

## CHAPTER VI

### NATURAL CALAMITIES

#### EARTH QUAKES

THE earthquake of 1897 was felt all over the district, its effects being particularly severe at Ranigaj and Asansol where many of the masonry buildings were damaged. Four lives were lost in the district, but otherwise little serious damage was done. Slight earthquake shocks are experienced fairly often, the most recent having occurred in August 1909.

#### CYCLONES

The great cyclone of 1874 caused widespread damage in the district, the vortex passing right over the town of Burdwan itself. The following account is condensed from the Collector's reports. The storm burst upon Burdwan at 8 P.M. on the 15th of October 1874 from the north-east, and towards the morning of the 16th the wind shifted to the east attaining its utmost fury. The vortex passed over the town at 5 A.M. on the morning of the 16th, and towards 12 o'clock the storm gradually abated. The storm was throughout accompanied by heavy rain, and the Banka and Bhagirathi overflowed flooding the surrounding country. The area of the greatest destruction was from Panagarh to Memari. Many large trees were uprooted and others broken. According to the police reports 99 lives were lost mostly by the fall of houses, and in one thana (Bud-bud) 57 cattle and 393 goats and sheep were killed. Five per cent. of the houses in Burdwan town were completely destroyed and fifteen per cent. unroofed or partially damaged, and the Collector estimated the total number of houses destroyed in the district at 21,677. The force of the wind was so great that a train on the East Indian Railway near Khana junction was blown completely over. The lowest barometric reading

recorded at Burdwan was 28.44, or reduced to sea-level 28.54 at 5-51 A.M., showing a depression of 1.36 inches below the normal atmospheric pressure, and the velocity of the wind was estimated to be at least 92.5 miles per hour.

#### LIABILITY TO FAMINE

On the whole Burdwan is less liable to famine than most other districts of the Province. The Asansol subdivision depends on industry for its prosperity rather than on agriculture, and it is improbable that the failure of the crops here would ever cause serious distress. The deltaic portion of the district is more liable to famine, as the people depend almost entirely upon the winter rice crop for their means of subsistence; and a failure of this crop could not be compensated for by the autumn rice crop which is only cultivated on a comparatively small scale. The means of communication, however, are good and amply sufficient to avert the extremity of famine from the greater part of the district, though certain tracts in the south and north-east, such as thanas Khandaghosh and Raina, and portions of Manteswar are more or less isolated. Burdwan suffered seriously in the great famine of 1770 an account of which has been given in Chapter II. During the past half century the district has experienced two famines—in 1866 and 1874.

#### FAMINE OF 1866

Burdwan was one of the districts of Lower Bengal in which the famine of 1866 was severely felt, although not to anything like the same degree as in the adjoining district of Midnapore. The early or autumn rice crop of 1865 was a full one, and the winter rice crop, taken over the whole district, probably did not average less than two-thirds of a full outturn. By March 1866, however, distress began to make itself felt, and coarse rice, which formerly sold at from Re. 1-4 to Rs. 2 per maund at that time of the year was then selling at Rs. 4-8. In June the price rose to Rs. 5 a maund against Rs. 2-2, the usual rate in that month. In the beginning of July there was a sudden influx of paupers

into the town of Burdwan, principally from the weaving towns of Chandrakona in Midnapore (then in Hooghly), and Bishnupur in Bankura, and from the Birbhum district. The attraction to the town was caused by the customary distributions of rice made by the Maharaja, and by the trustees of various religious endowments. The Maharaja increased his daily charitable distributions of rice, but the increasing number of applicants made it impossible for all to gain access to the existing relief-houses, and it was soon found that charitable subscriptions were unable to cope with the increasing distress. Government aid was invoked and in August the Board of Revenue granted a sum of Rs. 3,000 for the relief of the distress, which was soon after followed by a further grant of Rs. 2,000. Upon receipt of these funds, the Commissioner of the Division formed a committee, consisting partly of official and partly of private gentlemen. At the first meeting of the committee a letter was read from the Maharaja of Burdwan, offering to provide for all the destitute paupers in Burdwan town entirely at his own expense, the arrangements being subject to the supervision and approval of the Commissioner. This munificent offer was at once accepted, and from the 6th September the work of gratuitous relief in the town was made over the Maharaja. The Maharaja's representative at first appeared to be unwilling to make labour a condition of relief. He eventually found, however, that the number of applicants could never be expected to decrease as long as all who asked were fed gratuitously. Clothes were distributed gratuitously to 2,183 persons in all; and money was given to enable the paupers to return to their homes, as the distress began to subside. In October the number of applicants fell gradually, and on the 31st of that month the returns showed only 1,206 as being fed daily. The total expenditure of the Maharaja up to the 4th November amounted to Rs. 14,550. It was reported officially that the people in the town at the end of the year did not show any signs of emaciation or starvation. Men and women were stout and in good case. There appeared to be no limit to their rations. Several of them had been for months subsisting on this charity, and, though probably

stronger and haler than they ever were in their lives before, had not done a day's work. Not a man was being employed in the labour yard. In fact, it seemed that labour had been almost optional and not compulsory.

Outside the town the distress was not very serious ; but the country on the opposite side of the Damodar, which is unprotected by embankments, was flooded and 3,065 houses were destroyed the inhabitants of which left their homes for the towns in search of food. The Raniganj subdivision probably suffered most severely in the famine. At that time this part of the district was included within the magisterial jurisdiction of the Bankura district, only the revenue jurisdiction being attached to Burdwan. The town of Raniganj contained several emigration depots, and in the first four months of 1866 no fewer than seventeen thousand emigrant coolies left Raniganj by rail. In the middle of June, emigration was stopped, as small-pox had broken out among the coolies and was being imported into the town. Severe distress was manifested in June, when it was reported that, in consequence of the drain on the male population due to emigration, Raniganj was full of women and children, who followed carts laden with rice, picking up the grains which fell. Soon afterwards, numbers of destitute people began to flock in from Manbhum and on the 30th June a sum of Rs. 500 out of the Rs. 5,000 which had been assigned to the Bankura district was allotted to Raniganj. The means at the disposal of the Committee were still inadequate, and a further grant of Rs. 2,000 was made by the Board of Revenue ; a sum of Rs. 1,000 was also received from a fund subscribed by the servants of the East Indian Railway Company and Rs. 500 more from the Bankura Central Committee Centres of relief were thereupon opened at four places in the interior of the subdivision, where gratuitous distributions as well as cheap sales of rice were made. The mortality in the town from diseases induced by privation of food was very considerable, and a pauper hospital and, afterwards, a small-pox hospital were established. The number of deaths in the streets and hospital was estimated

at an average of fifteen a days during the months of July, August and September, and numbers of children were deserted. Employment on the roads was found for 1,500 paupers in September. The mortality, however, still continued very great, the paupers flocking in from Bankura, Manbhum and Deogarh in a state of utter prostration, and dying soon after they arrived from the effects of starvation, dysentery and diarrhoea. The total amount expended on relief in the Raniganj subdivision was Rs. 7,568, and the aggregate of the daily total of persons who received relief was returned by the Committee at 348,296 a daily average of 2,902 for the four months, from the middle of July to the middle of November, during which the operations were in progress.

In Burdwan generally (excluding the Raniganj subdivision which did not then belong to the district), the total amount expended on relief by the Burdwan, Katwa and Kalna Relief Committees was as follows : From the Board of Revenue, Rs. 3,000 ; from the Calcutta Central Relief Committee, Rs. 2,000 ; private subscriptions Rs. 9,558 ; total Rs. 14,558. The Katwa and Kalna relief centres were maintained solely by private subscriptions. This sum, however, does not include the expenditure incurred by the Maharaja and other private individuals in giving relief, besides Rs. 4,830 granted and Rs. 4,210 advanced for special works.

In concluding the district narrative of the famine in Burdwan the Famine Commissioners remarked that "speaking comparatively, the people of this district did not suffer severely. The generally prosperous condition of the cultivating classes, caused by their proximity to the Calcutta markets, enabled them to oppose a greater power of resistance to famine than that which could be offered by the cultivators of the less advanced districts to the west and south-west, and they also received much support from their landlords. The day-labourers were driven into the towns to seek for subsistence, and there swelled the crowds of paupers who had come in from districts which had suffered more severely. In these centres disease and death were

unavoidable. Although the external relief granted to this district was small we think that it probably did not fall short of the requirements. It would, however, have been well if the organised relief at the different points in the interior of the district had been begun earlier in the season."

#### FAMINE OF 1874

The following account of the famine of 1874 is condensed from Mr. A. P. Macdonnell's "Food Grain Supply and Famine Relief in Bihar and Bengal." Relief operations in Burdwan during 1874 were for a lengthened period very widespread, but the distress which called for them cannot be wholly attributed to the failure in the harvests of 1873. The year 1874 found the district suffering from the effects of two years of markedly adverse harvests and nearly ten successive years of virulent epidemic fever. Not only were the material resources of the people reduced, but their physical capacity was also seriously impaired. In 1872 the rains commenced very late and they were not equally distributed. There was a very short outturn of the winter rice crop, the principal food supply of the people. Several plots of land, even entire villages, remained uncultivated. Only in the Katwa subdivision—less than one-eighth of the district—was the rainfall seasonable or the harvest good. The rains in 1873 were not so greatly deficient in quantity as unseasonable in distribution, and in September and October there was great deficiency.

Distress which had gradually been making way, first attracted serious attention in the north-west of the district about the beginning of April. The Collector on proceeding to the spot found "the condition of some of the people very wretched, the labourers complained very loudly of want of work, and it appeared that many of the men had emigrated to Kachar and elsewhere leaving their women and children. The so-called respectable classes were nearly as loud in their complaints as the poor; goldsmiths complained that their trade was at a standstill; barbers, that the people had given up shaving; cultivators that the grain-lenders had refused

the usual advances; Brahmans, that their sources of income had failed; village watchmen that their service lands yielded next to no crops, and that their money dues were not paid; mendicants, cripples and lepers, that charity was no more; weavers, that advances were no more to be had. Allowing of course for some exaggeration in all these complaints, still the looks of many of the complainants were enough to prove that they were in the main founded on truth." On the 1st of June the Collector after a tour of inspection wrote: "The eye is at once caught by the anæmic, clammy faces of the sufferers from chronic fever." The circle of distress as the year wore on widened still more. In July around Katwa in almost every village visited by him and the Civil Surgeon more or less distress was found; some of the poorest people were even found to be eating grass seeds.

Charitable relief began in the first week of April, when nearly seven thousand persons were gratuitously fed. The number rose to eleven thousand in the end of May and twenty-six thousand in the end of June, whilst during the three following months of July, August and September, the recipients of charitable relief never fell below fifty-five thousand and rose in the middle of August to seventy thousand. In all 6,812 tons of rice were gratuitously distributed, 3,002 tons advanced on loan and 1,495 tons paid as wages. At the same time Rs. 5,46,723 were expended in charitable relief, Rs. 62,277 in wages and Rs. 70,559 advanced on loan. Labourers employed on relief works numbered on a daily average 1,168 in January, 3,513 in February, 3,359 in March, 6,430 in April, 9,613 in May, 11,574 in June, 7,571 in July, 5,252 in August, and 2,206 in September, after which this form of relief ceased; but on the last day of November 3,475 persons were still being fed at the cost of Government. All relief was brought to a close with the end of the year.

Since this famine the district has been singularly immune from serious scarcity. In 1884-85 there was some considerable distress due to failure of the crops in two

successive years. Local relief works were opened, gratuitous relief was distributed and loans were advanced. The supply of food was, however, always plentiful in the markets and prices never reached famine rates. In 1896-97, when the adjacent district of Bankura was seriously affected with scarcity, Burdwan escaped scatheless; not a single relief work was opened and not a single person publicly received gratuitous relief. During 1904 some portions of the Burdwan and Katwa subdivisions suffered from scarcity as a result of the failure of the *aus* rice crop, but the distress was local and short-lived. The total cost of the relief operations which were closed in July was Rs. 26,600; Rs. 3,000 was expended in gratuitous relief and loans amounting to Rs. 35,000 were made.

### FLOODS

From the earliest times the district has been protected from flood by embankments along the Damodar and Ajay. At first individual effort rather than public contribution provided for their construction. A farmer or landowner whose field was threatened would construct a *bandh* to save it with the result that the flood water would attack some other point further down. The process would be repeated again and again until the banks of the rivers were protected by a series of regular embankments. Before the last half of the 19th century, however, these were neither so extensive nor so strong as to effectually check the fury of the great floods to which hill-fed streams, such as the Damodar and Ajay, are liable, and the early history of the district is full of accounts of disastrous floods which breached the embankments and caused widespread damage. The earliest recorded occurred in 1770 and the injury which it caused to the winter rice crop, following on a previous season of scarcity owing to drought, intensified the famine of that year. The inundation was first observed on the 29th September, when the waters of the Damodar rose to a level with the top of the embankment, and near the western extremity of the town of Burdwan the embankment gradually

gave way. The damage was repaired, but four or five days afterwards a second rising of the river resulted in the entire destruction of the embankment. Every effort to check the violence of the torrent proved in vain and the town of Burdwan was almost totally destroyed: not an earth-built house remained, and even those constructed with bricks suffered considerably. The Ajay had also flooded its banks, and the whole tract between that river and the Damodar was under three or four feet of water. Sugarcane and cotton, both which crops appear to have been cultivated to a much larger extent than at present, suffered severely and the whole of the embankment was in a state of ruin. A sum of Rs. 80,000 was remitted from the land revenue payable by the Maharaja, in consideration of his undertaking the necessary repairs, the cost of which, however, is said to have far exceeded the sum remitted. It was not till a period of two years had elapsed that the cultivators began to recover from the disaster. The Maharaja and other zamindars, in spite of the destruction of their crops, cattle and homesteads insisted on the payment of rent, and it does not appear that any further abatement in the Government demand for land revenue was granted on account of the calamity.

Another flood which seems to have been equally disastrous occurred in 1787. Describing the damage caused by it the Collector, Mr. Kinloch, wrote: "The town is totally destroyed, not a vestige of a mud house remaining, and even those built of brick are many of them fallen or so entirely damaged that a longer residence in them becomes dangerous. Many people have lost their lives and a great number of cattle are drowned." And again: "Every house in Burdwan and every village contiguous to it fell down—nothing but the banks of tanks remained for the reception of every living animal."

### FLOOD OF 1823

The inundation of 1823, which commenced on the night of the 26th September, was caused by the bursting of the embankments of the Damodar, the Bhagirathi and minor

streams. A correspondent of the "Calcutta Monthly Journal" has described the inundation : "Picture to yourself a flat country completely under water, running with a force apparently irresistible, and carrying with it dead bodies, roofs of houses, palanquins and wreck of every description. It lasted for three days ; communication was cut off, and the owners of masonry houses took refuge on the roofs. For many miles the thatched and mud houses, as well as thousands of trees, were prostrated. Such trees as had withstood the ravages of the flood formed the resting places of men." The area embraced by the flood commenced from Bali, and extended for twenty-five miles. The villages on both banks of the Bhagirathi, especially on the west bank, were submerged. The height of the water in these villages was at first about three feet. The inundation rose, and at its height, on the 2nd October, the water was about seven feet deep. On the 29th September a boat sailed across country from Calcutta to Burdwan. The loss of life was immense. The crops were destroyed ; the houses were submerged and ultimately carried away ; the people were destitute of food, so that parents sold their offspring for a mouthful of rice. The landmarks distinguishing the holding of the cultivators were swept away, and great confusion and endless litigation naturally ensued. The owners of properties were converted into claimants for land which had been in their possession and that of their forefathers for generations.

#### FLOOD OF 1855

The inundation of 1855 resulted in the destruction of the embankment on the right side of the Damodar. Previous to this time the embankments had been in charge of the zamindars or landholders within whose estates they lay ; but as their neglect caused the periodical breaching of the embankments Government took the matter into its own hands and maintained the embankment itself, debiting each landlord with a portion of the cost. After the destruction of the embankments on the right side of the Damodar in 1855 it

was resolved to abandon them, and to keep up only those on the left bank. New embankments have accordingly been constructed along the whole of the left bank of the Damodar, a measure which has resulted in the comparative immunity of the country north of it from flood. Floods still do occur as in August 1909 when, owing to heavy rains, the Banka and other rivers overflowed and flooded large tracts of country. The water took several days to run off and the crops were damaged by their continued immersion. Many houses were damaged and five lives were lost.