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## **Natural Calamity, Society and State: In the Light of the Midnapore District of Colonial Bengal**

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### **Abstract**

*Constant changes in the balance of the environment have become a worldwide nuisance at the recent time. Among the natural calamities, overwhelming floods and tropical cyclones were a periodical phenomenon in the social life of colonial Bengal. The people of Bengal are still not free from this panic. All these natural calamities caused awkwardness not only to the natives but also to the colonial rulers. The present paper seeks to explore the impacts of natural catastrophes on the environment, ecology, society and human life, especially on the marginalized people. Natural calamity was a common occurrence in colonial India as well as Bengal, which has endangered both man and nature. Natural calamities emerged in the form of flood, cyclone, landslide, drought, earthquake and famine etc. throughout the year. The current article discusses about flood and cyclone in the light of the Midnapore/Mednipur (Mednapore) district of colonial Bengal. At first it tries to explore whether nature and man both are accountable for floods and cyclones. Secondly, it tries to show the factors and extent of floods and cyclones in Mednapore district of Bengal. Then, seeks to shed highlight on detrimental impacts of floods and cyclones on ecology, environment, society as well as human life, especially the marginalized people i.e. their livelihood, agricultural fields, shelter, wealth and health condition. Finally, it tries to find out what role did the colonial Government play in controlling natural calamities and providing food and other necessary relief?*

**Key words: natural calamities, colonial Bengal, environment, flood, cyclone.**

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**Introduction:** In the present situation, the discussion on environmental issues is becoming very significant. The current paper deals with environment and marginalized people in the context of social history. The study of environmental history is gaining considerable importance in the construction of recent social history. Constant changes in the balance of the environment have become a universal headache at the recent era; therefore, recently the trend of studying of environment-centric history is increasing. Thucydides and Herodotus have long ago spoken of the importance of the environment in human society. The history

of natural disasters is not new to India; evidence of this can be found even in prehistoric times. Much evidence of devastating floods and mighty storm in prehistoric times is found in Indian mythology, literature and architectural sculpture. During the colonial period, almost all states of India were affected by natural calamities and among them, this aggressive shadow fell the most on Bengal. Both man-made and natural phenomena are responsible for constant changes of the environment. As a result, natural calamities as climate change, heavy rainfall, flood, mighty cyclone, drought, earthquake, landslide, soil erosion, had been occurred throughout the year. And along with this, famine, monsoon crops failure, epidemics, and various types of diseases emerged as catalyst. At the outset of the discussion, it needs to be mentioned that present article discusses two natural disasters in Midnapore (Mednapore) district, because this district was most affected by these two natural disasters during the colonial period. Due to the fact that Midnapore district is located in the north-west of the Bay of Bengal, frequent floods and cyclones appeared and it is still a common occurrence. During the colonial period; massive floods and tropical cyclones occurred in the coastal region of Midnapore district of Bengal every year. Needless to say, of all the natural disasters, floods and tropical cyclones have probably affected human life the most. And even in the post-colonial period, Bengal was not spared from these two natural calamities.

**Methodology:** The current attempt has followed the historical and empirical method. And it is based on a historical and analytical approach. Data has been collected for both primary and secondary sources. L.S.S. O'Malley's Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore and W.W. Hunter's A Statistical Account of Bengal have been used as primary sources and variety of books, articles etc. as secondary sources.

**Devastating Floods and Cyclones: Its Causes and Extension:** Both human activities and the whimsical of nature are responsible for various natural disasters such as floods, cyclone famines etc. First of all, let's discuss about the whimsical of nature. We are known that Bengal is well known as a riverine region. Numerous small and big rivers, (*jhils*) lakes, canals have flowed through Bengal. As Midnapore district is located close to the Bay of Bengal, the number of rivers is quite lofty. Several rivers like Hoogly, Kasai or Kanshabati, Kaliaghai, Silai, Dwarakeswar, Subarnarekha have flowed through Midnapore district. Malley reported that rivers and reservoirs flowing from the surrounding hilly region, which was particularly liable for the flooding in the district.<sup>1</sup> These abundant rivers in Bengal became a source of embarrassment to the colonial rulers. Natural causes of floods are—mainly decrease of navigability of the river, change of course of the river, heavy rainfall and shallowness at the bottom of the riverbed due to siltation. The Tamralipta region under the Midnapore was a prosperous and renowned commercial port on the Gulf of shores, which is mentioned in ancient Indian and Chinese literatures. The slit flowing from Tamralipta has created many types of seashore. Most of the areas that can be traced in the Medinipur district during the pre-British period or at present time did not exist before. Gradually lands like Sutahata, Nandigram, Khajuri, Kanthi etc. have been formed from the slit of the estuary of the rivers.<sup>2</sup> So these areas are even today inundating due to heavy rains during the

monsoon season. Looking at some old maps of Bengal drawn by European sailor especially Portuguese, British, and Dutch in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries AD, it is clear that the course of several rivers in the southeastern part of the district has changed over the centuries.<sup>3</sup> In tropical regions like Bengal, magnitude cyclones occur in April-June every year in the form of *kalbaishakhi*. Apart from, due to its location in the coastal area of the Bay of Bengal, Midnapore was often the victim of severe cyclones in colonial time. Simultaneously, mighty cyclones and heavy rainfalls caused the strong tidal waves to break the river embankments, which led to the outbreak of terrible floods. Even at present time, the people of Bengal, especially people of East and West Midnapore districts, have not been spared from these two devastating natural disasters.

On the other hand, nationalist leaders such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Ramesh Chandra Dutt, Mahadev Gobinda Ranade and post-independence historians and commentators have blamed the economic policies of the British Government for frequent natural disasters, famines, epidemics and poverty of the common people. For this reason, many of the historians of both periods have slammed the evils of permanent settlement, the commercialization of agriculture and expansions of the railways. Notably, just at that time, Western imported words like civil liberty, utilitarianism, unitarianism, colonization, free trade etc. new notion were floating in the streets of Kolkata. We know that in the second half of eighteenth century, capitalist industry developed in India as well as in Bengal at the hands of British imperialism. An important event took place in the entire world around the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The industrial revolution in England in the middle of the eighteenth century gave birth to a new trend that was influenced by colonialism. With the advent of industrial revolution came widespread industrialization, factories and urbanization. At the same time, with the increasing demand for the high quality of human life, the indiscriminate use of natural resources began. The British government in India adopted several of commercial policies to use the resources of India. Industrialization was one of them. And this imperialist industrialization had a profound effect on the environment and the human society. Because industrialization causes the balance of various parts of the natural environment such fauna, flora, water, soil and human life etc. to disturbed. Needless to say, the colonial intervention to meet the aspiration of economic exploitation had a lasting effect on the balance of the ecosystem. Since the Jungle Mahal area adjoining Midnapore came under the East India Company in 1764 to 1793, continuous deforestation had began. Consequently towards the end of the nineteenth century, water began to accumulate on the upper land. During the First and Second World Wars, the demand for timber increased tremendously and another phase of deforestation continued.<sup>4</sup> Professor Arabinda Samanta noted two important aspects of floods in Bengal, the shallowness of the riverbed and lack of irrigation.<sup>5</sup> At that time farmers and landowners used to build dams on the river for irrigation. These dams were not well-built as to effectively check the fury of the gigantic floods. In colonial Bengal, the sewerage and drainage system was dilapidated and unhealthy. Hindoo Patriot gave evidence that the drainage system of rural Bengal was extremely deplorable.<sup>6</sup> Malley also said that the mouths of the rivers were insufficient to

discharge the excess water, as a result many parts of the district remaining waterlogged for several weeks after the floods.<sup>7</sup> The construction of artificial reservoirs, construction of railways and roads, expansion of irrigation canals, railway dams disturbed the ecological balance during the colonial period. As a result, the course of the river was often changed due to blockage of drainage system. So it can be said that, both the environment and human were accountable for the flooding during the colonial period.

During the colonial time, Midnapore district faced many destructive floods and cyclones. According to the description of Malley, the massive floods occurred in the region in 1823, 1831, 1833, 1834, 1839, 1840, 1845, 1848, 1850 and 1888. And the catastrophic cyclones were appeared in Midnapore district in 1831, 1832, 1833, 1840, 1848, 1850, 1851, 1876, 1885, and 1901.<sup>8</sup> However, in comparison to severity of the damage and destruction, the cyclones of 1864, 1867, 1914, and 1942 are comparable. A cyclone, originating from the Andaman Islands on 5<sup>th</sup> October 1864, first struck the coast of Balasore in Orissa and later the Midnapore. Three years later, in October 1867, a violent cyclone devastated the Contai (Kanthi) region. The cyclone killed 3,049 people and 17,500 cattle. Later this cyclone passed through Ghatal, Arambagh and moved towards Burdwan.<sup>9</sup> The cyclone of 1874 was more powerful and terrible than the cyclone of 1864. The wave was flooded up to 13.5 feet.<sup>10</sup> In 1942, on the eve of Second World War; an awful cyclone completely devastated the entire Burdwan, Midnapore and adjoining other Bengal districts.<sup>11</sup> These cyclones were so powerful and terrifying that it devastated other districts and states in the vicinity.

**Impacts on Human and Social Life:** The entire of Bengal witnessed floods and cyclones during the colonial time, of which Midnapore district had the greatest impact. Tragic description of this scene can be found in contemporary '*Bengali*' and '*Basumati*' newspapers. These magnitude calamities killed countless lives and those who somehow survived lost their relatives, homes, property and livestock. Coastal adjoining Midnapore district was repeatedly inundated by floods during the colonial period. Mr. Bayley reported that whole line of embankment was destroyed, in May 1823, and due to the rising flood waters, all documents of Collector's Office at Contai (Kanthi) was destroyed. Grain fields were also ruined by the salt water of the sea.<sup>12</sup> The second flood occurred in 1831; the floodwaters smashed the ripe *aman* paddy fields. In October of the following year, devastating floods again destroyed the paddy fields.<sup>13</sup> More severe flood in May 1833 completely destroyed the remnants of the embankment. More than half of the crops were swept away due to the flood of September 1834. It killed 7,112 people and 865 villages were submerged.<sup>14</sup> Shortly afterwards, in January 1839, May 1840, August 1845, October 1848 and April 1850 several areas of Midnapore district were submerged due to severe floods. Along with this there was a massive crops loss. The flood of 1850 caused great damage to indigo cultivation. Excessive rainfall caused flooding in 1888. The northern Ghatal subdivision was severely affected due to heavy floods in Kasai, Silai and Dwarakeswar rivers. At the same time, Midnapore subdivision, Tamluk, Contai (Kanthi) areas were submerged by the flood waters of Kaliaghai.<sup>15</sup> According to Paul Greenough, on

6<sup>th</sup> August 1943, the *Aus* paddy was completely spoiled by the severe floods of the Subarnarekha and one hundred villages were washed away and ten thousand people became homeless.<sup>16</sup> So there is a popular proverb in Bengali that—

*“Nadir dhare bas  
Dukho baro mas”\**

The devastating cyclones severely damaged the Midnapore district during the colonial time. Many died due to lack of food and proper medical treatment. Destructive floods and cyclones destroyed the paddy fields, other crops, bulky trees, river fishes, earthen-houses, pucca houses. According to administrative reports, 14,443 people died in Midnapore during the 1942 cyclone, of which 11,000 were people of Kanthi subdivision.<sup>17</sup> Communication system was also cut off. Besides, an unhealthy environment created all around and the sources of drinking water were wasted. There was a shortage of milk due to death of many dairy cows. Fish prices became skyrocketed due to the death of fishermen and the siltation in the rivers.<sup>18</sup> Lack of these proteins and nutritious foods led to various malnutrition disorders. Various types of epidemics and diseases such as cholera, smallpox, malaria, typhoid etc. as well as terrible famines appeared as a catalyst of floods and cyclones. Also many people lost their lives due to snake bites. Not only have all these natural disasters affected human life but also the environment and the ecosystem equally. In many cases, silt accumulates in the riverbed and created shallowness at the bottom of the river, which changed the course of the river. Apart from the rivers and ponds water was polluted due to the death of people, cattle, fishes etc. during floods and cyclones.

**Government’s Response towards Disasters Superintendence:** Repeated floods and cyclones in Bengal during the colonial period not only embarrassed not only the natives but also to the colonial rulers. But the indifference of the British Government towards natural disasters can notice. A different incident can be observed in the case of the flood of 1831 in Midnapore as compared to other districts. A full investigation into the damage was carried out by Mr. Collector Wyatt and he waived the revenue of Rs. 85,678.<sup>19</sup> The Public Works Department built several embankments to protect lands from devastating floods.<sup>20</sup> However, since the time of the company, local officers were appointed to look after the condition of embankments in Midnapore district.<sup>21</sup> After the floods of 1888, a special committee was appointed in Midnapore district to collect information on the origin and cause of the floods so that remedial measures could be taken during the floods.<sup>22</sup> After the cyclone of 1942, there was uproar for rice but the Government of Bengal did not arrange any relief.<sup>23</sup> In this natural and political situation, in the midst of disaster and chaos, post-cyclone relief work began in Midnapore. The Government realized that relief efforts in Tamluk and Kanthi were urgently needed. Within two weeks of the cyclone, a boatload of food, drinking water and medicine was sent from Calcutta. Eight senior officials of the Revenue of Public Health Department were given the responsibility of conducting the relief work.<sup>24</sup> That amount of

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\* Those who live along the river have to spend the whole year in misery.

food grains sent from Calcutta to rural *langarkhanas* (Alms- house) and low-cost grain outlets created an uneasy situation.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the colonial Government was so preoccupied with the cycle of war that it was unable to properly manage the 1942 natural disasters and relief efforts. Therefore, it can be said that the colonial Government was not entirely successful in controlling natural disasters and providing food and relief supplies. In many cases again, the Government had a slight role to play in the management of disasters and relief supplies. Needless to say, there were mysterious self-interests of the Government behind the intervention of natural disasters. The cries of the flood victims can be heard even today and the present state Government get rid of this liability with the slightest aid to the flood and cyclone victims.

**Conclusion:** Despite unimaginable advances in science and technology in the twenty first century, natural calamities such as floods and cyclones have not been prevented. Both the environment and people are equally liable for natural disasters. In Bengal, along with numerous rivers, heavy rains, severe cyclones and the boundless desire of the British Government for unbridled financial exploitation had a lasting effect on the ecological environment. Apart from, due to its location in the coastal region of the Bay of Bengal, Midnapore district used to often victim of awful cyclones every year in the colonial time and the same scene can be seen even today. As a result strong cyclones flooded the rivers and affected the whole of Bengal. Among then, Midnapore districts had the highest impact. Needless to say, the marginal and poor class people of the society suffered the most by these natural disasters in colonial time and those who somehow survived the natural disasters fell ill after by begging and eating inedible food. If the colonial administration had acted at the right time, these common people would not have been victims of natural disasters. Somewhere cultivators were exempted from revenue during natural calamities and somewhere it was seen that revenue exploitation was continued by the Government during calamities. Even after independence, the people of Bengal are not spared from this natural calamity.

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