

CHAPTER VI NATURAL CALAMITIES

LIABILITY TO FAMINE

THE district is liable to famine owing to its dependence on the rice crop, and to the absence of a complete system of irrigation works to counteract the effects of a failure of the rains. The normal acreage of the rice crop is no less than 529,000 acres or 88 per cent of the normal net cropped area, and winter rice alone occupies 507,000 acres or 84 per cent. Though a certain amount of artificial irrigation is carried on by means of tanks and of embankments thrown across the line of drainage, the greater part of the rice crop is dependent entirely upon the rainfall, and this must be not only sufficient, but also well-distributed. A deficient or badly distributed rainfall is specially disastrous to rice, for the prospects of the early rice are seriously prejudiced by scanty rainfall at the beginning of the monsoon, while its premature termination is injurious to the winter rice crop. If there is a failure of both these crops, the people have little to subsist on except maize and inferior millet crops, until the harvesting of *rabi* crops in the latter part of March. The *rabi* crops again are grown on a comparatively small area, occupying only 10 per cent of the normal net cropped area, and in a year of short rainfall they are deficient both in yield and area, owing to want of moisture at the time of sowing. The result is that if the rice crops fails completely, distress inevitably ensues.

TRACTS LIABLE TO FAMINE

The experience of the last famine, that of 1897, shows that the tracts most liable to suffer from famine are the Gangājalghāti thana, the north of the Sonāmukhī thana, the Chhātnā outpost, the Raipur thana and the Simlāpāl outpost. The Gangājalghāti thana consists largely of jungle, with villages and cultivation scattered here and there. It comprises two outposts, the Sāltorā

outpost, which contains hilly country in parts and a considerable area of jungle, and the Mejiā outpost, which has but little jungle. The population generally is distinctly poor, the soil is inferior, and even in ordinary times the people are not well-off. There are no wealthy zamindārs; and the number of landless labourers, belonging chiefly to the Bāuri caste, is conspicuous. Road communications are on the whole fair, but the Dāmodar on the north cuts off this portion of the district from the railway. The northern part of the Sonāmukhī thana is nearly all under cultivation, but most of it is very liable to drought. About a century ago the Bishnupur Rāj made a simple but effective system of irrigation channels, called the Subhankari *daurā*, to counteract the natural tendency of this area to drought, but the channels have silted up and become useless. The Chhātnā outpost consists, to a considerable extent, of jungle. The population is poor and has not many resources, a considerable number of its inhabitants being Sāntāls and Sāmantas; the latter, who call themselves Kshattriyas or Rājputs, are mostly poor, are averse to work, and consequently suffer severely in time of famine.

The Raipur thana is a hilly tract mainly under jungle, but is intersected by the river Kāsai, and contains some large areas of open country under cultivation. It is badly off for communications, and is practically cut off from the outer world. The old families of zamindārs, locally known as Rājās, have now lost their lands and been reduced to poverty, but there are a good many substantial ryots, especially Brāhmans, who claim to be Uikal Brāhmans who migrated from Orissa. The Simlāpāl outpost adjoins Raipur on the east and its physical features are similar, except that it is not hilly. It boasts of two substantial zamindārs known as the Rājās of Simlāpāl and Bhālāidihā, and the portion east of the river Silai has good communication with the town of Bānkurā.

It must be remembered, however, that since the famine of 1897 conditions have been considerably altered owing to the construction of the railway through the heart of the district. Thus, the Chhātnā outpost is now intersected by the railway, and other areas, which were formerly cut off from this means of transport, have been brought into communication with it by means of feeder roads.

FAMINE OF 1866

The most terrible famine which has visited Bānkurā during the last half century was that of 1866, which was due to the failure of the winter crop in 1865. The western and south-western portion of the district bordering on Mānbhūm suffered severely, but its effect were not felt to any serious extent in its north-eastern portion adjoining Burdwān. On the other hand, there was much distress in and round Bishnupur, which at that time contained a large population of weavers. Deprived by the general distress of a market for the produce of their ordinary labour, and unable to compete in field work with those whose daily occupation is agricultural labour, their condition was specially miserable. The agricultural labourers, who live by daily wages, were but a few degrees better off; even their labour, when employed, scarcely yielded enough for their own support and left no surplus for wife and children.

Prices had been high in 1865, and exports had been unusually heavy, for those who ordinarily kept stocks for their consumption through the coming year were tempted by the high rates to sell off what they had. Distress was already noticeable in some parts by the beginning of 1866, and in February there was a violent outbreak of cholera at Bishnupur, which was promoted by, if not directly due to, the extreme scarcity of food. The people were paralyzed by panic, and poverty-stricken to such a degree, that they could not even pay the cost of burning their dead, and threw down the corpses outside the town. Prompt measures were taken, however, for the removal of corpses, and the epidemic was checked. In the meantime, distress continued through the east and the south of the district, and in March the shopkeepers at Bānkurā combined not to sell rice below the rate $7\frac{1}{2}$ standard seers. Relief works were accordingly started in the town, but at the end of April they had to be discontinued for want of funds. Some of the labourers were thereupon sent to work on the chord line of the East Indian Railway beyond Rānīganj, but soon returned, complaining that the standard of work was so high that, in their emaciated condition, they found it impossible to earn more than two annas a day, a sum which was not sufficient to keep body and soul together at the ruling price of rice.

At the end of May Mr. W. T. Tucker, the Judge, applied to Government for a grant in order to carry on relief measures, for it was found impossible to provide, from local resources, the relief necessary to alleviate "the fearful distress prevailing." A grant of Rs. 5,000 was given, which was expended on the importation of rice from Calcutta and its sale at cost price. These sales were carried on in the town of Bānkurā from June to November at the rate of 10 seers for the rupee, except in August, when the price was 8 seers per rupee. The necessity of this relief and the general destitution of the people may be gathered from the fact that on the 13th July the Committee wrote that "there is actually no rice in the Bānkurā bazar, and people are entirely supported at present by the rice which they purchase daily from the Committee."

While these measures were being carried out at Bānkurā, nothing was done for a long time at Bishnupur, which at this time was under the Subdivisional Officer of Garhbetā. Subscriptions had been collected, but the Subdivisional Officer made no special report to the Collector as to the necessity of relief work, said that he had no time to look after the work of relief, and admitted that, although the money collected was lying idle in his hands, nothing was done from April to July (when he left Garhbetā), because there was no agency at Bishnupur capable of carrying it on. On the 3rd August the Committee learnt that the weavers of Bishnupur were in terrible state of destitution, and a separate fund was at once raised for the purpose of enabling them to carry on their trade.

Matters were equally bad in the Raipur thana to the south-west, which was then included in the Mānbhūm district. Towards the end of May it was reported that hardly a night passed in which some house about Raipur was not attacked by large bodies of armed men and grain plundered. The property stolen consisted of nothing but food, and any valuable found in a house were left by the dacoits as useless. Rice could not be got for love or money; even the better classes were forced to eat *mahuā* and other jungle products, while numbers eked out their scanty subsistence by devouring the grass of the fields. Relief works were started about the end of this month at different points between Raipur and Ambikānagar; but an officer, visiting the Ambikānagar depot at the end of August, reported that many

would not come to the centres of relief through fear that they might be made to work, and that though the Sāntāls were suffering severely, not one was to be seen at the depot, as they looked upon begging or receiving alms as more disgraceful than stealing. According to another account, they would not eat rice cooked by a Brāhman, and all the cooks at the depots were Brāhmans. Whole villages appeared to be depopulated, and rice was selling at $3\frac{1}{2}$ and $4\frac{1}{2}$ seers per rupee.

Besides the relief works in this thana, there was a relief depot at Bānkurā, a second 3 miles from the town, and a third at Bishnupur. In September the incoming of the *bhādoi* harvest brought down the price of rice to 12 seers per rupee, and relief operations were suspended early in November, except in Bishnupur, where they were continued till the end of that month. In many places, however, the relief had come too late, and meanwhile the migration, suffering and mortality were very great. Even at the end of August, when it was reported that distress was increasing on all sides and that numbers were dying on the roads from exhaustion, being unable to reach the depots, the application of the Committee for another grant of Rs. 10,000 was refused, though a grant of Rs. 4,000 was eventually given in the latter half of September. The efforts of the Committee, moreover, were mainly concentrated on the town of Bānkurā and its neighbourhood; and as late as September 1866, Sir William Hunter on a visit to Bishnupur wrote: "I found Bishnupur, once the most populous place in Bengal, a city of paupers." Between 2,000 and 3,000 persons were fed daily; but cholera had broken in its most virulent form, and the relief was not sufficient. "Thirty-five poor wretches were dying daily of hunger, and multitudes of deserted orphans were roaming the streets and subsisting on worms and snails."*

FAMINE OF 1874

In the famine of 1874 relief measures were promptly and thoroughly organized, and the distress was not comparable to that which prevailed in 1866. This famine was due to a failure of the rice crop in two successive years. The outturn of this crop in 1872 was estimated at only one-half of the average,

* F. H. Skrine, *Life of Sir William Wilson Hunter*. (1901) pp. 114, 115.

and in 1873 the rainfall was unseasonably distributed, being scanty in May and June, excessive in July and August, and quite insufficient in September and October, with the result that the rice crop, including both *āus* and *āman*, gave a little less than half of the average outturn. Relief measures had to be undertaken in March 1874, and by the 1st June 11,000 persons were in receipt of charitable relief, while 3,650 were employed on relief works. The greatest distress occurred in July owing to the scanty rainfall, for cultivation was delayed, the usual demand for field labour failed to arise, prices became dearer, and private charity ceased to support the destitute poor. In these circumstances, distress spread fast, and at the end of July over 39,000 persons were in receipt of charitable relief and 4,100 were employed on the relief works. In the end, however, there was a good outturn of the rice crop, and it was found possible to bring relief operations to a close at the beginning of October. The number of persons relieved was equivalent to 107,828 persons gratuitously relieved and to 21,365 persons relieved by wages for a period of one month.

SCARCITY OF 1885

In 1885 relief measures were again necessary. There had been failure of crops more or less pronounced in the two preceding years, and in 1885 some distress, necessitating the establishment of systematic relief operations, became apparent. The supply of food, however, was always plentiful in the market, and prices can hardly be said to have reached famine rates, the highest price of rice in Bānkurā being $16\frac{1}{4}$ seers per rupee. The classes who stood in need of relief were labourers, beggars, and others who, in ordinary times, subsist on the charity of their neighbours; and the difficulty lay in the fact that the failure of the local crops restricted the labour market and forced on Government the necessity of providing employment for those whose circumstances prevented them from migrating in search of work. The distress was by no means extensive, the highest daily average of persons receiving charitable relief being only 2,860 (at the end of July); and it was found possible to close the relief centres by the end of September.

FAMINE OF 1897

The last famine from which the district has suffered was that of 1897. In the year 1895-96 the rainfall was very deficient for the winter rice crop, which in this district is the main food crop, and the result was a total outturn of only $9\frac{2}{3}$ annas of winter rice for the whole district. The Bishnupur subdivision, which contains the best rice lands in Bānkurā suffered most for the acreage fell from 185,000 acres in 1894-95 to 70,000 acres in 1895-96, and the outturn from 16 annas to 7 annas, while in the tract between the Dāmodar and Sāli river in the Sonāmukhī and Indās thanas the crop was almost a total failure. The headquarters subdivision also suffered, the outturn of the *bhādoi* and *rabi* crops being only 10 and $12\frac{1}{2}$ annas respectively, though it must be remembered that these crops occupy only a small proportion of the area under cultivation. The rainfall of 1896-97 was again very unsatisfactory for the winter rice crop, the outturn of which for the whole district was estimated at 9 annas or less, while it was only 4 annas in several areas, viz., the western part of the Gangājalghāti thana and its outposts (Sāltorā and Mejiā), the north of the Sonāmukhī thana, the Raipur thana, and the Simlāpāl outpost. The great rice producing thanas of Indās and Kotalpur in the Bishnupur subdivision happily had a comparatively good crop of 10 annas each; but the Tāldāngrā and Barjorā outposts had only a 6 anna crop and the Chhātnā outpost only a 5 anna crop. The *bhādoi* crop, however, which consists mainly of rice, was fully up to the average, the rainfall having only failed from about the 19th September, while the unimportant *rabi* crop had a 7 anna outturn.

Not only did the short winter crop of 1896 succeed a short one in 1895, especially in the north of Sonāmukhī and the west of Gangājalghāti, but high prices were caused by abnormal export to other districts. The result was that, before the end of October 1896, common rice sold at Bānkurā at 10 or 11 seers a rupee, as against $16\frac{1}{4}$ seers in the previous month, $17\frac{3}{4}$ seers in October 1895, and $18\frac{3}{4}$ seers in October 1894. The remote south-west corner of the district, comprising the Raipur thana and part of the Simlāpāl outpost, did not suffer, however, from high

prices nearly so soon as other affected areas, owing to there being no export on account of bad communications and the distance from large marts. In spite of this early rise, the price of rice was $11\frac{1}{2}$ seers at Bānkurā and 11 seers at Bishnupur by the end of December; and it remained wonderfully firm till the end of April 1897. In the first half of May, it suddenly rose to 10 seers at both places, and even higher in the affected areas of Gangājalghāti and Sonāmukhī, where it was 9 to 8 seers per rupee.

Unmistakable distress appeared in May, when gratuitous relief had to be given and relief works opened in the Gangājalghāti thana and in the north of the Sonāmukhī thana; in the south of the latter thana relief operations were not necessary till the end of July. The Chhātnā outpost showed signs of being affected about the same time. Relief also had to be given in part of the Bānkurā thana adjoining the Chhātnā outpost and in the Tāldāngrā outpost, the Indpur outpost, the Khātrā thana and the Barjorā outpost, but it was not considered necessary to declare these tracts affected. The distressed area comprised 1,053 square miles with a population of 413,000 persons, and the persons relieved were mostly landless labourers, belonging chiefly to the Bāuri caste, but also to other low castes, such as Bāgdis, Hāris and Khairās, and including a considerable number of Sāntāls. The relief works were brought to a close at the end of September. The total number of persons employed on relief works was 318,577, representing an average of 2,377 per diem, or 0.5 per cent of the population affected, while the total number of persons gratuitously relieved was 855,204, representing a daily average of 6,528, or 1.58 per cent of the population affected.

FLOODS

Other calamities besides famine are of rare occurrence. Small inundations frequently occur owing to the suddenness with which the rivers and streams rise in the rainy season; and the lands bordering on the rivers suffer accordingly, so much so that in many places they are permanently allowed to remain waste and

uncultivated. No flood, however, has occurred within the experience of the present generation on a scale sufficiently large to affect the general prosperity of the district. The most serious flood in recent years was that which occurred in June 1897 owing to the abnormal height to which the Kāsai and Dāmodar rose. Along the banks of the Dāmodar the *āus* rice crop was much damaged, 4,000 or 5,000 *bihās* of rich soil were buried under sand, and some villages were washed away with everything in them. There was no loss of life, but relief had to be given in the north of the Sonāmukhī thana to 1,386 persons, who had been rendered homeless by the flood. Such floods, however, are fortunately rare, and, as a rule, only partial and local damage is caused.