

**EVOLUTION OF THE RURAL NON-FARM ACTIVITIES
IN MURSHIDABAD DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL: A
BRIEF STUDY FROM HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Arnab Ghosh*

ABSTRACT:

This paper provides a brief historical account of the rural non-farm activities in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal in India. It is observed that although Murshidabad has been fundamentally an agrarian district, it has also been experiencing the coexistence of both the farm and non-farm activities, to a considerable extent, for a long period of time. Murshidabad became one of the important centers of trade and commerce from the 18th century. Availability of cheap labour and raw materials, plenty of navigable water routes and concentration of political power for a long time created a favourable environment for the industrial expansion in this district. This caused structural changes in the district. In fact, a rural transformation from purely agricultural subsistence-economy to an agro-based non-farm economy had taken place during that period which brought about immense economic prosperity to the district. However, that prosperity did not last long due to some political, economic and social reasons. From the middle of the eighteenth century, the advent of the industrial revolution in Britain led to a gradual breakdown of the traditional indigenous structure of the district and there emerged a purely colonial economic structure influenced and controlled by the British. The paper focuses on the fact that rural development through the expansion of non-farm sector must take into account the historical perspective along with the pure socio-economic features of a particular region.

KEY WORDS: historical perspective, colonial rule, non-farm sector, rural development.

JEL Classification: N9, O18

* Assistant Professor of Economics, Department of Economics, Krishnath College, Berhampore, West Bengal, India, PIN-742101

1. Introduction

Murshidabad district of West Bengal is characterized by geographical and historical significance, socio-economic diversity and rather high concentration of the non-farm workers in rural areas. Although the district fundamentally represents an agrarian economy, it has also been supplemented by the traditional cottage industries from the time immemorial. Historically speaking, the rise of political power, sometimes in the past, centering this district led to a high rate of urbanization, whereas the fall in political power in some other times led to de-urbanization. Consequently, the district passed through several spurts and dips which had immense effects on the rural economy of the district at the different phases of its history. In spite of that, the artisans and craftsmen of the district could maintain a standard for a long period of time due to its advantageous location. In fact, rural Murshidabad has been experiencing the coexistence of both the farm and non-farm activities, to a great extent, for a long period of time.

Though Murshidabad had a background of traditional handicraft industry and also enjoyed favourable water route for trading which helped to expand its export markets from the time of 'Shashanka' (606-637 A.D.), we restrict our historical analysis of the non-farm activities within the time period of 1575-1947, i.e., from the time of establishment of the Moghul supremacy in Bengal to the time of the Indian independence. The reason behind this is that the economic history of the district during the period has close connection with the economic transformation of the district in the post-independence period. Since 1575, some new economic forces appeared and gradually started to play dominant role in the local economy. This caused structural changes in the district which had immense long-term effect. In fact, minute historical analysis would reveal that a rural transformation from the purely agricultural subsistence economy to the agro-based non-farm economy had taken place during that period which brought about immense economic prosperity in the district. However, that prosperity became lackluster in due course of time due to some political, economic and social reasons.

We have divided the above mentioned period into four sub-periods:(i) The period of the inception of indigenous economic transformation of the local economy (1575-1632); (ii) The period of regional economic prosperity (1632-1704);(iii) The period of conflict between the local and foreign powers (1704-1757); and (iv) The semi-colonial and colonial period (1757-1947). In the following sections, we trace out the history of economic transformation of the district during

these periods to clarify the rationale behind choosing Murshidabad to analyze the role of the rural non-farm activities in the context of West Bengal.

2. The Period of the Inception of Indigenous Economic Transformation of the Local Economy (1575-1632)

The agrarian structure of Murshidabad before 1575 was characterized by the self-working and self-sufficient village economy for more than fifty years. However, the change in the course of river Ganges, establishment and expansion of the Mughol supremacy in Bengal and also the expansion of Portuguese trade ushered in a new era. First, the change in the course of river Ganges opened up the way to economic prosperity of the 'Bagri' Murshidabad through the expansion of external trade. Secondly, the assemblage of Mughol administrators, their dependents and the military forces led to urban habitation in Saidabad, Mukhsudabad (former name of Murshidabad) and Masumabazar. These urban areas gradually became prosperous as an obvious effect of Mughol administrative and military system, because traders, merchants and moneylenders always pursued the Mughol administrators and army in order to ensure a smooth supply chain. Consequently, these areas were gradually transformed into the centre for trade and commerce. Besides, the Mughol administrators and other aristocratic class were the patrons of handicrafts. Thus, the demand for such products were created and gradually integrated with the external demand due to the expansion of external trade. This urbanization process and the expansion of trade and commerce had immense effect in transforming the rural economy of the district from closed and self-sufficient agricultural economy to an open economy with the coexistence of diversified non-farm and farm activities. In the third place, the predominance of the Portuguese traders and merchants during the period spread the fame of silk of Saidabad and Mukhsudabad not only in the other parts of the Indian markets but also among the European traders. Consequently, the production and trade of raw silk and silk materials gradually increased. Another important consequence of the Portuguese trading was the import of huge amount of gold and silver which led to the increase in the supply of money. This transformed the local barter economy into a monetary economy.

In order to make a clear understanding regarding the relationship between the newly grown urban centers mentioned above and their adjacent villages, it is also necessary to mention the change in the land revenue system occurred at that time in the form of "Todormol's revenue

reform policy". As a consequence of this policy, some external revenue collectors and intermediaries like 'Zaigirdars', 'Lakherajdars' etc. were appointed by the Mughol emperor. They gradually became very rich and their needs became diversified. Consequently, the production in both the farm and non-farm sectors expanded. For example, the rapid expansion of the mulberry farming and the production of silk during the period were the result of such change in rural production relationship.

From the above historical account, it is clear that urbanization, change in the nature of agricultural production, expansion of trade and commerce, change in pattern of demand and also the change in the land revenue system were broadly responsible for making the base for the transformation of the local economy from the pure agricultural economy to a 'multi-active' economy with the coexistence of the farm and non-farm activities.

3. The Period of Regional Economic Prosperity (1632-1704)

This period is the most significant period in the economic history of Murshidabad. During this period, the regional economy experienced the initiation of economic prosperity with relatively more importance on the secondary and tertiary sectors as compared to the primary sector. There were three important incidents occurred during the period which can be treated as the prime-movers in transforming the rural economy. First, Due to the expansion of the European trade in the eastern India, Murshidabad became the connector between the northern India and the European and far-off eastern countries. Secondly, European merchants, specially the British and the Dutch, directly established their firms and business houses coming into Murshidabad during the period which resulted in huge foreign investments. This accelerated the pace of industrialization. Thirdly, the Dutch and the British merchants started to import huge amount of silver from the American mines which rapidly increased the use and circulation of money.

All the above mentioned factors attributed to certain prominent changes in the rural Murshidabad which can be summarized as follows:

- (i) Factory system of production of raw Silk was initiated by the newly established European firms which started to employ artisans for a specific time period in exchange of wage.
- (ii) The dearth of sufficient capital appeared as an important constraint to the local artisans to meet up the increasing demands for raw silk in the face of rapidly growing external trade and

commerce. However, the initiation of 'Dadoni' or advance system by the European merchants helped the craftsmen a lot to expand their production.

(iii) The urbanization process in Mukhshudabad, Sayadabad, Kashimbazar and their adjacent areas got momentum due to expansion of trade, commerce and industries. The rate of urbanization further accelerated during the period 1650-1680 due to the establishment of the Dutch, the British, the French and the Armenian business firms. As the production increased, urban population also increased and the rural economy became integrated with the newly developed urban economy to satisfy the diversified needs of the urban population.

(iv) Major emphasis was also given on wood and iron industries during that period to satisfy the diversified needs of the urban population.

(v) In order to feed the increasing urban population, strict revenue collection system was undertaken and this was implemented through the revenue collectors, jaigirdar etc. appointed by the Mughol Emperor. The village community paid 1/4th to 1/3rd (1/2 in Aurangzeb's time) to the king. This was collected by the representatives of the king who were known as zamindars and Jagirdars. These revenue farmers paid 9/10th of the total revenue collected to the government, keeping rest as a reward for their services. From 1680s, it became a custom to pay the revenue in terms of money due to monetization. Consequently, there developed money wage-labor on the one hand and increased purchasing power of the elite class on the other.

(vi) Another important endogenous change arose from the contradiction between the dominant classes comprising the landlords, jaigirdars, traders, artisans etc. and the poor peasants, agricultural labourers and so on. The large and medium farmers and also the craftsmen experienced economic prosperity, whereas the burden of poverty aggravated for the bottom most segment of the village economy.

(vii) The rapid growth of the industrial sector created more and more employment opportunities causing migration of rural population and hastened monetization of the rural economy having far-reaching implications for the rural areas.

4. The Period of Conflict between Local and Foreign power (1704-1757)

It is now clear that Murshidabad became one of the important centres of trade and commerce from the 18th century. However, the age of economic prosperity which was on the way during the previous period, reached its culmination point during the period 1704-1757.

Availability of cheap labour and raw materials, plenty of navigable water routes and concentration of political power for a long time created a favourable environment for industrial expansion. The emergence of Kashimbazar port and the consequent arrival of foreign traders and merchants made the excellence of industrial products of the district to be familiar to the rest of the world. In addition to this, the transfer of capital of the provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa from Dhaka to Murshidabad (1704) accelerated the industrial expansion of the district. Murshidabad became the administrative and commercial centre. However, the British East India Company got a decree (*firman*) in 1717 from the Mughol Emperor Faruqshere to trade from Bengal by road and water with the rest of the world without giving any tariff and also enjoying some other advantages. This helped the East India Company to establish their supremacy relative to other European traders and merchants in expanding trade in Bengal. In this backdrop, the invasion and plundering by the Marathas, which was popularly known as 'Bargi Hungama', jerked heavily the apparently prosperous economy of the district. All these accompanied with some other socio-political factors prepared the ground for the 'War of Plassey'.

5. The Semi-Colonial and Colonial Period (1757-1947)

After the war of Plassey (1757), the East India Company became the actual controlling power of the puppet Nawab sitting at the throne of Murshidabad. The disturbed internal conditions in Bengal during this transitional period undoubtedly exercised an adverse influence on silk manufacture. The oppressions of the English Company's agents on the silk-weavers and the Company's policy of forcing them to work as winders must have caused a gradual decline in this industry making its revival in a well-marked degree impossible. Cossimbazar and other important centres of silk manufactures lost their influence regarding silk-weaving.

From the middle of the eighteenth century, the demand for raw silk became greater within the United Kingdom due to the advent of the industrial revolution in Britain and henceforth they wanted raw silk and not silk manufactures. After the acquisition of *Diwani* in 1765, the British East India Company began to devote more attention to sericulture than to the manufacture of silk fabrics. They brought a batch of experts to Bengal for introducing the mode of winding as practiced in the filatures of Italy and some parts of the continent. This period can be termed as the transition from the semi-colonial rule to purely colonial rule when a conscious attempt had been gradually made to reconstruct the district economy to serve the interest of the

foreigners, specifically the British East India Company. Consequently, the British East India Company gradually took the role of determinant in the district economy.

Amidst the chaos, indiscriminate loot and plunder and rack-renting of the peasantry by ever increasing revenue demand collected by the company with unexampled vigor, came the devastating famine of 1770 which was followed by the famines of 1784, 1786 and 1790. These natural calamities combined with the revenue hunt of the East India Company inflicted untold miseries on the starving peasantry. Since 1772, there was a gradual breakdown of the traditional indigenous structure of the district and the emergence of a purely colonial economic structure influenced and controlled by the British. The district ultimately became the supplier of raw materials to facilitate the British industrialization under the colonial rule.

6. Present Industrial Scenario of the District

If we look at the present industrial scenario of the district it would appear to be very much dismal and disappointing. Most of the traditional industries which were developed under the patronization of the then King, Nawab and zamindars were basically inherited from one generation to another generation. Therefore, they were confined to certain specific families which were specialized and skilled in those activities. In such cases, those traditional industries are bound to become extinct if future generation becomes reluctant to be engaged in those activities. This is what has happened in the case of many small and cottage industries in Murshidabad. Such reluctance stemmed from the fall in the demand for such products, disappearance of the royal families, the policy of the colonial rule against indigenous industrialization, the inability to compete with the low cost modern products, change in the tastes and preference etc.

As the present-day Murshidabad suffers from lack of heavy industries due to unavailability of economically important minerals and proper infrastructure, agriculture has been supplemented by the cottage industries. Consequently, a good proportion of the main and marginal workers are engaged in household industries. Silk weaving industry has been considered to be the principal cottage industry. The raw silk weaving has been growing prominently since the pre-historic times. The brand 'Murshidabad Silk' is not only famous across India, but also has great demand throughout the world. Sericulture industry is the principal agro-based rural industry in the district. The other small scale industries like the bell metal and brass

utensils, carpentry, earthenware making, smithy and pottery and *bidi*-making etc. have been serving the rural economy to a great extent.

According to the Census 1991, Murshidabad stands first among all the districts in terms of percentage of workers engaged in household industries absorbing 20.42 per cent of main and marginal workers. Out of those workers belonging to small and cottage industries, 64.66 per cent are female and 28 per cent are child workers. In fact, majority of these female and child workers are getting engaged in the '*bidi*' industries. There are 2807 registered small and cottage industries which has created job opportunities for 1, 2,788 rural workers. However, there are large numbers of unregistered small industries which absorb a large number of rural workers.

It has been revealed that majority of the workers employed in different registered small and cottage industries in the district are employed in the '*bidi*' industry followed by 'manufacture of silk textiles' and 'manufacture of bricks'. While as high as 40,000 workers are officially engaged in 200 *bidi* industries, the corresponding figure for 6000 silk weaving industries turned out to be 12,000. This implies that the employment intensity in terms of labour absorption capacity is quite high in the *Bidi* industry as compared to any other small and cottage industries in the district.

Let us now have a brief profile of some of the important small and cottage industries which have significant influence on the rural economy of the district.

Jute Industry

Jute is the main cash-crop of Murshidabad district. According to the statistics provided by the Government of West Bengal, nearly 1902 thousand ton Jute was produced in 141 thousand hectares land of the district in 2000-2001. However, in spite of that, there has not yet been established any large scale jute industry in the district. The number of government registered jute industries in the district is only 5 where only 10 workers are employed. In fact, it is very much difficult to determine the actual number of workers employed in these industries, because the number of workers employed exclusively in this industry is negligible. However, to a large number of workers, it appears as a spare time cottage industry. Cordage, rope, bag, door mat, table mat, telephone cover and many other fancy goods are produced from jute. The government organization 'Manjusha' often purchases those products from the artisans and sells through their retail outlets. However, this is not sufficient as required. Though there is availability of cheap

raw materials and labour power, the industry cannot flourish due to lack of proper marketing infrastructure. Recently, jute-stalk-made paper board manufacturing factory has been established in the district which has created some job opportunities.

Brass and Bell Metal Industry

From the eighteenth century, one of the most important industries in Murshidabad had been the 'Brass and Bell Metal industry' which had immense impact on the economy of this district. The Bell Metal industry was basically concentrated at 'Khagra' and 'Kandi'. The demand for the products made of Bell Metal was not confined within the territory of the district, the state and the country. Rather, the industry had international demand. However, it should be noted that the workers engaged in this industry were highly specialized in nature. Consequently, they exclusively participated in such non-farm activities and the villages in which they lived in became highly specialized in nature. In 1944-45, there were as many as 180 brass metal factories in the villages of 'Kansaribazar' and 'KhagraKansaripatti'. The Bell-Metal and Brass utensils are manufactured in large quantities in Khagra, Kandi, Baranagar and Jangipur. Locks and betel nut cutters of a superior kind are made at Dhulian and iron chests at Jangipur. But, in the course of time, the industry has lost its importance due to insufficient availability and consequent rise in the price of raw materials, high cost of production, lower wage paid to the workers etc. In the changing scenario, the poor brazier cannot afford to purchase newly invented high cost machines and equipments. Thus, they have to depend on the moneylenders for the supply of raw materials. The money lenders collect the finished products by giving very low wages to the real artisans and the lion's share of the revenue generated in the industry has been pocketed out by them. So, the entire production system has been captured by those moneylenders. Consequently, the number of skilled workers has been declining day by day. Moreover, the industry cannot cope up with the changing market demand. The mere production of dish, glass and other utensils cannot capture the market in the presence of low-priced stainless steel, plastic and ceramic goods and crockery. So, the industry has to focus on the fancy products which have artistic excellence. The government has to take sufficient initiative by providing financial assistance, raw materials and marketing infrastructure so that the actual artisans can reap the benefit from the industry and a large number of skilled and semi-skilled workers find employment in those units. Otherwise, this traditional industry will be gradually passed into oblivion.

Sericulture and Silk Weaving Industry

Silk is basically an agro-bio-industrial product. This requires, at first, the cultivation of mulberry which provides the food for silk-worm. A silky case is spun by the larva of silk-worm around it which is known as cocoon. From this cocoon, silk is extracted through riling system. Therefore, there are two parts of silk industry: one is the breeding of silk-worms known as sericulture and the other is weaving of silk. Sericulture has been prevalent in Murshidabad for a long period of time. In fact, the silk manufacturing industry of Murshidabad has grown up on the basis of cocoons supplied by itself and its neighbour districts, Maldah and Birbhum.

Murshidabad had a flourishing silk industry with world-wide reputation for a long period of time. At the far end of the sixteenth century, the expansion of the Portuguese trade ushered in a new erain the history of silk industry in Murshidabad spreading the fame of silk of Saidabad and Mukhshudabad not only in other parts of the Indian markets but also among the European traders. Consequently, the rapid expansion of mulberry farming and the production of silk during the period led to a substantial rise in trade of raw silk and silk materials. Afterwards, European merchants, especially the British and the Dutch, directly established their firms and business houses coming into Murshidabad which resulted in huge foreign investments. The initiation of 'Dadoni' or advance system and factory-based system of production by the European merchants helped the craftsmen a lot to expand their production. This accelerated the pace of rural industrialization. The Bengal silk manufactures formed one of the important exports of the English East India Company to England, and these were exported also to the markets in the Asiatic countries. After the establishment of English factories at Malda and Cossimbazar, the English Company's trade in Bengal silk manufactures began to increase, and their use became common among the people in England because of their good quality and cheapness. However, after the war of Plassey (1757), the East India Company became the actual controlling power of Murshidabad. The disturbed internal conditions in Bengal during this transitional period undoubtedly exercised an adverse influence on silk manufacture. The oppressions of the English Company's agents on the silk-weavers and the Company's policy of forcing them to work as winders must have caused a gradual decline in this industry making its revival in a well-marked degree impossible. From the middle of the eighteenth century, the demand for raw silk became greater within the United Kingdom due to the advent of the industrial revolution in Britain and

henceforth they wanted raw silk and not silk manufactures. The British East India Company began to devote more attention to sericulture than to the manufacture of silk fabrics. They brought a batch of experts to Bengal for introducing the mode of winding as practiced in the filatures of Italy and some parts of the continent.

Ivory Industry

The Ivory carving industry was one of the famous industries of the district which dates back to the time when the Nawabs of Bengal had their court at Murshidabad. As this industry was fully dependent for its prosperity on the support of a luxurious court and wealthy noblemen, it had to face a crisis when the Nawabs lost their power and their court disappeared. However, during the early period of the British rule, the performance of the ivory carvers of Murshidabad was also praised by foreigners. During the Exhibition of 1851 in London, a variety of specimens of carving in ivory were sent to different parts of India and these were much admired for their minuteness and elaborate details. In 1888 again, the Murshidabad carvers were declared to be the best in India, fully displaying the finish, minuteness and ingenuity characteristic of all true Indian art. When Berhampore rose into importance as chief military station in the province, the art flourished there for a time but began to wane with the decline of the military importance of the town. If not for the trade depending on the railway communication, this art would have died out long ago. Earlier the ivory carvers used to get large orders from the Government for supplying specimens of their work for various exhibitions in England and other European countries, as also in India. But this was later discontinued when arrangements were made to collect the exhibits on loan from noblemen and zamindars, like the Nawab of Murshidabad and the Maharaja of Cossimbazar who were in a position to supply the best specimens under their possession. Mathra, Daulatbazar and Ranshagorgram bordering the city of Murshidabad were once noted for the industry but altogether forgotten in later years owing to decay of the industry. At present, this industry has become nothing but a matter of historical research. Under the 'Wild Animal Conservation Act' the collection and storage of ivory have been completely banned which paved the way of the destruction of this traditional industry. Consequently, the workers engaged in this industry have become jobless. Most of them are compelled to shift in carpentry or sandal wood industry.

Wood Industry

The wood and wooden products have great use value in any rural as well as urban economy. Therefore, wood industry played a very important role in the rural economy of the district for a long period of time. Two sorts of wooden products are found to be produced in the district, one having great use value and the other having great artistic value. Both skilled and unskilled workers have been engaged in this industry. While most of the skilled workers have been engaged in this activity as the main (full-time) workers, quite a large number of farm workers have also been employed seasonally as part-time carpenters. A skilled worker usually earns Rs. 120-150 by working 6 hours in a day, whereas an unskilled worker earns Rs. 90-110 by working same period of time per day. Hence, the industry is likely to have quite a good potentiality to absorb workers and to fetch them higher income.

Indian Cork (Shola and Sholapith/sponge wood)

‘Sholapith’ is a milky-white sponge-wood which is carved into delicate and beautiful objects of art. Although the history of this industry in Murshidabad is not as old as Silk or Brass Metal industries, it has been another important cottage industry for more than 200 years. Shola is a plant which grows wild in marshy waterlogged areas. The sholapith is the cortex or core of the plant and is about 1½ inch in diameter. The outer harder brown skin is removed by expert hands to reveal the inner soft milky-white and spongy material, almost similar to "Thermocol", artificially produced in a laboratory. However, sholapith is much superior to Thermocol in terms of malleability, texture, luster and sponginess. The artisans use it for making artifacts used for decoration and ornate head-wears of the bridal couple. In Murshidabad, flowery designs, decorative head-wears of gods and goddesses, garlands, exquisite figurines like faces of gods and goddesses, elephant-howdahs, peacock-boats, palanquins and so on are made of sholapith.

The Shola Industry of Murshidabad is purely confined to certain specific families which possess specialized and skilled workers. Around 50 households in the district have been engaged in this industry where almost 300 workers have been involved to eke out their livelihood. However, they are also classified into three categories. First, the semi-skilled workers who are engaged in making garland, flower, ‘chandmala’ etc. are the poorest among these artisans. The craftsmen, who are used to make head-wears of bridal couple, decorative head-wears of gods and

goddesses etc., belong to the second category. Though they are skilled, their economic conditions are not very sound. Thirdly, the artisans who are specialized in making exquisite figurines like faces of gods and goddesses, elephant-howdahs, peacock-boats, palanquins. They earn quite healthy income by exporting image of god and goddesses not only in other states of the country but also abroad.

Bidi Industry

The *bidi* industry of the district has been basically centralized in the 'Jangipur' sub-division which has a wide market throughout the country. Though *bidi* is being produced also in other parts of the district they are meant for satisfying only the local demand. The geographical location and the availability of cheap labour are responsible for the expansion of this industry in Jangipur. From the onset of the previous century, the river 'Bhagirathi' had changed its way across the land several times. Besides, it has been very difficult for the inhabitants of this region to carry on their farming activities due to frequent attack of gigantic flood in almost every rainy season. The floods come and carry away not only their houses but also their agricultural land. So, the rich landlord classes as well as large and small farmers do not find it profitable to invest much on farming. Consequently, the returns from farming activities are very low and uncertain. Hence, the poor farm households have been compelled to search for some alternative non-farm activities. Consequently, a large number of children and female workers are engaged in 'Bidi-binding' in order to supplement their family income in the absence of any alternative job opportunity. Although there was scarcity of raw materials, it did not appear as a constraint in the expansion of this labour intensive industry in this region due to the availability of cheap labour and the presence of wide market in the East Bengal as well as Eastern India. In the second decade of the twentieth century, the *bidi* industry of the district was initiated through the establishment of *ViswaVijaya Biri Factory* followed by *Mrinalini Bidi Factory*. Afterwards, some more factories were established among which the 'Pataka Bidi' captured a large share of the market. Presently, Mrinalini and Pataka Bidi rank the top two in terms of their share in the total *bidi* production of the district.

There are two types of production system prevalent in the district, factory based production and home based production, among which home based production dominates over the other. In the home-based system, the *bidi* workers collect raw materials (leaf, thread and

tobacco) from *munshi* (the intermediate contractor between factory-owner and labourer) and organize their production with the help of the female and child members of their families. The wages of the *bidi* workers are functions of volume of production. Usually, they are paid Rs. 35-50 per thousand of *bidi* which require 8-10 hours of labour depending on the personal skills of these workers. The advantage for the households engaged in 'bidi-binding' is that they can earn higher incomes by increasing production using intensively most of their family members. This is why the family-size of those households, particularly those belonging to 'Jangipur' sub-division, is relatively higher as compared to other regions of the district. These households use their children as input. Consequently, number of children per household as well as birth rate is quite high in these regions. Parents are reluctant to send their children to school as its opportunity cost is very high. Consequently, literacy rate is also low. The illiterate workers are often cheated by the *munshi* and the factory-owner. However, given the limited job opportunities in other farm and non-farm activities, the role of *bidi* industry in reducing the intensity of poverty among these rural households cannot be denied in spite of all its evil effects. Table 4.4 presents some basic information regarding the *bidi* industry in Murshidabad.

Power Plant Project

The only heavy industry in the district is the thermal power project of the N.T.P.C having a central power plant at Farakka. Besides, the district is having the largest power plant at Sagardeghi, which is 12 km. away from the town of Raghunathganj. A hydropower project is coming up in the district. The district also has one iron and steel manufacturing company, in the city of Jangipur. The town of Omarpur is the hub for manufacturing plastic household goods. The Century Cement has also established a large factory near Monigram. All these are likely to create greater employment opportunities for the rural inhabitants of the district in the days to come.

7. Prospects for Future Industrialization

It is necessary to establish labour-intensive heavy industries by utilizing the huge human resources of the district in order to rejuvenate the industrial slowdown. The availability of cheap labour, adequate water resources and power supply and also the favourable communication

system may facilitate the expansion of heavy industries. The family specific traditional home-based small industries lost its importance in the course of time due to changes in tastes, preferences and pattern of demand in the face of modernization. However, there is an immense scope for the expansion of the food-processing industries as well as tourism. There is a huge wastage of vegetables every year due to insufficient cold-storages in the district. The development of food-processing industries would prevent such wastages. On the other hand, huge non-farm employment opportunities can be generated in tourism sector by exploiting its historical importance. However, the district is still lagging far behind in this respect due to negligence on the part of government. Export of local crafts or artwork may likewise prove feasible provided the marketing links can be established with outside buyers.

References

- Chaudhuri, K., (ed), 2008, Murshidabader Itihas, Vol. 1, Kolkata: Dey's Publishing.
- Govt. of West Bengal, 2007, District Statistical Handbook, Murshidabad, Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics.
- Govt. of West Bengal, 2003, Murshidabad District Gazetteers, Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics.
- Govt. of West Bengal, 2001, District Statistical Handbook, Murshidabad, Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics.
- Govt. of West Bengal, 2001-2, Economic Review, Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics.
- Maitra, P., (ed.), (1988), Murshidabad Charcha, Berhampore: Signas Printing Cooperative Society Ltd.