regularly exported to Serampore, Hooghly, Chandannagar, Sheoraphuli, Howrah, Bali and other places.\(^55\)

Third, the rise of prices elsewhere, combining with the improved facilities, resulted in an influx of purchasers in Burdwan and the resulting export of rice from the district.\(^56\) The quality of rice of Burdwan was good and its price was more or less steady in normal situations, sometimes even being lower than the price of some other districts of Bengal, Bihar and Assam,\(^57\) and therefore it attracted the traders from outside the district. Calcutta dealers were very eager to get rice and paddy from Memari and elsewhere in Burdwan district because they could have made larger profits in Calcutta and also by exporting it to other provinces by sea.\(^58\) In and around Calcutta, Burdwan’s rice was believed to have been less expensive than other kinds of rice. Although the price of rice in some districts of Bengal was lower than that of Burdwan in the first quarter of the twentieth century, all of them were not in a position to export it. The districts possessing lower prices were not surplus districts. In other words, Burdwan, Birbhum and Midnapore were the only surplus districts in southwest Bengal whereas Bankura and Murshidabad were self-supporting and Hooghly was a deficit district.\(^59\)

In fact, Burdwan took the opportunity of increasing demand for food in these provinces, particularly Bihar and Assam with whom the district had had a regular export trade in rice. Though with the available statistics we are unable to precisely measure the quantity of rice exported annually to these places during the period under study, it is evident that these were deficit regions. There was agricultural distress in Bihar in the second half of the nineteenth century. Famines and scarcities followed each other in quick succession, resulting in deterioration of the material condition of the cultivating classes.\(^60\) The population of Bihar increased during the second half of the nineteenth century, while the acreage under

\(^{54}\) Chaudhuri, ‘Growth of Commercial Agriculture’, p. 32.

\(^{55}\) Seth, \textit{Mokamer Baniyatattwa} (in Bengali), Part I, pp. 48–49, 121.

\(^{56}\) Government of Bengal, Revenue Department (Agriculture), Prog. 98, December 1919 (WBSA).


\(^{58}\) Report of the Director of Civil Supplies, p. 21.


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cultivation increased to a very limited extent. The rice fields of north Bihar bore good crops, though these were not as heavy as those raised in Bengal. But south Bihar, except for a narrow strip of fertile land close to the Ganges, had poor soil, its southern portion being frequently in distress for failure of crop. There was underproduction of food crops during the First World War, caused by two extraordinary crop failures in 1918–19 and 1920–21, affecting large areas of United Provinces, Bihar and Orissa and as a result, there was demand for food grains in these regions.\(^6^1\) An exodus of agricultural labourers from Bihar to the jute mills and tea plantation areas of Bengal and Assam makes it clear that they did not have a livelihood in their parent places and therefore migrated to these places in search of sustenance.\(^6^2\)

The land-abundant economy of the Brahmaputra Valley failed to grow enough food-grains to feed its increasing industrial population. The annual import of food-grains into the valley increased from 11,250 tons around 1872 to some 26,250 tons during the last five years of the nineteenth century.\(^6^3\) Total cropped area in Assam decreased from the 1890s and the situation was aggravated by the black fever epidemic. The prices of food grains were rising, and many starvation deaths were reported from Nowgong in the bad season of 1896.\(^6^4\) Most of the immigrants into nineteenth century Assam came from the tribal areas and were absorbed as labour in the tea plantations. Those who took to cultivation of ordinary crops as tenants or ryots were poor cultivators, with backward techniques and serf-like social status. Despite an increasing demand from the plantation sector for grain, the peasant economy of Assam failed to respond adequately because of an acute manpower shortage.\(^6^5\) The population of Assam increased largely in the first quarter of the twentieth century due to huge immigration. About 55.6 per cent of the total increase of 748,650 in the population of the Assam valley between 1911 and 1921 was due to immigration. But they mostly took up occupations connected to the growing of tea.\(^6^6\) Therefore, agriculture remained stagnant for want of cultivators and hence the local production of rice was insufficient. What is more surprising is the fact that the non-Assamese people working in Assam had a prejudice against the use of Assamese rice.\(^6^7\) As a result Assam had to import large quantities of rice which were exported from the surplus districts of Bengal with Burdwan having a share in it. Thus the expansion of the market added to an increase in the rice trade of the district, being facilitated by the rapid

\(^{62}\) Diwakar, Bihar through the Ages, p. 777.
\(^{63}\) Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, p. 30.
\(^{64}\) Ibid.
\(^{65}\) Ibid., p. 32.
\(^{66}\) Report of the Assam Banking Enquiry Committee, p. 11.
\(^{67}\) Chaudhuri, ‘Growth of Commercial Agriculture’, p. 32.
growth of railways. The rice of Burdwan was good in quality and more reasonable in rate than the rice of most other districts in southwest Bengal. The bulk of the marketable surplus of paddy and rice could then easily find way from the villages to these newly arising trade centres and ultimately got exported to the bigger markets.

At the same time, the rise of Burdwan as a market town in the late nineteenth century created further trade opportunities. It was in the 1850s that the Burdwan raj family settled in the new palace which along with the adjoining areas subsequently became the central part of the town. With the completion of this new palace, new markets are said to have grown in its adjoining areas. Moreover, after the onslaught of malaria in the 1860s and 1870s, many big traders and merchants shifted eastwards and settled around the palace abandoning their ancestral establishments at Kanchannagar, a suburb to the south-west of Burdwan town. The Maharaja of Burdwan seems to have been interested in setting up of a market at the new site and requested them to come and settle in the new centre of the town. The result was the establishment of new business premises in the late nineteenth century—the mahals of Nutanganj, Alamganj, Barabazar—where markets, arats (warehouses), shops, godowns and the dwelling houses of the merchants gradually grew. These areas gradually developed into the busy centres of business in Burdwan sadar. The circumstances were thus gaining ground in the new site for developing Burdwan as a market town. A number of merchants and traders from within and outside of the district migrated to Burdwan sadar to carry on their business with the mainstream of Bengal’s expanding trade. Interestingly the wholesale trading concerns dealing in paddy, rice, mustard and molasses gradually emerged in different parts of the town.

The movement of paddy and rice had three stages into the market. First, the cultivators usually sold their paddy or hand-pounded rice to village merchants or aratdars and to itinerant traders (paikars, beparis). These sales sometimes took place in the villages, but more often in the rural markets (hats). In the second stage, a part of the grain passed into distribution locally through retail shop, whereas the greater part passed to the larger markets where it was sold to the big merchants or wholesalers or to local rice mills. The bigger cultivators brought their grain to this market. A part of the grain assembled to this stage passed into local consumption. The third stage was reached when paddy and rice moved from these assembling centres. A part was dispatched to consuming centres in different parts within and outside the district and the remaining to the wholesale market in and

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68 The construction of the Raj Palace named Mahatab Manjil was completed by 1851; Ganguli, *Social History of a Bengal Town*, pp. 50–51; Chaudhuri, *Bardhaman Itihas O Sanskriti*, (in Bengali), pp. 344, 349–50.

69 Ganguli, *Social History of a Bengal Town*, p. 83.


*The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 49, 1 (2012): 73–104
around Calcutta. Though there was a direct contact between the producers and the organised market, small cultivators/peasants had to sell their produce to the village mahajans or merchants.

Important rice markets of the district, such as Mankar, Guskara, Burdwan, Memari, Raniganj, Saktigarh, Nabastha and Hatgobindapur, Kalna and Katwa handled the bulk of the surplus of rice for exporting to the neighbouring districts and provinces. For example, in the 1910s, about 37.5 tons of rice a day was sold at Mankar and Guskara.\textsuperscript{71} It is from these centres that rice was exported to Calcutta, Serampur, Barrackpore, Naihati and also to the distant markets in Assam, Bihar, United Provinces and Bombay where shortage of local supply due to bad harvest and failure of crops, and high prices always created a demand for rice.\textsuperscript{72} Calcutta took the lion’s share of the surplus, and the rest of it went to neighbouring as well as distant provinces.\textsuperscript{73}

Although no statistics regarding the quantity of rice exported from Burdwan district for the period spanning 1901 to 1947 are available, one can get an idea about it by looking at the data available in an unofficial source for the period from 1917–18 to 1921–22, when government restriction decelerated the movement of food grains from one place to another. It reveals that 37,575 tons of rice and 126,300 tons of paddy were supplied from Burdwan to Calcutta during this period.\textsuperscript{74} It is interesting to note, in this context, that of the Western Bengal Block districts (consisting of the districts of Burdwan, Birbhum, Hooghly, Bankura, Midnapore, Murshidabad and part of Nadia),\textsuperscript{75} Burdwan ranked first in the supply of paddy and fourth in the supply of rice to the Calcutta block during the same time period,\textsuperscript{76} (as shown in Table 4). The new growth of rice mills in Calcutta seemed to have required winter paddy during this time and this could easily be collected from the nearby districts like Hooghly and Burdwan. So the winter paddy of Burdwan was much more in demand in the rice mills in Calcutta and therefore Burdwan supplied more paddy than rice. A large quantity of paddy was also supplied from the Hooghly district. Lack of data inhibits the explanation of the rank occupied by Burdwan before and after this period. But it can be ascertained that Burdwan district contributed substantially in supplying rice/paddy to Calcutta. There also took place the diversion of rice to other places during the control system prevalent at that time. For instance, during the seven months from

\textsuperscript{71} Government of Bengal, Revenue Department (Agriculture), Prog. 98, December 1919, (WBSA).
\textsuperscript{73} Seth, Mokamer Baniyatattwa, Part II (in Bengali), pp. 56–58.
\textsuperscript{74} Seth, Bange Chaltattwa (in Bengali), pp. 403–406.
\textsuperscript{75} Report on the Trade Carried by Rail and River, 1915–1916, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{76} Seth, Bange Chaltattwa (in Bengali), pp. 403–406.
Table 4

Export of Paddy and Rice (in Tons) to Calcutta from Different Districts of Western Bengal Block

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>28,516</td>
<td>7,211</td>
<td>30,453</td>
<td>12,045</td>
<td>24,545</td>
<td>7,776</td>
<td>24,359</td>
<td>5,217</td>
<td>18,427</td>
<td>5,358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birbhum</td>
<td>2761</td>
<td>29,477</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>30,395</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>12,905</td>
<td>3,214</td>
<td>22,445</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>6,620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midnapur</td>
<td>1,568</td>
<td>40,347</td>
<td>1,099</td>
<td>65,173</td>
<td>4,114</td>
<td>57,991</td>
<td>5,658</td>
<td>24,957</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>32,423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murshidabad</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10,748</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11,566</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>4,274</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>6,724</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3,422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankura</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>1407</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>2,934</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>1,589</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>1,538</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooghly</td>
<td>15,197</td>
<td>30,554</td>
<td>14,881</td>
<td>47,656</td>
<td>12,462</td>
<td>37,454</td>
<td>4,716</td>
<td>28,930</td>
<td>6,120</td>
<td>30,403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>2,200</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>4,228</td>
<td>1,940</td>
<td>2,804</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>821</td>
<td>927</td>
<td>904</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Seth, Bange Chaltattwa (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1332 BY, pp. 403–06.
December 1918 to June 1919 a total of 47,662 tons rice from Burdwan was exported to various provinces—Assam, Bihar, United Provinces, Central Provinces, Bombay, Madras and Punjab.77

Merchant Enterprise and Organisation

This section deals with the activities and achievements of the merchants and millers, focusing on their entrepreneurial and organisational abilities. It will also discuss how industrialisation grew with the expansion of commercialisation and the role of the rice mills in the trade of the district. The merchants and traders from various parts of Burdwan were active in the rice trade of the district, carrying on substantial inter-district trade through both the waterways and railways. The principal group among them consisted of the local Bengali merchants from Burdwan, Kalna, Katwa, Guskara, Memari and other places, though some non-Bengali traders participated in the rice trade and rice milling business. The big merchants of the district, such as Rajkrishna Dutta, Banwarilal Panja, Baksiram Marwari, Kalicharan Ta, Saratchandra Pal, Haripada De, Beni Bhakat, Bakreshwar Ta, Basantalal Kundu, Suresh Chandra Hazra, Bholanath Bandopadhyay, Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay and others had a significant place in the overall rice trade of the district, exporting the bulk of the surplus to the neighbouring districts and provinces.78 They were paying the highest prices and sold rice to those markets with which they were most closely in touch, particularly in Bihar, Assam and the United Provinces at rates comparatively reasonable. They seemed to have felt secure in selling the crop to their counterparts in the nearby and distant provinces with whom they were familiar.

Many big and substantial peasants of Burdwan district, known as jotedars (holders of estates), emerged as efficient merchants dealing in paddy and rice,79 appropriating the village surplus in various ways. Burdwan witnessed the existence of middle and big jotedars who possessed land ranging from 30 to 1,500 acres. They succeeded in exercising their control on agricultural lands and had also a command over the labour of the poor and landless villagers, posing to be the immediate landlord of subordinate under-tenants and sharecroppers.

They combined grain trading with moneylending business in the villages. There was hardly any professional banker or moneylender like the house of Jagat Seth in the district where the jotedars were the main source of rural credit. They also had surplus stock of paddy and provided grain loans for the poor cultivators particularly during lean months. These loans were repayable in kind with usurious rates of interest. The poor peasants and the cultivators had to sell their produce

immediately after the harvest to the jotedar cum mahajan in order to pay the land rent and repay their debts. As a result the jotedars dictated the price of the peasant’s crop. They also appropriated the village surplus through the sharecropping system which was very common in Burdwan district. They had been able to retain considerable stocks of paddy and sold them in the market at a fair price and thus multiplied profit. Many of them became the big aratdars or rice merchants exporting the crop to different places.

There were some important business families of Burdwan town, who were engaged in trade and commerce rather than in large-scale industrial undertakings. The majority of them dealt in rice and their wholesale rice trading concerns emerged in Burdwan. They were the new actors in this field and their enterprising activities placed Burdwan on the map of the rice trade of Bengal. It is through their initiative that rice of Rarh reached different parts of eastern and western India, and thus local and provincial/national commercial integration was achieved. We may refer to Rajkrishna Dutta, Sashi Bhusan Kundu, Banwarilal Panja, Sarat Chandra Pal and others who became famous for their business acumen. One unique example of Bengali business acumen of Burdwan was demonstrated by the Tah family of Palitpur, a village near Burdwan town. Bakreshwar Tah of this family, belonging to an enterprising Ugra Kshatriya caste, started a small trading concern at Barabazar, Calcutta (the date is not available) dealing in rice. This business thrived under his nephew Dintaran Tah, who became a reputed rice merchant of Calcutta, being commonly known as the ‘rice king’. It was through trading in rice that the family achieved economic prosperity and enhanced their prestige by purchasing patni taluqs in Burdwan district.

In fact, the grain merchants of Burdwan had investible surplus in their hands and they were induced by a profit making motive to invest it in non-agricultural pursuits, as was found in some other regions of India, for example, coastal Andhra and Tamil Nadu. In Punjab, coastal Andhra and Tamil Nadu, the prosperity based on wheat, sugarcane, cotton and rice induced many farmers or traders to set up rice and oil mills, sugar mills and cotton gins. Bengal followed the same path. Rice merchants invested money in the milling business and thus developed a modern small scale industry with the expansion of commercialisation. This industry started growing from 1900 and the growth of the mills accelerated in the interwar period. Thus commercialisation stimulated such small-scale industry in Bengal which was also found to have flourished in southwest Bengal districts

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81 Interview, Amarnath Tah of Palitpur, Burdwan.
83 For details, see Roy, The Economic History of India, p. 151.
like Burdwan hence leading to industrialisation. Some of the merchants gradually started milling rice by setting up rice mills from the 1920s and thus turned to become rice millers. The rice milling business was found to be a profitable venture, and consequently big merchants in the Burdwan district were attracted to this enterprise, resulting in the growth of rice mills and an increase in rice trade.84

Rice millers occupied an important place in the trade-circuit. They facilitated the flow of credit to the paddy trade. Sometime even the aratdars acted as agents of the rice mills, receiving their funds from the latter and worked on a commission of approximately two to three annas per maund (approximately 37.5 kilogram) of paddy when taken from producers.85 For easy procurement of paddy, the rice millers and their agents introduced the system of offering cash advances to the producers as loan on condition that the crop after harvesting would be sold to the lender at a specified rate. This system was known as dadan, which was prevalent in several places of Burdwan district.86 However, it could not spread widely because very few producers could avail themselves of this flow of credit owing to their economic ties to the village landlords or jotedars. In the marketing of rice, the millers had a dominant place too. In most cases they exported milled rice directly to Calcutta and other places. In fact, the aratdars, wholesale rice merchants, and rice millers handled the bulk of the marketable surplus. From among them, the wholesale rice merchants had the largest share in the rice trade of Burdwan district as a whole and roughly 80 per cent of the marketable surplus passed through their hands.87

The rice trade of Burdwan even attracted some of the merchants from the neighbouring areas of this district. A trader named Ram Dayal De who dealt in mustard at Sahebganj (Bihar) settled at Burdwan town in the early twentieth century and started an oil mill at Alamganj.88 He was gradually attracted by the new venture of rice milling and established the New Rice Mill in 1920. Rasamay Pal who is said to have settled in Burdwan town from Naihati in 1929–30 possessed a large-scale trade in rice at Borehat and established Sreedhar Rice Mill at Saraitikar (Burdwan) in 1935.89 Suraj Bhan Jasoria, a big merchant of Agra dealing in rice and mustard, came to Burdwan in 1920 in connection with the rice trade and gradually turned to the rice manufacturing business. In 1935, he acquired the lease of the Annapoorna Rice Mill and eventually purchased it in 1937, renaming it as Jasoria Rice Mill.90

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84 For details, see Dutta, Economy and Ecology in a Bengal District, pp. 208–09.
85 Marketing of Agricultural Produce in Bengal, pp. 70–71.
88 The exact date of his arrival is not known; interview, Anath Saran De, a rice miller of Burdwan.
89 Interview, Shibsankar Pal, owner of a rice mill in Burdwan.
90 Interview, Virendra Kumar, a rice mill owner of Burdwan.

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Apart from the merchants, some of the patnidar families, locally known as zamindars, also participated in rice trade, turning to the rice manufacturing business. The Nandis of Jamgram, the Hazras of Dhanyakherur and the Hazras of Anguna may be referred to in this context. They had a large number of holdings and even purchased patni taluqs in different villages, thus having power, influence and social prestige. They established rice mills at Jamalpur, Memari (Sreedurga Farm) and Burdwan town (Bhuvaneswar Rice Mill) respectively. The rice milling business in the district thus throws light on the upward mobility of merchants and big land-holders.

The rice trade of Burdwan was not represented by a single caste; persons belonging to various castes like Brahmin, Tili, Ugra Kshatriya, Sadgops, Bania and also the Muslims worked in this field. Interestingly, the Ugra Kshatriyas and Sadgops had a monopoly over the paddy/rice trade of Burdwan. Many of the paddy and rice merchants of Katwa, Guskara, Memari, Nadanghat, Manteshwar and Burdwan belonged to the Ugra Kshatriya and Sadgop community. A large number of them were found amongst the large landowners and jotedars in the rural areas of the district. The Ugra Kshatriyas combined trade and moneylending as well as grain-lending with agricultural pursuits. A typical example of an Ugra Kshatriya business tycoon was the family of Banwarilal Panja, who came to Burdwan town from a nearby village in the wake of commercial pursuits. The Panjas were essentially agents commissioned to sell products, such as grain and mustard oilseeds, a calling that brought them an annual income of ₹50,000 to 100,000. The Ugra Kshatriyas demonstrated their entrepreneurial activities in coal mines, rice milling and mica mines. Men like Nagendranath Samanta, Janaki Nath Samanta and others, belonging to the Ugra Kshatriya caste, were the pioneers in the rice milling business of Burdwan district. A large number of rice mills in Burdwan district are still owned by the Ugra Kshatriyas. All this indicates that all the Bengalis were not entrepreneurially inept. Though non-Bengali rice millers cum merchants participated in the rice trade of Burdwan, the Bengalis dominated the scene, owning about 80 per cent of the total mills in the district. They invested in this business their own capital, derived mainly from agriculture and trade, and successfully managed it.

The Ugra Kshatriyas and the Sadgops were influential castes in the agrarian economy of Burdwan. It is agriculture that increased their prosperity and many of them turned out to be substantial peasants and landlords. The Ugra Kshatriyas continued to maintain their dominance even after the Permanent Settlement through

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91 Interviews, Debnath Mondal, Anath Saran De and Sachchidananda Hazra, rice mill owners of Burdwan.
93 Ganguli, Social History of a Bengal Town, p. 84.
94 Interviews, Debnath Mondal and Anath Saran De.
their control on land and accordingly over the people. Their socio-economic position as the dominant caste facilitated their engagement in trade and commerce with the expansion of the commercialisation of agriculture. The absence of non-cooperation and enmity among the members of the Ugra Kshatriya community might possibly have added to their business, assisting them in their achievement of further riches. The economic prosperity of the Ugra Kshatriyas had encouraged them to receive modern education. With the growth of prosperity, power and prestige they may have acquired the status of ‘bhadralok’, well mannered persons. All this encouraged them to project a new image of themselves and also a new identity in the caste hierarchy by introducing social reforms among the community. For this purpose they established their association known as Ugra Kshatriya Samiti in 1888. Nevertheless, this enterprise did not last long. After a long time, merchants like Banwarilal Panja and other members of his community coming from different occupational backgrounds took the initiative of reviving it in 1920. Influential merchant families like the Panjas and the Kundus attended the conferences organised by the Samiti from 1929 onwards. The Samiti protested against unfavourable accounts about the Ugra Kshatriyas noted in various official and non-official publications and objected to the term ‘cultivating caste’ assigned to them. It claimed kshatriya status for the caste and propagated the agenda for purification of ritual practices among caste members. At the same time they were urged to take advantage of modern educational opportunities, public health programmes and agricultural cooperatives. Emphasis was also given to the integration and coordination among the different branches of the caste. The members of the Samiti also assisted those who wanted to make contacts with caste-fellows established in business or other professions. With the introduction of elective institutions, the Samiti canvassed for votes for Ugra Kshatriya candidates, urging for caste solidarity.

Backed by the economic prosperity, the paddy/rice merchants of the district demonstrated their political consciousness and organisational ability. They organised themselves through the establishment of their association—Burdwan Rice and Paddy Dealers’ Association to protect their business from any sort of threat. Besides, the rice millers of the district had formed the Burdwan District Rice Millers’ Association to fight against their adversaries and protect their trade. Such associations had also been set up by their counterparts in Calcutta, Birbhum,

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95 Bandyopadhyay, Caste, Politics and the Raj, p. 106.
96 Ugra Kshatriya Patrika, 1337 BY, p. 2.
97 Ibid., p. 3.
98 Ugra Kshatriya Pratinidhi, 1298 BY, pp. 269–74.
99 Broomfield, Mostly about Bengal, p. 255.
100 Dates of establishment of these associations are not available.
Barrakpore and other places. The objectives of these associations were to protect and promote the trade, commerce and manufacturing relating to rice and other commodities; to foster ideas of cooperation and mutual help among all persons engaged in the rice trade; to adjust controversies between members of the association; to promote or oppose legislations and other measures relating to trade, commerce and manufacture; to establish just and equitable principles in trade; and to maintain uniformity in rates, regulations and trade usages.

These merchants cum millers carried on their trade independently. They were not the underlings of British merchants and had no organic link with British capital. They were not the collaborators of the British government. Some of the merchants like Banwarilal Panja, Ramdayal De and Rajkrishna Dutta had supported and stood behind the Swarajya party of C.R. Das by providing liberal financial support. They rather resented the restrictions imposed by the government in 1943 on their free transactions. In order to have adequate control over the supply of food grain in the context of the famine of 1943, the government introduced the Procurement Scheme under which the rice millers had to collect the required paddy from the government agent at a fixed price. Similarly, under the Bengal Rice Mill Control Order, 1943, the rice mills were required to sell their entire output of rice at a price fixed by the government to the Chief Agent. All this hampered free transactions of the rice millers and merchants in Bengal, making their scope of profit narrow. The rice millers of Burdwan and other parts of Bengal particularly Calcutta resented these restrictions and tried to regain their former position by coming to terms with the government. In this respect the committee of the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce being supported by the Bengal Rice Mills Association considered the matter and approached the government to think it over, submitting some suggestions.

The rice trade in Bengal took a pace forward from the 1890s with the commercial manufacturing of rice by rice hullers and subsequently by rice mills. The rice mills of Calcutta were the pioneers in Bengal in this regard. They were supplied paddy from Burdwan and other districts of southwest Bengal. Saktigarh, a rice mart in Burdwan district, used to play an important part in it. For instance, 525 tons of paddy was exported only from Saktigarh to the rice mills at Chetla in

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101 Some of the better known associations were Calcutta Rice Merchants’ Association, Chetla Paddy Merchants’ Association (in Calcutta), Birbhum Rice Millers’ Association, Calcutta Rice Mills’ Association, Barrakpur Rice Mills Association, etc., Report on the Marketing of Rice in India and Burma, pp. 393–95.

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Calcutta from August 21 to 27, 1919.\textsuperscript{107} However, the rice mills of Burdwan district subsequently checked the drain of paddy to Calcutta from the 1920s when there was a steady growth of rice milling industry in Burdwan itself. Thereafter, Burdwan started supplying milled rice to the markets within and outside Bengal. This was a significant change in the rural economy.

The primary factor contributing to the introduction of machine in manufacturing rice was the demographic boost. Burdwan district had an increase of population especially in the industrial belt of the Raniganj/Asansol subdivision from the late nineteenth century. As a result, the demand for eatable rice increased. Moreover, the rice of Burdwan had a demand in the country beyond Bengal and the district had a regular export trade in rice. Naturally, it seems to have been difficult to some extent for the traditional system of paddy husking by \textit{dhenki} or by hand-pounding to keep pace with the increasing demand of rice.\textsuperscript{108} Manufacturing of rice by machine became, therefore, imperative and the mechanical milling process started from 1908 in this district side by side with the \textit{dhenkis}.

From time immemorial, the people of Burdwan, like the people of other districts of Bengal, had consumed the \textit{dhenki}-husked rice. But after the machine-made rice was available, the taste of the population, mainly in urban and industrial areas, gradually changed. They sought the white polished rice of the mill. Moreover, the availability and comparative cheapness of the milled rice encouraged them, particularly the industrial labourers in the Asansol–Raniganj areas, to discard the prejudice against the use of machine-made rice. The growing consumption of this rice led to an increase in its demand which necessitated the growth of rice mills in this district. The milled rice actually attracted both the sellers and the consumers and this resulted in an expansion of the rice milling industry.

Apart from the demand factor, this district had almost all the favourable conditions for developing this industry. There existed an abundant supply of raw material (paddy), availability of cheap labour, a ready local market and the proximity to the great rice markets in Calcutta and Howrah. There was also an easily accessible transport by railway, which in turn had an unimpeded supply of coal. All of these were factors that contributed to the advantageous circumstances which added an impetus to the growth of rice mills. The merchants considered it economically sound to husk rice at the place where it grew instead of taking the risk

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of transporting a large bulk of useless materials. Above all, the rice milling business, being a profitable venture, had gripped the attention of the merchants of Burdwan, who were gradually drawn to this enterprise, providing the required capital for it. This easy flow of capital contributed further to the growth of this industry.

The rice milling industry was located in the semi-urban areas, primarily in sub-divisional towns and in the district headquarters. The industry had close contact with the source of raw materials and cheap rural labour and it could be worked on a small scale with smaller capital, cruder technique and small tools. It could obtain handsome returns for the investors. Naturally these conditions made it an ideal industry for rural and semi-urban investors, who were already closely linked up with trade in agricultural commodities and were already owners of considerable lands. The first rice mill in Burdwan was started in 1908 by a rice merchant named Haripada De at Keshabganj Chati in Burdwan town. Burdwan had a steady growth of rice milling industry from the 1920s. By 1921 nine more rice mills were established within the Burdwan municipal area. In Burdwan district, 22 rice mills were running as a whole in 1921–22. Although no annual statistics showing the growth of rice mills in Burdwan district for the period under study are available, it is known from some sources that the number of rice mills increased to 47 in 1934, 56 in 1934–35, and 59 in 1944–45. It is thus evident that there was a phenomenal growth of rice mills in Burdwan district, although not always at an equal pace, and it occupied second or third position in Bengal during the colonial rule. The absence of interference by the government in the organisation, production and marketing spheres of the rice mills seemed to have facilitated the growth of this industry. Most of these rice mills were situated in the major trade centres (Kalna, Katwa, Memari, Guskara and Burdwan). All these were ‘big’ rice mills and they did conform to the definition of ‘factories’ under the Indian Factories Act. A more or less static trend in the growth of this industry was found from the early 1940s, especially in the War years when the Government of Bengal imposed restrictions on the movement of food grain and controlled transaction of the rice mills in the province.

Along with the big rice mills, the rice huller also prospered in this district. This was the smallest rice husking unit, commonly called husking machine, employing only one mechanical huller and less than ten persons with a hulling

110 Ibid.
111 Sarkar, ‘Rice Milling Industry in Bengal’, p. 16.
112 Government of Bengal, Commerce Department (Commerce), Prog. 14, August 1935 (WBSA); Report of the Bengal Rice Enquiry Committee, pp. 12–13; Sarkar, ‘Rice Milling Industry in Bengal’, p. 16.

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capacity of 0.1125 to 0.225 tons of paddy per hour.\textsuperscript{114} This unit was the unregistered sector of the industry and remained outside the purview of the Indian Factories Act. The lower input value of this machine and its low operational and manufacturing cost contributed a lot to its growth.\textsuperscript{115} However, from the 1920s, there was also growth of different rice marts in the district.\textsuperscript{116} The husking machines combined the advantage of the low cost of husking with the facility of small-scale and readily available services in or near the village and were, therefore, welcomed by the villagers.

Rice milling was predominantly an indigenous industry, although the mill owners of Burdwan district installed foreign made boilers in their rice mills. The industry was run by permanent inhabitants of the district or by permanent nationals of the province, though non-Bengali merchants also participated in this business. Participation of non-Indians in this field was nil. The raw material, capital and the management required for this industry were totally indigenous. Paddy for the rice mills in Burdwan was mostly supplied from the local market. When the local supplies of paddy failed to cope with the growing requirement of the local mills, it was purchased from the neighbouring districts. For instance, rice mills in Katwa (in Burdwan) regularly purchased paddy from Murshidabad in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{117} This agro-industry flourished exclusively under the management of the local entrepreneurs.

**Conclusion**

The foregoing analysis leads to the observation that Burdwan was the most productive district of south-west Bengal in providing food grain and used to supply a large surplus of rice to the metropolis of Calcutta and its adjoining areas during the colonial rule. Trade in paddy and rice became one of the major areas of the economic activities in this district. It was primarily inter-district and secondarily inter-provincial. It continued as an essential part of Bengal’s trade. There was a close nexus between the rice trade of Burdwan and that of Calcutta for exporting the crop to other parts of India and the world. As a surplus district, Burdwan had helped Bengal over decades to keep her flow of rice supply unabated to the areas where it was in great demand. As to the movements of food grains, although provincial statistics were kept by trade blocks, movement between the districts cannot be estimated from them accurately. No one had any idea as to what normal stocks of paddy/rice existed in each district. Yet, the data available from various official and non-official sources throw some light on the volume of rice trade and

\textsuperscript{114} Mukherjee, ‘Impact of Modernisation of Women’s Occupations’, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{115} Sarkar, ‘Rice Milling Industry in Bengal’, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{116} Seth, *Bange Chaltattwa* (in Bengali), pp. 64–65.
\textsuperscript{117} Sarkar, ‘Rice Milling Industry in Bengal’, p. 42.

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movement of rice from the district, and they reveal that Burdwan occupied an important place in the rice trade of Bengal. Thousands of tons of rice were exported from this district during the colonial rule. The colonial government had to depend largely on the grains produced in the southwest Bengal districts in order to cater to the needs of the areas of scarcity. The expanding rice trade of this region directly or indirectly helped the colonial rulers to take the village surplus away from the hinterland.

There was hardly any major constraint on this trade during the period of study, except in a few cases caused by the emergency situation due to the occurrence of famine, flood and war. European competition in this field was almost absent. It is also evident that the rice merchants of the district were not incapable of pursuing enterprising and entrepreneurial activities. They had the capacity to take advantage of the contemporary situation arising out of the development that was taking place from the late nineteenth century onwards. Backed by the increasing economic prosperity and favourable situation, they earned huge profits; but the cultivators and producers hardly received any benefit of the expanding trade.

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