



## CHAPTER VI

# NATURAL CALAMITIES

Dinajpur is in the fortunate position of being remarkably free from natural visitations such as floods, cyclones, and earthquakes. There is a vague tradition that a severe hurricane from the north-east visited the district in November 1787 but nothing is known of the extent of the damage done. There is no record of any cyclone having occurred since then. CYCLONES

As to floods—though small local ones, caused by the rivers overflowing their banks, are of almost annual occurrence and do more or less damage to crops in particular localities—the only really serious one of which any account has been preserved was that of the 9th July 1892. This appears to have been an inundation from the Atrai which by way of the Gabura and Ghagra streams, swept down on the town of Dinajpur from the north-east and washed large numbers of the inhabitants of the northern and eastern quarters out of their houses. At one time it seemed likely that the whole of the central portion of the town might be destroyed, but the timely cutting of the Darjeeling road let the water off and relieved the pressure. A dangerous feature of this FLOODS

flood was that it made its first appearance in the evening, and the darkness which ensued added greatly to its terrors. By the exertions of the local officials the people of the quarters most affected were got out of their houses without loss of life and collected in places of safety. Money was distributed to them for their maintenance and to assist them in the rebuilding of their houses. It would seem that the Punarbhaba also was in flood on this occasion, though not to the same extent as the Atrai, as we learn that the water level in the former was two feet lower than the level of the flood from the north-east. Any way, the railway line was breached on both sides of the town. On the east the mails had to be transported for some distance by boat while on the west they were carried over the breach, which was apparently of small extent compared with the other, by means of an elephant borrowed from the Maharaja. An enquiry into the cause of this disastrous flood led to the conclusion that the railway line, which bisects the district from east to west, was in large measure responsible for the damage done, by holding up the flood water coming from the north. To obviate this, the water way was greatly increased with, it would seem, satisfactory results, as no flood worthy of the name has occurred since.

**EARTH  
QUAKES**

Of the many earthquakes of which record has been kept in the last 150 years, with one exception, the effect appears to have been slight in the Dinajpur district. The exception was the earthquake of 1897, which caused considerable damage to masonry buildings and created something of a panic amongst the inhabitants of the town. The Rajbari suffered most of all and had to be rebuilt in part, but the *pukka* house in the town belonging to several of the zamindars were also seriously injured, and the walls of the Judge's and Collector's houses were cracked.

**FAMINE**

Dinajpur falls within that portion of Northern Bengal, extending from Champaran district on the west to Rangpur on the east, which experience has shown to be liable to famine. The copiousness and regularity of the rainfall in Dinajpur as compared with the more westerly portion of this tract are, however, the cause that real famine, while of frequent occurrence in Behar, is very rare indeed in Dinajpur, though a famine year in the former place is sometimes marked in Dinajpur by a drought accompanied by partial failure of crops, and scarcity and dearth of food

grains.

The first of these scarcities of which any record has been kept occurred in 1865-66, when the price of rice rose to 11 seers to the rupee as compared with 26 seers, the rate in an ordinary year. It seems, however, that this scarcity, for it was hardly more than this, was confined to a comparatively small area and it was not thought necessary to adopt any special measures for the relief of distress.

**SCARCITY  
OF 1865-  
66**

In 1873-74 the whole of Northern Bengal from Champaran to Rangpur was visited by a severe famine. The following extract from the opening paragraphs of a minute by the Hon'ble Sir Richard Temple, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, describes the weather conditions which led up to the famine :- "In Bengal and Bihar, after a season of extraordinary heat during May and June of 1873, the rain did not begin till late, that is in July, and even then was scanty. It lasted more or less, but never abundantly, till the end of August, when it for the most part ceased prematurely. Enough had, however, fallen to secure a fair yield of the crops which are reaped in August and September. Little or none fell during the months of September, October, and November, that is during the whole autumnal season, when heavy showers are indispensable for ensuring the maturity of the rice crop of December (the most important of all the crops), and for sowing the crops which are to be reaped in the following spring. As experience showed that the consequences of drought are sometimes averted by rain even at the last moment, hope was not abandoned till the end of October. Not till then could it be seen whether the apprehension of failure of the crops would be realised or not. By that time, however, it became certain that widespread and heavy loss must occur in the December crops; that the sowing of the spring crops must be short; and that the germinating and growing of what had been sown must be jeopardised. The injury to the young spring crops might yet be repaired, if rain should fall between the end of December and the beginning of February. Fear was chiefly felt for Bihar and for the north part of Bengal, but largely also for all the rest of Bengal save the eastern part in the basin of the Brahmaputra, and the deltaic region in the south, which depends on inundation rather than on rain fall." The expectation of rain in the cold weather was disappointed and the spring crops also came to nothing. By March the people in

**FAMINE OF  
1873-74**

the affected tracts had eaten up their reserve stock of food-grains and were in a pretty bad way. The stock of rice in the market was quite insufficient for their needs and the grain-dealers were asking exorbitant prices for it. During the autumn and winter, however, the authorities had not been idle. The local officers had collected information as to the extent of the scarcity and arrangements had been made for importing large stocks of rice from Burma and elsewhere. In April 1874 relief works were opened in Kaliyaganj, Raiganj, Hemtabad, Pirganj, Ranisankoil and Thakurgaon thanas, which were the most severely affected. The daily number of labourers employed in these relief works reached the imposing total of 95,000 in May 1874, after which the attendance fell off rapidly. Gratuitous relief on an extensive scale was also resorted to, and, owing to the breakdown of the ordinary machinery of the grain trade, Government depots for the sale of grain at reasonable rates, to those who had money to purchase it, were opened at Raiganj and several other important centres. By July 1874 the numbers in receipt of gratuitous relief had reached 84,000, though by this time the relief works were almost deserted. The relief works on which the people were employed were chiefly the construction of new roads and the repair of old ones. A large number of tanks also were excavated or re-excavated. The recipients of gratuitous relief were chiefly the beggars, who at all times a numerous class, were deprived, owing to the scarcity, of the support they usually received from the people themselves, and were thrown on the mercy of Government. The action of the latter in importing and selling grain stimulated the local grain-dealers to renewed activity, and when famine operations had got into working order rice could be purchased in the market at the comparatively reasonable rate of 10 seers to the rupee. From what one can gather from the accounts extant, the Government measures appear to have been fairly effective in dealing with the crisis. There was little, if any loss of life from starvation, though the lower orders, such as agricultural labourers, coolies, and artisans, endured considerable privations. The money spent by Government on the relief of distress amounted to some Rs. 24,00,000, including the value of rice paid as wages and distributed by way of gratuitous relief. This did not include cash loans to landholders and agriculturists, which were given to some extent, nor the

value of the grain which was advanced in large quantities to those who could give security for ultimate payment.

In the years 1891 and 1897 partial failures of crops occurred and the scarcity in the latter year was aggravated by the high prices prevailing elsewhere. On the former occasion Rs. 27,000 was spent on charitable relief from the district funds, while in 1897 Rs. 8,000 was raised by private subscription and most of it spent. **SCARCITIES OF 1891 AND 1897**

In the autumn of 1908-09 real scarcity again made its appearance in the district. The cause and extent of this are thus described in the opening paragraphs of the Collector's report on the relief operations undertaken in the district: "The last agricultural year, 1908-09, began with good rainfall in May, and both the jute and *bhadoi* looked well, but the promise of a good season disappeared with the long drought which followed in June, July, and August, in consequence of which the *bhadoi* was spoiled and the jute, which was actually a good crop, was almost entirely lost for want of steeping water. The prolonged drought seriously affected the main crop—winter rice. For want of rain transplanting for the most part could not be done, and even the little that had been put out withered for want of moisture. The rain in September was too late to save the situation and the result was a total loss of the winter rice in the thanas of Pirganj, Hemtabad, Raiganj, Itahar, and Ghoraghat, and extensive loss all over the Balurghat Sub-division and also in parts of Thakurgaon and Birganj. The following rabi crop was also a failure for want of moisture, except in Kaliyaganj and Gangarampur, where a small crop of chillies was obtained. In this district, which is normally prosperous, the total loss of one season's crops would not ordinarily cause a famine or even acute distress but for the fact that the people, accustomed to a succession of good seasons, have become thriftless and extravagant. The real distress was due not so much to a shortage of stocks in the market, which were ample, nor to high prices, but rather to the inability of the people to buy food owing to lack of money and the contraction of credit. The shortage of money is due to the fact that in the previous year when the price of paddy suddenly went up with surprising rapidity to the almost unprecedented figure of Rs. 3-12-0 per maund, the cultivators promptly sold their entire stocks and, in some cases, even seed grain. This shortage was most marked in the *pali* area **SCARCITY OF 1908-09**

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which is nearer the railway communication and where recurrent crops being possible the *raiya*s had larger stocks. In the *khiar* tracts, where the *raiya*s have practically only one crop (winter rice) to depend on, the sales were not so extensive, and even where stocks had been sold the money was not wasted. It was very different in the *pali* area, where the *raiya*s with the utmost improvidence squandered all their money and the subsequent unforeseen failure of successive crops left them without food-grains or money. It is an important feature that, whereas scarcity was apprehended in the *khiar* tracts and a famine programme of works drawn up for these areas, the greatest distress was evidenced in the *pali* area and amongst the ordinarily prosperous *raiya*s and most particularly in the neighbourhood of large fairs, several of which are held annually in the district." From the above it is seen that the principal seat of the scarcity was much the same as in 1873-74. There seems indeed little to choose between the two years in the size of the area affected or the extent of the failure of crops, and if on the latter occasion the distress and the Government action necessitated by its relief was much less than before, the reason may be found in the general increase in prosperity amongst the agricultural classes resulting from the high prices for produce obtained in recent years, and in improved communications and better organisation of trade which enabled rice from Burdwan, Bakarganj and Burma to be poured into the district without any interposition on the part of Government. The famine was throughout a money famine. There was a plentiful supply of food-grains in the market to be bought by those who had money to buy, and even at the height of the famine the price of these rose no higher than in ordinary years. As is inevitable in all cases of drought the labouring classes were thrown out of employment, and had no money to buy grain at however reasonable a price. As on the former occasion, too, the beggars were deprived of their customary doles and were thrown on the hand of the Government for support. For the relief of these classes relief works were started in Ghoraghat, Raiganj, Itahar, Hemtabad, Pirganj, and Ranisankail thanas, and gratuitous relief in these thanas and some other parts of the district also. Up till 1st April 1909 the work was done by the District Board with the help of a special grant from Government. From that date on Government itself assumed the

## GAZETTEER OF THE DINAJPUR DISTRICT

responsibility for the operations. Towards the end of April good rain fell and the workers on the relief works began to return to their ordinary work in the fields. After a week or two of continued seasonable weather, it became clear that all danger would soon be over, and in effect, by the end of May it became possible to stop relief in all but one thana, Itahar. Here it was continued for another month, after which all relief operations ceased. Besides favourable weather, the timely distribution of agricultural loans, which stimulated credit and enabled the cultivators to get their fields sown, contributed largely to this satisfactory result. During the prevalence of this scarcity, relief works were not opened in any locality except after careful enquires to ascertain if they were really required, and gratuitous relief was very sparingly distributed. In both cases the provisions of the Bengal Famine Code were strictly applied. As a result the numbers on relief works never exceeded 7,000, and those in receipt of gratuitous relief never exceeded some, 2,000, on any one day, and the total expenditure on the relief of distress was proportionately small. The total cost of relief works was some Rs. 82,000, and of gratuitous relief some Rs. 21,000. Of this expenditure, the major share was borne by the District Board. Besides this, Government advanced Rs. 1,50,000 in loans to agriculturists under the Agriculturists' Loans Act, and nearly Rs. 30,000 in loans to landholders under the Land Improvement Loans Act. An agreeable feature of this scarcity was the interest shown by some of the zamindars in the welfare of the *raiya*s. Several of them started relief works on their own account, with or without the help of loans from Government, while others organised committees for the distribution of gratuitous relief with the help of private subscriptions. This was the more to their credit as collections of rent were, as was in the circumstances to be expected, particularly bad. Many of the more well-to-do cultivators also provided work for their fellow-villagers by digging new or re-excavating old tanks with the help of loans obtained from Government under the Land Improvement Loans Act. The timely relief afforded by Government and the District Board, and the plentiful harvests which have since been reaped, have had the effect of enabling the people of the

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affected tracts to recover very rapidly from the effects of the scarcity, which otherwise, as such visitations often do, might have left its mark on the district for years. In fact, with the exception of unusually heavy arrear balances in the zamindars' accounts, and a tendency, short-lived I fear, to thrift on the part of the agricultural classes, there is little to recall the hard times of a few years ago.