

The 1864 Cyclone and Its Aftermath in Midnapore District: A Historical Analysis of a Disaster

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The district of Midnapore was always prone to cyclonic storms owing to its location at the northwest angle of the Bay of Bengal. However, it was in 1864 that the intensity of the storm and the height of the storm-wave were extremely high. The article not only exposes the dreadful distress of the people during the disaster but also draws to our attention, the apathy and indifference of the colonial government towards the survivors.

Keywords: Midnapore, Cyclone, Storm, Calamity, Disaster, Epidemic.

I

The 1864 cyclone was one of the worst calamities, of its kind, in British Midnapore. Never before had such a calamity of so much ferocity struck the district. And in terms of ravages also, perhaps none of the recorded cyclones was comparable to those of 1864.

This article is a case study of the 1864 cyclone in Midnapore district. Generally, the description of this great devastation in the British period is primarily confined to the official publication of the district gazetteers.¹ However, in these gazetteers we can notice only the account of deaths of living beings and damages of properties especially crops and houses. But nothing has been said about the survivors and their indescribable sufferings. The contemporary local historians were also of the same views and depicted the scenario in the same way. Bhagabati Charan Pradhan, Panchanan Roy Kavyatirtha and Trailokya Nath Rakshit have mentioned severe devastation caused by this cyclone in Mahishadal, Daspur and Tamluk respectively.² Jogeshchandra Bosu has described the ruins in the south western portion of Midnapore district in his book *Medinipurer Itihas*.³ In 'Khejuri Bandar',⁴ Mahendranath Karan has described the 1864 cyclone and its aftermath in Khejuri. He thinks that the prosperity of Khejuri came to a complete end as a result of it. Indeed, all these descriptions are only the summarized narratives of the physical aspects of this disaster in the different parts of the district and, therefore, quite inadequate to make a critical review on the human aspects of the calamity. Later on, the work of Arabinda Samanta makes a difference in this context. Samanta's work provides an analytical picture of destruction and creation in human society against the background of this disaster. Although his article⁵ demands a significant contribution on the human aspects of calamities in the whole coastal West Bengal in the late 19th and 20th century, it leaves the scope for the study of the devastating impacts of the 1864 cyclone in Midnapore district wide open. An extraordinary attempt to apply systematic social science concepts in the study of disasters has been taken by Tirthankar Roy in his article 'State, society and market in the aftermath of natural disasters in colonial India: A preliminary exploration'.⁶

Roy's work, covering the period from 1864 to 1935, provides an analytical picture on the acute distress that arose in Calcutta due to the 1864 cyclone without any detailed discussion about its effects in Midnapore district. In very recent period, one of the worth-mentioning and invaluable volumes on the study of environmental history, entitled *Critical Themes in Environmental History of India*⁷, has been edited by Ranjan Chakrabarti, an eminent environmental historian. It has definitely helped to raise some prime issues and attempt an interpretation of them on a comparative scale. Though the article 'Cyclones of East Coast of India'⁸, in the above-mentioned volume, reflects an analytical approach to the 1864 disaster, its main focus is on Calcutta. So, the study of this great cyclone, affecting Midnapore, about which little is known, is, therefore, highly desirable.

The present discussion on 1864 cyclone deals with mainly two things. First, it briefly analyses its formation and progress; and also its landfall in the district. The article shows how the violence of the associated wind force and high storm waves made this cyclone a terrific and tragic incident in the history of Midnapore. In this context, the study seeks to examine both the physical and human impacts of the cyclone and address the crises which were created in the society. Second, the discussion seeks to address several issues regarding what help the survivors received from the state and the society, how the colonial administration handled the crisis. To understand these, the question of efficiency of government's relief operations towards the disaster is to be considered. The study seeks to address some more issues regarding the effect of the epidemic. What steps had the authority taken to check the epidemic? Why did so many people perish? Now the discussion, that I am going to take up, seeks to address the prime debate regarding the disaster: Was the 1864 disaster simply a 'natural' disaster? Or did it become more fatal by 'man-made' factors? Finally, the study seeks to address some questions regarding how the state made a defense mechanism for such cyclones in future, what the long-term consequence of this disaster was within this district. All these are good reasons to revisit the cyclone of 1864.

II

It was around the end of September and the beginning of October 1864. The south-west monsoon was about to retreat; the north-east monsoon was yet to commence. The time was also the season of storms. The weather station at Calcutta was recording high air pressures, high degree of humidity, temperature and as usual seasonal winds mainly from the south. These observations were recorded uninterruptedly only during the preceding part of the storm and were then discontinued partially due to the damage of the self-registering equipment and because of the observers who departed from the observatory house under the anxiety of its destruction by the imminent cyclone.

The following table exhibits the anemometric, barometric, thermometric and hygrometric readings of the government observatory at Calcutta for the given dates:

	September				October	
	27 th .	28 th .	29 th .	30 th .	1 st .	
Anemometer (wind direction)	SW.	WSW.	Var. Sy.	Var.	Var. S. Ey.	
Barometer*	29.882	29.828	29.817	29.833	29.836	Mean of day.
Thermometer#	84.4	85.8	84.8	85.8	84.9	Mean of day.
Hygrometer	80	78	80	74	78	Saturation being 100.

*The means calculated in the surveyor general's office from hourly observations of a Newman's standard barometer.

#All data were recorded in degrees Fahrenheit.

Source: Gastrell, J.E. and H.F. Blanford, 1866, *Report on the Calcutta Cyclone of the 5th October 1864*, Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, pp.1-8.

The cyclone vortex was formed by the noon of 2nd October to the west of the Northern Andamans. On the same day the *Moneka*, which was at about 12°28½' north latitude and 89°53' east longitude, i.e., westward of Port Blair, had been expecting bad weather and during the afternoon saw the sky very dark and lowering, towards the north and north north-east. From the same quarter there came a high rolling sea. Sheets of lightning flashed in the north north-west, barometer began to fall and the wind blew in blasts from the west. 'Ship pitching, bows under', Loftus, the captain, wrote in his log.⁹ The phenomenon of the initial cyclone was also recorded in the logs of the *Conflict* and the *Golden Horn*. The centre of the cyclone had passed over or very nearby both ships at about midnight of the 2nd.

The direction of the storm greatly altered on the 3rd of October when the cyclone took a northward turn. It passed over the *Proserpine* steamer, proceeding from Calcutta towards Akyab, at midnight. The commander experienced every indication of bad weather. Lightning flashed eastwards. The waves rose to peaks. 'Barometer falling', wrote the commander.¹⁰ It had fallen 0.10 inches from noon. The *Clarence*, sailing from Madras to Calcutta, hadn't been influenced by the cyclone until the morning of the 4th. 'Every appearance of being near a cyclone', captain Watson wrote in his log at 10 a.m. 'Wind veered to north, hard squalls; very heavy rain and confused sea on', he wrote at noon.¹¹

Thus, the descriptions from these logs helped us to trace the progress of the cyclone from the 2nd of October, the day when the first indications of its existence were noticed towards the west of Northern Andaman, up to the 4th, when the centre moved north towards Hijili at an average rate of 10 to 11 miles per hour and the fury of the storm was felt chiefly throughout the north of the Bay from midnight.

III

Now it began with its destructive course over lower Bengal.

Contai

The executive engineer of Hijili division, J O'Flaherty reported to the government of the barometric reading of Contai. The storm came by the dawn of 5th October. From about 8 o'clock to the lull, i.e., ¼ to 10, the readings of the aneroid barometer fell from 28.95 to 28.025, and remained at that point till 11, during which the centre of the cyclone was passing over Contai. After a complete lull of nearly an hour (i.e. from ¼ to 10 up to ¼ to 11), the gale came back; the wind blew from the south-west. For nearly an hour the storm had been more like a whirlwind. Then the barometer was rising gradually – at twelve o'clock 28.125, at quarter past twelve 28.53, at quarter to one 29.025 and at quarter past one 29.10. Eventually at 2 p.m. it was 29.40 and the gale subsided.¹²

Kaukhali

We have received a valuable account of the storm from James Daniel, the superintendent of Kaukhali light-house, situated about 13 miles to the east and four miles to the north of Contai. As per his account:

About 5 A.M. of the 4th, the wind commenced blowing a stiff breeze from north north-east, which continued the greater part of the day; at the close of the day the wind fell and kept so till midnight, after which it increased again. At 3 A.M. of the 5th there was a dead calm, which lasted for an hour: after that it began to blow again in frightful puffs with a lull between. This lasted till day-light, when it began to blow very heavily from the north-east, with a driving rain, and at 7 A.M. it was blowing a hurricane, which increased in violence every moment; about 9 A.M. a thick scud or spray obscured everything, so that I could not see anything around. A little after 10 A.M. there was a sudden lull, so sudden that I could hardly believe everything was still; this was of short duration; for, in the course of a few minutes, it was blowing as heavily from the east, the wind having shifted during the lull. It was at this time (10 h. 30 m.) that the storm-wave broke over the place, sweeping everything before it; this continued without any intermission until 3 P.M., when the wind moderated a little and suddenly shifted to the south-west; from this quarter it blew with equal fury till 4 P.M., driving a large quantity of water before it, with human beings and cattle intermingled.¹³

From this description it comes into sight that the eastern edge of the central calm arrived at Kaukhali almost at the same time as the centre of the cyclone passing over Contai. However, it is noted that the radius of the calm was not less than fourteen miles, if assumed that Contai was on the central line.¹⁴

Tamluk

The centre then progressed on to the next station, Tamluk, situated on the banks of the Rupnarayan, about 37 miles north-east of Contai. We have got information about the gale in Tamluk from Haughton, the assistant district superintendent. A strong gale proceeded from the north-east on the 4th. By 4 a.m. of the 5th it was blowing very heavily from the same direction. At around 8 or 9 a.m. the gale, which came from north of east, became a violent storm. It increased its power until

about half-past eleven; the time when the storm-wave arrived and grew higher and higher till about noon, when the central calm passed over the station and wind blew towards east. After half an hour, the storm set in again, but this time the wind was due west; as a result of which the water was driven back. The gale abated by 6 p.m. There was, then, only a little fresh breeze from the west.

Kolaghat

From Kolaghat, situated 11 miles north by west of Tamluk and the location where the road from Calcutta to Midnapore, passes over the Rupnarayan by a ferry, we have received a graphic account of the passage of the storm by JP Grant. He set out for Midnapore from Uluberia at about 10 p.m. of the 4th by *palki*. But the stormy weather retarded his progress throughout the journey. He arrived at Kolaghat at 6 a.m. of the 5th and found that the river was too rough to cross. He was compelled to pause his journey and took shelter in a mud hut. From 6 to 10 a.m. the wind came in blasts from the north; at 11 it was towards east. Grant described:

So matters went on till about 12, when the hut next to us resolved itself into a heap of mud. A few minutes after this there was a most curious sound in the air, exactly like the letting off steam from a steamer, but of course on a gigantic scale; and then the Cyclone burst on us in all its fury. First, we saw my palkee being rolled along like a barrel round and round, until it was brought up by the ruins of the mud hut which had fallen. There it struck on its end almost, having been forced into an upright position by the wind. Then the roof of our hut was lifted off like the lid of a box on its hinge, and immediately the walls crumbled into their original mud. There were still left some of the posts standing, which were rather sheltered (as we were) by the ruins of the hut to windward of us; and to these posts we clung... You may imagine it was not pleasant. We watched as much as we could, (for it was difficult to see twenty yards off through the driving rain, or rather mist) the rise of water; and sure enough, though I did not see any actual *bore*, the water all at once suddenly rose, as if by magic, and slowly rolled towards us.¹⁵

At about half-past two, it was a perfect calm all around. The clouds parted and the sun came out. During this interval, of nearly an hour, Grant changed his shelter to a *pucka* house. After this calm, the storm came back from the west. It blew more furiously, than before, for almost two hours. Then it died down.

Midnapore

At Midnapore, the storm was severe. We have a short yet a vivid description of the tempest here from Dr. EC Bensley, the civil surgeon. The morning sky of the 4th was cast with dark clouds. Towards the afternoon a chilly moist breeze proceeded from the north-east. It was three days after the full moon day. But the night was dark and there was little precipitation. The barometer started to fall from 29.75, in the evening of the 4th. The storm arrived that night. At about 2 a.m. of the 5th, a fresh breeze arose from the north northeast, which soon grew virulent into a storm, blew with increased violence and was accompanied with rain. It was about 7 o'clock when the storm veered round to the north-west and assumed the character of a cyclone. Between 8½ and 10½ the wind

blew in furious gusts; the rain fell in torrents. By 2 p.m. the storm subsided eventually. The rain also came to an end at 3 p.m. The rainfall during the storm was 4½ inches.

Garhbeta

The detailed account of the storm, as observed from the Amlaparah [Amlagora] factory near Garhbeta, 29 miles north of Midnapore, was printed in the *Englishman* newspaper shortly after the gale:

At 3 A.M. of the 5th there was a moderate breeze and rain...At 11h. 15m. the wind was from the north, blowing very hard. 11h. 45m., blowing harder than ever. Noon, blowing very hard, with fearful gusts. 12h. 40m. blowing harder than ever. 1h. 30m. A.M. wind still increasing. 2 P.M. blowing the hardest. 4 P.M. a moderate gale with slight rain. Four miles to the north-west there was only a moderate breeze the whole time, and 10 or 12 miles beyond that in the same direction, but little rain or wind, and the same to the west. A little to the eastward some trees and *kutch*a houses were blown down, but to no great extent.¹⁶

It was observed, therefore, that Garhbeta was beyond the fatal range of the gale, and the strength of the storm was evidently not stronger than that of a normal north-wester.

IV

Midnapore, as expected from its exposed location, had suffered a two-fold calamity during this time. First was from the tremendous force of wind, previously stated. Besides, there had been storm waves, the sudden and unusual incursion of the sea, which submerged the sea coast and swept the country several miles inland. In some places it arrived in a rush, and in others it increased gradually. At Kaukhali, the wave reached, as measured by O'Flaherty, to a height of 16.48 feet above high spring tide level, and 6 feet 4 inches above the crest of the Hooghly dyke, rushing towards the territory and carrying away everything in its way. Along the great sea dyke of Hijili, on the western bank of the Rasulpur, the wave did not attain any extraordinary height. At Junput, on the most exposed part of the coast, the wave rose to 9 feet 7 inches, and at the Pichabani *khal*, it was only a little more than 1 foot.¹⁷ Its height and force increased in the tract between the Rasulpur and the Rupnarayan. When the water gushed into the narrow estuary of the Haldi and the Hooghly, it piled up into a gigantic wave, rose higher and higher and then went onwards. The waves moved across the Rasulpur and flooded the Bahirmuta *pargana*, and a large portion of salt and fuel lands to the north-west of Contai.¹⁸ At Khejuri, 3 miles above Kaukhali, the wave was found to have reached a height of 15.9 feet above high springs, and 28.9 feet above low water mark.¹⁹ The large flourishing village of Garchakraberia, located eight miles from Khejuri, had been totally washed away by the storm-wave, as almost all the villages of Gumgarh *pargana*. The low-lying *pargana* of Doro Dumnán, situated north of the Haldi, exposed itself to the furious storm-wave. The loss of life and property was thus immense. West of Doro Dumnán is Mahishadal, located between the Haldi and the Rupnarayan. From both these rivers and from the Hooghly below Kukrahati, the storm wave had topped the embankments, therefore inundating the estate of

Mahishadal.

An account of the storm-wave, as experienced at Kukrahati, situated at the mouth of the Rupnarayan, was narrated by Deenanath Bhattacharjee. Bhattacharjee was a sub-overseer of the Department of Public Works. During the storm, he had taken shelter in the office at Gazipur, but when the office room became roofless, he had to search for another shelter in the village nearby, situated on a higher land than that of his office bungalow compound. The water in the adjoining field started rising from nearly 11 a.m. and rose rapidly to around six and seven feet by ½ past 12 o'clock.²⁰

The destruction caused by the wave was very severe at the small *pargana* of Kashimnagar, located at the north-east corner of Mahishadal *pargana* and to the west of Doro Dumnán, because of its very low land level. At Tirpara *pargana*, in the north of the Haldi and west of Mahishadal and Banka canal, the height of the wave was around 6 or 8 feet above the grazing grounds.²¹ In accordance with Haughton's report, the storm-wave reached Tamluk a little after 10.00 a.m. Tamluk town, built on a high ground could sustain minor ruins by the wave, but the destruction caused by the wind was severe. The remaining *pargana* that comprised 207 villages, all large and populated, had its low shore especially exposed to the destructive rush of the storm-wave. The water gushed in irresistible volume over the embankment. Rameshwar Nath, the assistant engineer, measured that when the storm-wave rose, its greatest depth was 12 feet over the metalled road.²² All the trees, huts and many of the *pucka* houses were absolutely shattered by the gale in company of the storm waves. At exposed points, the first sign the inhabitants had of the wave was their being drowned entirely. Many who saw the wave, therefore, did not exist to narrate their experiences.

V

Now the question is what had happened in the district. Within the first few days after the storm, though the exact details of what had happened were not yet clear, on the 9th of October, the then officiating magistrate and collector of Midnapore, A Smith, placed before the commissioner of Burdwan, a brief account of the effects of the cyclone on the district, with a promise that it would be supplemented by a more complete report on receiving detailed information. After a month, on 10th November, Smith submitted his promised report with two appendices exhibiting the meteorological features of the cyclone. Even then he was not possessed of complete details and had not yet received any formal report of deaths from Contai and Tamluk.

Smith reported that no damage had occurred to the police stations of Salbani, Bhimpur, Gopiballabhpur, Dantan and Jaleshwar (S.W. of Dantan). At Keshpur, Narayangarh and Raghunathpur the damage was little. At Midnapore police station 33 deaths had been reported. The school house and St. John's church were injured.²³ Things had obviously gone terribly in the south-east of the district. The graveness of the situation was made even clearer with Smith's description. It was, however, in the tract between the Rasulpur and the Rupnarayan that the effects of the storm-wave were violently experienced. The loss of human life was immense. In the extensive and highly populated villages of Bahirmuta *pargana* of the southern Hijili division, a dreadful destruction took place, over an area of 56 square miles. In the low lying *pargana* of Gumgarh,

comprising an area of 103 square miles in northern Hijili, the destruction was also terrible. Smith reported that the people of Gumgarh surmised their loss to be three-fourths of the total population. For instance, in a case involving dacoity from Nandigram, a police station in this Gumgarh *pargana*, and which had been committed to the Sessions with thirty-two witnesses, the police informed that only two of them were forthcoming. Smith received some other statistics from Suratharam Pradhan. Pradhan was then the *naib* of Doro Dumnán. His statistics also gave a very serious estimation of the loss; and here it was two-thirds or more of the population.²⁴ Between Khejuri and Kukrahati, Smith saw none who hadn't lost large numbers of his relatives. Smith had even made it clear that the full extent of the disaster had not been detailed yet. He still had very little idea of how many people actually were drowned; no news came at all from southern Hijili, and the *parganas* of Dattakharui, Kismat Pataspur and Naruamuta, though the loss of life in these localities was immense. No information about deaths had been received from Jalamuta and Sujamuta; no officer had visited these *parganas* till then.

Several months after the catastrophe, Colonel Short also, in a report on southern Hijili, described:

The fury of the cyclone caused a fearful destruction in the villages to the interior; indeed, the raised plateaux on which many stood were swept clean. It appears that the people, believing the lull in the storm to be the sign of its having passed over, proceeded to bring in their cattle, and whilst so engaged they were overtaken by the waters, which, topping the lowest part of the dyke or entering through the breaches, drowned man and beast; while many, standing on the high ridges separating the fields, were, during the height of the cyclone, literally swept into the water and drowned.²⁵

The estimate of the loss of life in the *parganas* south of the Rupnarayan, exclusive of the large portions from which no details were received, stood as follows: Gumgarh: 8159; Aurangnagar: 106; Hijili Kasba, Parbisian, and Eranch – counted loss: 8000; Doro Dumnán – calculated loss: 10,000; Kashimnagar: 686; Mahishadal: 3740; Tirpara: 132; Gumai: 23; and Tamluk: 2166; total 33,012.²⁶ The details for Tamluk were incomplete.

Through his letter dated the 6th of November, CF Montresor, commissioner of the Burdwan division, concisely informed to the secretary to the government of Bengal regarding the injury of the crops. Though the exact details regarding the extent of the injury could not yet be ascertained, Montresor guessed that the harvest would be about half of that of the last season.²⁷ But Smith in his letter, dated the 10th of November, wrote that the flood water did not, however, linger for a long time as the wind changed its direction to south-west after the centre passed and carried off the salt water from an extensive portion of the land very quickly. So, the damage occurred was much less than which was initially guessed. The crops then bore a very promising appearance and the paddy plants were looking green, though in some places, especially in Kasba Hijili and Turf Bisian, Smith confessed that 'the crops...ought to have been still green of a darker color than natural, and shewing the yellow leaf without the grain.'²⁸ In Gumgarh their appearance was much more unpleasant. Smith stated that the peasantry did not expect that more than one-fourth of the

ordinary harvest would be gained. On account of Doro Dumnán's low level, the flood water remained long and thus it suffered the most. The crops became worse and eventually disappeared in to the interior. Cultivators in the affected areas had to deal with the loss of their cattle too. The loss was estimated to be three or four times more than that of human life. For instance, in the *parganas* south of the Rupnarayan the destruction was counted at 95,000.²⁹ Survivors had lost not only their crops and cattle but also their lodgings, ploughs, and seeds: people had nothing to set back upon. In Tamluk, for example, only 27 out of 1400 houses remained standing after the storm.³⁰ At many other places also, an equal proportion of houses were demolished. Of utmost concern, there was no rice, or any other food and cloth available. This, therefore, indicates that the desolation brought about by the disaster was massive.

On the other hand, the damage caused to the government's real estates, especially the injuries to the embankments and the immense loss in the salt stores, was recorded by collector Smith. The embankments were breached at numerous places. The estimate of the destruction brought about to these embankments in different divisions is given below:

	Rs.	A.	P.
Tamluk division	1,90,839	0	0
Midnapore division	11,465	0	0
Hidjili division	1,68,274	13	0

Source: Gastrell, J.E. and H.F. Blanford, *Report on the Calcutta Cyclone of the 5th October 1864*, P. 147.

Besides, the loss of government property was from its salt stores. The *golahs* at Rasulpur, Kalinagar, Krishtanagar, and Purighat of the Hijili agency and those at Narainpur of the Tamluk agency were all blown down. Gastrell and Blanford reported that the main loss was at Narainpur *golahs*. 1,07,045 *maunds*, out of a total quantity of 2,00,045, were damaged. The value of the amount damaged, i.e., Rs. 4,27,111, summed up with the cost of demolished storehouse-buildings, i.e., Rs. 18,190, amounted to a total of Rs. 4,45,301.³¹

VI

In this context the fate of the survivors was in the hands of those who had access to resources and relief: the middle-class gentlemen, the landlords, and the government authorities. As soon as the first tidings of the distress reached Midnapore town, a fund was raised from the subscriptions of the European and the Indian gentlemen of this station and subsequently this fund was transferred to the hands of the magistrate in order to utilise it to cover up government's relief expenses. Smith realized that if help was to be offered, it would have to be quite instant. He, in concert with the superintendent of police F Adams, immediately began distributing the supplies of food among the sufferers along the Uluberia road, and at Tamluk, on and from 8th October. On his arrival to Tamluk on the 10th of October, Smith placed a part of the aforesaid fund under the control of Houghton, the assistant superintendent of police, Tamluk and Krishna Prasad Ghosh, a deputy magistrate of Contai. Two relief committees were formed at Contai and at Tamluk under the

management of the local officers. All were instructed that food and clothes were to be sold to the able-bodied who could buy, and distributed only in cases of absolute necessity. And all these measures were taken by Smith without holding on for orders from the higher authorities.

After hearing the details of the cyclone at Calcutta, Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, 2nd Bt. and some of his Parsi and Hindu friends, who were assembled to witness the foundation stone of the main building of Deccan College at Poona on 15 October 1864, decided to draw a subscription of seventy-five thousand rupees for the relief of the survivors. His brother, the hon'ble Rustomjee Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, had already contributed twenty-five thousand rupees on the 11th of October. Thus Rs. 1 Lac was raised from public subscriptions.³² All of it was in the form of donations by these prominent philanthropists. In this event, Calcutta had also responded energetically. A few days after the cyclone, a large public meeting was held and £30,000 (Rs. 3,00,000) was raised from public subscriptions. This money was used for the relief of the distressed.³³ Surprisingly, nothing came from the European landholders or missionary gentlemen, who were not to be found ready to render their assistances in Midnapore.³⁴

We have a little account of how the landlords of Midnapore responded to the cyclone. Montresor reported that in Doro *pargana*, one of the government *khas* estates of Hijili, a wealthy *mahajan* Jaynarayan Giri and his *naib* Surathram Pradhan 'gave away all grain they had in store, and divided any clothing that they could procure among the sufferers who applied to them for assistance before relief was sent from Calcutta.'³⁵ But these altruistic activities were not at all trustworthy to the British. After hearing of their assistance to their own needy *ryots*, the British officials thought that they were hyperbolizing and their activities required careful investigation.

After getting news of the disastrous effects of the cyclone, the commissioner of the Burdwan division, Montresor, decided to send instructions through Telegram via Bankura. Smith was advised to do everything for the immediate relief of the starving population with the advance received from the government treasury of that station and to proceed himself with all possible resources to assist. Smith had anticipated the commissioner's order. He had already proceeded to the south. At the same time Smith was mobilizing the resources available to him around the southern portions of the district. By the 9th, all executive officials of the district were allocated in different areas of southern portion to render this assistance further.

VII

There was a considerable difference between the proposed relief plan and its actual activation. The difficulties in communication were extreme. The line between Contai and Narghat had suffered severely. Between Koila and Panskura some of the metalling of the Imperial Road had been washed off. About a mile and a half of the embanked roads between Narainpore and Tamluk was washed away. The estimate of the destruction brought about to the Branch Imperial Road, between Tamluk to Panskura, was Rs. 80,000.³⁶ The Dawk Road, from Salpore to Kukrahati, had been damaged. The telegraph lines were also affected seriously. From Debra to Tamluk and from Contai to Kukrahati via Khejuri, the wires and posts had been brought to the ground. Smith himself saw that the wires of the Midnapore line were hung so low over the road, as to be a source of danger

to travelers.

Even it must be heeded that the access to the southern parts of Midnapore was much difficult. Under the peculiar circumstances following the cyclone, the difficulties were more than previous. Now the absolute stoppage of communication in this portion was caused by the complete disappearance of boats on the Haldi and Rasulpur rivers and the destruction of bridges on the whole of the tidal *khals*. Here relief personnel and supplies could only be transported by boat. In this scenario Johnstone, the assistant superintendent of police at Contai, Pratt, the deputy magistrate of Contai and O'Flaherty, the executive engineer, started to find boats for relief works. It was not an easy task. Johnstone walked six miles along the river bank in search of a boat in order to land at Khejuri, but in vain. Most of the boats in this portion had been wrecked by the cyclone. The only boat, Pratt and O'Flaherty could detect fit for service, was a small *dinge*, even though their adventure for relief by it was equally unsuccessful. On account of this disrupted communication, the government lacked in detailed information. Smith still had very little idea of what had actually happened and no news of the area from the Haldi to the Rasulpur, which could otherwise be used as a guide to the extent of supplies required. Eventually after four days Smith, accompanied with the district superintendent Adams, his assistant Johnstone and the executive engineer of Midnapore, Captain Swayne, accomplished the aim of reaching Khejuri.

The government's response to the cyclone was confounded by the great devastation, the disaster had brought about on the local administration. Much of the government's property had been damaged due to the storm and storm-waves. One of the greatest losses had been at Tamluk where the deputy magistrate's *cutcherry* and house, the *munsiff's* office, the school, the hospital, and other government buildings were entirely trashed. The sub-divisional officer Shyamacharan Chatterjee was compelled to hold his office in a tent. With the government buildings had gone a number of valuable records. At Khejuri, 'None of the records have been recovered', reported Montresor.³⁷ Here the house of the post master and honorary magistrate had been entirely washed away. Post master Botellho and his family had all been drowned. The telegraph office was destroyed. The village itself and the police station had been collapsed. One immediate consequence of all this was the deficiency of personnel, Montresor wrote. Problems regarding the maintenance of law and order also evolved. In the days after such disaster there used to be several incidents of looting. Even ornaments were put off from the dead bodies. Smith regretted to inform that Mrs. Botellho's body was not found. 'She is said to have worn on her person at the time of her death jewellery to the value of Rupees 2,000; which is', he feared, 'the explanation.'³⁸ But the police, who survived, were unwilling to get back their posts and left the country, when their presence was badly needed during the post-disaster period.

VIII

As the government of the colonial India, the empire had a general responsibility towards the welfare of the people of the district, and towards the protection of life and property. The question now is whether the colonial administration performed its duty truly or not in the post-cyclone scenario.

The tract between Kukrahati and the Rasulpur was one of the most isolated parts in the southern portion. Three depots were established at Kukrahati, Baliaghata, and Khejuri. DJ McNeile was the highest ranking among the relief personnel, and his views were given special importance. He was deputed by the government to supervise the arrangement associated with the cyclone relief fund. At the instance of Neile, Montresor appointed P Dickens in charge of the conduct of relief works of the Doro, Mahishadal, Gumgarh, Erinch, and Khas Hijili *paraganas*. To the English, the natives were considered unreliable and so they were kept out of such top-ranking posts.³⁹ But it was in 1864 that the relief operations were being done not only by the Europeans but the natives too. Shyamacharan Chatterjee, a deputy magistrate of Tamluk, dispatched a boat full of stores at his own expense on the 19th of October, which was distributed to the really indigent and helpless.⁴⁰ So far in Contai, deputy magistrate Krishna Prasad Ghosh had done everything with the resources he had access to. However, these native officials were not given the same level of responsibility as Neile and Dickens, despite having known this portion better than any other European.

Already there were signs of anomalies in the official response to the relief operation. The local officials in Midnapore were being over-ruled by both the projecting officer and their own superior at the higher levels of administration, whose utmost concern was with the government's capital. Even though Smith was anxious regarding 'the vast destruction of life and property which occurred'⁴¹ in Tamluk, but both the Burdwan commissioner and Neile felt a peculiar optimism about the prospects of this town: 'Tamluk itself had been severely visited by the storm, but the inhabitants were rapidly recovering themselves...'⁴² Montresor's intervention in the relief work at Tamluk brought it to a swift end. The same happened again. Smith had a much better understanding than Montresor of the difficulties facing the survivors. Realizing the problems faced by the villagers on the right bank of the Rupnarayan, Smith had suggested the establishment of a relief depot at Banka which intersects the Mahishadal *pargana* between the Rupnarayan and Haldi rivers; but the commissioner abandoned his suggestion. Actually, the most noticeable feature of the relief operation, taken by the colonial administration, was that the government's role and expenditure in the recovery process were kept as minimum as possible.

Perhaps the most crucial – and most harmful – problem of post-disaster period was the polluted water supply. The chief want of fresh water was doubtless confined to the villages more inland in the southern portion. Montresor made an allowance of 4000/- rupees for cleaning tanks, excavating wells in the interior and other charitable purposes. However, the proposition of excavating wells had not been successful due to a prejudice against the use of well water. Dickens tried to make arrangements for cleaning tanks. Some tanks in Tamluk, Mahishadal and northern Doro *paragana* were able to recover their sweetness. Despite of those, Dickens had expressed his regret for the substandard quality of water in the southern Doro *paragana*. The water in the tanks was salt, brackish, and 'the people say, undrinkable'⁴³ till then. The villagers used to walk to fetch their water from Solat, a village at a distance of six miles. Actually, the colonial government's role in the recovery process was nickel and dime! For example, Dickens thought that the cleaning of all tanks was, for sure, a very costly operation and McNeile requested his subordinate officials 'to induce the people, whenever it may seem advisable, to clean or bale out their tanks, or to dig

wells, for the purpose of procuring a sufficient supply of good drinking water'.⁴⁴ Thus the policy was that most of the relief programmes would be carried out by the people themselves. Indeed, the government relief policy of post-1864 cyclone period in Midnapore was unlikely to do much to help the survivors. In his letter, dated 22nd December, Neile confessed that many individuals and families were still in distress; though he suggested to give relief to only those persons who might present certificates of their destitution signed by competent officers.⁴⁵ Even the agricultural population, who were clamouring for their losses and distress, were actually those 'who have hitherto escaped the scourge', said Montresor.⁴⁶ Actually, it was the cultivator who suffered the most from the cyclone and storm-wave. They had lost not only their crops but also their houses, their savings. There was no means for them to reconstruct their houses. But Smith's attitude towards this was offensive as usual:

The construction of their houses is an item essential to their comfort, but bamboos are plentiful, and the crops now in the field, whatever may be the supply of grain, will soon yield plenty of thatch.⁴⁷

Weeks after the cyclone, it became apparent that the British had belittled the difficulties faced by the survivors. In this connection, the *Hindoo Patriot*, a paper of the zamindar-dominated British Indian Association, had done a comparative analysis of the roles played by the native zamindars and the government in the relief of the cyclone-victims. The paper showed that while several zamindars postponed the collections of rent and in few cases abandoned the rents-collections for that year, the colonial administration except the case of Mahishadal zamindari, neither allowed any remission nor suspended the collection of the quarterly instalment for a few months, despite repeated demands made by several distressed zamindars.⁴⁸

Above all, it was stated that the damage incurred to the embankments by the gale was extremely severe. It was obligatory to rebuild them to such height so as to keep the belongings protected from the tidal waves during the highest rise of tides. Just two months after the 1864 cyclone, collector Smith described the idea of erecting such embankments 'impracticable'. As to him, 'These calamitous visitations appear from experience to occur only after long terms of years.' The financial question still prevailed. To put the embankments into order again, Smith thought that the cost to the state would be very large. Moreover, any such structures, he said, were of 'no use except when a storm occurs and then give way is to have no return for our outlay.'⁴⁹ Thus the programme was not going to be performed to represent the colonial government's humanitarianism: as far as the British officials were concerned, it was only the matter of profit and loss.

IX

Together with the putrid vegetation and unburied bodies and carcasses which, for many weeks, lay strewn over the country, the consumption of unhygienic food and insanitary water played a crucial role in the outbreak of epidemics. Collector Smith, however, expressed his hope that the epidemic would be soon brought under control. 'I sincerely trust that this additional calamity may be warded off'⁵⁰, said Smith. Even then he did not change his policy. He ordered that the bodies and carcasses would be removed at public expenses. Thus, government's unwillingness to spend

money on disaster relief reflected a deeper negligence about the state's obligation to public health. The situation became progressively worse. On 2nd November, McNeile wrote that Kukrahati itself was in a terrible condition. There were carcasses of cattle, laid around everywhere, and an offensive stench of human bodies. Neile and others tried to persuade the survivors to dispose of the bodies, but the local people, by dint of religious prejudices, didn't touch the bodies. After one month on 2nd December, Neile reported that people, in the tract between the Rupnarayan and the Haldi rivers, were suffering severely from cholera brought on by taking bad food. Dickens also noticed the condition. He confessed:

Sickness, I regret to say, is fearfully on the increase. Cholera is spreading and has attacked almost every village. Five or six persons died here last night, and in one small village, I visited containing a population of 150, forty deaths were reported. ... I am apprehensive of the most serious consequences. The people are already beginning to leave their houses in some quarters.⁵¹

The question now is what steps the government had taken to check the spread of cholera. The colonial government's immediate response to the lamentable outbreak of cholera, on both sides of the Haldi, was to send out the easily available native doctors and some medical aids. Neile noticed that the medical department was being able to supply only three native doctors up to the 22nd of December. The treatment during the epidemic was mainly being done by these native doctors. But in the medical service, like the civil service, these Indian doctors were usually subordinate to the British surgeons, though these natives were also trained in Western medicine from Calcutta Medical College.⁵² Besides this, the deficit of native doctors was being adjusted by *Ayurvedic* practitioners. But the government again failed to send some *Coberajes* to the affected parts. 'I fear, little else can be done', Neile confessed, 'but the measures taken cannot possibly meet the emergency, which is real and pressing.'⁵³

Following such a devastating calamity, the menace of epidemic became quite prominent. But the colonial government did not want to link the two calamities; the need for food, cloth, shelter and water on one hand, and proneness to fall sick on the other. Montresor too did not see this connection. On December 30, he concluded in his report:

In conclusion, I would add that the general distress arising from want of food, clothing, shelter, and water has been tided over...but the present distress is now chiefly caused from sickness, almost entire villages having been depopulated from those awful scourges, cholera and small-pox.⁵⁴

If the two calamities were seen conjointly, unlike Montresor, there would be no confusion that the government had done little to improve the condition of the people after the storm. And this terrible condition during the post-storm period gave rise to an environment in which diseases could flourish.

X

Here the study examines the debate concerning the extent to which the disastrous impact could have been avoidable, the extent to which the colonial government is to be blamed. Meanwhile, we

have discussed about the violence of the associated wind force and high storm-waves, which caused widespread devastation to lives, livelihoods and assets. It is true that those lives couldn't be revived, though many lives could have been saved and the severity of the disaster could have been reduced with timely relief to the survivors and diligent response to the epidemic. In this context human factors of calamities should not be overlooked. We have already analysed the self-interested relief policy of the colonial government. And on discussing the epidemic we have seen that the government did nothing except sending three native doctors and some medicines. The total negligence of the British policy in order to control the situation implied that more people, especially infirm and aged, remained vulnerable to the epidemic. The diseases were showing no signs of mitigating, and deaths from sickness were threatening to surpass deaths from the cyclone and storm-wave. Daniel, the superintendent of Kauhali light house, was alarmed to see the terrible condition. He apprehended:

I cannot accurately state the loss of life, but I am afraid the fatal malady has carried off more than the cyclone. There is utter desolation everywhere. Scarcely a human being is to be seen. The paddy, now ripe, is left in the fields for the cattle to destroy. When I asked any one the reason of this, the answer always was, "Who is to eat it?"⁵⁵

The above statement is justified with some statistics, collected from *Report on the Calcutta Cyclone of the 5TH October 1864*. In Gumai, 23 were drowned, and the deaths due to sickness amounted to not less than 526. In Terupara, 132 persons were recorded to be drowned, while 515 perished due to subsequent sickness. In Mahishadal, the deaths caused by the storm-wave were 3740, while the deaths due to sickness were not less than 4,243.⁵⁶ The dismal performance of the colonial state in dealing with the epidemic made the situation worse. And thus, the losses by sickness amounted to nearly equal to those caused by cyclone and storm-waves; attributing a total of at least 66,000, and the figure did not include the tracts, from which no returns had reached.⁵⁷ After a thorough and critical analysis of the British policies to the survivors, we may conclude that the 1864 disaster, though primarily a result of the extreme natural forces, was not just a natural calamity. Actually, man-made elements of the calamity made the post-cyclone situations even worse. And the great disaster of 1864 was transformed into a 'man-made' one.

XI

The extent of devastation caused by the cyclone and storm-wave made it impossible to avoid the question of what measures ought to be adopted with a view to providing against such calamities in future. One of the most pressing questions was how to mitigate the people's sufferings on such occasions chiefly from want of good water. A scheme for 'good water' was put forward by Croster, the magistrate of Howrah. He suggested that 'all funds that could be made available for the purpose should be devoted to the excavation of large tanks in central situations.'⁵⁸ To Montresor, this suggestion was worthy of deliberation. The existence of well-embanked tanks in the centre of the cyclone-prone areas had served well in two ways during the storm-wave: the bank would be a place of refuge in case of inundation and the tank itself would hold a plenty of fresh water for the

survivors. In addition to these, the construction of large and *pucka* masonry granaries in the proximity of the tanks was also drawn to the attention of the government.

Second, the issue of the prevention of the disastrous effects of the inundations by salt water was already taken up by the administration. The main intention behind adopting this policy was to keep up the inflow of revenue instead of protecting their tenants' lives. However, in the meantime, when the remodeling of the sea-dyke was ongoing, the district was visited by this devastating cyclone; and widespread havoc was caused by storm-waves overtopping the lower portions, sweeping up the Rasulpur and the un-sluiced *khals* i.e., the Mirzapur, Ramnagar and Pichaboni *khals* on the sea face. Fortunately, after 1864, not only had the remodeling of the sea-dyke been finished, but all the great *khals* leading into it closed by sluices; the large Pichaboni sluice of 22 vents had been completed in 1872. Hijili was thus safeguarded from incursions by the sea at the expenses of the government. For instance, during the cyclone of 1874, a storm-wave, evidently higher than that of 1864, burst with immense violence nearly on the centre of the sea-dyke and the district would have entirely escaped inundation from the sea face, if the open Pichaboni *khal*, due to renovations, remained sluiced.⁵⁹ Undoubtedly the injury from salt water during 1874 was not to be compared with that happened in 1864.

Last but the most important question in the aftermath of the cyclone was how a scientific system of storm-warnings could be introduced. Here also, the real motive was the same. The violent cyclone of 1864 had demolished the ships in the Calcutta port. For the sake of its flourishing maritime trade, it was inevitable for the British to take some serious measures. In effect, the discussion over it was laid before the government of India in 1864. And in a few months after the cyclone, one of the government's constructive responses was the appointment of a meteorological committee in March 1865, in order to develop a system of meteorological observation for the protection from a storm. Hereafter the office of the meteorological reporter was founded on the 1st of April 1867, to carry on the storm-warning system, which had been introduced by the meteorological committee in the meantime. The purpose for which the system had been established was well fulfilled. And, it facilitated a warning of some hours before the approaching violent cyclone of November 1867.

XII

1865 set about badly for the inhabitants of the cyclone affected Midnapore. Obviously, the poor had not recovered their losses yet. Besides, there were several reports of frequent grain robberies in September 1865 from the eastern and southern portions of the district.⁶⁰ In *parganas* Doro and Gumgarh, the prices of food grain began to hike. Many were getting ready to leave their motherland. Indeed, it was the cultivator who experienced the most. They were acutely lacking in grains. And their difficulties had been compounded by the absence of rains since September 15 of 1865. On the other side, the grain dealers or *mahajans* were loitering nearby. Where rice had been saved from the storm-wave, *mahajans* were keeping it from sale in the local market. At the same time, the high market prices prevailing in Calcutta tempted the hoarders to sell their stock in the Calcutta bazaar in order to make as much profit as possible. All this points to the fact that rice was not

entirely out of stock but that it was inaccessible to the poor. The situation became progressively worse. According to the order issued by the government to report on the matter, the commissioner of the Burdwan division visited the district. After inspecting the district, Montresor confessed that the crime i.e., the plunder of grains caused by extreme demand. But he did not seem to have proposed any special remedy for the problems, the district was facing. Instead, Montresor strongly recommended that the police force should be strengthened and the Whipping Act should be introduced immediately.⁶¹ There were no signs of aid from the colonial government yet. The disgraceful attitude of the state in dealing with the situation contributed, to a considerable extent, in the furtherance of the disaster. In the mean time the old and infirm were beginning to die from appetite and finally the rumour of the impending famine became gradually true in 1866 in Midnapore.

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