

The Socio-Economic History of Churni River in Nadia District of Colonial Bengal: A Review

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Abstract

Bengal is a river country. Nadia, one of the districts of Bengal, was also riverine. Rivers such as Bhagirathi, Padma, Jalangi, Mathabhanga, Yamuna, Ichamati, Churni, etc. can be mentioned. Churni River was an easy river route to East Bengal. Bishop Heber traveled to Dacca in 1824, using the Churni River as his route. In other words, because the communication system and the logistics of living were sufficient, *Shibnivas*, *Kayetpara*, *Ranaghat*, etc. Janapadas developed on the banks of the Churni River. As both banks of this river were populated, traders could safely send goods to Calcutta port through this river route. Even after the introduction of railways in Nadia in 1860, traders sent goods worth *lakhs* of rupees to Calcutta till 1903-04. But the navigability of the Churni river was reduced when the British built the railway bridge at *Kalinarayanpur* in 1903, and in 1942 the British rulers threw soil and boulders to strengthen the railway bridge at the source of the Ichamati and Churni rivers. In this situation, the trade on the Churni River route decreased. Due to easy communication and farming facilities, numerous Indigo factories were established on both banks of the Churni River. Iswarchandra Mustafi and Shambhunath Mukhopadhyay, *Birnagar's* zamindars, engaged in indigo cultivation in a vast area of the Churni river basin. These topics form the structure of this article.

Key-words: Bridge, Churni, Due, Janapada, Mustafi, Navigable, Route, Source, Zamindar.

Introduction:

Nadia district is made up of sediments carried by numerous rivers. Churni River is one of these rivers. The Churni River is not named in Raynell's map. But by looking at the map, the course of the Churni River can be seen. Kumar River used to supply or supply water to Mathabhanga River during Renel. Mathabhanga gave birth to two rivers near *Matiari* and *Shivanivas* in the course of Mathabhanga, or Kumar River. A stream goes eastwards with the name Kabadak. Another stream goes southwards past *Naranpur* via *Shibnivas*. Near *Naranpur*, the main stream

gives rise to another sub-stream. This new course swells straight, splits into two near Ranaghat, and falls into the Bhagirathi river at *Shibpur*.¹ There is no doubt that this is the ancient course of the Churni River. In fact, during Raynell's time, Churni was very small. Moreover, Raynell's understanding of this country's culture was limited. Therefore, although many small rivers like Churni were caught in his field survey, Churni could not write the name of the river due to ignorance of the name. That is, the Churni River existed before Rennell's survey began. However, a number of people have questioned whether the Churni River is actually a cut or whether it originated naturally. This time, the question revolves around whether the Churni River is a natural river or a cut.

Controversy Regarding the Origin of the Churni River:

Churni River is a natural river. There is no doubt about the natural origin of this river. But many researchers are of the opinion that Churni is not a river; it is a cut canal. Many scholars believe that when the *Bargi* invasions broke out in Bengal in the 18th century, Maharaja Krishnachandra established his second capital at Sibnivasa and dug canals there to facilitate transportation and security. Later, it transformed into a small river in a flood. This is how the Churni River appeared. But there are some problems with accepting this view. First, the Nawab of Bengal imprisoned Krishnachandra Roy for a debt and released him on a promise to pay it. His debt amounted to 22 lakh rupees.² A debt-ridden king could not afford to dig canals at great expense. Secondly, there was a headwind current flowing from the east at that place. The book '*Kshitish-bamshavali-Charit*' provides evidence of this. In this book, Dewan Kartikeyachandra Roy said that the place was already forested and surrounded by water. The reservoir that surrounded the area was similar in size to Kankana. Maharaja Krishnachandra cut a canal on the eastern side of this reservoir with the Mathabhanga river and another canal on the west with the Anjana river near Hanskhali. A 1000-cubit canal was cut across from Shibnivas. And in the west, the length of the canal was 3 miles.³ Then, when the canal met the headwaters of the Mathabhanga river and the Anjana river, it caused a lot of tides. Actually, the Krishnachandra Canal is a moat, not a river. The term "Nadi"(river) refers to the watershed of Mathabhanga, which was situated around Shibanivas, similar to Kankana from the east, and it was Shibanivas from Kankana who joined Anjana. Therefore, it can never be said that Churni River is a cut canal. Thirdly, a map of

Alivardi's time shows a river flowing next to Shibnivas.⁴ But its source is not identified. Moreover, Bishop Heber went to Dacca on the Churni river route through Ranaghat in 1824.⁵ In his account, Heber refers to the Churni River as a natural river. Moreover he has not mentioned anywhere that Churni River is a cut canal. He mentioned that the Churni River has been confused in two places. This river is straight, joins another river, and travels towards the Bay of Bengal. Hence it is proved that Churni River had its origin by natural means. Fourthly, there is logic behind the naming of the Churni River. Churni is an adjective meaning crusher or digger. Or crushing means one who advances. The name Churni is derived from the word '*Churnikrit*.' '*Churnikrit*' (in Bengali word) refers to the person who progresses through it.⁶ Churni refers to a person who navigates through crevices or the ground. The same applies to Churni River. Once upon a time, the Churni River emerged from the Mathabhanga River, splitting and crushing the soil as it proceeded with strong currents, thus gaining its name, Churni. Fifthly, like other rivers in Nadia, the slope of the Churni River also faces south-east. Therefore, we can say that Churni is a naturally formed river. This river was also one of the trade routes for traders from North-East India and Nadia. From this perspective, the socio-economic importance of the Churni River is immense.

Socio-economic Importance of Churni River:

The Churni River basin's environment was also very healthy. Shibnivas, on the banks of the Churni, was an abode of good health. King Krishnachandra, enchanted by its natural beauty, established his new capital, Shibnivas, here. Besides, Krishnachandra had a special passion for hunting, and his aim was unflinching. Once in search of game, he reached this place and, being impressed by the natural beauty of the river banks, named this place Shibnivas, and the name of the river is Kankana. When King Krishnachandra Roy built his residence, the Churni River was surrounded by a dense forest. In 1824, while travelling along the Churni River, Heber stopped to visit Shibnivas.⁷ According to Heber, the north bank of the Churni River has extensive forests and some pagoda houses.⁸ Ranaghat, on the banks of the Churni, was once considered a healthy place. It was surrounded by rivers. To the north was the Bachko River, to the south-east the Hangar River, and to the west the Churni River. Numerous trees covered the large tracts.⁹ Hanskhali was developed during the colonial period as a commercial town located on the banks

of the Churni River. Traders from different parts of India, including Nadia, used to exchange goods through the Churni River when there was a navigable waterway. Many common people also used this river for transportation. One could reach Damurhuda and Krishnanagar from Hanskhali after crossing the Churni.¹⁰ Due to the navigable waterway on one side and the easy communication route on the other, a large number of people began to flock to this area. Hanskhali gradually became a prosperous township (Janapad). The potential for income from such a richly populated area was enormous. Therefore, the British government established a toll station here.¹¹ Even after the introduction of the Sealdah-Kushtia railway in 1862, the importance of this toll station did not diminish. Everyone, from traders to ordinary people, used to cross the Hanskhali ferry to get to Bugula station. Later, when the Ranaghat-Lalgola railway was introduced, another reason for the decline in the importance of the Hanskhali trade centre was the decline in the navigation of the Churni River. Therefore, the importance of the Churni River was immense in the rise of Shibnivas, Hanskhali, and Ranaghat Janapadas.

On the other hand, several Indigo factories are developed in the Churni river basin. The Churni river basin area was very fertile and had commercial advantages, so there was a lot of indigo cultivation here. Hence, many English and native landlord classes participated in indigo production and trade. Ishwarchandra Mustaufi and Shambhunath Mukhopadhyay engaged in indigo cultivation in a vast area of the Churni river basin. Shambhunath Mukhopadhyay established an Indigo factory near *Kantaari Ghat* in Dharanagar village, on the banks of the Churni River near *Ula* village.¹² He built Indigo factories at many places on the banks of the Churni River. For instance, he established the '*wild kuthi*' (actually indigo factory) in Durgapukur, located west of Chakhar Bil and south of Chilte Canal, and the Indigo factory of Shambhunath Mukhopadhyay in Harinde, situated just east of *Ulai Chanditla* (the Goddess of smallpox), near the Churni River.¹³ Another notable Indigo factory of his was the *Nilkuthi* (indigo factory) of *Kadabil*, just near Churni, east of *Khar* Field. Ishwarchandra Mustaufi had two large Indigo factories in the Churni river basin. He had a *Nilkuthi* on the east side of the Churni River, as well as *Naghatar* Hut. Another *Nilkuthi* was located in *Chathimatla*, Paznau. The Mallik dynasty of Ranaghat was associated with indigo industry and trade.¹⁴ Geographically, Ranaghat was a favourable location for indigo cultivation. As a result, the Mallik dynasty became linked to the indigo manufacturing industry. Ranaghat is surrounded by the Churni River

in the west, the Bachko River in the north, and the Hangar River in the south and east. Ranaghat was born by the river, and the land surrounding it was very fertile. All crops, including indigo, were productive because of fresh alluvial soil cover.¹⁵ The communication system was good, as there were rivers, canals, and bils. Due to the favourable environment for indigo cultivation and the demand for indigo in the market, the Mallik clan of Ranaghat established Nilkuthi near the Churni. In 1253 BS, they made a lot of money by trading indigo.¹⁶ Just as traders brought financial prosperity to the Churni river basin by cultivating indigo, the government and traders also made significant profits through trade and communication.

There were ferries situated at several locations along the Churni River. One of them is the Ranaghat and Hanskhali ferry. The district board controlled the Ranaghat ferryboat, which plied from Ranaghat to Shantipur. The waterway from Ranaghat to Shantipur was one mile. The river was navigable, and the boat played all year round. However, during winter, the Churni River at Ranaghat was 7 feet deep. The river in this area was 250 feet wide. The district board earned Rs 4065 per annum from the Ranaghat ferry.¹⁷ On the other hand, the Hanskhali ferry maintained communication between Bagula and Sadar town, Krishnagar. This river course was also quite navigable. At the ferry, the river was six feet deep. And the width was 300 feet. The district board controlled this ferry, which earned 1650 rupees annually.¹⁸ The Churni River ferry's statistics in 1938 confirm two facts: 1. The Churni River was once quite wide. 2. Common people were quite dependent on this river. This river served as the hub for all forms of transportation and the movement of goods. That's why the District Board used to collect tolls from ferry users at Hanskhali and Ranaghat.

In 1813, the British started collecting the first tolls on the Nadia River, i.e., the Bhagirathi, Jalangi, and Mathabhanga rivers.¹⁹ There were total toll stations at four places along the rivers, namely Jangipur (Bhagirathi river), Nabadwip (Jalangi river), Krishnaganj (Mathabhanga river), and Hanskhali (Mathabhanga river).²⁰ It is worth mentioning that most commercial boats coming through the Mathabhanga River used to take the Churni River route to reach Calcutta port faster. On the way, traders stopped at Hanskhali toll station, where they had to weigh the boat and pay the toll. Here, the British mistakenly named the Churni River as the Mathabhanga River.

The Churni River was a crucial waterway for commercial transactions. According to the statistics from 1882–83, the Churni River was used to transport 1381136 maunds of goods. This implies that the total cost came to 497859 rupees. On the other hand, 63 thousand 966 mounds of goods were transported upstream on this river. The goods were transported for a total cost of one lakh 47 thousand 841 rupees.²¹ From 1888 to 1891, the transportation of goods on the Churni River increased. The Churni river route carried downstream 17 lakh 4 thousand 988 maunds of goods in 1888-89. This huge quantity of goods had a market value of Rs. 5475337. However, this year, a total of 557688 maunds of goods were transported upstream on this river. Its market value was Rs. 1760638.²² That is, the Churni River was one of the waterways for import and export trade for traders. Traders used to export indigo, jute, wheat, rice, linseed, mustard, sugar, silk, and tobacco to Calcutta port through this river route. In 1888-89, 503490 maunds of jute, 68606 maunds of wheat, 578411 maunds of paddy, 116340 maunds of linseed, 41050 maunds of mustard, 8281 maunds of sugar, and 558 maunds of tobacco were shipped to Calcutta port.²³ But from 1889–90, the export of goods through the Churni River began to decline. During this period, Calcutta port received 463639 maunds of jute, 54928 maunds of wheat, 449552 maunds of paddy, 100183 maunds of linseed, 65363 maunds of mustard, 9915 maunds of sugar, and 1275 maunds of tobacco. In 1890-91 and 1891-92, the port imported 1160056 and 667075 maunds of goods, respectively, with a market value of Rs. 3517868 and 2476029.²⁴ On the other hand, 612503 and 442412 maunds of goods were exported in 1890-91 and 1891-92, respectively. Their respective market values were Rs. 1780379 and Rs. 1505338.²⁵ The Churni route sent a substantial amount of merchandise to the port of Calcutta in 1892-93. The Churni River route imported and exported 568181 maunds and 380395 maunds of goods during this time.²⁶ However, the construction of the railway bridge over the Churni River at Kalinarayanpur in 1903-04 destroyed this shipping trade.²⁷ Then, during the second world war in 1942, when the British threw boulders and souls at the sources of the Churni and Ichamati rivers, the water supply in the river decreased.²⁸ Following this river, trade became impossible. This time, we will explore the primary cause of this unusual shift in the Churni River.

Evolution of the Churni River:

Churni River did not change in a day. As a result of long-term evolution, today it has transformed into a narrow, rugged river. According to the H.G. Ricks report, many changes have been organised in the rivers of Nadia district for a long time.²⁹ As the Ichamati was once an important river. But after the Churni River emerges from the Mathabhanga River and falls into the Hooghly River towards the southwest, its importance is lost. Therefore, it can be said that the Churni River originates from the river formed by fresh alluvial soil. But when the origin of this river is not known exactly, The existence of this river at the time of Raynell proves that the Churni River originates from the Mathabhanga River long before 1781.³⁰ At the beginning of the colonial rule, the Churni River was quite abundant. But changes can be seen in the course of this river. However, the evolution of the naturally crisscrossed river courses has not had much impact on society. However, the establishment of the railway at the Churni river's mouth in 1860 marked the beginning of its decline.³¹ Then in 1903, when the railway bridge over the Churni River was established at Kalinarayanpur, the lower flow was finally blocked. Under these circumstances, large commercial vessels ceased to navigate this river. However, more and more trade was still carried out by small boats. In fact, changes have been noticed in the Churni River since 1860. The Churni River's water flow remained active as long as it maintained its connection with the Mathabhanga River. A map from 1890 shows the origin of the Churni River from the Mathabhanga River near Krishnaganj. The flow of water in the river was quite good.³² In fact, due to the continuous flow of water in the Mathabhanga river, Churni was able to retain its navigability even after 1903. The water flow in Churni was good until 1911–12.³³ However, water flow in Churni decreased from 1915–16.³⁴ This was caused by a decrease in the water flow in the Mathabhanga River. The map from 1915-16 illustrates that the shift in Mathabhanga's headwaters reduced the water flow in the Churni River, causing the silt layer to descend.³⁵ However, from 1915 to the 1940s, the Churni River had a small flow of water. However, in 1942, when boulders were thrown to strengthen the Pabakhali railway bridge between Ichamati and Churni sources, the Churni river could not return to its former rhythm.³⁶ The question is whether the ruling class took any initiative to channelize the Churni River. The ruling class earned a lot of money from the Churni River due to naval duties, as we have already shown. For this reason, they took the initiative to keep the flow of water in the Churni River unbroken. For instance, in 1942, they erected a guardwall towards Pabakhali to ensure the Churni River's water supply remained intact.³⁷ However, this system was unable to sustain the water flow in the

Churni River over an extended period. However, the attempt to solely rely on guard walls to increase water levels in the Churni river, without crossing the confluence of sources, has proven to be a failed venture. In other words, it was necessary to remove the silt from the Churni River's mouth earlier and then construct guard walls at the appropriate locations. Along with these futile efforts, the mistaken construction of a railway bridge over the Churni River by the British was also responsible for the deterioration of the Churni River. On the other hand, if the Churni river deteriorates, the river will become polluted. Cholera occurs in riverside residents who drink contaminated river water.³⁸ This is entirely the responsibility of the colonial ruling class.

Conclusion:

So it can be said that the Churni River was the medium of easy communication and trade during the early British period to the second half of the Nineteenth century in Nadia. After that, the navigability of the Churni River started to decrease gradually, and the shipping trade in this river decreased. Although there are natural reasons behind the deterioration of the Churni River, the British railway bridge was at the root of its deterioration. But the key to rural health and development is the river system. If people interfere in it, the river and the rural economy will gradually decline. A cholera epidemic consumed the riverside inhabitants. Actually, the root of the decline of the Churni River was the excessive greed and lust of the British. Looking at it from this point of view, it can be said that the Churni River becomes a canal when the ruling class rejects the normal river system and joins the river regime. As a result, the river has now dried up and is very thin. Not only that, the Churni River is full of water hyacinths from its source to its estuary. The current length of this river from source to mouth is 53 km. There is no water at the source except during the rainy season. Moreover, the effluents from the factories of 'Keru & Company' (1939) in Bangladesh have polluted the river. As a result, the livelihood of people who depend on the river has come under question. That is, it is clear to us that one of the elements of the natural environment, rivers, canals, and *bils*—is inextricably linked with human society. If he is damaged, human society faces extreme losses. The degradation of the Churni River is a big proof for us. This example teaches us to be responsible for the environment for the next generation, as it is entirely the responsibility of colonial rule and the recent ruling class.

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