

Disaster, Vulnerability & the Colonial Midnapore: An Environmental History of the 1867 Cyclone

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Abstract

The historical dimensions of natural calamities form one of the important parts of the historical reconstruction of human past and these issues along with their regional variations are being increasingly recognized. In this context, the present article seeks to tell the story of the 1867 cyclone in the Midnapore district from a historical perspective. The discussion not only exposes the distress of the people during and after the cyclone but also draws to our attention the apathy and indifference of the colonial state towards its survivors.

Keywords: Natural disasters, Cyclone, Midnapore, Colonial Administration

Calamities & Midnapore

Before the study discusses anything about the 1867 cyclone in the Midnapore district, it would be pertinent to introduce in brief the then district. British Midnapore, the largest of the Bengal regulation districts, lay between the latitudes of 21° 36' N and 22° 57' N and extended from 86° 33' E to 88° 11' E longitude in the south-western part of Bengal, covering an area of 5,186 square miles.¹ Due to the geographical location, this district was unique for its geological, climatic, and edaphic varieties. The north and northwest of Midnapore was a part of the eastern fringe of the Chota Nagpur plateau and composed of hard lateritic rocks. The climate of this part was characterized by fierce dry heat in the summer, moderate rainfall in the rainy season, and short chilly weather in the winter. A large area of this portion was mostly unproductive and uninhabited. On the other side, the eastern portion of Midnapore was mostly covered by alluvial deposits of the Gangetic delta. Hence this portion was highly fertile, but also prone to flooding,

¹ O'Malley, L.S.S., 1995, (Reprint), *Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore*, Calcutta: West Bengal District Gazetteers, P. 1.

with a usually humid climate. The south as well as the southeast portion of the district, which lay at the head of the Bay of Bengal, was sandy, saliferous, and naturally less fertile than the east. The unique geography of this colonial district illustrates that some portions of it were liable to drought while others were to inundation upon the occurrence of unusual irregularity in the seasons. Moreover, due to its geographical location at the northwest angle of the Bay of Bengal, Midnapore was liable to cyclonic storms. Usually, cyclones come in from the Bay of Bengal in the post-monsoon period i.e. from October to November and a few take place at the beginning of the monsoon, from May to June.

It is very unfortunate to note that, especially during the colonial period, a large part of the district was exposed to frequent natural catastrophes like droughts, floods and cyclones that often turned into calamities due to the lack of effective preventive measures. But it is not unreasonable to assume that if proper measures had been taken, the British Midnapore might have been spared from such a calamitous drought or flooding outbreak. However, in the case of cyclones, the matter is different. The modern world has not found any way to prevent its occurrence or alter its course till date. Hence, cyclonic disasters, in the colonial period, were unavoidable. Adding to the inevitability of such natural disaster brought about by the devastating cyclone, during the second half of the nineteenth century Midnapore experienced repeated cyclonic appearances causing a significant disruption in the district's agriculture-based socio-economic life. The present article is a case study of one of these cyclones, which appeared in 1867.

This discussion deals with mainly two things. First, it briefly analyses the formation and progress of the 1867 cyclone and its landfall in this district. The article shows how the violence of the cyclone affected Midnapore. In this context, the article seeks to examine both the physical and human impacts of the cyclone and address the crises which were created in society. Second, the article seeks to address several issues regarding what help the survivors received from the state, and how the colonial administration tackled the crisis. To understand these, the question of the efficiency of the government's relief operations towards the disaster must be considered. All these are relevant issues to revisit the cyclone of 1867.

Cyclone of 1867: A Brief Analysis

The description of this cyclonic devastation in the British period is primarily confined to the official publication of the district gazetteer, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore*, written by L.S.S. O'Malley. O'Malley informed us that the violent cyclone burst on 15th – 16th October of 1867 in the district of Midnapore. However, there seem to be several inconsistencies in this portion of his discussion. Probably, O'Malley muddled up the 1867 cyclone with the 1874 Midnapore cyclone, which occurred on the same date, that is, 15th – 16th October. Moreover, in this gazetteer, we can notice only the account of deaths of living beings and

damages of properties especially crops and houses, caused by the 1867 storm. But nothing has been said about the survivors and their indescribable sufferings.² Here also the statistics he provided regarding the death toll caused by this cyclone was related to the 1874 cyclone.³ In fact, no document received from the proceedings of the government of Bengal, archived at the West Bengal State Archives in Kolkata, supports O'Malley's data. Instead, an official report entitled 'Special Narrative by the Government of Bengal' (No. 13, dated 4th December 1867) shows that the cyclone of 1867 formed apparently at some point, southeast of the Bay, at the end of October and that its center moved north-eastward.

To find the exact date of the cyclone of 1867, it is better to start the discussion three years back. It was the month of October 1864. A violent storm came to this district by the dawn of the 5th of this month. Never had such a cyclone of so much ferocity struck Midnapore. And in terms of ravages also, perhaps none of the recorded cyclones was comparable to those of 1864. The estimate of the loss of human life, caused only by the cyclone and storm waves, in the *parganas* south of the river Rupnarayan, exclusive of the large portions from which no details were received, amounted to 33,012. Possibly an equal number of people died in the epidemic that followed. But it was not their headache; the greatest concern of the colonial government was their merchant ships as this violent storm had demolished a huge number of ships in the Calcutta port.⁴ So, for the sake of its flourishing maritime trade, it was inevitable for the British Raj to think about how a scientific system of storm warnings could be introduced in colonial India. In effect, the discussion over it was laid before the government of India. And in a few months after the 1864 cyclone, one of the government's constructive responses was the appointment of a meteorological committee in March 1865, in order to develop a system of meteorological observation for protection from a storm. Hereafter the office of the meteorological reporter was founded on the 1st of April 1867, to carry on the storm-warning system, which had been introduced by the meteorological committee in the meantime. Thus, a review of the government's motive behind taking these measures shows that the primary objective was to secure the economic interests of the Empire rather than to protect the lives and properties of their subjects though the purpose for which the system had been established was well fulfilled. Perhaps one of the most notable matters of this present discussion is that the storm-warning system, functioning since March 1865, predicted this impending

² O'Malley, L.S.S., op. cit., p. 118.

³ For a detailed historical analysis of the 1874 cyclone in Midnapore, see Willson, W G., 1875, *Report of the Midnapore and Burdwan Cyclone of the 15th and 16th of October 1874*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.

⁴ For a detailed historical analysis of the 1864 cyclone in Midnapore, see Shyamaprasad De, 'The 1864 Cyclone and Its Aftermath in Midnapore District: A Historical Analysis of a Disaster', *Vidyasagar University Journal of History*, 2019, Vol. VIII, Pp. 84-102.

storm successfully. On 1 November 1867, a warning, inferred from the Sagar Islands and Cuttack, was given to the master attendant a little before 3 p.m.⁵ The cyclone came at night.

On 2nd November, the day after the storm, J.C. Vertannes, the executive engineer of the Hijili division, gave a valuable account regarding the storm's passage in the Contai subdivision, situated southeast of the district. A strong gale proceeded from the north on 30th October. The morning sky towards the north and the east was cloudy. Towards the evening of the 30th, the sky became cast with dark clouds. It started raining by 3 a.m. on the 31st and continued till about 5 or 6 p.m. on the same day. At about 10 p.m., the wind, without any rain, commenced blowing from the northeast. On November 1, at about 7 a.m., the rain again started to fall. As the day advanced, by 7 p.m., the wind became virulent and blew from the northeast. By 10 p.m., the storm assumed the characteristics of a cyclone and was blowing from the north and east until about 11.30 p.m. The storm had subsided entirely at 3 a.m. on November 2.⁶ The following table exhibits the rainfall in Contai from 31st October 1867 to 2nd November 1867:

Statement showing the Rainfall in Contai from 31 October up to 2 November 1867

Date	Since	Fall in inches	Remarks
31 st October 1867	From 3 a.m. to 10 a.m.	1.875	Wind North-East
1 st November 1867	From 10 a.m. of 31 st October to 10 a.m. of 1 st November 1867	1.575	Ditto
2 nd November 1867	From 10 a.m. of 1 st November to 10 a.m. of 2 nd November	2.800	This fall occurred during the late cyclone.

[Reading taken every day at 10 a.m. & Guage used was a funnel-shaped copper provided by the Surveyor-General's Department.]

Source: West Bengal State Archives, General Department Proceedings (April 1868), Progs. No. 89, 'Statement showing the rainfall in Contai from 31st October 1867 up to 2nd November 1867.'

⁵ West Bengal State Archives [henceforth WBSA], General Department Proceedings [henceforth GDP] (May 1868), Proceedings Number. [henceforth Progs. No.] 97, 'Report of the Meteorological Reporter to the Government of Bengal, 1867-68.'

⁶ WBSA, GDP (April 1868), Progs. No. 86, Vertannes to T.W. Armstrong, consulting engineer to Government of Bengal, Irrigation Department, No. 257, 2 November 1867.

At Tamluk, situated on the banks of the Rupnarayan and about thirty-seven miles northeast of Contai, the storm wind amounted to a severe gale, especially in Doro and Mahishadal and in Tamluk itself. As observed at Tamluk, the details were described by Annoda Prasad Ghosh, an assessor deputy collector, on the 2nd of November. The weather on 30th October became worse from the night. By 10 p.m., a brisk wind, accompanied by rain, blew from the south southeast. On the next day, the weather continued in the same state. On November 1, by 10 p.m., the aspect of affairs became progressively deteriorated. The wind was blowing very strongly from the north and sometimes from the west. Then the storm was more like 'a hurricane' accompanied by heavy rain. At about 4 a.m., the storm subsided eventually.⁷

On November 1, the officiating magistrate and collector of Midnapore, T.H.H. Shortt, reported the bad weather at the Midnapore town to the government. The wind blew in gusts; the rain fell in torrents. He apprehended severe damage to the crops.⁸ On the 3rd of November, just two days after the storm's occurrence, the collector sent another report. Based on these and subsequent reports, C.F. Montresor, commissioner of the Burdwan division, reported a detailed account of the cyclone at Midnapore to T.B. Lane, officiating secretary to the Board of Revenue, Lower Provinces on 29 November. On the evening of 31st October, the sky was quite clear in the station; the usual calm-cold weather had set in. Shortly after midnight, thick clouds started gathering in the Midnapore's sky. On November 1, by noon, it started raining heavily; a rather heavy gale had come from the northeast and later from the north northeast. However, it had not yet merited the name of a storm until about 10 p.m. Between that time and 11.30 p.m., a very high wind accompanied by heavy rain blew with increased intensity. From then, the aneroid barometer at the Midnapore Jail Hospital, which had been falling steadily, remained still until midnight, when it began to rise again. The wind decreased its power from the night, and it was comparatively calm in the morning of the 2nd.⁹ The following table shows the barometric readings from an aneroid barometer, which Dr. Bensley kept at the jail hospital during the gale:

⁷ WBSA, GDP (April 1868), Progs. No. 62, Annoda Prosad Ghose to T.H.H. Shortt, Tamluk, 2 November 1867.

⁸ For details, see WBSA, GDP (April 1868), Progs. No. 62, Shortt to Montresor, 3 November 1867.

⁹ WBSA, GDP (May 1868), Progs. No. 60, Montresor to Lane, No. 650A, Burdwan, 29 November 1867.

Barometric Readings & Wind Direction during the Gale at Midnapore

Date	Time	Wind direction	Barometer
1 st November	3 p.m.	Rain falling with gusts of wind from N.E.	29.83
Date	Time	Wind direction	Barometer
"	6 p.m.	Wind and rain increasing	29.70
"	6:30 p.m.	Ditto	29.69
"	8 p.m.	Ditto	29.66
"	10 p.m.	Ditto	29.62
"	11 p.m.	Ditto	29.58
"	11.30 p.m. to Midnight	Ditto	29.52
2 nd November	The barometer then began to rise		
"	1 a.m.	29.66
"	5 a.m.	29.72
"	7 a.m.	29.78

Source: West Bengal State Archives, General Department Proceedings (May 1868), Progs. No. 60, C.F. Montresor to T.B. Lane, No. 650A., Burdwan, 29 November 1867.

The article has discussed that this cyclone was attended with strong winds and heavy showers. Now the question is how the district was affected. The worst news from Hijili was that at the mouth of the Rasulpur, ten boats were waiting to take in salt, and a small ferry boat sank with their crews. In total, about one hundred persons were drowned.¹⁰ Along with this, the cyclone had appeared in the affected area with the news of the loss of lives due to the falling of houses. There had been a severe injury in Tamluk too. The loss of life in this subdivision amounted to 18; all (except two) happened in Doro.¹¹

Shortt reported that the inhabitants, most of the respectable persons of Midnapore, who attended the *cutcherry*, apprehended that the crops had sustained very significant injury.¹² The western half of the district had not suffered much. Due to the bad weather, the yields along the roadside at Godapiasal, seven miles north of Midnapore, were slightly lower. However, there was a large amount of beaten-down grain nearly ripe.¹³ At Garhbeta, twenty-nine miles north of Midnapore, the deputy magistrate reported that the storm had unfortunately inflicted severe injury

¹⁰ WBSA, GDP (April 1868), Progs. No. 64, Letter from T.H.H. Shortt, Contai, 11 November 1867.

¹¹ WBSA, Montresor to Lane, No. 650A., op. cit.

¹² WBSA, Shortt to Montresor, 3 November 1867, op. cit.

¹³ WBSA, Montresor to Lane, No. 650A., op. cit.

on the *hoymantik* paddy crop, just coming into the ear. The plants mainly had come down, and it was feared that the yield would be from eight to twelve *annas*.¹⁴ Although the exact extent of crop damage at Tamluk could not be determined, deputy collector Annoda Prasad Ghosh estimated that the wind and rain destroyed about 8 to 10 *annas*. Rice that sold at Rupees 1-6 per *maund* on the 30th, was now selling at Rupees 2 to 2-4 per *maund*, wrote Ghosh on November 2. Many large trees within the town were blown down.¹⁵ At Contai, according to the deputy magistrate's report, the maximum loss was at two-sixteenths through his subdivision.¹⁶

Nevertheless, cultivators lost their houses and cattle also. For instance, during this disaster, about a hundred heads of cattle and about six hundred huts were destroyed only in the Tamluk subdivision.¹⁷ C.F. Montresor, the then commissioner of the Burdwan division, also noticed this. In some parts of the district, the poorer classes, who were deprived temporarily of shelter, suffered more or less from exposure to the ensuing cold weather, stated Montresor.

Vertannes recorded the damage to the government's estates in the Tamluk subdivision. The wind blew off many thatched roofs of government buildings. Bungalows in Mohanpur and Junput also lost their thatch due to the wind. Moreover, the force of winds had broken the door of the deputy magistrate's office at Tamluk. Fortunately, no damage had been to either the dams or sluices.¹⁸ At Contai, the deputy magistrate, Rattray, informed that the salt *golahs* at Kalinagar and Ramnagar had been damaged slightly. But five hundred *maunds* of salt sank in the Rasulpur inland.

The Administrative Response: Some observations

As the ruler of colonial India, the empire had an obligation toward the well-being and protection of the inhabitants of the district. The question now is whether or not the colonial state performed its duty. The adversity caused by the cyclone made it necessary that immediate measures should be taken for offering relief where required. On November 8, through an office circular (No. 91.), the commissioner suggested for the formation of local relief committees and raising local subscriptions immediately. The government facilitated this movement by promising to double all private local subscriptions collected from the public. In

¹⁴ WBSA, Letter from T.H.H. Shortt, Contai, 11 November 1867, op. cit.

¹⁵ WBSA, Ghosh to Shortt, 2 November 1867, op. cit.

¹⁶ WBSA, GDP (April 1868), Progs. No. 62, A. Rattray to Shortt, Contai, 2 November 1867.

¹⁷ WBSA, GDP (April 1868), Progs. No. 65, Herschel to Lane, No. 1086, Midnapore, 21 November 1867.

¹⁸ WBSA, Vertannes to Armstrong, No. 257, op. cit.

continuation of this circular, on November 9, Montresor issued another circular to all the collectors (except Bankura and Birbhum) in his division, announcing immediate measures, in the shape of remissions or suspension of local taxes in towns, with a view to providing an opportunity to the poorer classes who were rendered houseless.¹⁹

The following table shows the details of what relief operations were found requisite at ten villages in the Tamluk subdivision. This relief was distributed by Jadub Chunder Chatterjee, deputy magistrate of Tamluk, and the objects were mainly widows and indigent.

Details of Gratuitous Relief

Expended from the Cyclone Relief Fund	In actual relief	Expenses	Number of persons relieved			Average relief per person
			Men	Women	Total	
Rs. 124 – 4 – 0	123 – 0 – 0	1 – 4 – 0	9	16	25	5 – 0 – 0

Source: West Bengal State Archives, General Department Proceedings (October 1868), Progs. No. 35, 'Report of the Committee of the Cyclone Relief Fund of 1867', Appendix H.

The study suggests that the above account indicates the government's pathetically small contribution to relief work in the post-disaster period. Along with this, our sources abound with harrowing references indicating the deliberate retaliation and indifference of the state to deal with the situation. For instance, we already came to know that the thatched roofs of most of the houses in the cyclone-stricken villages were blown off. Vertannes, the executive engineer, apprehended in his letter, dated the 2nd of November, that this should cause much suffering among the poor in the forthcoming winter, as they could not procure fresh straw to re-thatch their huts until December next. Montresor had shown interest in dealing with this crisis. In his memorandum (No. 575, dated 9th November 1867), Montresor prayed for a large sum of money to repatriate the losses.²⁰ But, a general attitude of the colonial government was that the state's contribution on relief should be minimal. In effect, on November 13, Montresor received a reply to his prayer from H.L. Harrison, the junior secretary to the government of Bengal, who was directed by the lieutenant

¹⁹ WBSA, GDP (May 1868), Prog. No. 42, Circular from CF Montresor, No. 92, 9 November 1867.

²⁰ WBSA, GDP (April 1868), Prog. No. 80, Memorandum from Montresor, No. 575, 9 November 1867.

governor, stating that it was not the wish of the government to see relief funds applied in all.²¹

Within a few days after the storm, it became apparent that the colonial administration tried to underestimate the difficulties faced by the inhabitants. The damage to the crops, particularly in Tamluk and Hijili, saw a bundle of petitions come, such as from the *mouzas* of Majnamuta and Sharifabad, stating that ‘by the storm of the 31st and 1st instant the Bay of Bengal flowed over the dykes on its coast, the salt waters let into the villages (sic.) destroying the standing paddy crops, the trees, the houses, a few men and cattle, and we only are living.’²² But commissioner Montresor thought the villagers had grossly overestimated the damage. So, he refused to allow any land revenue remission. According to him, the petitions were full of ‘unusual and unmeaning exaggerations.’ But he admitted in the same letter, dated the 29th of November, that in the eastwards of Midnapore town, ‘the crops were blown about with greater violence.’²³ The government acknowledged the loss of crops but did not change the relief policy. The same view was reflected in the collector’s report. After inspecting some of the cyclone-affected villages in Midnapore, Tamluk, and Contai subdivision, the then officiating collector, Shortt, found that the received reports from the local officers ‘concerning the damage done to the crops were very much exaggerated.’ Instead, the administration deserved a pat on the back. So, he wrote that ‘we may congratulate ourselves on having escaped very easily when we consider how exposed a great part of the district is to the effect of storm and flood.’²⁴ Shortt’s intervention brought the relief work that had begun to a swift end. Within ten days after the storm on November 11, he reached his conclusion that ‘we have no need of public or private relief.’²⁵

Actually, the administrators had decided that the colonial government’s contribution to relief would be as little as possible. For instance, from Montresor’s letter, we learn that the unfortunate *pargana* of Doro had again borne the brunt of the storm after the 1864 cyclonic devastation. The loss was more than one-third. And the price of rice had risen six *seers* (from 32 to 26 *seers* per Rupee).²⁶ Despite this, Shortt said on 11 November that there was no distress at all in the two

²¹ WBSA, GDP (April 1868), Progs. No. 81, Harrison to Montresor, No. 4570, Fort William, 13 November 1867.

²² Cited in WBSA, GDP (April 1868), Prog. No. 72, Extract from a letter from THH Shortt, 10 November 1867.

²³ WBSA, Montresor to Lane, No. 650A., op. cit.

²⁴ Cited in WBSA, GDP (April 1868), Prog. No. 66, Montresor to Lane, 10 November 1867.

²⁵ WBSA, Letter from T.H.H. Shortt, 11 November 1867, op. cit.

²⁶ WBSA, Montresor to Lane, No. 650A., op. cit.

parganas of Mahisadal and Doro, ‘which call for any intervention on the part of the authorities’.²⁷ And the next newly-appointed collector W.J. Herschel too felt an impracticable optimism like other district-level officers that the people of Doro ‘could set themselves right without assistance.’²⁸ Thus, the nonintervention policy of the Empire, particularly for the sake of its finances, probably made the post-cyclone situations even worse every time during the colonial period.

²⁷ WBSA, GDP (April 1868), Progs. No. 74, Letter from Shortt, 11 November 1867.

²⁸ WBSA, Herschel to Lane, No. 1086, op. cit.