

## **1942: A Natural Disaster and Resurgence of Communist in Midnapore**

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### **Abstract**

The year 1942 was one of the disastrous circa in the history of Midnapore and the colossal cyclone had swept away almost everything to live of the people of Midnapore. The Communist party of India took the side of the British in the Second World War when Hitler invaded Russia and from this time the nature of this War had been changed, it was now People's war. This stance of the Communist party alienated common people but disastrous made by the cyclone in 1942 brought an opportunity for the Communist party to revive in the district. The party was engaged in the rescue work, organised relief camps, relies centres, medical camp, opened milk centres, opened canteen and etc. The communist party resuscitated by helping the shipwreck people of Midnapore.

**Key Words:** - Cyclone, Disastrous, Communist party, Rescue work, Midnapore, Relief camp, Organization, Flood, victims.

### **Introduction**

Midnapore was one of the epicenters of the Quit India Movement. The congress and the supporters, sympathizers and the Communist party and its rank and file in the district could not have restricted themselves from taking part in the Quit India Movement.<sup>i</sup> The new party line was only followed by the workers and the members of the Communist party from the beginning of the movement. The few members who did not keep themselves aside from the wave of the movement in 1942, joined immediately in the social welfare and rescue work which was required for repairing the destructive and ruinous activities made by the cyclone on 16<sup>th</sup> October, 1942 just before the day of Durgapuja festival during the course of the Quit India Movement.<sup>ii</sup> The cyclone and the excessive rain destroyed the agriculture especially the paddy harvesting and the production of vegetables.

### **The Official Report Relating this Cyclone as Follows:-**

Wireless).—The terrible cyclone which struck the eastern sea coast of Bengal on October 16 caused 11,000 deaths, says a Calcutta message. The cyclone was accompanied by a tidal wave 20ft. high, which flooded the countryside. The country was devastated far more than by any air raid, and 3000 homes were affected by the cyclone, the velocity of which was estimated to be 70 miles an hour. The story is told by Horace Alexander, a Quaker, who came to India in charge of a Friends' am- balance unit to assist in the event of bombing. He has just returned from the affected area, and graphically described scenes of stark tragedy which were accentuated by an outbreak of cholera. The Governor of Bengal has appealed for public funds to assist the starving inhabitants.

**LONDON, Nov 3.-CYCLONE IN INDIA.**

Devastation by Tidal Wave 11,000 was killed. An official message from Calcutta reveals that 11,000 people were killed in the Midnapore and Parganas districts when for 24 hours a cyclone swept over several parts of Bengal on October 16. Seventy-five per cent of the cattle in both districts were also wiped out. The cyclone rose in the bay and forced up a tidal wave which broke into the mainland and devastated considerable areas. Rains lashed the whole area as the cyclone reached its climax and practically every roughly-built house was either severely damaged or destroyed. The havoc in Midnapore was so great that the first few days had to be spent in restoring communications without which relief work could not begin. It is the worst disaster in India since the earthquake that destroyed Quetta.

**The Weather Forecast before the Occurrence of Cyclone**

According to the special reports of the director of metrology of Poona, by the evening of 16 October, 1942 the severe cyclone struck the south west Bengal coast between sugar Island and Balasore, about 55 miles south east of Midnapore. It then curved north and north – eastward slowly, diminishing in intensity, and was centred as a storm on the morning of 17<sup>th</sup> October, near Krishnanagar where the pressure at 8.00A.M. Was 0.46'' below normal. Therefore, in the same direction, the storm was weakened rapidly and the centre as a depression on the morning of 18 October, near Rajshahi. It rapidly filled up over north Bengal during the course of the day. Some of the district average rainfall and particularly heavy falls associates with the storm are given below.

Name of the District	Rainfall (in inches)	Date
24 paragana	1.7 & 3.0	16 <sup>th</sup> & 17 <sup>th</sup> Oct, respectively
Nadia	2.2 & 2.5	16 <sup>th</sup> & 17 <sup>th</sup> Oct, respectively
Mursidabad	1.7 & 4.3	16 <sup>th</sup> & 17 <sup>th</sup> Oct, respectively
Burdwan	4.5	17 <sup>th</sup> Oct
Birbhum	2.4 & 2.6	16 <sup>th</sup> & 17 <sup>th</sup> Oct, respectively
Bankura	2.7	17 <sup>th</sup> Oct
Midnapore	3.0 & 2.5	16 <sup>th</sup> & 17 <sup>th</sup> Oct, respectively
Hooghly	3.3 & 2.4	16 <sup>th</sup> & 17 <sup>th</sup> Oct, respectively

Sources- census of India, 1951 Report, volvi part 1A p – 77

Proving the weather report wrong, the actual rainfall in the different places on Midnapore

Places of District	Rainfall (in Inches)	October, 1942
Tamluk	7.4	16 <sup>th</sup> October, 1942
Danton	12.7	16 <sup>th</sup> October, 1942
Kharagpur	11.5	17 <sup>th</sup> October, 1942
Midnapore	12.8	17 <sup>th</sup> October, 1942
Ballichak	11.5	17 <sup>th</sup> October, 1942
Contai	8.1	17 <sup>th</sup> October, 1942

Sources- census of India, 1951 Report, vol - vi part 1A p – 77

The then Revenue minister of Bengal said before the Bengal Legislative council that a heavy cyclone from the Bay of Bengal passed over several districts of Bengal on the October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1942. It began about 7 or 8 A.M. and spent itself in the early hours of the next morning. On afternoon, October 16<sup>th</sup> there was high tidal bore, forced up by the cyclone from Bay, which broke into the main land and devastated a considerable area in the southern part of Midnapore and the 24 – Paragana district. The cyclone was accompanied by heavy rainfall and gusty winds at certain places.

For thereason of the depression created in the coastal area of Midnapore and Orissa, there were the overflow of water of sea which flooded almost the entire area in the Contai sub-division and the incessant rain also flooded almost entire part of the district. The wave of the seawater rose from 10ft to 40 ft high for cyclone, and its effect the seashore border of the district was flooded within few minutes.<sup>iii</sup> Within a few hours so many men and domestic animals was washed away in the currents of the salted sea- water and at the spur of this movement almost all the people had to confine in their houses because of the destructive activities of the cyclone which also caused the river to break its bank The destructive activities of nature in the southern and eastern part of the district witnessed a devastating flood in 1942.<sup>iv</sup> The Durgapuja festival was turned into field of tears of people of the district in this year.

After the cyclone there was no government assistance to rescue the food-affected and cyclone stricken people of Midnapore. At this moment the Communist party who were being looked down upon by the eyes of general people for taking the policy of people's war stand in which the party supported the British war efforts. The party immediately took part in the social service and the rescue work to regain its ground which had been lost in the August movement in 1942.<sup>v</sup> The cyclone destroyed all the paddy fields and numerous houses of the poor people who were virtually homeless. It took away 14000 lives of man, and 1, 90, 000 domestic animals.<sup>vi</sup> The salted sea water which entered by the overflowing into the paddy field did not went down to the sea totally even in the winter. It was stored in the lands. Storing the salt water in the land made it a non-arable and less fertile. It was seen that the death body of men and animal were being rotten in the open air and it polluted the atmosphere. There was hardly any arrangement made by the government for the cremation or the coffin of the death body in this area of natural calamity.<sup>vii</sup>

The poor peasants' hut floated in the flood, bull was lost, agricultural food floated and utterly he was ruined. At the end of the natural calamities he had only two options - he was forced to either leave the village or to lend his small piece of land to the *Zamindars* or to the money-lenders for his survival. In this way the marginal peasants became ruinous after selling his small pieces of lands to the money-lenders at a very meager selling of price. Lending money from money-lenders, the poor peasants were never in a position to pay-off his debt, but he lost his moveable and immoveable properties to the money-lenders. The fishermen who used to catch fish in the sea shore area became also ruined as his small boat and fish catching net was also floated by the cyclone. Being a jobless it was very difficult

for him to survive. The cyclone and cyclone- originated flood affected every stratum of people in the eastern part of Midnapore very severely.<sup>viii</sup>

The prices of the essential commodities like food grains and vegetables soared so high that it went beyond the reach of the common peoples purchasing commodity. Despite the desperate effort, the common masses were not able to collect the food grains for their survival. As a result the people went on starvation that led to premature death. In winter the land turned like graveyard. The paddy and vegetable fields were ravaged in the cyclone and flood and there was no production of vegetables or paddy recovered in the winter. The late autumnal paddy was also not produced and at the same time rice in sufficient quantity was not imported from Burma to minimize the scarcity of food grains.<sup>ix</sup>

Taking the advantage of this situation the black marketers stored food grains in secret place; they caused the numerous boats full of paddy submerged into the river, and destroyed a good number of stocking place of rice. So the people of Midnapore after facing the havoc national disaster faced the famine which was essentially a man-made, partly natural.<sup>x</sup> So the two natural calamities the cyclone in 1942 and eight month later famine in 1943 devastated the society, economy and daily life of the people of Midnapore.

The distress of the people did not end there. The cholera, small pox dysentery and many other epidemic diseases had broken out immediately after the famine in the district. A sizeable number of people died of these epidemics than the natural calamities. Over 15 lakhs of people became the toll of natural calamities and its followed epidemic in two years in this district.<sup>xi</sup> The situation worsens in the next year in 1943 when once again the district was over flooded with swelling water of river Damodar. Village after village were totally destroyed; almost nothing left in the villages in consecutively for three years.

The cyclone of 1942 hastened the economic dislocation of agrarian community in Midnapore. Numerical increase of landless labour through the process of depeasantisation during these distress years aggravated land hunger. The destitute landless labours were the most hardworking but lived in extremely poor condition. This stratum included both agriculture and artisans, placed in the significant position in the village production operation. All of them lost asset of liquid property and about half of them lost land to the class of affluent. The peasant having from .5 to 2.5 acres of land, suffer most since most land become uncultivated from the days of flood. Money lenders often refused loan to destitute people.<sup>xii</sup>

Moreover food policy of the local government for the cause of flood and famine in next year was anti - people. Considering the inadequacy of paddy produced to meet the demands of the people, local leader of Tamluk suggested to the district magistrate to import rice from abroad and to take measure to stop export rice from the region.<sup>xiii</sup> But the district authority paid no heed to the suggestion. Any kind of protest to authority's high handedness was met with frequent arrest and persecution, empowered by the defense of India rules (DIR) thus the scarcity was caused by administrative bungling, food procurement policy necessitated by the war effort, the dislocation of the indigenous system of river transport, extensive black marketing in food grains and a certain degree of

callousness of the local administration. This unwise execution of the food policy invariably made the people hostile towards the government.<sup>xiv</sup>

Partly to resist possible Japanese aggression and partly to the government atrocities the local congress leaders formed the volunteer corps at Sutahata, Mahisadal and at Tamluk later on, several camps were inaugurated to train volunteers and Bhaginisenasibir (sister's army camps) were formed to instruct the women volunteer. These camps were visited by the congress stalwarts like Prafulla Kumar Ghosh and others. These volunteer corps were entrusted with the task of removing war-phobia from the minds of the people, prevent export of rice from the district and to launch constructive works in Midnapore. But the congress leaders were very calm in the midst of government repression.

### **Resurgence Work of the Communist party**

From these above analysis it was fact that the district was running through a critical period from which the inhabitants wished to get the relief. It was seen that there were multifarious tendencies of crisis which destroyed the normal functioning of rural areas as well as in urban lives of the district. The distress of the people reached its culmination point. The political climate of Second World War and the Quit India Movement demanded the complete British exclusion from the Indian soil. Though the Communist party rejected the idea of exclusion of the British from the Indian soil at that time rather they were anxious about the question of Indian national movement which they neglected at the cost of world Communism.

This attitude of the Communist party isolated it from the masses of India. This was also true in the district politics. The Communist party of the district now began to think that it was the ideal time to revive the Communist party and it was the golden opportunity to regain their mass - base through the welfare activities which were much required for the distressed, hungry and hopeless people of the district.<sup>xv</sup> So the Communist party was immediately engaged itself in the welfare work to remove the distress of the people as well as to repair the damage of their own organization.

So the Communist party's workers and leaders without wasting time involved themselves in the work of the reconstruction of the villages by helping the distressed people and putting up the Relief Movement for feeding the hungry people. Relief Movement did not only the activities for distributing the essential commodities to the distressed people but also it went on helping the poor to put them up as self-helpers and thereby they earned money for their livelihood. The Communist party workers at this time used to come out for begging both rice and money in cash from the *Zamindars*, the *Jotedars*, the rich peasants and from the well to do families.<sup>xvi</sup> The begged rice was distributed among the poor and the collected cash money was used to purchase the medicine, clothes, village reconstruction work etc.

### **Relief Movement:**

The Relief Movement involved also the people to build up self-help women group who at least could collect the rice for their own family by her remuneration and she would get the share of the profit from her organization led self-help groups.<sup>xvii</sup> Many centres were set up to prepare the mat and furniture, cotton, dhoti, saree etc. The people of relief committee provided half of the capital and half should be provided by the members of the self-help group for running an organization of self-help group. Government purchased the finished goods of the self-help groups and the wages and profits were paid to the members of the self-help group by the Relief Committee.

There were 20-25 women workers in one relief centre and the wage was 25 paise and half kilogram of rice for per day work of eight hours and it was an inspiring phenomenon for the women of that days.<sup>xviii</sup> The women who did not contribute anything, or had the capacity of contribute anything in the Relief Fund also could be engaged as a labourer of husking Pedals. A few Husking Pedals were founded in the villages by the Communist party to help the poorest section of the society. The *Zamindars* or well to do families came for husking their paddy. The poor women labour after husking the paddy returned to their houses with rice and husk. She was given the wage or rice as her wage. The relief centres immensely contributed benefit to the poorest section of the society as the wage was used for the feeding of her family or for the paying off the loan of money –lenders.<sup>xix</sup>

### **Setting Up Medical Unit:**

The persons who were given relief had to register their names and he donated 10 paise per month as a token for the expenditure for bringing relief articles at the centre from which he was given relief. Some relief centres also opened their medical unit attended by a doctor at least once in a week. The doctor was arranged by the left-wing leaders. The doctor trained the local quacks and also trained some girls for nursing for 3-4 months. After leaving of the doctors from the medical unit, those were running under the supervision of Dr. Ramani Pramanick and Dr. Haripada Bhowmik, both was the supporters of the Communist party.<sup>xx</sup>

### **Opening The Milk Centres:**

The Communist leaders started the milk union canteens at Gurupota in union XI and polanda in union VI of Tamluk area.<sup>xxi</sup> Side by side with the setting up of the relief centres the milk-centres were also opened by the Communist party for helping the poor and the destitute people of the village. There were some milk centres as follows.<sup>xxii</sup>

	<b>Centres</b>	<b>Conducted by whom</b>
1	PurbaChilka	BimalaMajhi&BirjabalaPatra
2	Kalagechia-(west)	GangamaniPattanayek
3	Kalagechia-(east)	BirjabalaPatra
4	Chak-Durgapur	SripatiBhowmik
5	Chak –Gouranga	DhiriPanja&NarenPanja
6	PaschimChilka	Local girls
7	Putputia	PurnimaMaity
8	PurbaNakha	AnupamaPattanayek
9	Dhanichak	Local committee of CPI
10	Chap Basan	Kamala Dolai
11	TamlukSankar Area	BimalaSamanta
12	Parbatipur	KiranArcharya
13	Parbatipur	Boarding of Sucharita Das
14	Harir bazar	Girls of the washerman (local)
15	Polanda	RenukaArchaya
16	Gavindapur	Dr. GunadharSamanta
17	Sonapata	RameschandraKar (The Congress leader)
18	Uttar Polanda	NagenGhara
19	Gothra	Wife of BashinhidharSamanta
20	Khapur	Sarat Jana
21	Harinan	Murati Barman
22	Paikbar	Dr. kalidev Barman
23	Parbatipur (Daspur)	RadharaniSamanta
24	Kalora	Mrigendranath Bhattacharya
25	Amanpur	Shibarani Dixit
26	Parulia	Mother of Rabindranath Mitra
27	Midnapore town (chhata Bazar)	Usha rani Chakrabarty
28	Midnapore town (kot Bazar)	Mother of Haren Roy
29	Mashuda (Mahishadalp.s)	Kishori Jana
30	Lakhya	Karan family
31	Chandipur	SurendranathBhunia
32	KalikaKundu	AnuddahKuila
33	Tangrakhali	Patit Jana

From these milk centres mainly the milk was distributed for the child and also some amount of milk was distributed to the destitute persons and poor mothers.<sup>xxiii</sup> A wing of the Communist party women front called as “*NariSevadai*” (women volunteers Association) arranged for vaccination to prevent cholera, chicken pox etc. Through the various activities

of relief works and the milk centres, the Communist party came in touch with the people and they regained faith from the public who deserted them for their proximity with peoples' war theory. The selfless social service and sacrifices of the left-wing leaders for the cause of the poor and destitute people of the village in the period of the natural calamities made the people praise the Communist party and their sympathy fell upon the Communist leaders and thereby the Communist party regained the support of the masses in the district.

Most of the relief centres and milk unions were conducted by the women who were directly involved with the left-wing politics and the women who were involved or worked in the relief centres or in the milk units were involved in the politics of Communism in the later period.<sup>xxiv</sup> As a result, a women front of the Communist party named *Mahila Atmaraskhya Samiti (MARS)* was formed. Almost all the women engaged in the relief works took the membership of *MARS* and the Communist party got the women leadership like Bimala Majhi, Usha Chakraborty, Sibarani Dixit, Bbirajbala Patra and others.

### **Failure of Jatiya Sarkar to Reorganize the Communist Party:**

In spite of these facts majority people still supported the Congress and the the 'Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar' constituted by the congress which was functioning for the people from 17<sup>th</sup> December, 1942 to September, 1944. The 21 months long Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar under the leadership of Satis Chandra Samanta and later by Ajay Kumar Mukherjee and Sushil Dhara. Mukherjee tried to do yeoman service for the flood affected people. Jatiya Sarkar in the eastern side of district kept intact successfully the support of the masses towards the Congress by taking some welfare measures such as by distributing money among the poor after collecting from *Jotedars*, stockists, black-marketeers; paddy was also distributed among the poor.<sup>xxv</sup>

Amallesh Tripathi expressed the view that the Jatiya Sarkar forcibly collected the money even by abducting the people.<sup>xxvi</sup> But Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal praised the Jatiya Sarkar for its organization which took a great role to keep the people within its fold.<sup>xxvii</sup> Tripathi remarked that the Congress was unable to satisfy their demands of the flood-affected people who wanted to get relief from the Congress. For this reason some of the masses kept aside and withdrew their support from the Congress. In this way the Congress itself created an opportunity to the Communist party to revive again.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The activities of the '*Jatiya Sarkar*' created anger and despair to some sections of people who were victimized especially rich people and Jotedar, stockist and others whose money was forcibly collected by the '*Jatiya Sarkar*.' So the '*Jatiya Sarkar*' eventually had lost its support from a section of rich as well as the masses who sought help from '*Jatiya Sarkar*' in their real crisis. Under the cover of the popularity of the '*Jatiya Sarkar*' there was a current of anguish and resentment of the masses against the '*Jatiya Sarkar*'. It indirectly helped the Communist to regain its mass-base. The left-wing political leaders bought this situation in their favour. It would be nothing wrong to say that the painstaking and selfless devotion for



helping the people of the Communist leaders attracted the masses around the ideology of the Communists in the one hand, and on the other hand the irresponsible activities of the 'Jatiya Sarkar' pushed the masses far away from the Congress organisation and it helped to mobilize the masses in the fold of Communist party.

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