

CHAPTER VI

NATURAL CALAMITIES

FLOODS

BEFORE the Ganges broke its way to the east, the district must have been liable to terrible floods, but there have not been many occasions during the last hundred years on which inundations sufficiently serious to affect the general prosperity of the people have occurred. In 1801 a very destructive inundation took place necessitating Government aid for the sufferers, and a sum of Rs. 3,171 was expended on relief. The next serious inundation took place in 1823, but no definite information is now forth-coming as to its extent. Such also is the case with the floods of 1838, 1857, 1859 and 1867, but a full account of the inundation of 1871 is on record. Rain fell at short intervals throughout the hot weather of that year until the ordinary monsoon set in, but though it was unseasonable, the prospects of both the early and late rice crops were excellent until the beginning of August, when the rivers began to rise. By the middle of that month it had become evident that a serious inundation was to be expected. The portions of the head-quarters subdivision lying in the Bhagirathi and the Meherpur Subdivision were the first to suffer; the north-east and central parts of the district were next affected, and, lastly, the eastern part of the Chuadanga Subdivision. The Bhagirathi rose and fell three times, and the other rivers twice, on each occasion the Bhagirathi being some days in advance. Rather more than half the rice crop was lost, and it is estimated that 200,000 head of cattle perished either from starvation or disease. The people suffered severe hardships for two and a half months, but there was very little loss of life, as the water rose slowly. It was hoped that with the subsidence of the floods the cold weather

crops would give a good outturn, but this did not prove to be the case, as the sowing season was much retarded and many valuable crops were not put down at all. However, the poorer classes benefited by the increase in the demand for labour occasioned by the loss of so many cattle, and only a small amount was expended from public funds for the relief of pressing necessities.

In 1885, which was a year of a very high flood, the embankment breached at Laltakuri on 23rd August, and water passed through it until the end of September. For three weeks the discharge through the breach was at the enormous rate of 50,000 cubic feet per second. The inundation came down into the district through the Kalantar, and by 1st September it had reached the Bagula railway station; eight days later it topped, and then breached, the railway embankment, and it then passed along into the Ichhamati and finally breached the Central Bengal Railway.

The Bhagirathi went into very high flood again in the year 1889, but much less damage was done in the district than in 1885, as the Jalangi and Matabhanga did not simultaneously go into flood.

In September 1900, owing to torrential rain over the whole of south-west Bengal, the district was again visited by floods. Considerable damage was done in some of the large municipalities, and in the rural tracts nearly 3,000 kutchha and 1,000 pukka houses collapsed, and seven lives were lost. The damage to crops and cattle was not, however, very serious, and no distress requiring Government relief came to notice.

FAMINES

FAMINE OF 1866

There is no record to show the extent to which the district suffered in the famine of 1769-70. The famine of 1866

was severely felt. Great damage had been done in the district by a cyclone which swept across it in 1864, and a severe drought occurred in the following year. At the end of October 1865 the Collector reported that the outturn of the rice crop was expected to be less than half that produced in ordinary years, and that the prospects of the winter crops were very bad. By the beginning of 1866 prices had risen to double the ordinary rates and distress had commenced.

In March the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society addressed the Lieutenant-Governor on the subject. One of these, the Rev. T. G. Lincke, stated that "a certain measure of rice, which some years ago cost three or four pice, now sells at thirteen or fourteen pice, which alone is sufficient to account for the present distress of the poor. Were I to tell the instances of how long many must go without food, and what sort of materials they contrive to convert into food, you could not believe it, for it is really incredible and yet it is true nevertheless." Another missionary, the Rev. F. Schurr, of Kapasdanga, declared that "respectable farmers are so much reduced in circumstances that they cannot employ nearly so many day-labourers as they used to do in former times, and consequently the labouring classes are reduced to the point of starvation. They are now able to glean a little wheat, gram, etc., but after a month all the crops will have been gathered in, when nothing can be obtained by gleaning in the fields. They are now thrown upon roots, berries, etc., for their chief support, and when that supply is exhausted, they will be forced to eat the rind of trees, grass, etc. I never witnessed such misery in my life."

This appeal of the missionaries resulted in official reports being called for. A thorough inquiry was made, from which it appeared that the distress was severest in the central portions of the district, while in those parts in which much of the land is devoted to date trees, chillies, tobacco, and other of the more lucrative crops, the distress was least felt. On the 30th April 1866, it was reported

that the suffering was much less in the neighbourhood of Kushtia, Chuadanga and Meherpur than in other parts. "Regarding the rest of the district," the Collector stated, "all accounts agree that there is great distress. There is no famine, for grain is to be had, but there is very little money to buy it at the prevailing prices. For some months the poor (and in this word I include all the working classes) have not had more than one meal a day, and it is to be feared that many have not had even that."

On receipt of this information, Government sanctioned the expenditure of Rs. 20,000 on road-making and other relief-works. In May public meetings were held at Krishnagar, Ranaghat and Chuadanga, and subscriptions were raised for the relief of the sufferers. Before the end of the month relief works had been started at different places where most needed, and a sum of Rs. 5,000 was assigned to the district by the Government from the unexpended balance of the North-West Provinces Famine Fund. In June the distress became severe, and it was calculated that about 2,500 persons were employed on the special relief works, and on public works of all kinds about 4,000. In August a further sum of Rs. 30,000 was granted for relief works. Kitchens were established at different places for the distribution of cooked food, and in some few instances allowances were made to a limited number of people at their own homes. The general distress began to diminish in August, when the early rice crop, which is extensively grown in the district, began to come into the market. In the beginning of September steps were taken to gradually contract the relief operations, and in October only three or four centres remained open in the part of the district which had suffered most. Relief works were suspended on 10th October, but it was found necessary to resume them for a time in November, as the cold weather crop did not afford so much employment as was expected. In the western part of the district the distress caused by the famine was aggravated by floods from the Bhagirathi, which almost totally destroyed about 18,000 acres of rice. The aggregate daily number of persons

who received gratuitous relief throughout the operations was returned at 601,123, and the aggregate daily number employed on relief works was 337,059 including those employed up to February 1867, in order to finish some works of great public importance. The average daily number employed during the last week of May was 550; during the last week of June, 4,415; during the last week of July, 12,059; during the last week of September, 460. The total expenditure on gratuitous relief was Rs. 35,488, of which Rs. 24,500 was provided by Government and the balance raised by private subscriptions. The expenditure on relief works was Rs. 48,000. As regards the method of payment to persons attending relief works the Collector reported that "no wholesale contractors were employed; "the work-people were paid direct, generally by daily wages, which varied according to sex and age from three pice to ten pice, but sometimes by task work. Payment in food was attempted once or twice, but it was found that charitable relief gave quite enough in that respect, and money payments prevailed everywhere."

FAMINE OF 1874

The district suffered again from famine in 1874. Great distress had been caused by floods in 1871. The following year was on the whole prosperous, though there were not wanting periods of unpropitious weather or circumstances of partial failure in some of the crops; it was not however, a bumper season, nor such as to make good all the losses which had been incurred in the preceding year. The rainfall in 1873 was both deficient in quantity, and unseasonably distributed, the most marked feature being the failure in September and October, in which months only five inches fell. The effects on the harvest varied remarkably in different localities; in some the early rice crop was excellent, in others it was much below the average; but the winter rice on high lands completely failed, though a fair outturn was obtained in marshy lands. Taking the whole district, the early rice probably gave an average outturn, while the outturn of the winter

rice did not exceed one-third of what it usually yielded. The area affected covered 528 square miles and comprised the whole of thanas Kaliganj and Nakasipara, three-fourths of Tehata and Chapra, and one-fourth of Kotwali, the last-named being the tract adjoining the Nakasipara thana; severe distress was, in fact, practically confined to that portion of the district, which is known as the Kalantar. Relief works were opened in February 1874, and were maintained until September. The average daily number of persons who attended them varied from 1,662 in February to 5,006 in July. The amount expended on relief works was Rs. 1,39,712, and in gratuitous relief Rs. 54,000. In addition, 264 tons of food-grains were distributed in charitable relief works and 115 tons advanced on loan, also the sum of Rs. 1,30,662 was expended in cash loans.

FAMINE OF 1897

The famine of 1896-97 affected the district much more severely. As usual the Kalantar, in which nothing but *aman* rice is grown, suffered the most. The average outturn of the *aman* crop in the district during the preceding nine years was only 8 annas, nearly 3 annas worse than in any other district in Bengal: in the years 1894 and 1895 it was $12\frac{1}{2}$ and $7\frac{1}{2}$ annas respectively: in 1896 it was not more than 2 annas, as owing to the failure of the monsoon and the absence of the usual inundations, there was no moisture to swell the grain. The average outturn of the *aus* rice during the preceding nine years was under 10 annas, and in 1895 it was 9 annas; in 1896 the outturn was only 6 annas. The portion of the district which was first affected was the Kalantar, in which a test work was opened as early as 15th November. During January relief works had to be opened in thanas Karimpur and Daulatpur. Four more thanas, viz., Chapra, Gangni, Meherpur and Naopara, were affected during the following months, and, finally, between June and September it was found necessary to provide work, though not gratuitous relief, in thanas Alamdanga and Damurhuda. The total area affected covered 1,182 square miles, with

a population of 625,840. The distress was intense over 503 square miles with a population of 266,777. Relief works were open from the middle of November 1896 till the middle of September 1897: they were attended in all by close on three million workers, who excavated 105 million cubic feet of earth at a cost of $3\frac{1}{2}$ lakhs of rupees: this large amount of earthwork cost only 6 per cent. more than it would have at ordinary rates, which compares very favourably with the result obtained in the 1866 famine, when it was estimated that the earthwork cost double the ordinary rates. The average daily attendance on the relief works ranged from 573 in the last week of November 1896 to 29,545 in the third week in June 1897. Five major works were taken up by the Public Works Department, and 48 minor works under Civil Agency. Among the former the most important was the excavation of a channel to connect the Bhairab with the Matabhanga near Shikarpur; this was finished in time to carry the flood waters of the Matabhanga into the Bhairab, which greatly improved for a time the water-supply of a large part of the Meherpur Subdivision: the canal, however, has since then silted up to a great extent, and the Bhairab has lapsed into its old condition of stagnancy.

Gratuitous relief was afforded from January till September. The aggregate number of persons so relieved was rather over six millions. The daily average relieved ranged from 1,675 in the third week in January to 77,233 in the third week in June. No gratuitous relief was found necessary in the affected portion of the Chuadanga Subdivision. The only form which gratuitous relief from Government funds took was the grant of doles of cleaned rice at the rate of half and quarter of a seer per diem for adults and children respectively. In return for the doles, those who were fit for light work were required to either twist $3\frac{1}{2}$ seers of jute into string, or spin one seer of cotton into thread, per week. Some of the string and cotton thus obtained was issued to a few weavers who were in distress, and the matting and cloths woven by them were sold. From 1st August kitchens for the issue of cooked food to

the dependents of workers were opened. Poor-houses were very sparingly used. The following paragraph is taken from the chapter dealing with gratuitous relief in the final report on the famine submitted by the Collector.

“Very few general remarks would appear necessary. It was found in this district that the exaction of a task in return for doles made little or no difference to the number of applicants for relief, though it caused Government very considerable extra expense. If circle officers do their duty properly there should be no need to impose a task unless some task could be devised by which Government at any rate would not be a loser. These remarks do not of course apply to artizans. The system of subcircle officers has worked well. Before it was introduced, circle officers had to spend so much of their time in the purely mechanical duty of superintending the issue of doles, that they were unable to give sufficient attention to the extremely important work of careful house-to-house visitation. The system of relieving dependents of relief workers upon the works does not appear satisfactory; it is liable to abuse and is also rather hard upon the dependents themselves, in that they have to undergo a considerable amount of exposure to the weather. It is desirable that gratuitous relief and relief to workers should be kept entirely separate, and consequently it is, in my opinion, better that dependents of relief workers should be relieved in their own homes.”

The total expenditure on relief was about $8\frac{1}{4}$ lakhs of rupees, of which $3\frac{1}{4}$ lakhs were expended on the wages of workers, and $3\frac{1}{2}$ lakhs on gratuitous relief; the expenditure works out to an average of a trifle over one anna per diem per person relieved.

In the chapter on general remarks and recommendations in the Collector's final report, the following passage occurs:—

“The famine of 1896-97 was far more severe in this district than was that of 1873-74. Notwithstanding this,

it was found possible in the present famine to close Government relief a month to six weeks earlier than was possible in 1873-74. As stated, however, under chapter VII, I believe that it was mainly because by somewhat liberal administration during the time of cultivation of the *aus* crop, the people were enabled to obtain a better outturn than would otherwise have been possible, that it was not necessary to continue Government relief for a month or six weeks more. There are in my opinion no indications that the people have shown in the present famine increased resources and more resisting power than in previous famines. The people of the Kalantar are all wretchedly poor and hopelessly in debt; the great majority of them hold lands under the *utbandi* system, and being practically tenants-at-will, are entirely in the hands of zamindars. In fact, under present circumstances, there is no reason for supposing that their power of resisting famine has in any single way increased during the last 20 years."

DISTRESS OF 1908

Famine conditions prevailed again in the district in the year 1908, though it was not found necessary to formally declare famine under the Code. The rainfall in 1907 was very similar to that in 1896, the most prominent feature being the almost complete failure of the monsoon in the months of September and October, whereby the outturn of the *aman* rice was reduced to only 13 per cent. of a normal crop. The distress affected an area of about 800 square miles, with a population of 435,000; as usual, the Kalantar was the tract to suffer the most. A few relief works were opened in January, but they did not attract many labourers, and it was not until March that the pinch became sufficiently severe to cause the people to come in at all freely. In April about 3,400 persons attended the relief works daily, and this number rose to 5,677 in June, after which the attendance gradually fell off until September, by the end of which month it was found unnecessary to keep the relief works open any longer. A total sum of Rs. 9,859 was expended on gratuitous relief,

but there was some confusion in the accounts which renders it impossible to state the total number of persons so relieved. No kitchens or poor-houses were opened. A total sum of Rs. 6,68,535 was distributed in loans under the Land Improvement and Agriculturists' Loans Acts, principally during the months of April and May, and the Collector remarks that this "put heart into the people, prevented demoralization, and stimulated agricultural operations."

The total amount expended on relief works was Rs. 1,59,414, and the total amount of earth-work executed was $63\frac{1}{4}$ million cubic feet; this gives the remarkably low rate of Rs. 2·5-6 per thousand cubic feet. The piece-work system was adopted, and the average daily wage earned amounted to 3 annas 2 pies owing to the adoption of this system, the expenditure on gratuitous relief was much less than it would otherwise have been.

There was far less actual lack of food than was the case in 1896-97, and no steps were necessary to bring grain into the affected area. The tendency which has been observed in other districts towards a considerable increase in the power of the people to resist famine conditions was clearly indicated in Nadia in 1908; for though the failure of crops in 1907 was very similar to that in 1896, and the prices of food grains were considerably higher in 1908 than they were in 1897, yet the distress appears to have been far deeper in the earlier than in the latter of these two years.