CHAPTER VI

LIVING RIVERS: 
COLONIAL STATE AND FLOOD 
MITIGATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Relief and assistance as is necessary must be given to the villagers, but Miris are not people who have any great love for work; and if they thought that the Government was willing to feed them, they would not, I fear, attempt to help themselves.

- B. C. Allen, Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, 1921

In spite of the general opinion held by colonial administrators in Asom that embankments as flood-protection structures were necessary for the 'improvement' of agriculture, financial considerations often overweighed the decision in favour of the government taking up the responsibility of constructing them throughout the colonial period, confining mostly the state's role to small amounts of financial assistance to villagers to repair old alis or bund-roads. After

---

1 From B. C. Allen, Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, No.473R, Gauhati 13th August 1921, “Flood in North Lakhimpur”, File Nos. 110-123, Rev.- B, January 1922, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, ASA.
the earthquake of 1897 the impact of floods apparently went up caused by the disturbances in the drainage system of the rivers, bringing new and hitherto non-flooded areas within the reach of waters of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. When floods took destructive forms, the damage to the crops was considerable not only in the chapori tracts but also in the permanently settled and cultivated 'rupit' areas. It was apparent to the colonial government that the destructive affects of the floods could not be entirely neutralized by depending on embankments and other flood-protection works alone. Different forms of measures had to be adopted to sustain the people who lost their land, homestead, cattle, harvest, etc. and other means of production to the abnormal and destructive floods. These measures were considered for the state not so much out of the concern for the plight of the people, as would be apparent from the discussion in the chapter, but more in order to ensure that the land revenue was not lost, and that the peasants did not abandon their flood-damaged lands en masse in search of new ones.

The measures adopted in such cases took different forms, and included revenue remission, postponement of land revenue, allowing the relinquishment of flood-affected lands, provision of new land for rehabilitation, distribution of grain, seeds, agricultural loan, various kinds of temporary relief works, and so on. Moreover, the first decades of the twentieth century also witnessed the efforts of the colonial state to inquire into the causes accentuating the destructive aspects of floods, a reason for regular loss of state revenue, and to find out whether and in what manner such causes could be suitably remedied within the framework of colonial policies.

Compensation as Claim: The Question of Flood Protection

In one of the early instances of holding the colonial government responsible for providing protection to the rent-paying settled lands from floods, a tea planter claimed "compensation for alleged injury done to some of his tea gardens in the Seebsagur district owing to the bund of the Deehing having been allowed to fall
into disrepair in 1869. Reporting on the matter, Hopkinson, the then Commissioner of Assam, wrote

Mr. Grob states that he bought the garden in question 1863, at which time he alleges the bund on the left bank of the Deehing was in good repair, and that it was kept in repair some time afterwards. That during the time Captain Holroyd was Deputy Commissioner of the district as much as Rs.16000 were spent in one year on the Deehing and Deesang bunds, but that in the years (we are not told what was the year) the inundations destroyed Mr. Grob’s gardens. The Commissioner only granted the wholly inadequate sum of Rs.500 for the repair of the former bund, and therefore, as it was owing to the neglect of the local authorities to their duty in maintaining it in proper order that the loss of Mr. Grob has sustained was caused; he submits a claim for that loss amounting to one lakh eighteen hundred and ninety three rupees.2

The planter claimed that he bought the said lands only because the government recognized its “duty” to protect the banks of the Dihing and other rivers in Asom, and the losses that he suffered were due to the neglect of government officials to perform their duty.3 The claim for compensation made by the planters who was considered to “follow mercantile pursuits”, however, was not favourably considered by the state as it was contended that there was “no legal ground whereon to base his claim.” The government argued, referring to the nature of the terrain in which Grob’s tea garden was located,

The mouzah in which his property lies is called Panee Deehingeah [‘Of the Waters of the Deehing River’], signifying a locality liable to inundation from the waters of the Deehing, and a glance at the map... will show...that the mouzah referred to is entirely surrounded by the rivers Deehing, Dimoo, Deesang and Brahmaputo, and therefore it is necessarily peculiarly liable to suffer from high floods, so that it is clearly a place where no prudent man should have invested money in cultivating a plant that perishes, as Mr. Grob makes it out to do, from one submersion in river water, nor do I know of any other instance in Assam of a

---

2 From W. Agnew, Officiating Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.187, 14th June, 1869, Vol.34 of 1867, Series II, ASA.
3 Ibid.
tea garden being so situated that its existence depends on the maintenance of a public bund.  

The Commissioner emphasised that those gardens which had been threatened by flood waters were protected by embankments constructed by the owners themselves and not by 'public bunds'. The colonial government in fact was of the opinion from the early years of occupying Asom, that "When lands have been allotted to the Assam Tea Company or other associations or individuals engaged in the tea manufactory, it may be expected that their enterprise will be directed to increasing the means of subsistence by embankments and other works to improve the fertility, and increase the productiveness of the lands assigned to them."  

When in 1940 Brodie requested the sanction of funds for repair and construction of river embankments in Sibsagar district, Government of India was categorical in stating that if these embankments fell within the limits of the land granted to the Assam Tea Company, the Governor General “would not think it necessary that the Government should incur any expense on account of them.”  

However, Grob did nothing to protect his garden even with the full knowledge that the terrain on which his land was located was known to be a riverine tract, the government contended. It also suspected that the estate referred to was not considered valuable and worth protecting by the owner, yet he was trying to claim an unfair compensation in the pretext of flood damage. This was more evident, they argued, since the flood was not unexpected and the estate was long threatened by the possibility of inundation, “the bund [on the Dihing River] was weakened by gradual decay before the river finally burst through it.” Though residing in Sibsagar, an important administrative centre, and in a position to inform the government of the impending danger, the planter did not take any initiative to prevent it or even failed to request the government for the same, the Commissioner argued. Thus, no steps “at all appears to have been taken such as prudent men should and unquestionably would have adopted to save from

---

4 Ibid., emphasis added.
5 Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, to Agent of the Governor General, North East Frontier, Fort William 16 March 1840, 106-108 P.C., Foreign 1840-49, NAI.
6 Ibid.
destruction of property that was rendered as valuable and it is incredible that an estate would have been thus supinely surrendered if it really had been valuable.\textsuperscript{7} The government was of the opinion that the claimant was trying to take "undue advantage" of the floods, and that the garden was amongst the many others on which large sums of money were rashly spent during the time which large sums of money were rashly spent during the time that speculation in that kind of property ran high, and that when the reaction set in these gardens were abandoned from intrinsic worthlessness and that Mr. Grob would now like to recoup himself for his losses at the expense of Government.\textsuperscript{8}

Denying any validity and genuineness of the compensation claim, the government also asserted that it never took the responsibility in the past to maintain the Dihing bund in the first place. Therefore, nothing was done to repair or maintain the embankment in good order by the government for years. This was because the district officers considered it useless to spend any part of the small sums at their disposal on a bund to protect a "poor mouza" as the one where the tea estate was located, where "The people have been seared away owing to the Brahmaputra floods."\textsuperscript{9}

This issue, nevertheless, raised the larger question of the state's responsibility in protecting its subject's property from damage by flood through the construction and maintenance of 'public' or government embankments. The colonial state's general policy followed in the Brahmaputra Valley on this question in the second half of the nineteenth century, in any case, was of indifference. It was admitted by the Commissioner in 1869,

\begin{quote}
In regard to the general question of the obligation of Government to provide or maintain river embankments throughout this division, I am clearly of opinion that it would be very imprudent to embark on so gigantic an undertaking for even
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{7} From W. Agnew, Officiating Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.187, 14\textsuperscript{th} June, 1869, Vol.34 of 1867, Series II, ASA.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
if funds were forthcoming for the purpose. I cannot see where we could hope to get labour to carry it out.10

It was considered to be an enormous task to maintain the pre-colonial embankments, and in fact they were allowed to fall into disrepair by the colonial state. As a British engineer himself had been said to have testified, all the large rivers including the Brahmaputra were in former days embanked to prevent the devastating effects of extraordinary floods, but “since our occupation of the country these embankments have been much neglected, so much so that large tracts formerly under cultivation are now deep morasses or dense swampy jungles.”11 As a further justification of this admittedly conscious neglect, the Commissioner of Assam asserted,

it was not until the year 1838 that we finally assumed the management of Upper Assam... a country that was then so utterly impoverished... that it only yielded insignificant sum of 83,742 rupees of land revenue, and it is a monstrous injustice to say that government neglected its duty in not at once launching forth into extravagant expenditure on what seemed so unpromising an addition to its territory”12

In a clear indication that the colonial government’s policy of flood mitigation in the nineteenth century was fully contingent on considerations related to revenue generation, the officer noted, “As the revenues and importance of Assam however has increased, so in like proportion has government provided funds for works of public utility, but a great embankment scheme would involve a vast outlay. An outlay in fact such as Assam is not at present in a condition to warrant government incurring on its account.”13

10 From W. Agnew, Officiating Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.187, 14th June, 1869, Vol.34 of 1867, Series II, ASA.
11 Colonel Danis, former Executive Engineer of Upper Assam to the Ainslie’s Commission, quoted in ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
Similar demands for compensation by the tea planters were made and turned down in the second half of the nineteenth century on analogous grounds. From what can be seen from the developments that followed, it could be argued that this approach of the state hardly changed till the formal end of colonial rule, even when the demands for flood mitigation and relief from the peasants and other working people of the province grew in the first half of the twentieth century.

**Negotiating Floods in the Early Twentieth Century**

The colonial archive continued to record the intermittent failure or destruction of cultivation and the consequent loss of government revenue due to the floods throughout the nineteenth century, but also due to erosion and changes in the courses of rivers that at times led to the peasants claiming remission of rent. Such requests, which became more frequent by the end of the nineteenth century, were said to be nominal in the middle of that century. Answering the Bengal government’s query as to “why any remissions are necessary, seeing that the Chowdries in consideration of high rate of commission granted to them, have made themselves responsible for government revenue”, the district collectors stated that “remissions are never applied for”, which effectively tells that such requests were rare and exceptional in the Valley during mid-nineteenth century. And in case of such exceptions caused by extraordinary inundations or losses from the “devastations of the river”, the peasant proprietors were entitled to remission, the provincial authorities wrote to their Bengal counterparts, circumstances which were always especially brought to the Bengal government’s

---

14 J. Knox Wight, the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar wrote in 1888, “In the days before 1866, when the bunds were kept in repair, persons were tempted to open out gardens... tea was planted and no doubt great expectations prevailed. But when repairs ceased to the bunds, the tract of country was inundated, and of course the tea plants were all damaged or killed. In the old records I find letters from the owners of Gohainpukri tea garden, in which they demand payment from Government of Rs.1,01,893, i.e., over one lakh of rupees, on the grounds of damage sustained owing to their being compelled to abandon the garden by reason of the Dehing river having overflowed and inundated it, in consequence of sufficient repairs not having been carried out to the bund.” ‘Note on the bunds in the sadr subdivision of the Sibsagar district’, by J. Knox-Wight, Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, 3 February 1888, No.27, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, December 1902, ASA.  
15 From Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to E. J. Bivar, Secretary to the Board of Revenue for Lower Provinces, Fort William, Letters No.165 and 170, 18th and 27th January 1859, Series V: Letters Issued to the Board of Revenue for the Lower Provinces, 1854, ASA.
notice for accepting requests for remission. The provincial officials highlighted this peculiar absence of request for remission with an example,

During the last season but one there was a total failure of the *Salee dhan* crop, but though the Ryots were greatly distressed all the revenue was paid in and no remission was applied for on the grounds of loss of crops except when there has been an erroneous assessment, or lands been inundated by the river or carried off after unforeseen causes – when it had been deemed just and reasonable and for which remission is invariably solicited.\[^{16}\]

Explaining the net "heavy decrease" of Rs.10,343 in land revenue assessment in the year 1853-54 over the previous year's revenue in Kamrup, the Commissioner attributed this mainly due to "Decrease by resignation [and] encroachment of rivers and destruction of lands by inundation", which was shown as the cause for the government's loss of Rs.11,371. As reported by Jenkins,

The decrease is chiefly owing to the falling off in the quantity of land caused by the destruction of various rivers, the loss from this source alone in 5 years which is the longest period any of the leases had to run, amounting to 9447 poorahs of land and which decrease has nearly all taken place in the central division of this district. There is also a large quantity of land resigned by the ryots amounting to 9111 poorahs against 4015 poorahs newly taken up. The large number of *istuffas* and the small extent of new cultivation the collector observes is attributable to the great mortality amongst the people from cholera and death of cattle which prevailed for upwards of 2 years throughout the whole district, both of which causes when taken into consideration will be quite enough to account for the unfavourable result shown above.\[^{17}\]

But things were to change within fifty years, giving no more alibi of an absence of remission requests to the state. News of heavy floods in the Brahmaputra Valley was reported in July 1900. The Sub-divisional Officer of Barpeta wrote on 24 July

\[^{16}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{17}\text{From Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to the Board of Revenue for Lower Provinces, Fort William, Letter No.165, Series V: Letters Issued to the Board of Revenue for the Lower Provinces, 1854, ASA.}\]
that "the flood is rising alarmingly from yesterday. It has gone 2 feet above the last year's level, and is still rising. The treasury and jail have been placed on boats. The records have also been placed in boats, as far as practicable. The people are in a terrible state." Reports of heavy floods from other western and central Asom regions like Kamrup and Dhuburi started to come in as well. Subsequent reports from Barpeta noted that

There is great distress in the town and surrounding villages, and people are passing days and nights on the roofs of their houses, and on boats, improvised rafts, and are in constant fear of being swept away by the current. Lots of cattle have been floated away, and many granaries are under water. I have heard of several deaths of children by falling into the water. As all communication is stopped with mofussil, I cannot form any idea of the loss of life and property in the subdivision yet.

It was further reported that the condition of the people was getting worse by every hour. The price of rice and other essential provisions had shot up, and even on high price rice was not available in the market. Four deaths from drowning were reported from Barpeta. The Deputy Commissioner who visited the flooded parts of Kamrup, which was said to be the highest Brahmaputra flood ever recorded by the gauge at Guwahati, noted that the people were "in very great distress, and still graver discomfort". Everywhere he was met with by the cry "We have lost everything, we have nothing to eat!" from the people stranded on the roofs of houses or on rafts of drift timber, or on bamboo machans or temporary platforms. Nearly everyone in the region lost their granaries, and the

---

18 From the Munshi Mahib Uddin Ahmed, Subdivisional Officer, Barpeta to the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, No.312, Barpeta 24th July 1900, Nos.24-104, Home-A, January 1901, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
19 From Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Assam, Shillong to the Secretary to Government of India, Home Department, Simla, Telegram No.6731G, 30th July 1900, Nos.24-104, Home-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, January 1901, ASA.
20 From the Munshi Mahib Uddin Ahmed, Subdivisional Officer, Barpeta, to the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, No.315, Barpeta 26th July 1900, Nos.24-104, Home-A, January 1901, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
21 From the Munshi Mahib Uddin Ahmed, Subdivisional Officer, Barpeta, to the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, No.320, Barpeta 27th July 1900, Nos.24-104, January 1901, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home-A, ASA.
22 From the F. E. Jackson, Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.1241G–XX-11, Dhubri 26th July 1900, Nos.24-104, Home-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, January 1901, ASA.
officer suggested that it would be necessary to import rice either Goalpara or Noasali to meet the scarcity. With a view to address the temporary but acute scarcity, he held a meeting of all the merchants in the town and arranged that the kayas should import rice and make it available to the villagers at a pre-fixed rate. On the way back he stopped over at Baghbar Hill, where he noticed that a number of people had sought refuge from the floods of the last three years, and had already built 30 to 40 houses.23

Since colonial authorities considered Asom's peasants to be assessed lightly, demand for remission of revenue was not generally accepted for one, or even two bad years of cultivation, since there were "plenty of other years makes up for the deficiency."24 On the basis of this reasoning, the Director of the Agriculture Department decided that no remission after the floods of 1898 was necessary for the Nowgong raiyats, nor any other extensive measures of relief called for. Such conclusions, or differences of opinion, did little to recognise when the peasants were in dire need of flood relief measures, including remittance of revenue.

In Kamrup district the officer witnessed "boat loads of people" going to Howli in search of land. In Dakhin Sarubangsar mauza, great damage to the peasant's granaries and to the standing ahu crop was reported by the tehsildar. The paddy was lost not so much by it being washed away, but for being under water for several days. This destruction gave the "finishing touch to what the earthquake [of 1897] commenced in this mauza", and the Deputy Commissioner urged that the government must prepare itself for "a heavy loss of revenue both in Dakhin Sarubangsar, but also the other riparian mauzas."25 The inspection of Barpeta and "the effect there of the highest Brahmaputra flood on record" revealed that

Luckily, owing to the people of Barpeta being used to floods, although on all hands it was admitted that no such flood as the present one had been previously

23 Tour Diary of Captain P. R. T. Gurdon, Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup, 4th August 1900, Nos.24-104, Home-A, January 1901, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
24 'Resolution', Extract from the Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the General Department, No. 2869R, 3rd June 1898, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, May 1898, ASA.
25 Ibid.
experienced, the loss of life was small... Most of the Barpetias have boats of their own, so that it is not necessary to help them with boats.26

Those who had boats moved to higher and safer places for shelter, while those that did not had constructed changs or elevated platforms and rafts to tide over the floods. Cattle had been washed away by the floods, and it was feared that many more would subsequently die either from disease or from want of food that usually followed heavy and damaging inundations. In Goalpara, the impact of floods were said to be very severe in 1900, the highest ever known in the district.27 The local office of the PWD prepared a report on damages done, and calculated that the flood that year alone, being an extraordinary one, did more losses to government revenue as well as suffering to the people than all the floods since 1878 put together.

The Khanajan River that ran from the Dipar bil into the Brahmaputra River flowed in opposite direction during that flood, i.e., the Brahmaputra flowed into the bil. The bridge over the said river was only a foot above the water-level. An opening of about 10 feet wide and 2 feet 6 inches deep was discovered on the high road leading up to the bridge, through which river water was running into the adjacent bils. On examining the opening minutely, the government supervisor concluded that the road had been cut by some "mischievous men" from the nearby villages in order to channel the river's floodwaters to run into the bil.28

The supervising officer went down to the villages situated between the road and the river bank to ascertain the reasons for this act of cutting the road by the villagers, a "crime" under the colonial law. The bank of the river was much higher than the country between the bank and the road. Therefore, as soon as the river overflowed the bank, there was a rush of water towards the road. The level of water on the right-hand side of the road was found to be higher than that on the

---

26 From Captain P. R. T. Gurdon, Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.1516, Gauhati 4th August 1900, Nos.24-104, Home-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, January 1901, ASA.

27 From F. E. Jackson, Chief Commissioner of Goalpara to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.1413G.-XX-11, Dhubri 12th August 1900, Nos.24-104, Home-A, January 1901, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.

28 Report by Public Works Department Subdivisional Officer on the Damage done by the Flood of July 1900, 2nd August 1900, Nos.24-104, Home-A, January 1901, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
left due to insufficient waterway of the bridges to drain off river water through them. The bridges were constructed only to carry off normal rainwater, and not the waters of high floods. In the rainy season the water of the *bil* easily passed through into the river. But this time round, the situation was extraordinary.

The villagers are in a most miserable condition: they have lost all the paddy they had in stock, and vegetables in the gardens, ripe paddy (*ahu*) in the field have been destroyed, and transplanted green paddy (*sali*) has been badly damaged. *Under the circumstances, the villagers were naturally led to believe that the water would subside as soon as the water had an opening to run into the field. It was a mistake on their part. I tried to trace out the men who have done the damage to the road, but to no effect.*

This act was by no means an exceptional one. The cutting of embankments – considered 'illegal' and a criminal offense according to the provisions of the Bengal Embankments Act – was very commonly resorted to by villagers to drain out trapped floodwaters from their area.

Destructive floods induced migration as well. A large number of flood-affected people moved to safer areas in search of land in the first decade of the twentieth century, not all of which was temporary. The district officer of Goalpara in his letter to the higher officials in Shillong wrote that the people in the western extremities of the district were worst affected from the abnormally intense floods of 1900. Moreover,

Some of the villagers near Patamari are reported to have migrated to Rungpur... From Bilasipara thana it is reported that 50 villages went under water. The people of 4 villages migrated to higher land. The jurisdiction of South Salmara and Lakhipur thanas and Mankachar outpost suffered most heavily. From South Salmara it is reported that about one-eighth of the population migrated to the Bilasipara thana and to the Garo Hills. There has been a constant migration from

\[29\] Ibid.
South Salmara since the earthquake [of 1897] owing to the general subsidence of the land, and I believe the greater part of this migration to be permanent.30

The "question of advances and revenue-free terms to settlers in new localities" had to be seriously considered by the colonial authorities due to the displacement of people resulting from high floods, particularly after the 1897 earthquake. "The mauza of Pub Chamaria is now reported to be practically deserted, owing to the constant floods after the earthquake."31 In addition, the loss of more than 2,000 cattle from amongst the already diminished stock in the inundated tracts of the Barpeta subdivision caused great hardship to the cultivators of Barpeta. As its immediate fallout, less land than usual was taken up for cultivation that year. The area under mustard cultivation also shrunk in Goalpara drastically in the cold season of 1900, indicating a reduction in the land under faringati or fluctuating cultivation on the riverine tract of the Brahmaputra. Moreover, owing to the scarcity of plough cattle, people who migrated to newer and higher lands in Barpeta subdivision were unable to open up new land for cultivation. The greater portion of ahu, which was the main staple crop in a large area of Barpeta, was lost, the damage being greatest in the riparian tracts.32

On the impact of the same wave of floods in Nowgong district, the Deputy Commissioner observed that the damage to crops was principally in the chaporri mauzas, where about 25 percent of the standing ahu crop and from 50 to 75 percent of the bao was destroyed. But highlighting the beneficial effects of the floods, it was also found that a deposit of silt over the chaporri mauzas has been left by the floods. Were no more floods to occur that year, it was expected that

30 From F. E. Jackson, Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, No.1562G – X-11, Dhubri 20th August 1900, Nos.24-104, Home-A, January 1901, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
31 P. R. T. Gurdon, Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.1986, Gauhati 12th September 1900, Nos.24-104, Home-A, January 1901, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
32 P. R. T. Gurdon, Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.1986, Gauhati 12th September 1900, Nos.24-104, Home-A, January 1901, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA. Emphasis added. The total no. of cattle in Barpeta subdivision was 129,660 out of which 1,925 were reportedly lost in the 1900 floods. In the whole of Kamrup district this loss was 3,030 cattle out of 642,312.
there was an excellent prospect of a good mustard harvest in the ensuing cold season.\textsuperscript{33}

A significant section of cultivators in Kamrup district too were migrating after relinquishing and abandoning their agricultural lands due to the deposition of silt by floods, especially after the earthquake of 1897. The Deputy Commissioner of the district in his tour-diary noted that at a place called Amoni in Nalbari tahsil and on the edge of the flooded country, one could observe the few remaining houses of the former villages, most of the inhabitants of which had moved to Baroma.\textsuperscript{34} As a result, while the area under full-rent paying cultivated land (khiraj) sharply decreased in the former, the latter saw an increase in the period due to the transfer of the flood-affected population, as indicated by the following table. However, only a third of the people thus migrating from Nalbari settled in Baroma, the rest moving to other place.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tahsil</th>
<th>1897-98</th>
<th>1898-99</th>
<th>1899-1900</th>
<th>1900-1901</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nalbari</td>
<td>152,589</td>
<td>137,806</td>
<td>135,284</td>
<td>128,808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baroma</td>
<td>107,676</td>
<td>111,302</td>
<td>112,862</td>
<td>113,271</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, raiyats of Nalbari who were still holding on to their flood-damaged and sand-covered lands were doing so in expectation of a revision of the land revenue assessment by the government, and also in the hope of improvement of the soil. In some other cases, the peasants could not resign their land and take up new ones owing to their inability to pay the revenue arrears for the three years immediately after the earthquake of 1897.\textsuperscript{36} According to the Deputy Commissioner,

\textsuperscript{33} From J. F. Grunning, Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong to the Director, Department of Land Records and Agriculture, Assam, No.994R, 3\textsuperscript{rd} September 1900, Nos.24-104, Home-A, January 1901, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.

\textsuperscript{34} Tour Diary of H. C. Barnes, Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, in Memo by the Officiating Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.1645L.R.,Gauhati, 4\textsuperscript{th} July, 1901, Rev.-A, July 1901, Nos.29-50, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
the bulk of the land resigned will be found in the flooded area. The damaged land is retained, as it will no doubt very gradually become good, or may do so... *it is to the interest of Government to keep them on these damaged lands,* because continuous cultivation will help to improve the land by adding other ingredients to the land. I think, on grounds of policy alone, *they should be encouraged to stick to their land.*

The response of the government to the frequent requests by cultivators for fresh land, remission of revenue, relief measures, etc. to cope with the aftermath of the earthquake and floods of 1897, was to point towards the 'wasteland' available for cultivation in the Valley. Uncultivated land was considered to be so abundant that *raiyats* were legally free to take up land there by relinquishing their land which was seriously damaged. There were, however, certain regions where population was dense and the demand for land considerable. In such regions cultivators were generally averse to relinquishing their holdings, even when they were in difficulty of paying full *rupit* rates charged on the land rendered temporarily unfit for cultivation of transplanted rice. The government's policy was also to discourage the peasants from abandoning their permanently cultivated *rupit* lands. Thus, as "It is the policy of Administration to encourage the development of a permanent interest in their holdings on the part of settlement-holders", the Chief Commissioner directed that the assessment of *rupit* lands held under periodic lease at full rates and damaged by sand deposits resulting from the earthquake and floods of 1897 in the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong and Darrang, and which had not been relinquished, would be reduced to a lower *faringati* rates for the current settlement terms.

But it was found in 1898 that the distress of the peasants in a famine-like situation in Patidarrang, Rangia and Nalbari *tahsils* of Kamrup was precipitated by a high and unaltered revenue demand after the earthquake of 1897 and subsequent floods, which extensively damaged agricultural land or threw it out of cultivation. Near Nalbari, *ahu* had been planted on large areas classed as first

---

37 Ibid. Emphasis added.
38 'Resolution', *Extract from the Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the General Department,* No. 2869R, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1898, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, May 1898, ASA.
class *rupit* land after the sand deposits brought by the rivers made *sali* cultivation impossible or unproductive. In order to keep the *raiyats* on the damaged land and prevent large scale migration after the floods immediately succeeding the 1897 earthquake, the government decided – keeping in mind its own interest – that it had to not only reclassify the villages in the flooded tracts, but also reclassify the lands within the villages.

Orders were subsequently passed to this effect. However, it transpired that in the districts of Kamrup and Nowgong as well as in the Mangaldai subdivision of the Darrang district, the decision of assessing *rupit* lands damaged from the earthquake and floods of 1897 at *faringati* rates for the remainder of the settlement term was not put in practice by the local officials.\(^{39}\) Admittedly, the Chief Commissioner of Assam was “at a loss to understand why effect was not given long ere this to the orders.”\(^{40}\) Thus, according to their own admission, the nominal flood-relief measures such as remittance of land revenue or reclassification of land were not carried out on the ground even after orders to this effect. As the secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam remarked,

> It would not surprise the Chief Commissioner to learn that *some of the distress now reported from North Kamrup is attributable to the neglect of the local officers to comply with his clear instructions passed more than three years ago for the relief and assistance of the government tenantry residing within the distressed area.*\(^{41}\)

It was a clear admission that the colonial state's policies abated the conditions for the distress of the peasantry. It showed little flexibility in readjusting the fiscal demands for the peasantry who suffered losses due to floods. For the colonial bureaucracy it was much easier to present the floods as a 'natural' and inevitable calamity that was a factor causing the prevailing agrarian distress.

\(^{39}\) From Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Officiating Commissioner of the Assam valley Districts, No.1199 Misc.-5204G, Shillong 8\(^{th}\) July, 1909, Rev. A, July 1901, Nos.29-50, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) Ibid, emphasis added.
Much like the floods of 1900, the damage done by the one in 1916 was also recorded by the colonial state as 'abnormal', and with the standing crops totally destroyed in many areas of the river valleys, the raiyats were in despair. In such conditions, the extraction of revenue from the destitute peasantry became a major difficulty for the state. There were requests and demands for the suspension, and even the total remission of land revenue, given the widespread loss of crops. Hopes were expressed that the state would provide relief and agricultural loans for future cultivation.

A deputation from the 'gentlemen' of Sibsagar to the government that year requested for additional agricultural loans and gratuitous relief, suspension of repayment of the loans to the distressed, repairing, raising, and extending the bunds, and the need for spurs on the Dikhow river for protecting the town of Sibsagar from erosion. Similarly, a petition by Manuram gaonbura [village headman] on behalf of the peasants of Betbari mauza, Sibsagar district, reported that the raiyats of villages Akhoiphutia and Joyrapar in Betbari were "partly starving on account of not getting proper crops in the fields since the last year. The fields are fully under water up to date...The Desang bund causes great loss every year to the raiyats and may be set up properly." The gaonbura's plea was for remission of revenue for that year, as the peasantry was said to be in very great distress. Kuarpur and Banmukh raiyats and many others also prayed for remission of revenue due to the damage of crops by the Brahmaputra floods that year.

Untimely and excessive floods coupled with lack of adequate and timely revenue remissions affected all classes of the peasantry in the first half of the twentieth century. However the distress to the poor peasants and even the middle peasants was aggravated to a greater extent than the rich due to the relatively higher incidence revenue demands on the former. It forced a section of them to starve or beg after extracting the bare minimum of grain or money they possessed as

---

42 From G. C. Phukan, Sibsagar to the Subdivisional Officer, Sibsagar 13th July 1916, Rev.-A, August 1917, Nos.118-137, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
43 Petition of Manuram Gaonbura and other Raiyats of Babari Mauza to the Chief Secretary to the Commissioner of Assam, Sibsagar 14 July 1916, Rev.-A, August 1917, Nos.118-137, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
land revenue even after high floods had damaged their crops, the most crucial means of their subsistence. This acute distress of the poor peasantry was reflected in an impassioned petition by Bhogram Barua and other peasants of Banmukh in Sibsagar to the Chief Commissioner of Assam in July 1916:

We have been suffering from famine continually for two years. In the year before last we could not cultivate our fields in due times for want of rain and the paddy which was transplanted in the latter half of the season was destroyed by harmful insects and worms. So we could earn food only for six months. For the remaining six months of the last year most of us lived upon begging. At the beginning of the last year our ahu cultivation was destroyed by the floods of the Brahmaputra and the last floods in the rainy season destroyed our seed plants and paddy that was transplanted in the first half of the transplanting season. As Banmukh is a low-levelled place and as it was over-flooded many times by the high flood of the Brahmaputra most of our cattle died for want of grass. So we were reduced to a miserable condition, losing our cattle and seed plants. Still we tried thrice to transplant our paddy by buying seed plants from distant places but [to] no effect. All of them were damaged by the last floods. The portion which was left by the floods was also destroyed by the destructive worms. So we could earn nothing for the year. And the paddy which was in the barn of the middle class raiyats was washed by that unfortunate high floods. In this way we lost both, what was in hand and what was in bush. Now we are suffering much for want of regular food.

This being the case those who can afford money could manage to live from hand to mouth by buying corn from distant places and the rest lived upon begging. The little amount of wealth which was in our hand came to an end within two or three months. Then we managed to live by selling and mortgaging our valuable properties. And some of the poorest people who had no money and properties and could not manage to get alms lived upon wild fruits. Some of them died of starvation in the month of Aswina and Kartika. Survivors maintain their lives by taking two or three meals in a week. Thus being to a miserable condition we applied to the benign Government to lend some money in order to buy foods, cattle and seed plants. We have heard also that the benign Government has granted some fifteen thousand rupees to relive the poor subjects from the distress. About two thousand rupees were given to us each from Rs.5 to Rs.10 in order to buy seed plants only. But we are sorry to inform that distribution was
also not properly done. *Many who really deserved could not get a share through the recommendation of the headman of the village and the mandal, some middle class people got a share instead of the poor.*

The commissioner was reminded by the petitioners that when the officer visited Sibsagar the peasants applied for remission of revenue for the year 1915-16. The commissioner personally visited some of the paddy fields damaged by floods and verbally ordered at that time for revenue remission of those lands where the damage was more than half the total crop. The circle sub-deputy collector, a native officer, was ordered to inspect and report on the interior flood-affected areas. But the peasants complained that

he being a quite young and inconsiderate man reported those land where there were one or two stalks of paddy as growing paddy at half-rate, and where there was no paddy at all, as growing at the rate of one-fourth and so on. Thus he reported quite falsely. *He also reported some of the poorest people as middle class people and would be able to pay revenue...* According to the report of the Sub-deputy collector some of the people are getting remittance of two or three rupees of taxes but in this also some of the poorest people who had no paddy at all are getting no remittance at all. *At present the mauzadar is collecting revenue by force, sending his muharrirs and peon and thus gives much trouble by taking their things by force.*

It was clear that in the first decades of the twentieth century the requests for flood relief in various forms came thick and fast to the colonial government, a remarkable change in the situation from the time when such pleas were said to be rare. Arguably, the peasantry was feeling the impact of floods more than they did in the previous century. The needs of the subjects had changed, but not that of the state, which continued to hold the financial considerations to be of paramount importance.

---

44 Petition of Bhogram Barua and other Raiyats of Banmukh to the Chief Secretary to the Commissioner of Assam, Sibsagar 14th July 1916, Rev.-A, August 1917, Nos.118-137, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA, emphasis added.
Floods as Calamity

The peasant's request for agricultural loans or gratuitous relief which could be used to buy food, cattle and seedlings was often turned down by local officials. Most of the distressed peasants were in urgent need of money, since after destructive floods they had little savings in the form of grain, foodstuff or fodder left, and had to buy them at exorbitant prices from the market where traders generally used the opportunity of high demands and short supply to make a quick profit. The demand for loans and gratuitous distribution of funds was the highest in conditions when the raiyats had already exhausted their main source of borrowing - the kayas or other village money-lenders.

Wide-scale demands for remittance of revenue forced the provincial bureaucracy to lay down well-defined rules and procedures of providing relief to distressed cultivators by way of revenue suspension and remittance, which was quite ad-hoc and arbitrary till 1916. As the chief Commissioner's note of that year read, "it will have to be considered whether the rule should not be amplified so as to lay down the principles clearly, as is done in the case of local calamities." It was probably not done so far, he presumed, "because calamities on an extensive scale had not occurred in this province as they have, we may perhaps take it, occurred in recent years." As the colonial state saw it, floods at the turn of the century had taken the shape of major calamities, requiring a new kind of response.

As a result, while ordering a suspension of revenue collection in the affected areas, the question of modifying the 'vague' rules of remittance and suspension in the Assam Land Revenue Manual – first brought into effect in Asom in 1906 and drafted by the then Chief Commissioner Bampfylde Fuller – was decided to be reviewed and revised in 1917. It was decided that "Raiyats should not be called upon to pay till they are in a position to do so from the sale of their crops or other produce, and if next cold weather they are unable to pay the current as well as the suspended revenue, the question of giving a further suspension will

---

45 Note by Chief Commissioner of Assam, 24th November 1916, Rev.-A, August 1917, Nos.118-137, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
46 Ibid.
have to be considered."\textsuperscript{47} However, the final settlement of the question went along the lines of policy set forth by the imperial government, whereby

\begin{quote}
the Government of India recognised that "elasticity" of collection was an exceptional act of grace, as allowance is made for exceptional seasons by the suspension or remission of the demand which is due... the system of suspensions and remissions is to be recognised as a measure purely of grace and not of right, to be exercised only on exceptional cases of calamity so severe as to justify and necessitate a relaxation of the settlement contract... as a general rule, no suspended revenue should be collected until after one fair harvest subsequent to the failure has been reaped in the affected tract.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

In order to determine the nature of the distress to the subjects, the colonial state defined three kinds of 'calamities' eligible for remission or suspension of revenue. In the first category were the 'widespread Calamities', resulting from a general failure of rainfall or an earthquake or pestilence. Second was the 'local calamities' that included floods, along with hailstorm, blight, or ravages by insects which cause damage to a limited area and affect a particular harvest. In the third category, 'private calamities' such as fire, sickness or loss of cattle were to be included. After getting reports of widespread, local or private calamities, the Deputy Commissioner of a district was empowered to suspend the collection of revenue for the next installment. This was to be done after he satisfied himself that "the settlement-holders in any local area or any class of settlement-holders in such area cannot pay the next installment of land revenue from their own resources or without great hardship, but will be able to pay it subsequently in addition to the current Government demand if the succeeding harvest are normal."\textsuperscript{49} In case of suspension, it was to be only a postponement of the revenue due on the settlement-holders, who were expected to pay the suspended revenue at a later date.

\textsuperscript{47} Note by B. C. Allen, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 18\textsuperscript{th} July 1916, Rev.-A, August 1917, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Nos.118-137, ASA.
\textsuperscript{48} Note, 16 November 1916, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-A, August 1917, Nos.118-137, ASA, emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{49} 'Notification by the Chief Commissioner of Assam', no.3490R, 20 July 1917, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-A, August 1917, Nos.118-137, File No.L-124R of 1916, ASA.
In case of more severe damages when according to the Deputy Commissioner it was "practically certain that it will not be possible to collect the revenue in full at a latter date even if fair harvest follow, without causing great hardship to the settlement-holders", he could order a suspension of revenue pending a detailed field-to-field enquiry. The enquiry was to ascertain the amount of remission necessary for each plot of land. According to the new rules, remission was to be allowed only if the damage caused by the calamity was of 8 annas (half the crop), or more. If the crop that remained undamaged by the calamity was between 6 to 8 annas, the remission would be 25 percent. If it was between 4 to 6 annas the revenue remitted would be up to 50 percent, and when only 4 annas of crop remained intact (¾ of the crop), a full or 100 percent remission could be granted.

While determining the extent of relief required through suspension or remission, the revenue officials were also directed to consider the "general circumstances of the village and the pitch of the assessment", along with the character of the crop. Thus it was suggested that in a 'prosperous' village with a low rate of assessment, remission might only be necessary in quite exceptional cases, while in a 'poor' village where the rate of assessment was comparatively high, more 'liberal' assessment might be considered. Moreover, in case of the inundated tracts where floods emerged as the most frequent and common 'calamity' as per the government's definition, "two successive years of [crop] failure will justify liberal treatment." The general guideline thus evolved - in accordance with the directives of the Government of India - was to be flexible, at least in theory, if not more beneficial or 'liberal' for the peasants than earlier. The provincial government held that it had been quite 'generous' with reliefs in Asom so far, and that "we treat our people in the most favourable manner possible". But the new "principles laid down in the Government of India's Resolution would not apparently allow of our giving them more generous treatment."  

---

50 Ibid.  
51 'Note on the Rules for the Suspension and Remission of Village Revenue in Case of Local Calamity' by B. C. Allen, 23 November 1916, Lt. Col. P. R. T. Gurdon, Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts to Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.613R, Gauhati 21 October 1916, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-A, August 1917, Nos.118-137, File No.L-124R of 1916, ASA.
The relief mechanism through revenue relaxation was thus put in place, indicating an acknowledgment of repeated floods increasingly becoming injurious to crops and to state's revenue. The large and growing number of destitute peasants without the basic means of production even for bare subsistence raised frequent claims that the state intervene in providing direct credit to distressed cultivators, not for doing business like the kayas did, but to ensure the survival of the most oppressed of the peasant classes in the Brahmaputra valley. But such demands were not only confined to the peasants of the Valley alone. During the floods of the Brahmaputra that inundated its chars in Lakhimpur district in the vicinity of Dibrugarh in July 1915, "Graziers from all the important chars on the Brahmaputra have been into petition for reduction of grazing fees on the ground of loss of cattle."52

The Commissioner of Assam Valley Division declared the suspension of revenue collection after the abnormal floods that inundated Lakhimpur in July 1921, since the Dhakuakhana and Gohaingaon mauzadars were unable to collect the revenue of Rs.9,000 to Rs.10,000 due to the first wave of floods that year. However, the government considered that the mauzadars were lax in their duty, as “the outstanding revenue should have been paid long before the floods occurred, and theoretically, the flood in June should not have affected the question in any way.”53 Moreover, government officials concluded agreements – both formal and informal – with the Kaya or Marwari traders to supply rice and dhan (unhusked rice) to the affected villages which had lost their crops, granaries and other sources of food, and were thereby in scarcity. This practice had precedence in the past, and was to continue in the future. This was in spite of the official’s knowledge that the kayas took full advantage of the distress and scarcity of the villagers, hiked the prices of foodstuff and engaged in profiteering,

53 From B. C. Allen, Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, to Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, No.473R, Gauhati 13 August 1921, “Flood in North Lakhimpur”, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-B, January 1922, Nos.110-123, ASA.
thereby increasing the distress in the process. This not only exacerbated the ongoing crisis of the peasants, but also created future distress, since a majority of the poor peasants did not have enough cash to buy rice or dhan from the kayas in the desperate months after the floods, and thereby were forced to sell their harvest in advance to receive grains in return.\textsuperscript{54} The government admitted that “Local Kayas should not be allowed to profiteer and add to the distress by putting up prices”, and mulled over a plan for distributing rice to the needy through government depots in 1921. Nothing however is known about its implementation.\textsuperscript{55}

The floods of July 1921 also affected the peasants on the chars of Brahmaputra in Goalpara district. The district officer reported that such peasants were thrown into absolute destitution and were “thronging into Dhubri for assistance alleging want of food”\textsuperscript{56}. Though the district officers initially distributed Rs.3000 among the needy peasants under the provisions of the Agriculturalists’ Loans Act of 1884, the number of applicants was found to be far in access to what could be catered to by that sum. The official in charge admitted that initially he hoped the distress to be limited on the chars, and hence applied for a moderate sum. However it was soon realised that “Nearly the whole of the Ashu [ahu] has gone and now we fear the Amon crop will be ruined... stocks of food in the villages are at a very low ebb and crowds of people are coming in for help”.\textsuperscript{57}

It was estimated that seven to eight hundred families needed immediate relief, each family requiring a loan of at least Rs.15 to Rs.25 according to their varying circumstances.\textsuperscript{58} An amount of Rs.50,000 was soon requested for distribution as

\textsuperscript{54} From S. Monies, Superintendent of Police, to Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, Camp Guna Suti, 28 July 1921, ‘Flood in North Lakhimpur’, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-B, January 1922, Nos.110-123, ASA.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} From Lt. Col. A. Playfield, Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, No.782R, Dhubri 23 July 1921, “Flood in North Lakhimpur”, File Nos. 110-123, Rev.- B, January 1922, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, ASA.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Report of A. Rahaman, Subdivisional Officer, Goalpara, to the Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara, Goalpara 21 July 1921, “Flood in North Lakhimpur”, File Nos. 110-123, Rev.- B, January 1922, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, ASA.
agricultural loans under Rule 18 of the Act to tide over the crisis. But the government was equally keen on the question of recovering the loans. Since the flood-affected people were tenants of different zamindars of Goalpara who supposedly paid nothing more than "a pepper-corn assessment" to the government, and along with the jotdars "receive the whole of the landlord’s profit in the district", the government found it "only reasonable that they should bear the landlord’s losses." It was also stipulated that the repayment of the loan should be the first charge upon the tenants. In case it was difficult or impossible for him to pay the loan and the rent together, the latter was to be sacrificed. Given this arrangement, no "wholesale remission of rents" was required, the government argued, as the rates were low and the land yielding multiple crops.

Colonial officials every now and then conveyed the suspicion that the distress of the people due to floods, and the subsequent scarcity reported were generally exaggerated, and at times, simply simulated as if to trick the government to render some relief and mitigation measure. This suspicion of the native subject was amply demonstrated in the words of B. C. Allen, the Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, who visited the inundated Brahmaputra chars in Goalpara in 1921. Allen wrote,

I visited the small Chur of Sadhu Basha. Conditions there were not very satisfactory; and one man whom I found lying down in the house may possibly have really been weak from want of food. He certainly looked emaciated. These people are however much more sophisticated than those round Chunari; as, in another house which I visited I found the mother lying on the floor surrounded by four children. As far as I could ascertain, none of them were very weak, nor did they show special signs of emaciation. I have little doubt that this scene was specially arranged for my benefit.

60 ‘Note on the Inspection of Flood Relief Works in Goalpara’ by B. C. Allen, Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, 26 September 1921, “Flood in North Lakhimpur”, File Nos. 110-123, Rev.- B, January 1922, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, ASA.
61 Ibid.
The colonial state responded to the severe floods of July 1927 in Lakhimpur district with a limited amount of rescue operations as well as distribution of rice. Once the initial 20 maunds of rice sent – no more than 10 gunny bags – got exhausted, another 75 maunds were sent for the distressed people. The Deputy Commissioner reported that “The chapris opposite to Dibrugarh which were occupied mainly by Nadials have been evacuated. The people were quite destitute and I have arranged to distribute free rice to them until they are able to earn their living again.”62 Agricultural loans amounting to Rs.8500, and still smaller amounts of gratuitous relief of Rs.500, were distributed.

During enquiries, the district authorities were confronted with a range of demands made by the affected villagers. This included the grant of timber for boats free of royalty. The government was only ready to allow the free access of drift-timber in the Brahmaputra, to be collected and used for making dug-outs without any payment of royalty. The government assured that free passes would be distributed on a “reasonable scale” to those villages which did not have access to drift-timber.63 There was also the demand to repair the Dibru-Sadiya Railway bund from Dibrugarh town to the steamer ghat at Bogibil. This demand was made in 1926 or the previous year too, but the government did not accede to it due to the objections made by the railway company. Demand was also raised for the construction of a two-mile long protective embankment in Jamira mauza.

In addition, while some villagers requested for agricultural loans, one village “asked for the disforestation of the Charaihagi Forest Reserve to enable them to migrate there.”64 The demand for a relief fund and free distribution of seeds for winter crops were made as well, but were rejected by the district officials as unnecessary. Applications for remission of revenue were also made in large

62 From F. A. S. Thomas, Officiating Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, No.2662G, Dibrugarh 11 July 1927, ‘Remission of Revenue Consequent on Flood in the Brahmaputra Valley (Flood in Lakhimpur)’, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-B, September 1928, Nos.1184-1246, ASA.
63 From F. A. S. Thomas, Officiating deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Division, No.4008R, Dibrugarh 17 August 1927, ‘Remission of Revenue Consequent on Flood in the Brahmaputra Valley (Flood in Lakhimpur)’, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-B, September 1928, Nos.1184-1246, ASA.
64 Ibid.
numbers to the state in Lakhimpur. However, even though the floods in 1927 admittedly caused considerable damage to crops, seedlings, granaries and cattle, the colonial authorities found "no case for remission or suspension". The government expected that

When the time approaches for reaping the sali crop however, and the full effects of the flood are seen, I think it probable, taking into account the inferior crops of the last two years that a case will be made out not only for remission of the current revenue, but also in many cases of the Agricultural loans granted as flood relief and (earlier in the year) for replacement of cattle lost in the epidemic.65

The response of the Deputy Commissioner indeed made the impact of that year's flood appear less damaging than in reality. This was made apparent by the field report filed by the Sib-divisional Officer of North Lakhimpur after visiting the flood-affected Dhakuakhana and Gohaingaon mauzas. He considered it "a very pitiable sight to see the depredations", when it was found that "in about 90 percent cases the changs [raised platforms] of the granaries had gone under water [and] in all cases the water was about half to one cubit above the chang."66 The result was that the lowest layers of the paddy in stock in all the granaries got rotten and "became completely unfit for human consumption." It was also "abundantly clear" to the officer that about 90 percent of the raiyats had been hit by the floods, including the villages of the Mishing community.

The conclusion of the visit was that "A most difficult and critical time is awaiting the rayots of Dhakuakhana and Gohaingaon mauzas, and as most of them have got no money to buy rice or paddy they will have to be financed substantially by us to help them out of this calamity."67 The government, rather than accepting the appeals for remission, preferred subsequently to suspend the collection of land revenue for the time-being. Requests for remission of revenue were

65 Ibid.
66 From A. Rahman, Sub-divisional Officer, North Lakhimpur, to the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, No.3031D, 3 August 1927, 'Remission of Revenue Consequent on Flood in the Brahmaputra Valley (Flood in Lakhimpur)', Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-B, September 1928, Nos.1184-1246, ASA.
67 Ibid.
favourably considered on case of only four landholders. Setting aside the recommendation by the district officers in Lakhimpur for remission of land revenue of a few villages, the Government of Assam replied, "it may be preferable to suspend rather than to remit revenue altogether. It seems individuous to make the tea garden coolies...pay because they can earn wages in the tea gardens, but to remit payment of land revenue in the case of others who are apparently too lazy to work." The old colonial stereotype of the 'lazy native' was resurrected to justify a widely demanded remission of revenue, the burden of which made the impact of flood more severe and the flood-hit poor peasants more impoverished.

During the floods of 1927, the most serious distress in Lakhimpur was reported from Burisuti Dum-gaon - a Kaivartta village - but the "distress in their case is largely due to a cholera epidemic which had carried off many of the earning members of families of the village, and has also prevented them from selling their fish." Also affected were the Telahi and Kamalabaria mauzas of Lakhimpur on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The government enquiries however found that the distress of the peasants was not only or entirely because of the floods, but rather a combination of socio-economic factors coupled with floods made a serious impact. As the Sub-deputy Collector of Ranganadi revenue circle wrote in his enquiry report,

What I have gathered during my tour in the villages is that the present condition [of] the ryots is not at all due to the recent flood but it has been of gradual development since the last year and it has come to an acute stage at present. On account of insufficient rainfall the last winter crop was not such as it should be and as a result the amount of paddy in stock ran short 3 months ago, but this want was partially made good by the Ahu crop which the ryots cultivated on a

---

68 From Secretary to the Government of Assam to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, No.3295R, Shillong 10 November 1927, 'Remission of Revenue Consequent on Flood in the Brahmaputra Valley (Flood in Lakhimpur)', Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-B, September 1928, Nos.1184-1246, ASA.

69 From F. A. S. Thomas, Officiating Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, No. 5064R, Dibrugarh 31 October 1927, 'Remission of Revenue Consequent on Flood in the Brahmaputra Valley (Flood in Lakhimpur)', Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-B, September 1928, Nos.1184-1246, ASA.
very small scale. The Ahu crop thus saved the people from utter wants and privation for the last two months and at present they have come to such a situation where they are utterly confused to find out a means to save their very existence. The Marwaries and other neighbours who formerly helped these people with loan or paddy are now totally refusing to help them in any shape and the only means left to these ill-fated ryots is to approach the benign government for agricultural loan to save their existence for two months.\textsuperscript{70}

It was clear even to the colonial officials that floods in itself hardly took the shape of destructive calamities. It was the existence of adverse social conditions of existence that put the sustenance of life and livelihood for the weaker classes in difficulty. But when floods of increasing intensity in the first half of twentieth century forced the colonial state to initiate enquiries into the causes of floods, the priority of 'natural' factors were stressed upon over and above the 'social' factors.

\textit{Enquiring into the Causes of Floods}

\textit{It is therefore to the hills that we must go if we wish to control floods.}\textsuperscript{71}

Floods, in both their beneficial and destructive forms, were not new to the Brahmaputra Valley. As early as in 1829, Captain Rutherford came to know of disputes between the officials of the Bhutan kingdom and the zamindars of the British territory while visiting the Bhutanese-British border in the Duars for conducting surveys under orders of David Scott. Rutherford saw villages which he considered to be 'ravaged' by floods.

I have proceeded in concert with these people (I summoned the oldest inhabitants of that and adjacent villages...) to the eastern point of the boundary

\textsuperscript{70} From K. B. Nandi, Sub-deputy Collector, Lakhimpur, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, 13 September 1927, ‘Remission of Revenue Consequent on Flood in the Brahmaputra Valley (Flood in Lakhimpur)’, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-B, September 1928, Nos.1184-1246, ASA.

\textsuperscript{71} Note on Floods in the Surma Valley, Assam, their Causes and Remedies, by F. O. Lechmere-Oertel, Chief Engineer, Public Works Department, Shillong 6\textsuperscript{th} November 1917, Nos.1-62, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, June 1918, ASA.
on the Bur Nuddee [trans. Big River], for which, as the marks of Gohay Kamlar
Allie, had been obliterated from the effects of the overflowing of that river, I was
necessarily entirely dependent on the memories of these people for the
correctness of my assumption... you enter the Bijalee Pergunaah and Karadooree
lands, and ascend the Dea river, until the end of Oniahuttee village – I should
apprehend great changes taking place in this vicinity, even to the extent of loss of
some of the villages from the ravages committed by the river.72

However, even till the beginning of the twentieth century, floods were generally
considered to be of 'ordinary' and 'local' nature that rarely caused widespread
destruction and loss. There were many reasons for this. As B. C. Allen noted in
1905, "Darrang suffers little from destructive storms and floods. The
Brahmaputra and many of its tributaries occasionally overflow their banks, but
the area subject to inundation is well known, and the villagers do not attempt to
cultivate anything more than summer rice or cold weather crops in these flooded
tracts."73

But it was not uncommon to find colonial officials lamenting the losses caused to
the exchequer by floods. Alarmed by a series of high floods in Brahmaputra and
Surma Valleys, concerted efforts were undertaken at studying the floods of the
rivers in the early twentieth century Asom. The 'abnormally' high floods of
October 1916 affected both the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, but particularly
the latter, raising demands in the Assam Legislative Assembly for a thorough
scientific investigation of the causes of the annual floods that visited Asom. The
colonial government did not deem it necessary to systematically and seriously
collect and maintain flood-related data for the province till that time, but now
instructions were sent in the context of the recent floods. According to the Chief
Commissioner's orders, "In the case of Manipur and Nowgong, reports should be

72 From Lt. H. Rutherford to the David Scott, Agent to the Governor General, North East Frontier,
Jorhaute, 27th November 1830, File No.417 of 1829, Assam Commissioner’s Papers, ASA.
added.
made as to whether there have been any previous floods in these districts, and if so, when and what were their causes."74

The state often passed off 'natural' and non-preventable factors to be the causes for floods, in this case as well as in many others, such as heavy rainfall, etc., dismissing suggestions that it might be attributed to man-made factors like ill-planned embankments, railways and roadways, obstruction of the natural drainage of the river basin, etc. The Government of India intervened in December 1916 to direct the local colonial bureaucracy "to take very early steps to investigate the causes that led to these exceptional inundations and to report to the Government of India what remedial measures can be devised."75 In absence of any scientific investigation or observation worth noting till then, the causes of flood admittedly had to be subjects more of conjecture.

The occurrence of such a heavy and widespread rainfall must in my opinion invariably produce a flood. What is important is that the flood water should be carried off rapidly, and should not as it did on this occasion, submerge the crops for lengthy periods. A disquieting feature in the situation is that when the recent floods occurred, the Barak and Surma rivers were well below their rains level, while the big haors in the Sylhet district were far from full. Notwithstanding all this the flood water did not flow off until irreparable damage has been done to the crops. Whether or not the levels of the main rivers in the Surma valley are altering and drainage is less affective than it used to be are questions for experts to decide.76

Similar conclusions were arrived at for the Brahmaputra Valley floods of that year, and particularly regarding the causes of the recent floods in the Kapili Valley in the Nowgong district. P. R. T. Gurdon, the Commissioner of Assam

74 From B. C. Allen, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Commissioner of Surma Valley and Hill Districts and Assam Valley Districts and the Political Agent of Manipur, No.383638R, Shillong 27th October 1916, Nos.1-62, Rev.-A, June 1918, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA. Emphasis added.
75 From A. E. Gilliat, Under-Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.1035-6, Simla, 5th December 1916, Nos.1-62, Rev.-A, June 1918, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
76 From W. J. Reid, Commissioner of Surma Valley and Hill Districts to the Chief Secretary to the Commissioner of Assam, No.8297, Silchar 19th December 1916, Nos.1-62, Rev.-A, June 1918, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.

328
Valley Districts who conducted the enquiry at Kampur in Nowgong consulted the local people, rainfall data and the gauge readings at various points on the Brahmaputra by the end of November 1916. According to Gurdon, "I have framed the provisional conclusion that the causes of the excessive floods in the Kapili area, as well as of the Dayang, the Barpani and the Dikaru were due to excessive rains, in the hills coupled with the backing up of the Brahmaputra river at the same time." However, according to the local officials, nothing on their part could have reduced the damage of floods in any way, not even after receiving prior information about impending floods. "I do not think that information likely to save life or property would be obtained even if officers in the hills telegraphed the occurrence of heavy and continuous rainfall", was the response of the Commissioner of the Surma Valley and Hill Districts. Others too agreed to this. As the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar wrote while discussing "remedial measures",

Practically nothing can be done to prevent flood water coming down suddenly from the hills. It has been suggested that clearance of jungle would allow flood water to get away more quickly than before, but I doubt whether any extensive clearance has taken place in the higher hills where the flood arise. Warning by telegraph of coming flood is hardly feasible... All that we can do is to assist the flood water to get away as soon as possible.

Rainfall, even though regarded to be a major factor causing floods, could not be the only determining factor. As the chief commissioner noted, it was possible that the same amount of rainfall did not do the same amount of damage every year. So it was presumed that "This may be due to the present state of railway

---

77 P. R. T. Gurdon, Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.158G, Gauhati 2nd April 1917, Nos.1-62, Rev.-A, June 1918, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA, emphasis added.
78 From W. J. Reid, Commissioner of Surma Valley and Hill Districts to the Chief Secretary to the Commissioner of Assam, No.8297, Silchar 19th December 1916, Nos.1-62, Rev.-A, June 1918, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
79 H. A. C. Colquhoun, Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, to the Commissioner of Surma Valley and Hill Districts, No.3205, Silchar, 4th December 1916, Nos.1-62, Rev.-A, June 1918, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA, emphasis added.
embankments and roads and levels of river beds."80 Thus, though the annual amount of rainfall in the Brahmaputra Valley region and its adjacent hills was calculated to be one of the highest in the world, only on certain conditions this factor caused destructive floods. As the state itself admitted, when the natural drainage system of the region was interfered with through the construction of roads, embankments and such other obstructions, the impact of the runoff could turn normal floods into destructive ones.

**Jhumming Forests, Harvesting Floods? Colonial Demonisation of Shifting Cultivation**

The perceived relation of *jhum* or shifting cultivation on the hills to the floods in the plains engaged the attention of the colonial government during this time.81 The forest department officials were at the forefront in arguing that *jhum* in the hills aggravated the floods in the valley. They therefore advocated stringent actions to discourage this mode of cultivation and for the reservation of the forests. The Conservator of Forests in Cachar Division argued in April 1917,

[The] prevalence of *jhumming* in all these hill tracts had a considerable effect in increasing the damage done by the disastrous floods of 1915 and 1916. In a country like India where the rainfall is mainly dependent on the monsoon, it is not claimed that the presence or absence of more or less forest growth has any material influence on the precipitation. There can be no doubt however that the destruction of the natural canopy and of vegetable mould in the ground by laying bare the surface lessens the absorptions of moisture and increases the amount the violence of the run off. If the hill tracts had been uniformly clothed with a natural forest growth, a much greater proportion of the rainfall would have been absorbed and given off more gradually, thus obviating the violent rise in the river level, while the enormous quantity of silt which was derived from bare and

---

80 Chief Commissioner's Note, 8th January 1917, Nos.1-62, Rev.-A, June 1918, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA, emphasis added.
81 From the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Revenue and Agriculture Department, No.62, Shillong 20th December 1917, Nos.1-62, Rev.-A, June 1918, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
insufficiently protected surfaces would not have been brought down and
deposited in the Cachar plains where it caused such widespread damage.\textsuperscript{82}

Even though the discussion on the said adverse effects of \textit{jhum} particularly
centered in the context of the Barak Valley, this was seen as a general
phenomenon for all rivers of the province. The enquiries into the causes of floods
in the province was summarized in a report by Asom's chief engineer in
November 1917, which tried to give expert answers the unresolved questions
regarding the 'flood problem' and recommended measures for their solution.
Many of the findings of the enquiry were accepted, but were rarely put in
practice.

The report pointed out that the recurrence of the three floods in 1913, 1915 and
1916 must be ascribed to natural causes beyond the control of human agency,
namely, "simultaneous heavy rainfall over the greater part of the catchment area.
Abnormal floods like this are bound to occur from time to time."\textsuperscript{83} The report
suggested that the remedy to the problems caused by destructive floods was
mitigation and alleviation, not through flood prevention or protection. It was also
pointed out that the beneficial effects of the floods should not be lost sight of, and
that "these floods are by no means an unmixed evil, the harm done in one year
being often more than compensated in succeeding years by the increased fertility
of the land through the silt deposited on it. It is only when there is a succession of
abnormal flood years that the cultivator seriously felt the stress."\textsuperscript{84} For the
continued fertility of the cultivated soil it was necessary to allow the deposition
of silt brought down by floods. So the chief engineer of was categorical in saying
that

Nothing that could interfere with the raising of the low lands by silting, such as
marginal bunds (Marginal bunds along the edges of rivers for the purpose of

\textsuperscript{82} Conservator of Forests, Cachar Forest Division, Western Circle to the Chief Engineer, Assam,
No.1617-18R, 2\textsuperscript{nd} April 1917, Nos.1-62, Rev.-A, June 1918, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
\textsuperscript{83} Note on Floods in the Surma Valley, Assam, their Causes and Remedies, by F. O. Lechmere-Oertel,
Chief Engineer, Public Works Department, Shillong 6\textsuperscript{th} November 1917, Nos.1-62, Rev.-A, June
1918, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
protecting fields from inundation were in use in Assam long before the British occupation.) along the rivers, should be permitted. Bils or hoars should only be allowed to be drained under very exceptional circumstances.85

The chief engineer was also against the construction of high road banks across the path of natural drainage, and if at all permitted, they were generally to be kept below high water-level so that floods could pass freely over them.86 Since this was not possible with railway embankments and had of necessity had to be above the highest flood level, it was recommended that railway embankments needed to be provided with ample waterways so that they did not hold back flood waters.87 Further, it was felt necessary that the quantity and quality of silt brought down by various rivers should be ascertained, which would then play an important role in any future land reclamation scheme.88

On the crucial question of the relation between jhumming and floods, the report found that there was no doubt that the destruction of forests and undergrowth that accompanied the practice of jhum cultivation was “to some extent at least” responsible for the rapid discharge of flood-water and for the denudation of soil on the hill sides, and in some cases for and landslides and landslips. The forests at headwaters of the rivers acted as big sponge, retaining the rain and letting it soak slowly into the soil, instead of running off quickly from the surface and producing disastrous floods, the report noted. It further suggested that measures must be taken to preserve the forests of the hills, and particularly of those from which rivers ensued. It was also recommended that “jhumming should be prohibited at any rate at the head waters of rivers.”89 The report identified the ongoing process of deforestation in the plains another cause for floods that took a devastating form. Moreover, “The extension of tea gardens and of rice and other cultivation in the valley has no doubt also helped to increase floods through the removal of jungle and through improved drainage.” However,

85 Ibid.
86 Note on Floods in the Surma Valley, Assam, their Causes and Remedies, by F. O. Lechmere-Oertel, Chief Engineer, Public Works Department, Shillong 6th November 1917, Nos.1-62, Rev.-A, June 1918, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
financial considerations compelled this factor to be overlooked in the report, since the chief engineer admitted, “the benefit outweighs the harm” for the state.⁹⁰

The report came up with four broad recommendations. First, to control and check the running down of flood-water from the hills, forests in the catchments areas of rivers were to be protected by declaring Reserved Forests and prohibiting forest destruction through jhumming or such other activities. Secondly, it was to be ensured that no unnecessary impediments were created to the flow of the flood-water in its passage through the Valley to the sea, be it by closed and high railway embankments or raised roads. Thirdly, low-lying tracts needed to be raised above flood-level by channelizing the deposition of silt, which was only possible if no embankments on the river banks was allowed to be erected. And lastly, collection of systematic scientific data for better monitoring and study of the floods was needed to be taken up. Though the enquiry was an important step towards understanding the flood dynamics of the region, none of the studies it initiated or the recommendations put forward, were actually put into practice. The matter was shelved for a few more years, till another wave of high and damaging floods brought the issue back in sharp relief.

Government of India also directed the provincial authorities to conduct scientific enquiries and collect scientific data in July 1918. The Chief Commissioner clarified that these steps were “merely preliminary to a systematic enquiry by a forest officer, specially deputed for a purpose”, and to be done in coordination with the departments of revenue, forest and PWD. Yet, with the laying down the share of responsibility for the three departments, the government also for the first time initiated the process of collecting systematic scientific data to monitor and study the floods of the Brahmaputra Valley, building the base for ‘expert knowledge’. He stated,

It was the business of the Revenue officer (1) to select localities for comparison, (2) to make such arrangements as possible for the recording of the rainfall in

⁹⁰ Ibid.
those localities and in the catchment areas above them, (3) in cooperation with
the forest department, to record the extent of jhumming in the catchment area,
(4) to keep notes of the floods and extent of flood damage. It is the business of
the PWD to arrange for the taking of levels showing the rates of rise and fall of
the floods, to estimate the velocity and volume of the discharge, and to deal with
other such matters requiring expert knowledge. The responsibility of the forest
department would be chiefly in regard to the catchment areas, where they would
be in a position to know the extent of jhumming and the nature of the forest and
jungle with which the hillsides are clothed.91

One of the main objectives of this exercise was to determine the effects of jhum
or shifting cultivation on floods, i.e., whether the damage done downstream by
rivers coming down through hills cleared for jhum was greater than that caused
by rivers flowing through hills which were forested and under less or no jhum.
However, as pointed out by P. R. T. Gurdon, the Commissioner of Assam Valley
Districts, the extent of damage caused by floods depended on many factors and
not merely on whether the region around the headwaters of a river was under
jhum or not. He pointed out that the floods in a river depended on a combination
of factors, including the size of the river. A large river, other things being equal,
did more damage than a small one. The magnitude of floods was also contingent
upon the depth of the river bed. If the channel was deep and wide enough a
sudden and great influx of water might do no harm. The presence and absence of
bunds on a river and the terrain in which its course lay also determined the
extent of floods. Similarly, the level of the country through which the river
flowed, the extent to which the country was cultivated, the presence of other
large rivers in the neighbourhood, the coincidence of a flood in the Brahmaputra
with a flood in any of its tributaries, the suddenness of flood due to rainwater not
being held up by the undergrowth on heavily jhummed and cleared hills, all
contributed in varied degrees to influence the intensity of a flood.92

91 From the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, No.376R, 28
January 1919, ‘Remedial Measures against Floods in Assam’, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue
Department, Rev.-B, February 1919, Nos.54-56, File No.F-5/19, ASA.
92 From P. R. T. Gurdon, Commissioner of Assam Valley Division to the Secretary to the Chief
Commissioner of Assam, Jorhat 7 December 1918, ‘Remedial Measures against Floods in Assam’,
Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-B, February 1919, Nos.54-56, File No.F-
5/19, ASA.
Moreover, such an experiment was fraught with many difficulties, the problem of comprehension perhaps being one of the least difficult. The political officer of Sadiya Frontier Tract, through which many of the major tributaries of the Brahmaputra passed, complained on receiving directions to conduct the above enquiry in the region under his charge, "I am not quite clear as to what is meant by 'catchment area'. The term may be extended to mean the valley of a river till it debouches on to the plains. In this case it is impossible to prevent jhumming in this or in any other Hill District that I know. There would be no land left for cultivation. If however the words are intended to mean the area near the source of a river I can without hesitation say that the Chief Engineer's conclusions do not apply in the case of the local rivers and hill torrents of this district." 93

The conclusion of the Chief Engineer J. N. Taylor referred to here was undoubtedly an unambiguous one, though one may not say the same as to its veracity. According to him, "it has long been established that the intensity of flow off from forest clad catchment areas is very much less than from areas which have been denuded of their vegetation and no experiments or observations are really needed to further establish this self evident fact." 94 The experiments contemplated, he believed, might however help in obtaining more precise information regarding the degree in which jhum affected the floods in the rivers of the region by keeping recordings on rain and river flood gauges.

This view was contested by district officers who observed the rivers in their localities. Giving the instance of the Nam Diyun or the Noa Dihing River in the Sadiya Frontier Tracts – the easternmost region of the Brahmaputra Valley – the political officer argued that this river, the longest one in that district, experienced the most sudden rise and fall in the floodwaters. This was in spite of the fact that

93 From W. C. M. Dundas, Political Officer, Sadiya Frontier Tract, to the Under Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue Department, No.706G, Sadiya 5 July 1919, 'Remedial Measures against Floods in Assam', Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-B, February 1919, Nos.54-56, File No.F-5/19, ASA.
94 From J. N. Taylor, Chief Engineer of Assam, to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.3965R, Shillong 1 July 1920, 'Remedial Measures against Floods in Assam', Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-B, February 1919, Nos.54-56, File No.F-5/19, ASA.
its catchment area was heavily forested, with only five houses of 'Singphos' anywhere near its headwaters. He inferred that the sudden rises in this or other smaller rivers there was caused by the steep slopes of the catchment area, which brought the rain waters into the river bed in no time. 95 Similarly, the Commissioner of Surma Valley and Hill Districts also pointed out that "the rate at which the water rises in a given river after rain depends not only on jhumming but also on a number of other factors, e.g., rainfall over catchment area, extent of catchment area, configuration of the area, nature of the soil in the catchment area and the configuration of the river bed." 96

It was also felt that the value of the results obtained would be very doubtful unless the experiments were conducted "whole heartedly" and on the basis of a research extending over a considerable period. For its success, the experiments had to be carried out by "a competent officer who has thoroughly examined the hydrographical features of the district in which the experiment has to be conducted." 97 At the end of a series of official correspondence that lasted more than a year, the Chief Engineer of Assam came to the conclusion that "After carefully considering the question, I am of opinion that statistics collected in connection with this subject will serve no really useful purpose", and if at all observations were to be recorded, he suggested that two small areas of not more than 80 square miles be selected for comparing the effects of jhum on floods. 98

Though this initial attempt at undertaking scientific experiment on determining the causes of floods in the Valley was a non-starter, it was nevertheless agreed

95 From W. C. M. Dundas, Political Officer, Sadiya Frontier Tract, to Deputy Conservator of Forests, Assam, Memo. No.2268G, 9 March 1920, 'Remedial Measures against Floods in Assam', Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-B, February 1919, Nos.54-56, File No.F-5/19, ASA.
96 From H. C. Barmes, Officiating Commissioner of Surma Valley and Hill Districts, to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.1572, 6 March 1920, 'Remedial Measures against Floods in Assam', Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-B, February 1919, Nos.54-56, File No.F-5/19, ASA.
97 From the Officiating Executive Engineer, Sylhet Division to the Deputy Commissioner, Sylhet, No.3469, Silchar 12 November 1919, 'Remedial Measures against Floods in Assam', Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-B, February 1919, Nos.54-56, File No.F-5/19, ASA.
98 From J. N. Taylor, Chief Engineer of Assam, to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.3965R, Shillong 1 July 1920, 'Remedial Measures against Floods in Assam', Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-B, February 1919, Nos.54-56, File No.F-5/19, ASA.
that gauge-readings of water-levels in some select rivers needed to be installed. The rivers Gabhoru, Bhoroli, Borgong and Boroi in Darrang district were selected for the purpose, and gauges on the edges of the low banks on the Trunk Road where it crossed these rivers as well as concrete bench marks on comparatively high banks were erected for taking measurements.\textsuperscript{99}

Almost a decade after this enquiry, the provincial government's Public Works Department appointed another Flood Enquiry Committee in the year 1929. Its objective was to examine the extent of flood aggravation and abatement caused by railway embankments and raised public roads with insufficient water passages through them. The committee was asked to suggest remedies including alterations of alignments or even the abandonment of the ways where essential to minimize any adverse effect they could cause.\textsuperscript{100} The committee interviewed many "notable persons" in Cachar to find out the cause of the recent abnormal/extraordinary floods in the Barak River and its tributaries. Some of the causes pointed out were indiscriminate felling of trees in the hills surrounding the Barak valley, the practice of \textit{jhum} cultivation, inadequate opening in railway embankments, silting of the rivers, and even the increase of area under tea cultivation. According to one Sanat Kumar Das, a government official, "the block system of timber extraction whereby intensive clearing of forests is done from concentrated areas in the Lushai Hills, Manipur, and Sonai, Madhura, Chiri and Jiri valleys" led to the aggravation and intensification of floods in the Barak Valley. Das also noted that "\textit{The number of tea gardens is gradually increasing and additional areas are being cleared for cultivation. Even the portions in the valley which are water-logged grow Assam Tea and the drains made there bring water quickly down to the main streams.}"\textsuperscript{101}

The Flood Enquiry Committee also inspected many sections of the railway lines in the Brahmaputra Valley, both in the north as well as south banks of the

\textsuperscript{99} From G. E. Soames, Deputy Commissioner of Darrang to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, No.:4509R, 7 February 1920, 'Remedial Measures against Floods in Assam', Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-B, February 1919, Nos.54-56, File No.F-5/19, ASA.


\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., p.13. Emphasis added.
Brahmaputra from 6 to 9 January 1930. These included Golakganj-Amingaon section of Eastern Bengal Railway, Guwahati-Chaparmukh, Chaparmukh-Senchoa and Senchoa-Moriabari sections of Assam-Bengal Railway, Farkting-Badulipara-Jorhat and Simaluguri-Khowang branches of Assam-Bengal Railway. It found that the railway embankments in many cases had led to the disturbance of the natural drainage of the Valley, making previously flood-immune areas flood-prone and water-logged, a suggestion vehemently countered by the railway authorities.102

The committee came to the conclusion that,

Railway embankments and public roads do aggravate the effects of the floods on the upstream side especially where the water passage through them is insufficient. As to how far railway embankments and public roads aggravate, have aggravated or tend to aggravate those effects, all the evidence shows that the aggravation during abnormal floods may be serious, but is in most cases beyond control. During normal floods the aggravation is less serious and is capable of being controlled within reasonable limits.103

The committee recommended the establishing of gauge-meters at various points on the main rivers of the Brahmaputra Valley to be maintained and read by the Public Works Department. Further, the committee suggested that the possibility of dredging the beds of rivers, especially in their lower reaches, needed to be considered after the formation of a Waterways Division within the PWD. The committee itself was, however, "very doubtful" about the effectiveness of dredging a large river like the Brahmaputra.104 Significantly, the report of the Flood Enquiry Committee noted that it had "considered methods of reducing the

103 Ibid, emphasis added.
104 The following observation of the Orissa Flood Committee was quoted by the present Report to show the inadvisability of dredging: 'Similarly, to dredge the course of the rivers, as has sometimes been suggested, is to attempt to challenge deltaic action and would inevitably be doomed to failure. The sand would deposit again as quickly as it could be removed. Equally ineffective would be any attempt to shorten the course of a river carrying heavy sand by cutting through its loops. The formation of loops is a natural tendency, depending largely upon the velocity of the water and the nature of soil through which the river flows; even were such loops cut through, the river would not maintain a straight course but would merely form new loops elsewhere.' Report of the Flood Enquiry Committee, Assam, Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Press, 1930, p.6.
abnormal flood conditions by means of reservoirs or impounding areas and consider these to be impracticable."\textsuperscript{105}

There is little evidence to show that corrective measures were undertaken with any earnestness during the first half of the twentieth century even though many of the man-made causes of floods were identified. But some of these, such as the purported adverse effect of \textit{jhum} cultivation, were used as justification for closing off forests etc. from tribal communities, declaring them as reserved forests and prohibiting the practice of shifting cultivation therein. At the same time, the threads of many of these scientific investigations carried out by the experts of the colonial government in the Brahmaputra Valley were picked up by the scientific agencies of the Government of India after 1947, though as we would argue, for entirely different purposes.

**Work as Relief**

As we approach the mid-twentieth century, we find further evidence of peasants demanding reclassification of lands made uncultivable by the rivers. In a petition signed by 84 peasants of Tihu circle to the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup in February 1937, the following appeal was made, informing that about 4000 bighas of land has become fallow, yet the rent charged by the government was as per the best cultivable land. They wrote,

\begin{quote}
The lands of Nadala, Uttar Amoni, Dakhin Kaithalkuchi, Pub Sandheli of Dharmapur Mauza and Pub Bhojkuchi Block of Nam Borbhag Mauza are for almost last 6/7 years are being rendered waterlogged and lying fallow due to the atrocities of the two Rivers Pagladiya and Burhadiya. In the present days of economic distress it is difficult even to pay the revenue of cultivated land, so having to pay the revenue of this fallow land it has caused us the poor ryots great injustice. We the poor ryots prey to the government to favour us with a reclassification of the said lands.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., p.11.
This was followed by another petition signed by 110 villagers in January 1938, ruing the fact that several pleas and appeals to the government in the past had failed to bring any relief. They informed that

Having received no favourable response from the government, and having no other means at their disposal, the villagers themselves undertook the task of cutting a small channel [called dong] of half a mile of length through the said land to drain out the waters to the Burhadiya River in the south by spending nearly Rs.250. Yet the work has remained incomplete as another 1½ miles of the channel needs to be dug, and therefore has yielded little benefit. To muster the resources for completing the task is beyond the means of the poor ryots.

The peasants therefore appealed for a sanction of Rs.500 towards finishing the task, or alternately, to reclassify the land as well as to waive the land revenue of that area till it was once again fit for cultivation. The Under-Secretary of the government referred it back to the district officials, as he deemed it “a matter for the local authorities in the first instance to deal with”. After receiving a report from the district officials, the government agreed that “the nalla will be beneficial to the villagers”, but it further noted that “In these days of financial stringency it is doubtful the scheme can be treated as imperative.” The Deputy Commissioner was of the opinion that the “proposed dong should be dug by the villagers”. According to the revenue secretary of the provincial government, it was estimated that an area of about 8000 bighas could be brought under cultivation by draining the surplus water through the proposed dong with an estimated expenditure of nearly Rs.5000.

The Commissioner argued that rather than the government entirely bearing the burden of the work, the ideal situation would have been to get the work done by the villagers themselves, but conditions were found to be unfavourable for the success of such an effort. Further, it was asserted that “In these matters of rural

106 Note by the Under Secretary, Revenue Department, Government of Assam, 19th April 1938, “Construction of Dongs in Dharmapur and Khetri Dharmapur Mauzas in the District of Kamrup”, File No.726-749, Rev. B, June 1940, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.

107 Note by the Under Secretary, Revenue Department, Government of Assam, 31st October 1938, “Construction of Dongs in Dharmapur and Khetri Dharmapur Mauzas in the District of Kamrup”, File No.726-749, Rev. B, June 1940, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
economy I found the villagers have as shrewd an idea about the pros and cons as anybody else and although government may hesitate to foot the entire bill without making sure of the utility of the project by expert advice, encouragement may be given to the villagers by promising, say, half the cost, if they agree to find the remainder in labour and money."

The lack of scientific expertise and data was presented as a hurdle against taking up the work, and that the government "cannot take up work like this on an extensive scale without a properly equipped Irrigation Department." Yet, since the proposed *dong* was a project "which has the odds heavily in favour of ultimate benefit", it could be started without waiting indefinitely for expert advice. Nor was there any question of government acquiring land for the purpose if the villagers themselves wanted the *dong*.

The revenue minister echoes the opinions of his bureaucrats that villagers should be encouraged and asked to contribute by labour and money as much as they could to undertake the project. The minister later visited the region and concluded that "by bringing the surplus water through the proposed *dongs*, a vast area would be brought under cultivation as a result of which not only the people of the locality would get benefit but also the government might expect to get some more revenue." He further noted that

The people assembled agreed to contribute a sum of Rs.2000 towards the construction of this *dong*. This will mean that according to the estimate of the PWD government should sanction another sum of Rs.3000 or a little more towards this scheme. This, in my opinion, should not be grudged as ultimately the government will be gainer if the quality of the lands is improved.

The request for monetary assistance for another *dong* that was undergoing construction through the voluntary labour and contribution of the peasants in the same mauza was placed before the minister. He was of the opinion that

---

106 Note by the Secretary, Revenue Department, Government of Assam, 15th November 1938, "Construction of Dongs in Dharmapur and Khetri Dharmapur Mauzas in the District of Kamrup", File No.726-749, Rev. B, June 1940, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.

"when the people of the locality have done so much, government should not hesitate in contributing a small sum of Rs.500, which amount I am inclined to sanction for the completion of this project at an early date."110 The question of the competent government agency to carry out the work also came up for debate. The revenue minister concurred with the opinion of the deputy commissioner in saying that

if work is to be carried out there expert assistance is necessary by a department of government, which posses the expert knowledge and assistance. In the case of irrigation, success depends upon level etc., and PWD is the proper department [and not that of the deputy collector's]. When small projects not requiring expert knowledge and assistance are to be carried out in the submontane area among people who have the tradition of constructing irrigation channels on their own, government assistance may be limited to tendering such advice and monetary assistance as may be needed.111

Finally, it was decided that the works would be carried out in the 1940-41 season by the Embankment and Drainage Division of the PWD, which was to become functional from 1 April 1940.112

The prevailing political atmosphere was also reflected in the turf wars between the government and the provincial workers of the Indian National Congress on questions of relief to the peasants in distress caused by floods, draughts or other calamities, which often hinged on the issue of waiving or remission of the land revenue. A reported incident of famine in Madhyam Baska mauza in Kamrup district was an occasion for such contrasting perceptions and approaches to come to the fore, revealing not only the reluctance of the colonial government to acknowledge the distress of the peasants, but also the social base and class character of the Congress, which hardly reflected the interests of the most

110 Ibid.
112 Note by Under Secretary, Revenue Department, Government of Assam, 19th January 1940, “Construction of Dongs in Dharmapur and Khetri Dharmapur Mauzas in the District of Kamrup”, File No.726-749, Rev. B, June 1940, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
oppressed sections of the peasantry. However, the ensuing exchanges bring forward the prevailing acute agrarian crisis in parts of the Valley. In a petition to the government a local Congress functionary reported in June 1938,

The Baska region in the northern part of Kamrup district is known as the Kachari mahal. Most of the inhabitants of this region are Kacharis [also at that time used interchangeably with the Boros, a tribal community]. They can't even express their grievances. Presently a famine has widely set in covering this entire region. Due to their inability to communicate about their distress, you may not have been aware of the true condition of the region. Paddy, the main crop of this region, could not grow adequately last season due to paucity of rainwater. Whatever was produced was all sold off by the people during Falgun-Chaitra [January-February] to meet the demands from the mahajans [moneylenders] and land revenue arrears. Thereafter people survived somehow by begging and foraging, but now-a-days even begging yields nothing. Therefore people are forced to go hungry. Some people are surviving on wild roots and tubers. It will be difficult to keep them alive if no relief is immediately provided. For your information a list of the families which are forced to go hungry have been attached here [It follows a list of 56 families with a total of 278 persons]. I hope that you will enquire into the matter and provide the much needed relief to the hungry without delay. The following, in my assessment, needs to be done to ameliorate the condition of the famine-struck subjects: (1) Distribution of foodstuff to the hungry people after enquiry, (2) distribution of seeds to the peasants who do not have access to seeds through the agricultural department, (3) to stop the collection of land revenue after enquiry. After enquiry, land revenue should be collected from those who can afford it, those who cannot pay the revenue immediately it should be remitted, and those who are not at all in a position to pay their due should be waived.\textsuperscript{113}

The leader of the Congress in the Assembly and the future prime minister of Asom Gopinath Bordoloi wrote to the revenue minister Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri, requesting him to order an immediate inquiry to ascertain the extent of the distress in the Kachari mahal and start relief operations without delay. He also

\textsuperscript{113} Petition by Pratap Chandra Goswami, Nalbari Sattra, to the Government of Assam, 6\textsuperscript{th} June 1938, “Scarcity in the Madhya Baska mauza in the District of Kamrup and the Construction of a Dong in that Mauza”, File Nos. 1169-1215, Rev.-B, June 1940, ASA, translation from Assamese mine.
urged that the agricultural department be asked to freely supply the needy with paddy seedlings and to suspend the realization of land revenue in the affected villages, granting remission after enquiry to those who were incapable of paying their revenue dues.\textsuperscript{114}

The alarm raised about the perceived scarcity to the proportion of a famine condition was, however, perceived by the government to be "more 'political' than real"\textsuperscript{115}, and therefore as nothing but an attempt by "the leaders of the Congress Party... to make some use of this alleged scarcity in his political propaganda".\textsuperscript{116} Nevertheless, an enquiry by the Deputy Commissioner was ordered. The officer reported that he "saw as many of the alleged foodless men as could be produced...villagers from other villages – Mohina, Santipur, Bherbheri, Dhamdha, Harharia, Goalbil, all came to say that they were in want of food."

The enquiry also revealed that the petitioner P. C. Goswami had land in the area paying Rs.440 land revenue per year in the adjoining villages of Tupolia, Adala, Simlabari and Uttarpara. This year he went on 2 June and camped there four days for this purpose as he used to do every year. There, finding that there was a general scarcity of food that year, he made enquiries and on the basis of it wrote to the government, the Commissioner, the Deputy Commissioner and the Congress office at Guwahati. After collecting his rent, the landlord went off, the government officer complained, without rendering any help to his tenants or other distressed villagers. A Congress worker later came to Tupolia and distributed seven bags of paddy to seven persons, and returned.\textsuperscript{117} The officer's report described his experience of meeting the starving villagers,

\textsuperscript{114} From Gopinath Bordoloi, Assam Assembly Congress Party, to Rohini Kumar Choudhuri, Minister of Revenue, Assam, 12\textsuperscript{th} June 1938, "Scarcity in the Madhya Baska mauza in the District of Kamrup and the Construction of a Dong in that Mauza", File Nos. 1169-1215, Rev.-B, June 1940, ASA.

\textsuperscript{115} Note by the Secretary, Revenue Department, Government of Assam, 8\textsuperscript{th} August 1838

\textsuperscript{116} Note by the Revenue Minister, Government of Assam, 16\textsuperscript{th} June 1938.

\textsuperscript{117} From G. B. C. Paine, Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, File No.3212R, 25\textsuperscript{th} June 1938, "Scarcity in the Madhya Baska mauza in the District of Kamrup and the Construction of a Dong in that Mauza", File Nos. 1169-1215, Rev.-B, June 1940, ASA.
One Durgaram Matia of Ghoramara told me that on the whole people had enough to eat, and needy persons borrowed from mahajons. This happened every year. One Dharaja of Ulubari said that only two families in his village had enough to eat. He had not. He was going to Dhamdhama with eight annas to buy some pigeons for sacrifice and other things. Other villagers gave similar reports, and it appeared that there was some scarcity in this area at this season every year, though perhaps there was less paddy available this year owing to the drought last year, which decreased the outturn of ahu. I met also one Bhakua Koch (listed in P. C. Goswami’s list) of Tupolia and he said he was going to Dhamdhama to borrow paddy. He said the outturn of paddy has been bad, especially in the last two years... In Tupolia there are roughly 50 families, in Khagrabari some 60 families, and in Thankuchi roughly 25 families...All these men were tenants of the Goswami brothers. So also was Kachari, who had cattle, and had paid his rent this year. Sastiram (no a Goswami tenant) had a pair of bullocks, four bighas of land, as well as one pura on adhi terms. He had been subsisting on borrowing since March...Puaram had no land and no cattle. Lived on borrowing and begging. Did so last year also...At Thankuchi, the listed persons that I met gave similar reports: so also at Khagrabari. Khad said he never avoided want in any year. He had no land except his basti land. Akbar said he had 20 bighas and a pair of plough cattle, but had been in want for the last ten years. Others examined gave similar reports.118

From there, the Deputy Commissioner Paine visited Madhyam Baska, where the majority of the raiyats was said to be Kacharis and Koch, who were perceptibly worse off than their ‘Hindu’ neighbours.

Madhyam Baska land is high (being towards the Bhutan Hills) and the main paddy crop appears to be ahu. The villagers are mainly Kacharis, Koches, etc. The cultivation, though fairly permanent, is patchy – large area of jungle being scattered between fields. The land is not valuable...almost every year at this season there is scarcity...Here, as in other Baska mauzas and in the northern mouzas of Barpeta, the poorer people run short, and manage by begging and borrowing. The borrowing is at high rates of interest (50% or 100%) from co-villagers or mohajons. There has been some lack of rain in the past two years.

118 Ibid.
and so it seems that borrowers find borrowing more difficult. I could not find
any reason why Tupolia, Khagrabari, and Thankuchi should suffer worse than
other villages. People that came to me from other villages of the mouza told the
same story. For instance, villagers of Angar Dua said that there were 40 families
out of 60 without paddy. Kacharis of Santipur (Madhyam Baska) came to
complain to me. There were said to be 200 Hindu families there, and 60 Kachari
families. No Hindus came to complain.\textsuperscript{119}

After conducting his tour, the officer concluded that the people were not in any
serious condition of scarcity, and although the poorer people particularly the
Kacharis and other tribal peasants were in some difficulty, this was in no way
unusual, leading him to assert that “there was no immediate fear of famine”. As
for the relief measures, he neither recommended the distribution of paddy or
seedlings, nor money loans, with the plea that while the former was never
demanded, the latter could "go back to the mohajons”\textsuperscript{120}, and that “the issuing of
loans to shiftless people is not desirable in the interests of the people
themselves”\textsuperscript{121}.

In a later report, the Deputy Commissioner reasoned that relief of the kind
demanded could not be granted as “other Baska mauzas will demand similar
action for themselves, and it seems to be that there will be some difficulty in
denying their demands.” Rather, as a means of improving the irrigation and “as a
practical and permanent measure of relief in this area”, he recommended the
construction of two large \textit{dongs} in the next cold season with government funding,
in which he anticipated the help of the people in undertaking the ‘rough work’.
The district official maintained that "Only indirectly, and very slowly” any
improvement of a permanent nature could be achieved, which was related to the
improvement of the “method of living of the Baska Kacharis, by the provisions of

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} From C. B. C. Paine, Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup, to the Under Secretary, Government of
Assam, Revenue Department, No. 3911, 20\textsuperscript{th} July 1938, "Scarcity in the Madhya Baska Mauza in
the District of Kamrup and the Construction of a Dong in that Mauza", File Nos. 1169-1215, Rev.-B, June 1940, ASA.
\textsuperscript{121} From C. B. C. Paine, Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley
Division, No. 4629R, 23\textsuperscript{rd} August 1938, "Scarcity in the Madhya Baska Mauza in the District of
Kamrup and the Construction of a Dong in that Mauza", File Nos. 1169-1215, Rev.-B, June 1940, ASA.

346
dongs dug by trained diggers in the proper season so that cultivation may be more successful...without making the Baska Kacharis dependent on yearly contribution from government'. The dongs were considered to be the "only water source of cultivation of us all" in the Baska mauzas. The work was to be started by the villagers in the month of January in 1939, "when their cultivation will not be affected." Thus, the government was insistent that "What is needed in these areas is intensive uplift work from resident workers, aided with occasional grants for irrigation and road." But the Congress disagreed with the government’s assessment of the situation, and persisted with their call for immediate and thoroughgoing relief. It was stated that more than 2,000 people in the region were in immediate need of relief, and that "95% of the sufferers are Bodos, Kacharis, Nepalis and ex-tea garden labourers". The opinion expressed by B. K. Bhandary, secretary of a voluntary organisation working in the district also throws light on the prevailing

---

122 From C. B. C. Paine, Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup, to the Under Secretary, Government of Assam, Revenue Department, No. 3911, 20th July 1938, “Scarcity in the Madhya Baska Mauza in the District of Kamrup and the Construction of a Dong in that Mauza”, File Nos. 1169-1215, Rev.-B, June 1940, ASA.

123 Petition from B. Deka, Secretary of the Baska-Namati Ryot Sabha (with signatures of 545 ryots) to the Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup, through the S.D.C. of Tihu Circle, 15th August 1838, “Scarcity in the Madhya Baska Mauza in the District of Kamrup and the Construction of a Dong in that Mauza”, File Nos. 1169-1215, Rev.-B, June 1940, ASA.

124 From C. B. C. Paine, Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, No. 4629R, 23rd August 1938, “Scarcity in the Madhya Baska Mauza in the District of Kamrup and the Construction of a Dong in that Mauza”, File Nos. 1169-1215, Rev.-B, June 1940, ASA.

125 “Acute economic distress demands suspension of all sale proceedings in Baska mouza and Pati Darrang”, Telegram by Bishnuram Medhi, Chairman of the Gauhati Law Board and President of the Provincial Congress Committee, in letter from G. N. Bordoloi to Minister of Revenue, 18th July 1938. Also, forwarding a telegram from the secretary of the Gauhati Lawyers’ Association, Bordoloi wrote to the Chief Minister, “Apparently all that is necessary to be done has not been done. Suspension of realization of revenue has also been one of the points urged, but action in that direction don’t appear to have been taken.” The telegram read, “Great distress owing to flood and scarcity in Baska Pati Darrang, Chamaria mauzas [of] Kamrup. Gratuitous relief suspension revenue staying sale proceedings prayed”. Bordoloi in another letter to the revenue minister pointed out the relief measures sought: “1. Gratuitous relief to those who are in starving condition, 2. Relief loans to all the distressed, 3. Suspension of all revenue realization and stay of sale proceedings for arrears till the next crop is harvested, 4. Agricultural loans according to necessity to enable people to buy plough, cattle, etc., 5. Adequate funds for cutting canals or ‘dongs’ for irrigation”, From G. N. Bordoloi, Assam Assembly Congress Party to the Minister of Revenue, Government of Assam, 20th July 1938, “Scarcity in the Madhya Baska Mauza in the District of Kamrup and the Construction of a Dong in that Mauza”, File Nos. 1169-1215, Rev.-B, June 1940, ASA.

126 From G. N. Bordoloi, Assam Assembly Congress Party to the Minister of Revenue, Government of Assam, 20th July 1938, “Scarcity in the Madhya Baska Mauza in the District of Kamrup and the Construction of a Dong in that Mauza”, File Nos. 1169-1215, Rev.-B, June 1940, ASA.
condition. He wrote, painting a grim picture of the lives of the most oppressed peasants in the region,

From about a month famine conditions, scarcity and distress are being reported from several parts of the Baska area... In the absence of a thorough enquiry and irrefutable data it would be improper and even harmful to declare famine conditions all at once. But even a casual observer cannot miss the widespread distress and want prevailing in the Baska area. People are known to be feeding on jungle roots, wild vegetables, etc. It is only a sense of honour that makes them shy to disclose the fact to any casual enquirer. It may be noted that the Kacharis and other tribal people are the worst sufferers. It would however be worthwhile to know why the people are progressively getting into the slough of want and misery. This season is usually the worst for them. Their stock of paddy generally exhausts by about May. If the early monsoon are regular they get the first harvest by about the beginning or middle of July. Usually that is their calculation. If the crop fails as it has done mostly this year also there is general scarcity. Then is the opportunity of the petty moneylenders and other traders from outside who have settled even in remote corners. For every rupee lent they now demand and realise 1½ maunds of paddy during the main harvesting season. At a modest calculation it works out at about 200% interest. A man that borrows 10 or 15 rupees this season finds himself in the heart-rending position of handing over the major portion of the paddy to the creditors immediately after harvesting. Sickness, their never-failing companion, and other ceremonials etc. take their own share. With what remains they have to meet the revenue demands. With the rains again that is the beginning of the next cultivating season starts their misery. How well can starving people cultivate their fields? We have known workers who have gone to the fields to plough, lying down on the grass due to exhaustion on account of continuous starvation. The vicious circle, however, once begun goes on and never breaks.127

Such was the opinion within the colonial official circles too. As C. B. C. Paine, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup observed, "where Kacharis and non-Kacharis are living in close proximity, the non-Kacharis will be found to have no serious lack of food, while the Kacharis are in want". However, such a status of the tribal

127 Ibid.
community was reduced to their lack of "foresight" and hence the readiness to get into large debts etc., and to their use of paddy for making beer. The district officer, apart from the granting of Rs.5000 for the construction of the dongs and a gratuitous relief of an additional Rs.500, was neither ready for remission of the land revenue nor of the sale proceeds of the tenancies. He argued,

If sales are suspended, arrears will pile up, and the ordinary machinery whereby they are written off will be stopped. This will lead to considerable confusion and to obstruction of later dues, since, with arrears pending the rayot will be less willing than ever to pay any money. My general opinion is that the situation in Patidarrang does not warrant suspension of sales at all, and that while the Kachari people in the Baskas may be suffering from a little more scarcity than usual this year, the ahu crop is now being harvested, and suspension of sales will not, in fact, give relief sufficient to compensate for the extra difficulties that it will inflict on the collecting agents and (by stopping the machinery whereby the settlement is annulled and the dues remitted) to the ryots themselves. It has been a recognised policy for a considerable time to treat the Kachari rayots as leniently and sympathetically as possible in this connexion [sic], and I would suggest that the matter may be left to the discretion of local officers in particular cases, no general orders of suspension being passed.

Higher officials also agreed that "The situation is well in hand" and the talk of famine and scarcity was the handiwork of "interested politicians whose alarm is considerably greater than that of the inhabitants whose cause they plead."

What exacerbated the precarious condition of the peasantry was indebtedness. It was a dire problem mostly faced by the lower classes of the peasantry, who

128 From C. B. C. Paine, Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, No. 4629R, 23rd August 1938, "Scarcity in the Madhya Baska Mauza in the District of Kamrup and the Construction of a Dong in that Mauza", File Nos. 1169-1215, Rev.-B, June 1940, ASA.

129 From C. B. C. Paine, Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup, to the Under Secretary, Government of Assam, Revenue Department, No. 4321R, 3rd August 1938, "Scarcity in the Madhya Baska mauza in the District of Kamrup and the Construction of a Dong in that Mauza", File Nos. 1169-1215, Rev.-B, June 1940, ASA.

130 From J. C. Higgins, Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, to the Secretary to the Revenue Department, Government of Assam, No. 856R, Gauhati, 26th August 1838, "Scarcity in the Madhya Baska Mauza in the District of Kamrup and the Construction of a Dong in that Mauza", File Nos. 1169-1215, Rev.-B, June 1940, ASA.
also had to pay land revenue at a rate which the colonial governments themselves admitted, was quite high. It was the prevailing social exploitative conditions such as this, as defined by the usurious relations between the lender and borrower, or that between the landlord and tenant, which exacerbated the impact of floods. In what can be seen as government's admission of the growing indebtedness of the peasantry in the Brahmaputra Valley, the provincial legislature enacted The Assam Debt Conciliation Act in 1936. It was a feeble effort towards addressing the "difficulties of the raiyats in view of the fact that the prices of agricultural produce has fallen while their debts remained constant." Following the provisions of a similar legislation enacted in 1933 in the Central Provinces, the Act was intended to persuade the creditors and debtors through Debt Conciliation Boards to revise the terms of the credit. It was purported to benefit both the parties, since "the honest debtor gets the advantage of having his debt reduced to a limit which in the opinion of an impartial Board he will be able to pay, while the reasonable creditor will obtain the assistance of realizing his reduced dues." While the government wished to take advantage of "general willingness to compromise" which it believed to have existed between the creditors and debtors, this effort decidedly failed to address the deep-rooted and structural causes of indebtedness among the poor and marginal peasantry. The government itself admitted when it moved to amend the above Act in 1943, that without the power to "enforce a settlement in the absence of an agreement between the parties" as in the case of the Act in Bengal, or even to summon the creditors to enforce their appearance before the Board, the entire exercise was fruitless.

From the above discussion it can be surmised that the peasants generally approached the colonial government only when other means of addressing their

---

131 "There is a large proportion of lower class Ahoms and Chutiyas (chiefly responsible for the bulk of our [land revenue] arrears) who are lazy, thriftless, and addicted to opium. The people are indebted and their condition is not good. This result is due in no way to the present assessment...the material condition of the people is largely a question of habit, in other words, that a man's condition depends upon his caste." "Assessment Report: Western Golaghat Group, Sibsagar District", Rev.-A, June 1905, Revenue Department, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA, emphasis added.


133 Ibid.
distress - be it by taking loans from the village moneylenders at exorbitant and usurious rates, or borrowing grain, seeds and seedlings from the well-off villagers - failed to yield results. The other, or more important conclusion that can be drawn, is that the floods became damaging and destructive when combined with other socio-economic factors such as poverty, lack of ownership of means of production, the quality, quantity and height of land possessed, absence of savings in cash or crops, high rates of land revenue that did not leave a comfortable level of surplus in the hands of the peasant producer, exhaustion of avenues for credit and loan, reluctance of the government to extend gratuitous relief, agricultural loans and seeds, land for rehabilitation, and revenue suspension or remission after floods. Thirdly, destructive floods hit harder and impacted more severely the villages of the poorer and marginalised tribal and oppressed-caste communities, ex-tea garden workers turned peasants, and later the immigrant peasants from East Bengal much more than those of the landowning, relatively well-off, and economically secure villages inhabited by rich or middle peasants and from dominant castes. In addition, not all but the poorer classes of peasants within a village who had no or little land and lived a hand-to-mouth existence, suffered most from the destructive floods.

But it is not surprising that the colonial government emphasised more the natural causes of a flood turning out to be damaging and destructive, and not the socio-economic factors mentioned above. When a series of destructive floods in the early decades of the twentieth century forced the government to undertake enquiries into the causes of floods in the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys, the result was generally to look into the 'Natural' or ecological causes of floods, and away from the social and economic ones afflicting the society under an exploitative colonial rule.