



Murshidabad, well known for its silk production is also infamous for poverty and hunger deathss. In 2005, The Hong-Kong-based Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has alerted that people in Murshidabad district are dying of starvation while the communist government authorities have not taken any effective action to stop the deaths. 1.47% of India's rural poor live in Murshidabad were majority of the people are Muslims with an average literacy rate of 66%. The West Bengal government is letting its people starve in violation of its constitutional obligations, and those under international laws. Aavek Datta and Romita Datta writes about impacts of poverty in Murshidabad. (courtesy: livemint)

Kolkata: Murshidabad district, renowned for the opulence of Nawabi rule when it hosted the capital of undivided Bengal in the 18th century, is today home to the maximum number of poor people in the country, according to the first official assessment of poverty across 575 districts. Suburban Mumbai was found to be the worst in terms of urban poverty, according to the Kolkata-based Indian Statistical Institute (ISI), which is conducting the study for the Union Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. Some 1.47% of India's rural poor live in Murshidabad district of West Bengal. About 3 million people—or 56% of the district's rural population—are below the so-called poverty line. Although urban areas of Murshidabad are better off, some 347,844 people, or 36.69% of the district's urban population, are classified as poor.

The statistics illustrate the sorry story of a once-prosperous centre of the silk trade that was said to match London for its splendour during the years of Nawabi rule. Murshidabad, which takes its name from Nawab Murshid Quli Khan, was the capital of undivided Bengal (which included Bangladesh), Bihar and Orissa between 1704 and 1790 under Muslim and British rulers.

ISI's study is based on consumption data collated by the National Sample Survey Organisation, or NSSO, from around 124,000 households across the country in 2004-5. Every five years, NSSO collects consumption data from across the country. The data includes almost everything of daily household use -- cereals and pulses to fish and meat and medicines.

India had some 270 million poor people in all when in 2004-05 the consumption data was last collected.

“By now, according to statistical estimates, the figure has gone up by 20%, or about five-and-a-half crore (55 million) people,” said Buddhadeb Ghosh, associate scientist in the ISI's economic research unit, who is leading the project and will be submitting his report to the Union government in a few weeks.

“In India, the absolute number of poor people doesn't ever come down, though poverty, as a

percentage of national population, declines,” added Ghosh.

Sharp imbalances

The aim of the poverty assessment undertaken by the ISI is to understand disparities within the states, said Ghosh.

Most state governments tend to spend development funds almost entirely on building infrastructure in and around the state capitals, and this has been the trend for the past six decades, according to Ghosh. “This has resulted in sharp imbalances within the states... the aim of this study is to draw the Centre’s attention to these imbalances,” added Ghosh.

In each district, poverty has been assessed separately for rural and urban areas. “For clinical accuracy, we separated rural and urban areas... whereas the poverty line for rural West Bengal is Rs382, poverty line for urban West Bengal is Rs449. Not only did we assess poverty separately, we did not aggregate the two either because that would have compromised the accuracy of the study,” explained Ghosh.

Second to Murshidabad in rural poverty is Bihar’s Muzaffarpur with 1.96 million poor people. It is home to 0.95% of the country’s 205.4 million rural poor. West Bengal’s Midnapore district comes third with 1.82 million poor people, which is 0.88% of the country’s rural poor. Though Midnapore has been carved up into two districts—East and West—it has been treated as one in ISI’s study.

Of the 25 worst districts in terms of rural poverty, 10 are from Uttar Pradesh, seven from Bihar, six from West Bengal, and one each, from Maharashtra and Orissa.

Uttar Pradesh is the poorest state in terms of rural poverty, with a so-called below poverty line, or BPL, population of 44.14 million people, which is about 33.3% of the state’s rural population. Bihar is second with a BPL population of 28.42 million people, and Madhya Pradesh third with 16.92 million poor people. West Bengal comes fourth with a BPL population of 16.90 million.

Told that Murshidabad was found to be the poorest district in India, West Bengal’s finance minister Asim Dasgupta said he was surprised. “I am concerned and would certainly take a close look at the report when it is published,” added Dasgupta.

Rural-urban divide

What is worse, 14 out of West Bengal's 18 districts are among the 100 poorest districts in India, despite 30-odd years of Left rule through which the state government had taken steps such as land reforms to alleviate rural poverty.

"Half of India's rural poor lives in 107 districts... and if you were to draw a straight line (on India's map) from Kanpur in the north to Kanyakumari in the south, you'd see that rural poverty is very high in the area to the right of it, or the east of the country," said Ghosh.

The opposite seems to be true for western India, where urban poverty is very high. Suburban Mumbai was found to be the worst in terms of urban poverty. With a BPL population of 1.22 million, suburban Mumbai is home to 1.9% of India's 64.2 million urban poor.

"When considering poverty in Suburban Mumbai, you shouldn't look at the absolute number of poor people alone. It could give you distorted view," says Ghosh. "What is more important in this case is the percentage of Mumbai's population which is poor—11.71%, and that isn't very high." Ghosh pointed out that cost of living in Maharashtra is very high, and the so-called poverty line for urban Maharashtra is Rs665.90, which is one of the highest in the country.

Being the financial capital of the country, Mumbai draws a lot of unskilled workers from across India. Though most of them earn more in Mumbai than they did in their villages, they continue to remain poor, explained Ghosh. "They end up living in slums, giving the city one the highest slum populations in the world," he added.

The ISI study, which also looks at various other factors such as health, housing, education and social infrastructure at large, found conditions in suburban Mumbai "not too bad", according to Ghosh. "It isn't the worst, you could say, but not the best either. Yet, it ranks as the poorest urban district in the country because Mumbai is the most populous city in India," says Ghosh. Jaipur comes second with a BPL population of 1.15 million people, which is 1.8% of the country's urban poor. Four districts of Maharashtra—Pune, Thane, Nagpur and Nashik—occupy the third to sixth spots.

Maharashtra is the worst in terms of urban poverty—12 of the 25 poorest districts in India are from it and it is the home to the highest number of urban poor in the country. It has been estimated that 32% of Maharashtra's urban population, or about 11.94 million people, are poor. Uttar Pradesh comes second with a BPL population of 9.76 million, which is 30.12% of the state's urban population. Madhya Pradesh, with 6 million poor people in urban areas, comes third.

Bidi making

Asked where she learnt to make bidis, the small hand-rolled cigarette made out of tobacco wrapped in a tendu leaf, Supriya Khatun drew a blank. After pondering for a while, the 15-year-old girl replied, "In my mother's lap."

The mainstay of the Murshidabad's economy now is rolling bidis. The industry employs some 1.1 million people in the district, making it the biggest production hub of bidis in the country. Poverty forces women in Murshidabad's Jangipur area, which is the parliamentary constituency of India's external affairs minister Pranab Mukherjee, to take up bidi rolling as a profession at a very young age, often at the cost of education.

The government-stipulated minimum wage for bidi workers is Rs41 for every 1,000 bidis rolled. But most workers complain that they earn Rs35 at the most because the balance is kept by the middlemen, who supply the raw materials and have a stranglehold on the trade. "For the amount of labour that we put in, the government-stipulated wage is a pittance. What is more, we don't even earn that much," says Najma Bibi, a 20-year-old bidi worker, who, on an average, earns around Rs2,000 a month to support her family.

At least 50% of Murshidabad's population, or 3-3.5 million people, are dependent on farming for a livelihood. But the yield is low because land holdings are extremely small and irrigation facilities are poor. According to the state government's records, 95% of farmers in the district own between 0.5-0.8 hectares. What is worse, only 12% of the total cultivable land of 402,295 hectares receives irrigation of any form. The density of population, too, is high in this Muslim-majority district. According to the central government's estimates, population density in Murshidabad is as high as 1,102 people per square km as against a national average of 590 people for rural areas.

"What increases the pressure on land and resources is migration of workers from neighbouring districts," said Ghosh, adding, "The neighbourhood theory of perpetual poverty is at the core of Murshidabad's backwardness... all its neighbours are among the 100 poorest districts of India." The erosion caused by River Padma has, since the 1930s, compounded the district's problems. It has taken a heavy toll on agriculture in the district, which is most visible in the Jalangi area. The changing course of the river has so far destroyed the homes and livelihood of at least 30,000 people in this area, according to locals. In 2004-06, a number of starvation deaths were reported from Jalangi, which was to be part of Bangladesh but remained with India because of a last minute change of plans. "I feel privileged to have lived this long. Many people (who would have been) of my age died long ago, and almost all those who remain are ailing or terminally ill," says 59-year-old Sekender Ali, a farmer displaced by the river. But because Ali managed to secure a tract of cultivable land a little far from the riverbank, he still earns enough to make ends meet.

But most of those who were displaced by the river couldn't buy land elsewhere. They have either left the district to work as industrial labourers or joined the illegal cross-border trade in food grains and livestock. That, according to locals, continues to thrive despite tightening of vigil along the border. "We have noticed that people living near the border have closer ties with Bangladeshis than with Indians. It is almost impossible to stop smuggling," said a state government official at Behrampore, Murshidabad's headquarters, on condition of anonymity because he didn't wish to be dragged into a controversy.

Silk

Silk has traditionally been a big business in Murshidabad. At least 50,000 families in Murshidabad are engaged in extraction of silk threads and production of fabrics. Though the silk produced in Murshidabad is fast gaining popularity beyond the state and abroad, workers complain they don't even earn the government-stipulated minimum wages. Prabir Banerjee, chief executive officer of the West Bengal Khadi and Village Industries Board, admitted that such complaints were rampant.

NREGA

Murshidabad's record in offering jobs under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, or NREGA, is quite poor. Government records show, in the current fiscal year till date, the district administration has offered only 15 days of employment per household, whereas the average for West Bengal is 19. Though the average for Murshidabad too might go up a bit in the post harvest season, which has just begun, the total number of jobs offered under NREGA in the district is surely going to decline because people seeking jobs have halved from the last financial year.

As many as 889,021 households have registered for employment under the Act, or obtained job cards, but in the current year, the number of families that have demanded jobs has declined sharply to 156,010. In the last financial year, 330,016 households had demanded jobs, and the administration had provided almost 16 days of employment per household.

"Last year (in 2008), almost everyone in our village had applied for 100 days of work under NREGA. But only half the applicants got any work at all and that too for a couple of days only. This has been going on year after year... so people prefer to move to other states," says Ali Halder, an unemployed resident of Paraspur village in Jalangi.

Utilization of NREGA funds too is quite low, and has declined from around 67% in the last two financial years, to 58% so far in the current year. This though is slightly ahead of the West Bengal average, which for the current fiscal year till date is 53%.

So far in 2008-09, only seven households in Murshidabad have received 100 days of work—the full quota—and even if the figure improves in the next couple of months, it would be lower than the 612 households that received the full quota of jobs in the last financial year.

Murshidabad has as few as 2,834 beds in government hospitals catering to a population of 5.86 million people. The situation is particularly poor in those areas of the district where bidi rolling is the main occupation. According to a study conducted by the non-governmental Voluntary Health Association of India, three out of four of the 4.4 million bidi workers in India suffer from

respiratory and uterine disorders, and tuberculosis has been found to be the most widely prevalent disease among them.

Though there are 1.1 million bidi workers in Murshidabad, there's only one dedicated hospital for them, and it is located in Tarapur, which is 35 km from Jangipur—the main bidi rolling area in the district. Because of the distance, more people seek medical advice from quacks than from doctors at the hospital, say locals.

"Accessibility is indeed an issue," admitted Asim Sarkar, the chief medical officer of the hospital at Tarapur. "But, I would say, mindset is as big a deterrent (as distance). People here don't want to give up their centuries-old beliefs and practices, which is why they prefer quacks."

Infrastructure at the Tarapur hospital is extremely deficient. It has 65 beds, but only seven doctors and as many nurses. "Posts for two doctors and seven or eight nurses are lying vacant because people refuse to come here," said an official with the hospital administration who refused to be named because he isn't authorized to speak to the press. "The government had plans of raising the number of beds in this hospital to 100, but it would be impossible to manage the hospital with the existing level of manpower," he added.

Doctors at the understaffed hospital are made to do a lot of administrative work and even evaluate applications for scholarships of school-going children of bidi workers. "This is what we are made to do all day," said a doctor, pointing towards a heap of application forms lying on his table. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he didn't want to pick a fight with the administration. "Where's the time to treat patients?"

The lack of government-owned healthcare facilities in the district forces bidi workers to seek treatment in private hospitals in Kolkata and other towns. Because most bidi workers can't afford treatment in private hospitals, they borrow from their employers, and more often than not fall into a perpetual debt trap, according to Mohammed Nijabur Rehman, who runs a pharmacy in Jangipur town.

The district's own records show only 31% of children up to the age of 14 have access to any form of primary education. There are only 4,051 primary schools in the district, yet the average literacy level in Murshidabad at 55% isn't bad compared to other backward districts in the country. Average literacy is, however, a little lower in the rural areas at 46.37%, according to latest government records.

Because of poverty, a large number of children drop out of school to take up jobs as bidi workers or silk weavers. But thanks to the initiatives of non-governmental organisations, a lot of parents have started resending their children to schools.

“I do not want to see my children rolling bidis like me. I have suffered from tuberculosis and don’t want my daughters go through the same suffering,” said Sufia Bibi, a 32-year-old bidi worker of Khaspara village in Jangipur, who has two daughters aged two and five.

Aveek Datta and Romita Datta , Reprinted from [Live Mint](#)

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