
State, Society and Disaster:1874 Cyclone in Eastern Part of Colonial India

Lakshmi Kanta Das¹

¹Research Scholar

Email-lakshmikantapu@gmail.com

Abstract:*The present paper discusses the 1874 cyclone, officially known as the Midnapore-Burdwan cyclone, and tries to give a critical analysis of its impact on the society and economy of colonial Bengal. Hence, the primary focus of this study would be on the magnitude of damages of crops and commodities done by this cyclone in the occurrence of heavy rainfall which caused widespread floods in the affected areas and beyond. Although the center of the cyclone had passed over the districts of Burdwan and Midnapore, however, a large part of Bengal, especially districts situated on the periphery of the cyclone (such as 24 Parganas, Jessore, Beerbhum, Bankura, and Hooghly, Rajshahi, Maldah, Rungpore) had also suffered from the devastations.*

Keywords:*Colonial Bengal, Cyclone, Disaster, Economy, Disaster, State, Society*

Date of Submission: 22-10-2023

Date of Acceptance: 16-11-2023

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Introduction

At a point when the world wide covid19 pandemic threatens the very survival of human civilization, severe storms and cataclysmic cyclones are also giving a serious threat hand in hand. The pandemic has drastically changed the way of our lives in recent history. Worldwide economic crisis along with six million deaths, due to covid19, gather together became a worse nightmare in the known history of calamity. At this point reputed world magazines are claiming that 2020 might have been the worst year in human history in terms of natural disaster. However, the claim is rather a bit of unhistorical if not unscientific, since small pox, bubonic plague,

State, Society and Disaster: 1874 Cyclone in Eastern Part of Colonial India

famine of 1776, 1877 killed more people and destroyed much more than this. Nevertheless, one thing is crystal clear i.e. natural calamity has always been the reason for destruction of great civilization whether it is Indus or Mesopotamian civilization; natural calamity occupied the center stage.

Speaking of natural disaster in colonial Bengal, cyclone has always been the principle reason of destruction ever since it has been recorded in Bengal in 1737¹. The first ever recorded cyclone of 1737 (see, Chakrabarti, 2012-13) left an eminent danger on the economy as well as social lives of the Bengal province by killing 300,000 people at once (see, Chakrabarti, 2012-13 p. 11). Major studies have revealed that in colonial India, the rebuilding of economy following natural disaster greatly depends on market and its flourishing of trade² (Roy; 2008). To this contrast this paper will contribute on the field by discussing the 1874 cyclone and its impact on colonial economy of Bengal in general; damaged goods, crops and floods in particular. Further, it tries to understand the mode of colonial taxation, production and labor migration happened due to this devastating natural calamity.

Nevertheless, the 1874 cyclone was accompanied with heavy rain which caused massive inundation and floods in several districts, bringing about serious damages to crops. Boats were sunk and commodities had been destroyed by the rising water. The storm initially hit the areas of Balasore and Orissa. It was reported that 'no damage was done in this neighborhood except a few walls undermined by the heavy driving rain... there it was more of a heavy rain-storm than anything else. At Jajepore it was simply bad weather.'³ It was recorded that 'no trees were overturned. No houses unroofed. The storm therefore was not heavy.'⁴ In the center of the district the only damage done was the spoiling of the rice crop in flower at the time, and the threshing out of that which was ripe. Both these crops are fortunately insignificant in extent and the main crop remains uninjured. The only portion of the district falling within the direct track of the cyclone was the two northernmost police station jurisdictions of Baliapal and Jellasure, excepting the Futiaabadpergunnah on the west of the Sooburnrekha, where trees and houses have suffered damage but not of a severe character. In Baliapal and Jellasure, the ravages of the storm have been almost indescribably disastrous. It is unanimously described as having raged in its intensity from noon till midnight.⁵ Damage caused by the late cyclone in the northern pergunnahs of Balasore, had returned with information that *thanas* Baliapal and Jellasure, bordering on Midnapore had suffered severely and the population were exposed as houseless and the country was absolutely desolated. The Collector recommended that the next installment of Government revenue due from all temporarily-settled estates in the devastated *thanas* may be suspended.⁶ The main rice crops which were still immature, it was hoped that, would not be extensively damaged. There had been constant showers up to date, and the rainy season being unusually prolonged would give even the latest planted rice time to mature and afford every prospect of good cold-weather crops. The past year had been one of plenty and high prices and under such circumstances there ought not to be any immediate of the people falling into severe distress through they had suffered much loss and inconvenience by destruction of their houses

State, Society and Disaster: 1874 Cyclone in Eastern Part of Colonial India

and property. Cyclone damage had been most severe on the high lands of Pergunnah Kamarda Chour but is confined mainly to houses and cattle. In the low lands of Pergunnah Bhograi excessive rainfall had destroyed much of the peoples' rice and left their hopes of about one-fourth crop. This had been seriously damaged and houses and cattle lost during the cyclone. The rice crops, particularly such as were ripe or in flower suffered but the proportion thus lost to the entire crop was believed by the Collector to be very insignificant and the standing rice in the vicinity of Baliapal was found to be in fine condition and on the higher lands which seldom yield a full crop were expected to give a full outturn.⁷

In Burdwan, The damage done in the town was very great indeed. The tower of the church, the portico of the Maharajahs palace, and a very large number of *kutch* houses, had been blown down. Thatched houses were enraged very generally, and some of the Government offices and Europeans houses, including the Circuit Houses, have lost doors and windows. The telegraph posts had been blown down in all directions.⁸ A number of large trees forming the avenue along the Grand Trunk Road from the *cutheries* to the church and race-course had been blown down. A number of native thatched huts in exposed places were blown down, but the houses in the town of Burdwan suffered in a less degree as they protected one another. The Dilkoosha palace and menagerie also suffered and a large tree falling across one of the bear pits four small bears escaped and added to the terrors of the villages.⁹ The earthen embankment that connected the masonry at the Banka anicut with the side of the nulla was carried away, as it was apprehended, but the masonry of the work stood in a manner which does credit to the contractor who built it. The flood in the Banka has completely subsided.¹⁰ The number of houses destroyed and of these of which thatches were blowing off as also of the number of trees fallen appears large towards the eastern part of this sub-division than towards the western part.¹¹ The crops had suffered considerably from the storm and heavy rains of the 16th. Some of the *Kaleshaus* crop which was ripe and cut and kept in the fields, was washed away and of those that stood on the ground a considerable portion was shaken off and damaged. The stalk of the early *amun* crop was also suffered, and the blossoms had been partly injured. The sugarcane plants fell down and were injured. Much destruction of property took place throughout the district; but, the loss of life was much less than might have been expected. The Banka, Darkessur, and Bhagiruthee overflowed their banks, but the floods of the first named rapidly subsided.¹² The area of the greatest destruction was from Pannaghur in the west to Mymaree in the east and from Cutwa in the north to Gourhatty in the south the greater part of the district. The inquiries made on this head show that the paddy which was just in ear at the time of the storm has been damaged more or less everywhere, and in some places very considerably. But the *amun* crop in general has not suffered, and has on the country materially benefited from the heavy rainfall.

In the district of Midnapore, the injury done to the trees and building in the town had been properly attended to the removal of fallen trees and houses. Large quantities of grain had been destroyed by submersion, and that 'Government food- relief was urgently called for.' At Baliaghya bazaar a few shops were swamped by the rising of the khall and some thousands of

State, Society and Disaster: 1874 Cyclone in Eastern Part of Colonial India

maunds of rice injured; but this grain had all been collected for exportation, and the loss of paddy and rice which may have been intended for local consumption has not exceeded at the outside 2 per cent. From Chandra outpost the sub-inspector reported that—‘Chandra outpost, where the cyclone was not felt, about 14 *annas*, or about seven – eighths, of the mud built houses [had] been blown down.’¹³ The loss of stored again was estimated at between one-fourth and half of the stock. The sugarcane was reported to have been much injured and the canal had been somewhat damaged.

Half of the houses have been totally destroyed, and about one-eighth has not experienced any damage. The stock of grain has not been damaged. People experienced the shock of an earthquake during the storm. The standing crop has not been much damaged. An increase of fever is reported. No apparent damage to stored grain. There occurred partial damage to the standing crops. Sugarcane and paddy appeared to have suffered much. The roads have been somewhat damaged. Station and outpost building have also suffered. About three eighths of the houses have been destroyed, and about half have been unroofed and considerably damaged. Partial loss of stored grain had been taken place. About one-fourth of the standing crops were reported to have been damaged. Kasiari and Beldah outpost have been partially damaged.¹⁴ From Salbunnyit was reported that about 13 *annas* of the houses in the jurisdiction had blown down, but there had been no loss in the stored grain. Although the rice and sugarcane had been somewhat damaged, but there was no epidemic. In Sabhangit was ascertained on inquiry that one-fourth of the stored grain had been damaged. The rice crops throughout 40 villages which have been flooded will, it is supposed, be irrecoverably gone. The station and outpost building have been much damaged, and will require to be reconstructed. In Daspore little or no grain stored in the limits of this police station. The sugarcane plantations and cold weather crop has somewhat suffered. Some slight damage to the Government road. The station building will require entirely new roofs, and Sonakhali outpost house will have to be reconstructed, owing to the damage sustained during the cyclone.

Different parts of Bengal had witnessed varied quantity of rainfall, recorded at several stations. C. E. Buckland had given an account of rainfall in different districts of Bengal. Despite of living in a comparatively distant spot the district of Moorshedabad had witnessed more rain than the district of Burdwan, and the town of Berhampore had also witnessed considerable fall of rain along with the district of Rangpur.¹⁵ Thus it can be argued that, the cyclone had not been accompanied with equal quantity of rainfall which was neither dependent on the vicinity or proximity of the centre of the cyclone from the place. Buckland was of the opinion that ‘a large number of boats, with their cargoes were more or less injured on the river Hooghly.’¹⁶ Different quantity of rainfall coupled with increased water level of the rivers had produced floods of varied intensity and of unequal violence.

High standing crops such as jute, hemp mulberry and sugar – cane have of course been much injured. The people say that all rice which was coming into grain with also suffer severely this may be but all over the south or rice producing portion of the year a late one and aman crop is

State, Society and Disaster: 1874 Cyclone in Eastern Part of Colonial India

this year a late one and will probably be more benefitted than injured. The abundant rainfall supplied with water to the end of the season and if it reduces some crops from 14 to 10 *annas* it will raise other from 10 to 14 *annas* or even 16 *annas*. Unfortunately the irrigated crops which were the most important to Government were precisely those which being most forward will suffer the most. Complete arrangements have been made to test the irrigated and unirrigated crops actually harvested and this with will now be the more necessary to enable us to judge what truth there is in such excuses as will be made. But the best I fear that the unirrigated crops will now be of least as good, if not better than those irrigated and thus fresh discouragement thrown in the way of future years. This is a point which ought not to be overlooked in weighing the value to the people of irrigation. It years of drought such as last year occasionally occur in which the value of irrigation is immense so also in Midnapore do cyclone occasionally occur in which years the more backward the crop the better its chance of escape.

The more advanced of the paddy crops, viz. those which were usually reaped in the month of Kartik had suffered much. This class of crop was known here by the name of *jate*. The late crop, viz. the *hoymantik*, did not suffer by the cyclone. At the time of the cyclone few of these latter crops had given out their ears; and even in cases where the ears had come out, very few of these embryo ears were sufficiently large at the time of cyclone to get any injury. But as regards the *jate* crops, some again were half out of the ears of the corn. All these crops will suffer damage in proportion as they had advanced in the stage of their growth at the time of cyclone.¹⁷ The mulberry trees had been all stripped of their leaves, but none of them that I saw in my tour had fallen down. These trees are now giving out fresh leaves.¹⁸ *Rubbee* crops had not as yet been sown, but those that had been sown, such as *til*, were destroyed.¹⁹ At Chandrakone most of the houses were frail, and the weaver class could not repair them for last two or three years on account of their distress, caused by famine and malaria, and hence perhaps the damage was so great there. Trees could not find deep root in the laterite soil and magnificent mangoes, peepuls and others trees with their roots spreading horizontally over many yards of ground have been torn up by the roots dashed to the ground. All the labors of years in arboriculture have been rendered futile in a single night.

It was reported from Beerbhoom and Bankoora that more advanced rice crops had been injured, but not much.²⁰ At Suri isolated groups of trees were attacked and blown down, as if they had come under a cannonade, while other groups of trees close to them were uninjured.²¹ The Collector of Bankoora was of the opinion that 'damage done was slight.' A few trees were blown down, and some of the crop injured to a certain extent.²²

Most of the trees were blown down in the district of Hooghly jurisdictions are lying to the north-west, indicating that the wind blew hardest from the south-east. As far as the police report was concerned as many as forty-three boats laden with jute, muster, salt, rice, and miscellaneous cargoes were wrecked in the Hooghly River during the night of the 15th October between Gootiparah on the north and Ootterparah to the south; five boats were also wrecked in the

State, Society and Disaster: 1874 Cyclone in Eastern Part of Colonial India

Damoodah. The heavy rain that fell has been of the greatest value to the *amun* rice, and will prove most beneficial to the potatoes and other cold weather crops.

Many branches of trees (some of considerable size) were broken, but only two of three of the numerous take trees in the station have been uprooted. A few houses have been blown down; but the high growing crops, such as sugarcane and urhur, suffered more than anything else. Til, particularly, was much damaged. On the whole, however, there is doubt that the mischief has been less than was anticipated.²³ It was accompanied at intervals with heavy falls of rain; and it was heard that this and the strong gusts of wind would have seriously injured the *amun* rice crop, which in some places had already come into ear. These apprehensions, however, were happily not fulfilled; for in no part of the district was any portion of the crops injured and the only damage done was uprooting of a few trees principally plantain here and there and the destruction of a few huts.²⁴ In Jessore the wind was rather strong, but no injury to lives or boats in rivers or in localities comprised in the sub-division has been heard of.²⁵

It was declared that there was no cyclone in the district of Malda, though the 15th and 16th were very stormy, so much so that a good number of trees were blown down in *inthana* Gomastapore towards the south of the district, as well as a few huts, and six salt boats were sunk in the Mohanunda. No great damage resulted from the storm, and what damage was done was more than compensated for by the benefit the rice crops derived from the rain.²⁶

Many houses and their bamboo enclosures have been blown down. Some five boats laden with jutes and anchoring at the mouth of the mouth of the Teesta near Kalmee, have been overturned and foundered. No loss of or any such serious accidents took place.²⁷ The velocity was not observed but it could not have been very great as the damage done was very little. Except a few branches of trees and here and there a week-rooted tree nothing was laid down nor was any damage done to any property. It seems that this town was on the extreme left border of the path of the cyclone.²⁸

A number of fine trees were uprooted in the station of the district of Rajshahi, and many *kutch*a houses in the town were blown down or damaged. It is reported that about 100 boats were sunk at the ghats, but many were subsequently raised. The Collector of Rajshahi had reported that slight damage was done to the rice crops, but the ratur and sugarcane suffered more. The tobacco crop and cold weather vegetables have been irreparably damaged. It seems that this town was on the extreme left border of the passage of the cyclone.²⁹ In the district of Moorshedabad, the effects of the cyclone were noticeable in the destruction of human life, of cattle and the sinking of boats and destruction of houses and in the injury caused to the mulberry, sugarcane, *til* and *chillicrops* and to the advanced portion of the winter rice-crop while the backward portion and the late transplantations were very greatly benefitted by the heavy rain.

The damage caused to houses and other property and to the minor crops, was to be regretted, especially during a year of such scarcity and pressure, the great benefit caused to a considerable part of the most important crop of the year must not be forgotten in estimating the effects of the late cyclone.³⁰

State, Society and Disaster: 1874 Cyclone in Eastern Part of Colonial India

Conclusion

The above description has outlined the critical condition of economic lives of Colonial Bengal due to the destruction of crops, houses and property. Nevertheless, colonial authority did influence the resource distribution in these hours of argnet need. Since in the context of Bangladesh in recent years Sharmin Afroz, Rob Cramb and Clemens Grünbühel have argued that the root causes of vulnerability are embedded in the socio-political structures and processes that determine access to resources and influence in Bangladeshi society (Afroz, Sharmin; Cramb, Rob; and Grünbühel, Clemens; 2018). As it has been pointed out above description that a large number of houses were unroofed and demolished by the violent spread of the cyclone, the economic life of the poorer section came on the verge of catastrophic disaster. To this Gosh argues that labor became scarce as their individual recovery required a considerable span of time and money (Ghosh, 2016-17 p. 66). Even though some amount of benefit achieved due to the sufficient rain fall in specific areas for certain crops, however, large scale destruction of crops and stored grain had also resulted from the severe forces of the storm. The cyclone had brought about huge quantity of water with it in form of rain that caused serious inundations which ultimately brought about floods. Large scale spread of water covered the agricultural filed under water, which was sometime considered by the Collectors and other officials as beneficial to the standing crops or for the future crops. On the other hand, it had been already observed that floods had destroyed a considerable amount of standing crops and stored grain. Damages to the houses and property provided a serious blow to the poor inhabitants of the region. However, there was widespread ambiguity and confusion in the official circle about the exact amount of loss of property and houses suffered by the victims as cost to the destructive cyclone. Damages of bridges and embankments provided a lasting blow to the overall pattern of water systems and irrigation which was collapsed as a result of excessive floods and inundations.

Notes & References

¹Though the fact is that there is a fierce debate regarding the first tsunami or cyclone in the Indian Ocean in recorded history (See, Chakrabarti, 2012-13); Professor Sugata Bose argues that the first modern tsunami¹ took place in August 27, 1883 whereas Professor Ranjan Chakrabarti considers the Calcutta Cyclone of October 11, 1737 as the first cyclone/tsunami in the recorded history. This debate was also cited by the Professor Tirthankar Gosh in his article (See, Ghosh, 2016-17, p. 67).

² See for instance Roy's work on it where he argues, based on five episodes from colonial India, that between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century, the response to disasters changed from laissez-faire to more state intervention (see, Roy, 2008).

³W. G. Willson, *Report of the Midnapore and Burdwan Cyclone of the 15th and 16th of October 1874*, The Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1875, p. 16. (Hereafter *The Report of the 1874 Cyclone*).

State, Society and Disaster:1874 Cyclone in Eastern Part of Colonial India

p. 45.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵ From T. Norman, ESQ., Acting Collector at Balosore to The Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Financial Department, Statistics, collection no—4-47\48, No.696, dated Balasore, the 30th October,1874, Proceedings of the Hon'ble Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, January, 1875, West Bengal State Archives (WBSA).

⁶ From T. E. Ravenshaw, ESQ., Commissioner of the Orissa Division to The Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Lower Provinces, collection no.4—43, No. 264. Dated Cuttack, the 29th October 1874, WBSA.

⁷ From T. E. Ravenshaw, ESQ., Commissioner of the Orissa Division to The Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Lower Provinces, collection no. 4—44\45, No. 320, dated Cuttack, the 16th December 1874, WBSA.

⁸ From E.H. Whinfield, ESQ., Offg. Collector of Burdwan, to The Commissioner of Burdwan, collection no.4-2, Dated Burdwan, the 17th October 1874, WBSA.

⁹ From C. T. Buckland, ESQ, Commissioner of Burdwan to The Secretary to the Government of Bengal with Lieutenant Governor on tour, collection no. 4-7, No. 339, dated Burdwan, the 26th October 1874.

¹⁰ J. C. K. Peterson, *Bengal District Gazetteer: Burdwan*, The Bengal Secretarial Book Depot, Calcutta, 1910, p. 99.

¹¹ W. G. Willson, *The Report of the 1874 Cyclone*,p-59.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵ C. E. Buckland, *Bengal under the Lieutenant Governors: A Narrative of the Principal Events and Public Measures during Their Periods of Office from 1854 to 1898, Vol. II*, S. K. Lahiri& Co., Calcutta, 1901, p. 621.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷From Mohanda Gupta, Deputy Magistrate to The Magistrate of Midnapore, collection no.4—8\9, No, 579, dated Midnapore, the 9th November 1874, WBSA.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰From R. D. Him, ESQ., Offg. Collector of Beerbhoom to The Secretary of the Government of Bengal, Financial Department, collection-4-18, No. 909, dated Soory, the 28th October 1874.

²¹L.S.S.Omalley, '*Bengal District Gazetteers: Birbhoom*',The Bengal Sec by, The Bengal Secretarial Book Depot, Calcutta,1910,p-62-63.)

²²From W. R. Larminie, ESQ., Offg. Collector of Bankoora to The Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Statistical Department, collection-4-19, No. 1T, dated Bankoora, the 5th November 1874.

²³ From C. C. Stevens, ESQ., Collector of Nuddea to The Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Financial Department, collection—4-21/22, No. 1327G, dated Kishnaghur, the November 1874, WBSA.

²⁴ From F.B. Peacock, ESQ., Collector of the 24 Pergunnahs to The secretary to the Government of Bengal, collection—4 -25, No. 1346, dated Camp Kanchrapara, the 26 November 1874, WBSA

State, Society and Disaster:1874 Cyclone in Eastern Part of Colonial India

²⁵ From A .Smith, ESQ., Collector of Jossore to The Assistant Secretary to the government of Bengal, collection no—4 -23\24, No. 273, dated Jessore, the 13th November 1874, WBSA.

²⁶From F. Wyer, EsQ., Officiating Collector of Maldah to The to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, in the Statistical Department, ,[Collection No. 4- 29/30, No. 534, dated Maldah, the 29th October 1874, WBSA.

²⁷W. G. Willson, *The Report of the 1874 Cyclone*, p. 77.

²⁸From Baboo Krishto Dhone Ghose, MD, Civil Surgeon of Rungpore to The Magistrate of Rungpore, Collection No. 4. – 38/39, No. 402, dated Rungpore, the 31st October 1874, WBSA.

²⁹From W. H. Doyly, EsQ., Collector of Rajshahye, to the Assistant Secretary to The Government of Bengal, Statistical Department, Collection No.4-31/32, No. 2904, dated Beaulah, the 29th October 1874.

³⁰W.G.Willson,*The Report of the 1874 Cyclone*, p-71.

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