

## The 1942 Cyclone and the Colonial Administration: A Story of Imperial Revenge against the Rebellious Midnapore

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**Abstract:** *Midnapore, a district of southwestern Bengal, was always prone to cyclonic storms owing to its location at the northwest angle of the Bay of Bengal. However, in 1942 the intensity of the storm and the height of the storm wave was extremely high. Never before had such a cyclone of so much ferocity struck this district since the beginning of the twentieth century. And in terms of ravages also, none of the recorded cyclones of this century was comparable to those of 1942. The article not only exposes the distress of the people during and after the cyclone but also draws to our attention, the inhumane behaviour of the so-called benevolent British Empire towards the inhabitants of this district, who were well-known for their strong anti-British feelings and activities.*

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

The 1942 Midnapore Cyclone was one of the worst calamities, of its kind, in British Midnapore. The discussion on this cyclone deals with mainly two things. First, the article shows how the violence of the associated wind force and high storm wave affected the district. 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 society. Second, the discussion seeks to address several issues regarding what help the survivors received from the state and society, and how the colonial administration handled the crisis. The study seeks to address some more issues regarding the effect of the epidemic. What steps had the authority taken to check the epidemic? To understand these, the question of the efficiency of the government's relief operations towards the disaster is to be considered. Finally, the discussion, that I am going to take up, seeks to address the prime debate regarding the disaster: Was the 1942 disaster simply a 'natural' disaster? Or did it become more fatal to 'man-made' factors? All these are good reasons to revisit the cyclone of 1942 in the Midnapore district.

### The Cyclone

It was mid-October of 1942 in Midnapore. The southwest monsoon was about to retreat; the northeast monsoon was yet to commence. The time was the season of cyclones. It was also the festive season in Bengal. Besides, the Quit India movement was then in full swing in this district. In this context, the devastating Midnapore Cyclone came on the auspicious day of the *Maha Saptami*, the 25<sup>th</sup> of *Aswin* 1349 BS (October 16, 1942). The two subdivisions of this district – Tamluk, and Contai – where the Congress rebellion was most firmly organized, were devastated so severely that the All India Radio reported that such extensive disaster as had befallen the people of Midnapore this time had never been witnessed in India except during the 1935 earthquake in Quetta.<sup>1</sup> The extremity of the cyclone was known from the speech of the contemporary revenue minister of Bengal, who stated before the Bengal Legislative Council:

A heavy cyclone from the Bay passed over several districts of Bengal on October 16. It began about 7 or 8 a.m. and spent itself in the early hours of the next morning. In the afternoon of October 16, there was a high tidal bore forced up by the cyclone from the Bay which broke into the mainland and devastated a considerable area in the southern part of Midnapur and the 24-Parganas districts. The cyclone was accompanied by heavy rain at certain places; it was as heavy as 12<sup>9</sup> in less than 24 hours. All the rivers in these districts were in heavy flood due to the tidal bore, rain, and force of the wind. In the worst affected areas, there was a heavy loss of human lives – the present estimate being not less than 10,000 persons in the Midnapur district and 1,000 in the 24-Parganas district.

The loss of cattle was even heavier – nearly 75 percent. As to houses, practically every kutcha house was severely damaged or destroyed and only pucca houses except those with corrugated iron roofs remained standing.<sup>2</sup>

The devastating scene of the disaster in Midnapore was narrated in *India Ravaged*, published in January 1943, three months after the cyclone. The district had suffered a two-fold calamity. First, there had been a gust of wind, which began about 7 or 8 a.m. on 16 with a velocity of 460 miles per minute and consequently blew the people and the cattle away and smashed them to the ground. Then, in the afternoon of that day, the tidal wave wrought complete havoc from end to end in the affected area. There was no trace of human habitation in the worst affected area. The fertile lands and freshwater tanks were flooded with a layer of saltwater and sand. Communications had become disrupted.<sup>3</sup> The Bengal Nagpur Railway line had been so badly destroyed that it needed two months to reorder.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, in terms of death, ravage, and wreckage, the disaster of 1942 presented an incredibly tragic scene. According to the Bengal

government statistics, 11,000 of 14,443 deaths were in Contai alone.<sup>5</sup> No doubt, the actual number of deaths was much higher than it. Indeed, more males than females were blown away as they hastily entered the open while trying to save their cottages, cattle, and property in the first few minutes of the devastating storm. The remaining survivors lost their relatives, homes, crops, cattle, and property. Many were getting ready to leave their motherland. And in this connection, it was noticed that more male deaths in the first blast of the storm led hundreds and thousands of widowed females with their babies and children to ask for gruel on the roads of Calcutta from the end of November. So, the noticeable women mortality on the streets of Calcutta during the Bengal famine of 1943-44 had its root in the Midnapore cyclone.<sup>6</sup>

#### **The administrative response**

As the ruler of colonial India, the British administration had an obligation toward the well-being and protection of the residents of British Midnapore. The question now is whether or not the colonial administration performed its service. Our sources abound with harrowing references hinting at the deliberate retaliation and indifference of the state to deal with the situation. If at first, the study looks at the storm warning issue, the revenge mentality of the British against contemporary Midnapore, which was famous for its firmly pro-Congress character, would be cleared. It was now known that the sub-divisional officer of Tamluk received three telegrams warning him of the imminent danger of heavy showers and cyclonic storms in the Alipur Meteorological Observatory.<sup>7</sup> Congress subsequently complained that this officer intentionally concealed the warning message to punish the inhabitants for supporting the rebels though the colonial administration repudiated the charge, demanding that sabotage of the telegraph lines in Tamluk had barred the warning from transmitting.<sup>8</sup>

The conduct of the colonial state, later on, was more shocking. As for the rescue operation, a gloomier picture is obtained from the sources. The condition before the rescue and relief operations was more complicated than in the past. Because, apprehending Japanese aggression along the coast of the Bay, the colonial administration of Bengal had adopted a drastic denial policy long before the cyclone blast occurred in this district. The affected area, being a 'denial area', was previously placed under curfew. But after the devastating cyclone and tidal waves, the administration refused to lift the curfew even for a short time on that dreadful night of the storm.<sup>9</sup> Undeniably, under this peculiar circumstance after the cyclone, boats would be the most indispensable means of transport in the affected areas of estuarial Midnapore. But due to the Denial policy, boats were almost unavailable to rescue inhabitants taking shelter on the roofs of their huts that sometimes collapsed during that cataclysmic evening. In this connection, a gentleman gave a harrowing account regarding the most unsympathetic attitude of the district officers, in which he and others asked the officers to allow a boat, seen by

them, to save some men, women, and children lying near the concerned area. But this request was not granted. Consequently, all the people whom those gentlemen wanted to save were drowned.<sup>10</sup> This refusal was yet another demonstration of the colonial government's unwillingness to conduct a rescue program. Had that prayer not been rejected, more lives might have been rescued.

Interestingly, despite this devastating cyclone on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October, which disorganized human life certainly in the subdivisions of Tamluk and Contai, the power of the nationalist rebels was noticed to have been undiminished. As the British officer confessed, 'the cyclone by itself made very little difference in the plans and attitudes of the leaders of the movement.'<sup>11</sup> Against this background, the authorities were determined to take advantage of the disastrous situation caused by the terrific calamity to express vengeance on the inhabitants of the rebellious Midnapore. In a vindictive way, collector Niaz Muhammad Khan gave an order which stated that 'relief was a less pressing matter than restoration of law and order...and no outsider shall be allowed to do relief work in the district [which] is the abode of the rebels only'.<sup>12</sup> Even instructions were given for suppressing the news of the devastation, as the district was important militarily. For instance, the news was released on 20 October concerning the storm of 16 October having blown over some districts of Bengal, including 24 Parganas, Khulna, Bakarganj, Faridpur, and Noakhali. Because of the Bengal Secretariat's warning, this news did not refer to the incident in Midnapore. Finally, it was 3 November when a group of ministers led by Syama Prasad Mookerjee was preparing to come back after their five-day tour of the cyclone-affected territories and consequently taking necessary arrangements for publishing the news. Just then, the Bengal government released a brief press note: 'A heavy cyclone from the Bay passed over several districts of Bengal on 16 October. It began about seven or eight o'clock in the morning and spent itself in the early hours of the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup>'.<sup>13</sup> It was sixteen days after the storm had ravaged the coastal districts of Bengal. Meanwhile, the Japanese Radio stations repeatedly transmitted that more than a lakh of Bengalis had perished due to the disaster in a single night.<sup>14</sup> But unfortunately, even then, this belated press note did not have much detailed account of the devastation caused and the number of deaths of human lives. Undoubtedly, this delay in publishing the news proved the accusation that 'the authorities wanted to [take] revenge on the inhabitants for their support to the rebellion.'<sup>15</sup> It was one of the main issues which obliged Syama Prasad Mookerjee to resign from the ministry. 'The suppression of news of the havoc by Government, and even of appeals for help, for more than a fortnight was criminal,'<sup>16</sup> charged by Mookerjee in his resignation letter to the Governor.

Widespread criticism of the government's policy of suppressing the news of the disaster was provided by the *Yugantar*, a Bengali daily newspaper, through its editorial comment on November 4, 1942. The paper raised a question in any portion of England, 11,000 people had perished in one night

due to a natural disaster, would it have been imaginable to suppress the terrible news for such a long time? But it was possible in India only, the paper stated because those who were responsible for ruling over the country were Englishmen. So, it was impractical to plead for relief of the sufferers to the British administrators lacking in human feelings in a country, the paper argued, where a report about the death of 11,000 lives was deliberately not allowed to be published for 14 or 15 days. Indeed, this ironic writing provoked an angry reaction from the colonial administration. The governor immediately prohibited the further publication, sale, or distribution of the said issue. Also, he banned any subsequent Issue of the *Yugantar* newspaper's print, sale, or distribution for three days from the date of service of this order, No. 979 Pr, dated 14 November 1942.<sup>17</sup>

The government was still hesitant about distributing the relief. The local administration pressed the Bengal government not to relieve those villages, which were presumed to shelter the rebels. Collector Khan suggested to the chief secretary that 'relief be withheld from the disaffected villages until the people hand over the stolen guns and give an undertaking that they will take no further part in any Congress movement.'<sup>18</sup> The same principle was followed in the case of students also. The students of Midnapore were on strike and marched in procession after the arrest of nationalist leaders last August. It provided the local authorities with enough pretext to withdraw all grants-in-aid; instead of recommending additional monetary aid for restoring school buildings damaged by the cyclone and replacing damaged equipment necessary for efficient teaching. Not only had the authorities withheld allowances but also recommended the disaffiliating of academic institutions.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the government advocated this principle to teach the nationalists a lesson.

Yet S. G. Taylor considered refusing to give relief on a political cause to be foolish. Taylor was then the deputy inspector general of the Bengal police. He wrote to inspector general A. Gordon, on 27 October, that 'any delay in giving relief will encourage the people to seek help from the Congress and give the latter ground for spurious argument that they are more powerful than the government'<sup>20</sup>. Taylor's apprehension became true within two months. Massive torture by the administration, anxiety about life and property due to the panic of imminent scarcity, and the results of the cyclone and tidal waves, which disordered normal life, directed the Tamruk Congress to consolidate the anti-British feelings into an organizational structure of a parallel government. Accordingly, the Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar was established on 17 December 1942, which undertook relief and rehabilitation of the affected people with particular importance. Unfortunately, the relief works could not meet the expectations due to the deficiencies in resources of the Jatiya Sarkar. Nevertheless, it presented the Sarkar as a valid substitute for the colonial government.

Finally, after much delay, the administration commenced the relief program. But people's loathing of the colonial administration was so intense

that Taylor noticed that as late as the 27<sup>th</sup> of October, eleven days after the calamity, 'very few persons have come forward to ask for help, though there must be thousands who are homeless and without food and good water.'<sup>21</sup> So, the official relief program did not appear to have experienced a satisfactory response even during the unprecedented distress. Instead, on 7 December, the government published a press note describing the extent to which relief programs were being hindered in the district by the activities of rebellious people.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, after resigning from the Bengal cabinet, Syama Prasad asked for an inquiry about the government-callousness to tackle the crisis. Besides, several members of the legislative assembly, namely D.L.Khan, T.Goswami, Krishna Prasad Mandal, and Gobinda Chandra Bhowmick, firmly rejected the contentions of the press note.<sup>23</sup> However, this press note attracted severe critical comments from contemporary newspapers also. 'The whole situation, therefore, calls for an inquiry—public inquiry, we should say', wrote the *Hindusthan Standard*, an English daily published from Calcutta.<sup>24</sup> 'We have criticized Government again and again in connection with relief operations in Midnapore,' printed the *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. 'We hoped that Government would take this criticism as helpful advice, but the mentality which finds expression in the Press Note under discussion has surprised and disappointed us,' reproached this paper.<sup>25</sup> On the other side, the local administrators, on the contrary, found a big chance to take their revenge and hence continued their repression of the nationalists. In this context, what is genuinely heart-rending was the behavior of Indian public servants who were provided food and clothing at the expense of the public. Collector Niaz Muhammad Khan was notorious for his cruel and vindictive character. Khan did not report to the local government of this devastating calamity for a week.<sup>26</sup> Samar Sen, the sub-divisional officer of Contai, was determined to wreak vengeance on the nationalists during the disastrous crisis. Sen came out of his bungalow to personally visit the affected territory in the mofussil on 7 November, the 23<sup>rd</sup> day after the devastating disaster.<sup>27</sup> Sen's counterpart in Tamluk, Wazir Ali Shaik, whose callousness we have already discussed, was inefficient by official standards. Lower the ranking, respectively, B. K. Ghosh, special magistrate of Contai, Sudhansu Dasgupta, Khasmahal manager of Contai, Nalini Raha, a subdivisional police officer of Tamluk, and Nirad Datta, police sub-inspector of Contai were infamous for their inhumane behavior. Among them, particularly Ghosh and Raha carried on repression with systematic barbarity.<sup>28</sup> Their terrific brutal policy not only brought inexpressible misery to the affected area but was also genuinely unfamiliar in any civilized country's history. A large number of harrowing tales of looting, destruction, arson, unbelievable physical torture of the civil people, and above all, organized rape of women, on a mass scale in the affected area by the protector of the law were printed in the *Biplabi*, a weekly Bengali journal, through its successive editions.<sup>29</sup>

And it was not before December after the expiry of almost two months from the date of the occurrence, that the colonial government made some

proper arrangements to devise an elaborate relief program. Large sums were allotted for one of the most extensive relief programs in the history of Bengal. Between October 1942 and March 1943, the following expenditures were sanctioned: Rs. 12,890,520 for agricultural loans; Rs. 7,278,889 for test work; and Rs. 12,844,004 for gratuitous help. These were not only enormous amounts for a small area but also beyond Bengal's annual allocation for relief. For this reason, special requisitions were required from the government of India.<sup>30</sup> But it was too late to improve the situation. Because in post-cyclone Midnapore, this cash injection had a negligible effect: food, not money, was badly needed.<sup>31</sup> So, despite this attempt, this relief program ended in a fiasco.

On the other side, many restrictions were imposed by the administration on the relief program organized by private organizations in the affected area. It was determined that even recognized unofficial organizations, such as the Ramakrishna Mission or Marwari Relief Society, and others would not be permitted to select their areas. After discussion with the local officers whose unsympathetic nature of course should have been the concern of acute criticism, the government decided the portions to be served by these organizations. Moreover, only those confirmed to be members of a recognized relief society could be enabled to go to its area, along with a permit provided by the concerned sub-divisional officer.<sup>32</sup> But, the experiences faced by these private organizations were still disappointing. For instance, a group of Marwari Relief Society relief workers, despite showing their identity proofs to the sub-divisional officer of Tamluk, noticed themselves in jail.<sup>33</sup> Many such pathetic examples were there that could not be written to end. Yet the private agencies worked with a passionate plea for serving distressed humanity.

### **The epidemic**

However, together with the failure to dispose of the dead bodies and the colonial government's inability to supply sufficient relief, the awful environment played a significant role in the outbreak of the epidemic. Due to the devastating storm and tidal waves, the corpses spread over a large area. As the water started to ebb, the survivors cast off these corpses into rivers, ponds, and canals, showing a minimal sign of piety, which created a significant sanitation problem. In reality, in the subdivisions of Tamluk and Contai, the water in 8,500 ponds became unhealthy for drinking because of contamination by saltwater, corpses, and carcasses.<sup>34</sup> The polluted water supply was perhaps the most severe problem during the period. But the effort taken in dealing with this case in the affected areas had been nominal.<sup>35</sup> The survivors suffered from cholera, dropsy, dysentery, and, commonly, fever. Furthermore, the state was unable to supply the survivors with adequate food. We have received a short yet vivid account, which supports the earlier fact, of the condition in Contai shortly after the storm from T. G. Davies, a European relief volunteer of the Society of Friends Ambulance Unit. Davies described:

Delay in the giving of rice was the general complaint. ... True, in

the Panipia area, certain homes presented us with samples of the type of rice they used to eke out their supplies. This they had gathered when, amongst the ruins of their huts, the waters had subsided. ...It was black in color, with the smell of decaying flesh.<sup>36</sup>

The remaining villagers had to survive on the leaves of plants, greens, and water hyacinths. Even within a few days, nothing was found which could be consumed. The consumption of unhygienic food and unsanitary water contributed to the deterioration of public health. The question now is what measures the administration had adopted to check the epidemic. Our sources are filled with references indicating the negligence of the administration in handling the crisis. Even in this situation, when the crisis was deepening, the state's intention was vindictive. Doctors of the Indian Medical Association of Calcutta were prevented from going to the affected areas without a permit.<sup>37</sup> Again, the doctors, who were given permission, went there without minimum medical equipment. In Contai, the deputy assistant health officer and his six colleagues had no apparatus except their syringes. They confessed that they were more or less impotent in dealing with the crisis without medicine and medical equipment. Resultantly, the colonial administration ultimately failed to change the post-cyclone extraordinary situation to improve. The villagers entirely regretted their survival and had no hope, protest, or orison, apart from surrendering to death.<sup>38</sup>

The impact of the cyclone and tidal waves followed by the epidemic, as a whole, disastrously affected Midnapore. This discussion examines whether this calamitous outcome could have been avoided; also, whether the colonial administration should be held responsible. We have already discussed that, according to government statistics, nearly 11,000 persons died from the violence of the associated wind force and high storm waves in the subdivision of Contai alone. These losses couldn't be revived, though many lives could have been saved by timely transmitting the storm warning messages and conducting a proper rescue operation. Moreover, the severity of the disaster could have been lessened with sufficient relief to the survivors and diligent response to the epidemic. But the study suggests that the colonial rulers, for their Empire's interest, viewed the situation from a completely different angle. They were determined to take advantage of this disastrous situation caused by the cyclone to express vengeance on the poor inhabitants of the rebellious Midnapore. The district officials not only showed apathy to the distress of the survivors but also denied any relief to the sufferers for long after the cyclone. As a result of the total negligence of the state policy to tackle the extraordinary post-cyclone situation at least 1,100 persons, in addition to the above deaths, in the Contai subdivision alone perished due to trauma, exposure, cholera, and other contagious diseases.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the situation in Midnapore became progressively worse. Worst of all was the destruction of the harvest. Further, an upsetting crop disease set in at the same time, damaging much of the



paddy that had been remaining. All this transformed Midnapore from a surplus district into a deficit one in the post-cyclone period, with minimal stock for its inhabitants. Usually, this rice shortage was easily alleviated at other times by supplying rice from unaffected tracts of the district to the affected portions and importing it from other districts. But the situation was not so simple now. The ongoing rice denial policy already eliminated that hope. Moreover, there was still a massive export of paddy and rice from the affected areas. Simultaneously, a sharp increase in food grain prices aggravated the present crisis. But still, there were no signs of aid from the district administration. This disgraceful attitude of the district officers in dealing with the crisis contributed, to a considerable extent, to the furtherance of the disaster. Finally, the growing apprehension about the advent of famine became true in 1943 in Midnapore. Thus, after a thorough analysis of the British policies for the survivors, the study suggests that the 1942 disaster, though primarily a result of extreme natural forces, was not just a natural calamity; the human factors of calamities should not be overlooked. It made the post-cyclone situations even worse.

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