CHAPTER-III

THE BRITISH AND THE FLOODS: NINETEENTH CENTURY EXPERIENCE TILL 1897

The present chapter has two purposes. One is to delineate the trajectory of empire building by the British in northeast India with special reference to the making of colonial province of Assam. It will also briefly convey to the reader the way colonial administrative machinery took shape and where actually in this structure natural calamity like floods and their mitigation fit in. The other purpose is to assess the response of this colonial state to natural calamities such as floods in the nineteenth century.

The making of the British province of Assam:

The making of the colonial province of Assam was a long process stretching from the early decades of nineteenth century and continuing upto the 1870s when in 1874, it was detached from the province of Bengal and the Chief Commissionership of Assam was created. But its boundary kept on changing till the beginning of the 20th century. In 1874, the Bengali dominated districts of Sylhet and Goalpara were included within Assam which became an important cause of ethnic conflict in the days to come. In the 1890s, certain hill areas in the Lushai hills were further incorporated into it. When the Partition of Bengal was put into effect in 1905, a major chunk of eastern Bengal was added with Assam to create a new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Again, in 1911, the partition was annulled and the districts of Eastern Bengal went back to their parent province, but Sylhet continued to remain in Assam.

The British Assam was not coterminous with Ahom Assam. Ahoms became the masters of whole Brahmaputra valley as far as the river Manas in the west, only in the 17th century when, the Mughals were finally defeated in 1682. River Manas became the western most boundary of the Ahom kingdom. Beyond that river, the area, which later came to be known as the Goalpara district of British Assam, was a part of Bengal Subah.
and in 1765 with the rest of Bengal it passed into the hands of British. Goalpara became a part of the Rangpur district under Bengal administration of the English East India Company. Within a few decades however, the eastern part of the Rangpur district comprising the thanas of Goalpara, Dhubri and Karaibari along with the Garo Hills were exempted from the operation of general laws operating in the British Indian Empire and was consequently separated by the Act X of 1822 to form a new district called North East Rangpur, which since 1826 came to be known as the Goalpara district and became attached to the new administration of Assam. It was placed under a Special Civil Commissioner and David Scott was the first official to hold the charge. Goalpara became the base for further British encroachments into the Garo hills.¹

The entry of the British in the Brahmaputra and the Barak valleys was occasioned by the Burmese threat, which started to take ugly contours at the turn of the 19th century. The rich province of Bengal lay immediately to the west of these valleys and the British were in no mood to tolerate any nuisance on its frontiers, which would jeopardize their presence in Bengal. A stable frontier was a sine qua non for exploiting the resources of Bengal. Hence, the Burmese inroads in Assam were considered a big threat to imperialist ambitions of the British. The state of Manipur acted as a buffer between the Ahoms and the expanding Burmese in the late 18th century and consequently suffered most. There were sporadic attacks on Manipur and on one instance the Ahom king Rajeswar Simha and the Manipur king Jai Singh came together to expel the Burmese threat. But as the powers of both the kingdoms waned due to internal conflicts and external threats, the Burmese king Badawpaya (1782-1819) succeeded in occupying not only Manipur (1813) and Arakan but also controlling the affairs of the Ahom state. The conquest of Arakan brought the boundaries of the Burmese state close to that of Bengal, only a small river Naf separated the British districts of Chittagong from Arakan. Similarly, the occupation

of Manipur opened for the Burmese the gate to Cachar, Sylhet and the Brahmaputra valley.  

Obviously, the British could not ignore such a dreadful situation on its vulnerable frontiers. The province of Bengal in the early 19th century was surrounded on its northern frontier by the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills; and Cachar, Tipperah Hills and Lushai Hills on the east. In addition, the district of North East Rangpur lied to the west of Manas river which had been the boundary between the Ahoms and the British as has been already referred to. The British became actively engaged in repulsing the Burmese from both the valleys in the 1820s and the culmination of all these was the First Anglo- Burmese War which commenced in 1824 and ended in 1826. By the Treaty of Yandaboo, which concluded the war, the British forced the Burmese to renounce all its claims over Assam and its dependencies. David Scott, the Agent to the Governor- General of India played a vital role in repulsing the Burmese. He was also instrumental in sowing the seeds of the colonial province of Assam.

This treaty virtually made the British de facto rulers of Assam and the neighbouring regions bordering Bengal. The administrative structure of the Ahom state was in shambles. It had to be built anew and the British now earnestly devoted themselves to the task. Ironically speaking, one set of foreign masters was replaced by another set, not only more stronger and exploitative but also more subtle in its maneuverings.

Immediately, after the expulsion of the Burmese, David Scott made two alternative suggestions: first, the Brahmaputra valley should be restored to an Ahom Prince who should pay tribute and second, the area as far as Biswanath should be annexed to Bengal and the rest i.e., the upper portion of the valley should only be

restored to an Ahom prince after providing for proper arrangement for the defense of the Assam-Burma frontier. The Bengal Government after much hesitation accepted Scott's second suggestion and annexed Lower Assam upto Biswanath. Upper Assam was restored to the Ahoms in 1833 and Purandar Simha made the king. The Lower Assam by early 1830s came to be divided into the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang and Goalpara. Goalpara remained a part of Assam till 1866 when the Eastern Dooars, annexed from the Bhutan Raj was attached to it and the district as a whole incorporated into the Bengal Commissionership of Koch Behar. But this arrangement was short lived as in 1874 again it was retransferred to the newly created Chief Commissionership of Assam.

The legal position of the four districts of Lower Assam was defined by the Act II of 1835, which placed all functionaries employed in them under the control and superintendence of the Sadar Court in civil and criminal cases and of the Bengal Board of Revenue in revenue matters and further declared that the superintendence of these authorities should be exercised in conformity with instructions issued by the Bengal government.

Upper Assam was brought under direct administration of the British in 1838 when its ruler, the last Ahom king Purandar Simha was deposed and pensioned off. His territories were formed into two districts viz., Sibsagar, which included the tract south of the old course of the Brahmaputra and Lakhimpur, the northern part of the same river.

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5 *Ibid*, p. 35


7 *Ibid*, p. 293
The provisions of the Act II of 1835 were extended to these districts consequently. Moreover, in 1837, a set of rules, known as the Assam Code, was also drawn up for the regulation of procedure in civil and criminal cases. However, no specific guidelines were issued for the conduct of revenue business, but the local officers were directed to conform as nearly as circumstances would permit to the provisions of the Bengal Regulations. Thus, by the end of 1830s, rudimentary administrative framework was put into place by the British to govern the newly acquired territories in the Brahmaputra valley. But, it should be noted that they were still new into Assam and ignorant of local conditions. Their lack of knowledge regarding soil conditions, productivity of land and revenue administration was very apparent. 1830s and 1840s were a period of investigation into the natural world and social life of the people of this region by the British officials. A number of monographs came out during this time which tried to make sense of the New World i.e., Assam.

On the other hand, Cachar was annexed to the British territories in 1832 when its last ruler, Govinda Chandra was assassinated without leaving any heir. On the annexation of Cachar, it was formed into a district under a Superintendant, who was placed under the Commissioner of Assam, with its headquarters at Silchar. In 1836, it was transferred to the Dacca Division and the title of the officer in charge was subsequently changed to Deputy Commissioner. The provisions of the Act V of 1835 placed this district in civil and criminal matters under the jurisdiction of the High Court of Bengal and for revenue matters under the Bengal Board of Revenue. The hilly portion of Cachar was however, formally annexed to the British dominions only in 1854. The British lust for new lands, for reasons economic and strategic, ultimately led to the virtual extinction of all native states and Chiefdoms in the north eastern frontier of Bengal. Except for the states of Hill

8 Ibid, p.284
9 Ibid, p.290
10 Ibid, p.295
Tipperah and Manipur, the rest of the areas adjoining Brahmaputra and Surma-Barak valleys, whether hills or plains, were one by one annexed to the commissionership of Assam, by either deceit or force.

Administering such a huge province as an ‘appendage of Bengal’ became problematic in due course of time. Discussion for the separation of Assam from Bengal started gaining currency since the 1860s. The British officials both at India and at Great Britain were in favour of creating a separate province of Assam. The result was the formation of a Chief Commissionership of Assam in February 1874, which included the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Khasi & Jaintia Hills, Naga Hills, Garo Hills, Cachar and Goalpara. Further, on September 12, 1874, Sylhet was attached to the Assam administration. Col. R.H. Keatinge was appointed the first Chief Commissioner.\textsuperscript{11}

However, the political boundary of Assam along with its administrative status kept on fluctuating. In 1898, South Lushai Hills were transferred to Assam. A major change occurred in 1905, when the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam came up with its headquarters at Dacca. It was placed under a Lieutenant Governor who was to be assisted by a Legislative Council. The new province included the Chittagong, Dacca and Rajshahi divisions of Bengal, the district of Malda, the state of Hill Tipperah and the Chief Commissionership of Assam.\textsuperscript{12} Administrative convenience was put up as a justification for the creation of this new province. Although, the popular perception in Bengal was different. This measure was considered an imperialist ploy to divide and rule the Bengalis, the most vocal of the anti-British agitators.

But, this experiment proved short lived as well. In 1912, Assam was restored to its earlier status of Chief Commissionership. It was raised to the status of a Governor’s

\textsuperscript{11} M.L. Bose, \textit{op. cit.}, pp.28-29

\textsuperscript{12} K.K. Bhattacharjee, \textit{op. cit.}, p.117
province in 1921 and when the British left India in 1947, Assam was one of the seven Governor’s provinces of the British empire in India with full fledged legislative bodies to conduct its own affairs.\textsuperscript{13}

It is pertinent to mention here that when the Chief Commissionership of Assam was created, it was laid down that the system of administration would be simple and inexpensive. Further, it was stated that the Secretariat would not have the full complement of departments and staff as normally a Chief Commissionership would be entitled to.\textsuperscript{14} The Deputy Commissioners were placed in charge of the districts who were to administer their respective districts with minimal secretarial staff. It is obvious that the British wanted to keep an inexpensive administrative machinery in Assam to maximize its financial gain. Still, two major administrative innovations happened thereafter. \textit{First}, in 1880-81, a separate Commissionership of Assam Valley districts was established whose responsibility was to guide the activities of Deputy Commissioners of the said districts and \textit{secondly}, in 1905 a second commissionership was created for the Surma Valley and Hill Districts Division.\textsuperscript{15} Despite the fact that there was continuous increase in the number of departments in provincial colonial administration, no specific officer or branch was established to deal with floods. The provincial administrative paraphernalia as a whole negotiated floods as and when necessary. The revenue branch, however, was more concerned about the causes and the effects of floods than other departments, since in the colonial official circles, floods were considered chiefly as a hindrance to revenue collection.

If we look at the history of empire building by the British in north-east India, it becomes clear that from a slow hesitant start in the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century, it gained

\textsuperscript{13} M.L.Bose, \textit{op.cit.}, p.34

\textsuperscript{14} K.K.Bhattacharjee, \textit{op.cit.}, p.149

\textsuperscript{15} K.K.Bhattacharjee, \textit{op.cit.}, p.162
momentum as the years rolled on. The British, at first, were not sure of the economic potentiality of this region. The security concern over the frontiers of Bengal was the chief motive, which led them to interfere in Assam. But, soon, the discovery of tea and mineral resources such as coal and petroleum changed their whole perception regarding Assam. Realization also dawned onto them that the presence of large quantity of uncultivated wastelands was actually a blank cheque, which could be encashed with any amount it desired. The only challenge was to bring these lands under cultivation and to build an efficient system of road and railway network to backup this resource extraction. A vigorous drive to implement these ideals thus ensued. Favourable wasteland settlement rules to attract the planters and other energetic British entrepreneurs as well as the Assamese were framed to not only open tea gardens but also to extend general cultivation. Railway and road construction received a tremendous boost in the second half of the 19th century. At the same time, land revenue demands of the state increased manifold particularly from the 1860s to 1890s to finance this infrastructure building, subjugating the peasants to further oppression. Not just land revenue, other taxes were also imposed. The colonial machinery of revenue extraction thus evolved, was unsympathetic and unconcerned about the actual plight of the people. On the contrary, the Assamese were blamed to be ‘indolent’ and lackadaisical in their lifestyle and held responsible for poor state of economy in the region. The higher taxes were considered incentives to break their moribund nature. Absolute strictness was shown in collecting revenue even when there were legitimate reasons for the delay or non-payment of revenue such as natural calamities like floods, which destroyed crops almost annually. Throughout the nineteenth century and even after, such perception determined how colonial state in Assam negotiated floods.

The floods and the British in the Surma-Barak Valley:

The British became masters of the Bengal Subah in 1765 when they received Dewani from the Mughal emperor Shah Alam. Sylhet, as a consequence, came under their authority and was placed under the Dacca division for administrative purposes. The
initial years of British rule were not happy for the Bengalis. Within couple of decades, Bengal witnessed several unprecedented natural and man-made calamities, some of which were the creations of East India Company itself. It was indeed a terrible time for the residents of Bengal as not just floods but a famine of epic proportions visited them in 1770 killing one-third of the population of the province. Sylhet was more troubled by floods, which came in a rush one after another. B.C. Allen, the editor of official district gazetteers of Assam, writing after more than hundred years, noted this fact when he said, ‘towards the latter end of the eighteenth century the district suffered from a succession of heavy floods, which,....., produced effects of the most appalling character.’

Let us look into some of the floods of late eighteenth century in Sylhet below, which the British had to negotiate.

It seems the first significant flood, which really troubled the East India Company occurred in 1779. The floods were caused by extra ordinary rainfall. The rains commenced on 24th March and continued without intermission till 14th April. This was followed by an ‘infectious disorder’ among the cattle, which had reduced the farmers to utmost distress. Robert Lindsay, the Resident of Sylhet, feared that in the ensuing season of agricultural activity, the effects would be felt more severely ‘as in many of the pergunahs there actually (did) not remain cattle sufficient to cultivate the lands’. He also doubted whether revenue collections could be realized in full in such a distressing situation.

Already earlier, he had informed the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca that the baisakh or boro crop was entirely destroyed in the zamindaries of ‘Betungal, Jelsookah, Banyachung, Betal, Luckoy, Silberris, Autgong, Onchail and Rendeegah’ and they were no longer in a position to pay the revenue. Under such circumstances, he

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16 B.C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteers, Vol-II, Sylhet, Calcutta, 1905, p.46

requested the authority to partially remit revenue demand of the government. Moreover, the price of grain had increased by fifty percent within a short time, which had added to the distress level of people.\textsuperscript{18} In the meantime, however, good weather followed for almost twenty days, during which time the farmers had planted the high lands. But, it was again wasted by a second wave of flood.\textsuperscript{19} Despite such unfavourable circumstances, Lindsay was successful in realizing considerable portion of revenue,\textsuperscript{20} which was obviously, the chief concern of the East India Company rather than providing relief measures.

The years 1780 and 1781 saw, however, such bountiful crops of rice that even 'granaries could not contain it', wrote Lindsay in his autobiography. This time it was the problem of plenty as overproduction greatly depreciated the price of rice in the market. The peasants were unable to recover even the cost of production forcing them to default in their rent payment. Because of which, the Company government allowed the suspension of revenue for a certain period.\textsuperscript{21} But, the situation changed all of a sudden when the district was visited by a disastrous flood. Lindsay’s biography contains a graphic description of this flood, which is reproduced below:

'no sooner was this indulgence granted (suspension of revenue) than one of those dreadful inundations took place to which the country is subject, which in a few weeks involved the whole country in general calamity. The river, from being very low, rose thirty feet perpendicular, overflowing its banks and sweeping everything before it. A more dreadful scene could not be imagined; nor could relief be given to the numerous objects who were seen perishing in the torrent, --- the cattle and wild animals of every description were observed indiscriminately floating down the stream. The granaries upon the banks, filled

\textsuperscript{18} Letter of Robert Lindsay to J. Shakespeare dated 8-4-1779 in \textit{ibid}, p.61

\textsuperscript{19} Letter of Robert Lindsay to J. Shakespeare dated 29-6-1779 in \textit{ibid}, pp.64-65

\textsuperscript{20} Letter of Robert Lindsay to J. Shakespeare dated 8-4-1779 in \textit{ibid}, p.61

with the late superabundant harvest, were all swept into the flood, ---- and thus from a
general plenty we were in the course of ten days reduced to a state of famine.\textsuperscript{22}

Under the changed circumstances, Lindsay as Collector of the district dispatched express
boats in every direction to bring back the grain, which was sent from the province some
time before. But, his attempt was only partially successful and both the people and the
authorities faced a grim situation in front of them. Meanwhile, the Dacca Council
discretely investigated the actual state of affairs in the district, as it appeared to them very
perplexing as to how a district experiencing over production of grain, suddenly due to
floods, became food deficit within a short span of time. The findings corroborated the
views of Lindsay only. The intensity of this flood was so much that according to Lindsay
nearly one-third of the population perished and a famine like situation arose once the
flood waters receded, despite the assistance provided by the Dacca Council.\textsuperscript{23}

In 1784, another flood of enormous proportion again visited the district. In the
month of June, there was continuous rain for eighteen days starting from 7\textsuperscript{th}
June. The
water levels rose to an extra ordinary height, which was unprecedented in the living
memory of the oldest men of the district. The town of Sylhet, which stood on one of the
highest sites in the whole district, was overflowed and most of the houses became
uninhabited. The countryside was also laid under water as the rivers including Surma had
over topped and broken its banks, carrying everything before it. Human beings and cattle
died alike just like the previous years and both \textsl{boro} and \textsl{aus} crops were totally lost.
Grains stored in \textsl{golahs} (godowns) were also washed away causing the prices to rise. The
situation was so bad, that for three days in June, the town of Sylhet did not receive any
supply of rice and other agricultural products from the neighbouring villages.\textsuperscript{24} The large

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. (italic ours)

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} Letter of W. Hyndman to David Anderson dated 25-6-1784 in W. Firminger (ed.), \textsl{op. cit.}, pp.184-185
body of water that came down in a torrent from the Jaintia and the Cachar hills in the
course of a night, also raised the water level in the district and soon, not just the areas
contiguous to the hills which were flooded but the district as a whole was engulfed in the
distress and took the appearance of a sea.\textsuperscript{25} In the midst of which, at few higher spots,
usually 15 feet above the flood plains, the 'inhabitants are obliged to take shelter from the
waves and inclemency of weather, by erecting stages, for a temporary habitation'.\textsuperscript{26}
When finally the floodwaters subsided, the effects became more visible. It was estimated
by Lindsay that not less than two-thirds of the cattle in the district of Sylhet had either
starved to death or swept away by floods. Further, almost one-fourth of the inhabitants
died for want of subsistence and another one-fourth had deserted the district. There was
hardly any sign of cultivation. By March, 1785, it was reported by him to the Committee
of Revenue that the balance of revenue in the district was a whopping 2, 63,000 cawns,
about half of the total revenue demand.\textsuperscript{27}

W. Hyndman, who was the Acting Collector of Sylhet, in the absence of Lindsay,
in order to provide relief to the distressed, decided to prohibit the exportation of grain
from the district\textsuperscript{28} but the Committee of Revenue at Fort William decided against it and
asked Hyndman to 'take off the prohibition'.\textsuperscript{29} When Lindsay returned to Sylhet in the
beginning of September, he informed the higher authorities at Calcutta that it would be
virtually impossible to realize the whole revenue in the present year in the face of such a
disaster.\textsuperscript{30} It was further informed by him that zamindars of the district had 'formed a

\textsuperscript{25} Letter of W. Hyndman to David Anderson dated 10-7-1784 in \textit{ibid}, pp.185-186

\textsuperscript{26} Letter of R. Lindsay to Warren Hastings dated 2-9-1784 in \textit{ibid}, p.189.

\textsuperscript{27} Letter of R. Lindsay to W. Cowper dated 13-3-1785 in \textit{ibid}, p.207.

\textsuperscript{28} Letter of W. Hyndman to David Anderson dated 10-7-1784 in \textit{ibid}, pp.185-186

\textsuperscript{29} Letter of Samuel Charters & J. Evelyn to W. Hyndman dated 5-7-1784 in \textit{ibid}, p.186

\textsuperscript{30} Letter of R. Lindsay to D. Anderson dated 3-9-1784 in \textit{ibid}, pp. 189-190
general resolution of withholding the rent'. Any use of force on them, he added, would be of no use as it was physically impossible to collect the revenue. The provision of selling their lands was also considered by him to be impractical as there might not be any purchasers.\textsuperscript{31} The Committee of Revenue advised Lindsay to demand as much revenue as the peasants were able to pay and to encourage the people to renew cultivation as soon as the waters subsided.\textsuperscript{32}

Meanwhile, Lindsay was pressed with other problems. There was a two hundred percent increase in the price of grains by September, 1784. Moreover, ryots who had earlier left the district to avoid floods, were now unwilling to return despite promises of forfeiting one half of revenue demand, as many of them had settled in the neighbouring districts where by the established custom they were not required to pay any rent on the grains they would cultivate for the first twelve months. The revenue realization virtually came to a standstill and in some paraganas like Beejoorah, suffering greatly from floods and depopulation, there were arrears of revenue for ten months.\textsuperscript{33}

The situation seemed to have improved by October, 1784. But, a new problem now loomed large on the district authorities- the problem of hoarding. Because of which the prices of paddy and rice continued to be very high. The Committee of Grain at Fort William asked Lindsay to take strong steps against all those involved in the hoarding of grain.\textsuperscript{34} The government also took off duties on grain intended for Sylhet to ease the situation.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{31} Letter of R. Lindsay to D. Anderson dated 6-9-1784 in ibid, pp. 189-190
\textsuperscript{32} Letter of Samuel Charters & J. Evelyn to R. Lindsay dated 13-9-1784 in ibid, p.192
\textsuperscript{33} Letter of R. Lindsay to D. Anderson dated 28-9-1784 in ibid, pp.197-198
\textsuperscript{34} Letter of T. Graham, et al., to R. Lindsay dated 4-10-1784 in ibid, pp.200-201
\textsuperscript{35} Letter to R. Lindsay from J. Shore & J. Evelyn dated 8-11-1784 in ibid, p.200
The district authorities also proposed to repair breaches on the embankments on the rivers Surma, Manu and Kushiara. The cost of which was estimated to be around rupees six thousand to eight thousand. According to Lindsay, the breaking of these embankments was largely responsible for such acute material damage to the district. He recommended not only the renovation of embankments in Sylhet but also in the neighbouring Dacca region, as the latter also faced the same problem. He also wanted the zamindars of the district to ‘contribute towards the expense themselves’\(^{36}\) The Committee of Revenue approved of the proposal but added that ‘as little expense’ should be involved in the process.\(^{37}\) But, in actuality, the cost exceeded the estimate by more than rupees two thousand as the embankments did not receive any repairs for the last fifteen years and were totally swept away in different places for many miles.\(^{38}\) In 1790, one Mr. Willes constructed a further embankment of about 100 miles along the Surma.\(^{39}\)

Despite taking steps to strengthen and build new embankments, the district of Sylhet faced more floods in 1787, 1793 and 1795. By 1814, the British government seemed to have realized that these *bunds* were of little use in controlling rivers when in spate and was accordingly allowed to fall into disrepair and by 1905, the only one maintained was a dyke along a portion of the Surma river. Allen had given the reasons as to why such a decision was taken by the authorities. One was the fact that annual rainfall was extremely heavy. In addition, general level of the district was so low and the whole drainage system was of such a complicated character that it was found to be extremely difficult to control the action of rivers. It became clear to the British that *nullahs*, embankments, which protected one village, would cause damage to another, and hence their hydraulic interventions became very cautious in the district since the early 19\(^{th}\)

\(^{36}\) Letter of R. Lindsay to D. Anderson dated 12-12-1784 in *ibid*, p.203.

\(^{37}\) Letter of D. Anderson & J. Shore to R. Lindsay dated 30-12-1784 in *ibid*, p.204

\(^{38}\) Letter of R. Lindsay to W. Cowper dated april,1785 in *ibid*, p.208

\(^{39}\) B.C. Allen, *op.cit.*, p.49
They virtually took their hands off in constructing or renovating embankments in the Sylhet district, which might hamper the natural drainage system. The zamindars however, were not happy with this policy of withdrawal adopted by the British as they felt the safety of their crops depended upon the maintenance of these bunds. The aggrieved zamindars were particularly concerned about the payment of revenue to the East India Company in times of such a crisis as under the regulations of Permanent Settlement, and Sylhet was a permanently settled district, there was no provision of any relaxation in revenue collection by the government. Even then, there was no change in British attitude. A.J.M. Mills, who wrote a report on the district of Sylhet in 1853, reiterated the point that artificial protection was likely to cause more harm than good. He went on to say that by leaving embankments alone, the rivers were actually allowed to take their natural course, which in turn helped the spread of silt over the whole district, thereby increasing fertility of the soil. He was vehemently opposed to the construction of canals, irrigation works or other protective measures against floods. 

Mills was voicing his concerns at a time when in 1850-51, the district of Sylhet faced an inundation which lasted for an unusually long period and there were fresh proposals by the government to construct an embankment across the mouth of the Khazanchi’s Khal, a tributary of the river Surma. It was pointed out that ill-regulated water supply passing through the above Khal had caused the floods. Ultimately, Mill’s opinion prevailed and there was hardly any embankment building activity to be seen in Sylhet for the next fifty years or so.

The British policy in the Sylhet district was in stark contrast to what was followed in the Orissa delta- another flood prone region. Here, as Rohan D’Douza points out, the colonial state became more pro-active in flood protection measures by the mid 19th century. They virtually took their hands off in constructing or renovating embankments in the Sylhet district, which might hamper the natural drainage system. The zamindars however, were not happy with this policy of withdrawal adopted by the British as they felt the safety of their crops depended upon the maintenance of these bunds. The aggrieved zamindars were particularly concerned about the payment of revenue to the East India Company in times of such a crisis as under the regulations of Permanent Settlement, and Sylhet was a permanently settled district, there was no provision of any relaxation in revenue collection by the government. Even then, there was no change in British attitude. A.J.M. Mills, who wrote a report on the district of Sylhet in 1853, reiterated the point that artificial protection was likely to cause more harm than good. He went on to say that by leaving embankments alone, the rivers were actually allowed to take their natural course, which in turn helped the spread of silt over the whole district, thereby increasing fertility of the soil. He was vehemently opposed to the construction of canals, irrigation works or other protective measures against floods.  

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The British policy in the Sylhet district was in stark contrast to what was followed in the Orissa delta- another flood prone region. Here, as Rohan D’Douza points out, the colonial state became more pro-active in flood protection measures by the mid 19th century. They virtually took their hands off in constructing or renovating embankments in the Sylhet district, which might hamper the natural drainage system. The zamindars however, were not happy with this policy of withdrawal adopted by the British as they felt the safety of their crops depended upon the maintenance of these bunds. The aggrieved zamindars were particularly concerned about the payment of revenue to the East India Company in times of such a crisis as under the regulations of Permanent Settlement, and Sylhet was a permanently settled district, there was no provision of any relaxation in revenue collection by the government. Even then, there was no change in British attitude. A.J.M. Mills, who wrote a report on the district of Sylhet in 1853, reiterated the point that artificial protection was likely to cause more harm than good. He went on to say that by leaving embankments alone, the rivers were actually allowed to take their natural course, which in turn helped the spread of silt over the whole district, thereby increasing fertility of the soil. He was vehemently opposed to the construction of canals, irrigation works or other protective measures against floods.
century. The Orissa Canal Scheme of 1863 by Arthur Cotton was adopted by the government to complement the previous embankment policy. It becomes difficult for us to reconcile these two opposing tendencies. One probable explanation may be that hydraulic investments in Orissa were hoped to be more remunerative in terms of revenue as the province frequently suffered from droughts whereas in Sylhet, there was always sufficient rainfall and hence investments in hydraulic measures would not offer any special economic advantage.

The district of Sylhet, particularly its southern and south western portions suffered from another round of continuous flooding in the late 1870s. The rainfall in the district was unusually higher than any other district of Assam from 1876-77 to 1880-81 as can be seen from the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sylhet</th>
<th>Cachar</th>
<th>Goalpara</th>
<th>Kamrup</th>
<th>Darrang</th>
<th>Nowgong</th>
<th>Sibsagar</th>
<th>Lakhimpur</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1876-77</td>
<td>151.14</td>
<td>133.91</td>
<td>91.03</td>
<td>71.33</td>
<td>64.34</td>
<td>65.15</td>
<td>72.60</td>
<td>106.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1877-78</td>
<td>155.33</td>
<td>120.55</td>
<td>78.47</td>
<td>54.10</td>
<td>68.10</td>
<td>53.83</td>
<td>73.58</td>
<td>109.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1878-79</td>
<td>165.78</td>
<td>119.76</td>
<td>141.16</td>
<td>62.59</td>
<td>77.85</td>
<td>71.18</td>
<td>68.65</td>
<td>110.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1879-80</td>
<td>185.81</td>
<td>127.78</td>
<td>118.97</td>
<td>86.05</td>
<td>102.68</td>
<td>99.26</td>
<td>75.47</td>
<td>123.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880-81</td>
<td>153.40</td>
<td>98.83</td>
<td>72.66</td>
<td>65.88</td>
<td>72.37</td>
<td>64.61</td>
<td>65.46</td>
<td>100.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average of five years</td>
<td>162.29</td>
<td>120.17</td>
<td>100.46</td>
<td>67.99</td>
<td>77.07</td>
<td>70.81</td>
<td>71.15</td>
<td>110.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Report on the Administration of the Land Revenue in Assam, 1880-81, p.1)

In 1877, the Manu and the Khowai rivers inundated southern portions of the district and damaged sali crops. It happened due to unseasonal rainfall in the month of September. Nevertheless, as the aus crop was abundant no distress was felt. But, the

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42 For details see Rohan D'Souza, Drowned and Dammed: Colonial Capitalism and Flood Control in Eastern India, New Delhi: Oxford, 2006
prices of grain remained high due to regular exportation of crops from the district to the famine affected regions of southern and western India.\textsuperscript{43} Floods again partially injured crops in the next year but the overall impact was negligible. Infact, 1878 was a year of ample crops, high prices and great profit to the cultivators.\textsuperscript{44} However, heavy floods again visited the district in 1880 when there was exceptionally heavy rainfall in March. The total rainfall during the month was 23.67 inches as against 1.65 inches at the same time of the previous year. It was reported that such heavy rains and floods, at this time of the year, were not witnessed since 1787. Boro crop suffered as a result and led to a rise in the prices of food grains.\textsuperscript{45} Despite the fact that Sylhet witnessed unprecedented floods for three consecutive years, land revenue demand showed no signs of decline. Rather, it kept on increasing. For instance, from Rs. 5, 27,175 in 1878-79, it increased to Rs. 6, 10,089 in the next financial year representing an increase of more than 15% in the land revenue demand of the colonial state. Neither was any remission of rent allowed for flood-affected people during these years as it was a permanently settled district.\textsuperscript{46}

Thus, agriculture in Sylhet always had to confront floods. B.C. Allen, while commenting on these floods in 1905 made a very pertinent point. According to him, these floods ‘were of so regular and general a character that they are treated by the husbandman as part of the established course of nature’. The population of Sylhet in the late 18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries was also low enough to enable ryots to move from one place to another in search of better facilities and agricultural lands in times of largescale inundations. We also learn from his writing that he considered general prosperity of the district, towards the end of 19\textsuperscript{th} century, good enough to withstand these recurrent

\textsuperscript{43} Assam Administrative Report (henceforth AAR) for 1877-1878, p.62; Land Revenue Administration Report of Assam (henceforth LRAR) for 1877-78, p.1

\textsuperscript{44} AAR of 1878-79, p.79; LRAR of 1878-79, p.1

\textsuperscript{45} LRAR of 1879-80, pp.1-2

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, p.3
visitations of natural calamities. The absence of official relief measures during the high floods of 1883, 1885, 1893 and 1895 were taken by him as proofs of people being well off and not government apathy towards welfare measures. Obviously, Allen had tea industry and railways in mind, opened in the late 1850s and 1890s respectively, when he termed Sylhet as a prosperous district. The population of Sylhet also began to show an upward trend since the 1870s to the great satisfaction of the British because of largescale immigration of coolies to work in the tea gardens.

As with the district of Sylhet, so also with the district of Cachar, the first important flood, which the British encountered, happened immediately after their occupation of the province in the early 1830s. The flood of 1834 was referred to in the official documents as an ‘extra –ordinary inundation, the like of which, has not occurred here within the living memory of men.’ A heavy rainfall occurred on 27th and 28th June and by 29th the river Barak began to overflow its banks and for the next three days an area of five to six miles on either sides of the river Barak remained submerged destroying all standing crops and the grains stored in the godowns. Fisher, the Superintendent of Cachar, informed that the price of rice had nearly doubled. Although there was no loss of life, much cattle and property was lost. Rs. One thousand was spent in relief measures. Rice and paddy were also procured from Sylhet for distribution among the affected people. Floods again visited Cachar in 1836 and 1837. Though, their effects were less


48 Letter of T. Fisher, Superintendent of Cachar to the Commissioner of Dacca Division dated July, 1834 in Deabrata Datta (compiler) & Sunanda Datta (editor), *Cachar District Records* (henceforth *CDR*), Vol-I, kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 2007, p.18. However, a later official document (*Revenue and Agriculture A, July 1883, nos.11-17*) mentions the year of extraordinary flood as 1833. But from the contemporary official correspondences as found in the *CDR* it becomes clear that the extraordinary flood had actually occurred in 1834.

49 Ibid.

50 Letter of J.G. Burns to the Commissioner of the 15th Division, Dacca dated 19-7-1837 in *ibid*, p.44
severe, district authorities faced a lot of inconvenience to run the administration smoothly. Burns, the next Superintendent, recommended the purchase of ‘two good and capacious boats’ which were to be kept at Silchar, the capital of the district, for administrative convenience and transport of sepoys and convicts to higher grounds in case of such devastating floods in future.51

However, Burns made other interventions that were more significant. His revenue settlement for the district of Cachar in 1838 took note of the disastrous effects of these successive floods on the agrarian economy of the region and proposed a reduction in revenue rates. The settlement was made for five years and the highest rate imposed on the cultivable land was fixed at Rs. 3-0-0 per hal as against Rs. 5-2-0 per hal in the previous settlement of Fisher. However, under this new settlement chara (garden) lands were brought under assessment at the rate of Rs. 2-8-0 per hal. Homestead and other categories of lands continued to remain rent-free. Jungle lands were also decided to be settled rent free for at least one thousand days.52 The reduction in land revenue demand was therefore intimately connected to the issue of reclamation of wastelands in the district. A lower revenue rate would be a temptation for the peasants of neighbouring districts to come to Cachar, which was a deficit district in terms of population.

For the next three decades, it appears, Cachar got reprieve from large inundations, as colonial records were silent on this matter. The next important flood, which finds mention in British records, occurred in August, 1870 that lasted for several days. A portion of the Silchar town went under water near Janigang Bazar. A part of the Silkuri and the Nagdirgram roads were also flooded. The worst affected regions were the Chatla bil area and Hailakandi and the least affected Lakhipur and Katigora. Cachar reeled under

51 Letter of J.G. Burns to the Commissioner of the 15th Division, Dacca dated 15-7-1837 in ibid, p.43

52 Report on the Revenue System of the District of Cachar, 1853 in ibid, pp.230-231; Ratna Dey, Land Revenue Administration in Cachar, 1832-1900, Kolkata: Biswabani Prakashani, 2001, pp.18-23. However, Dr. Dey does not refer to floods as an important cause behind reduced rates in Burn’s settlement.
another major flood in 1875. Two waves of flood, one in June and another in August, did considerable damage to roads, bridges and agricultural fields. The northern parts of the district and the Katigora tehsil suffered most. It was reported that the greater part of the district was covered more or less, with water excepting Lakhipur, which did not suffer at all. 53

However, the greatest flood, which the district of Cachar witnessed in the nineteenth century, occurred in 1883. The British were quick to realize that only the floods of 1834 could be compared with it. It happened because of incessant rainfall, which commenced on 1st May and continued for the next twenty days. A staggering amount of 40.96 inches of rainfall fell between 7th and 16th of May. The river Barak consequently rose by 31 feet and 4 inches in the same period. The first casualty was the town of Barkhola that was flooded by the Jatinga river on 7th May. By 14th May, most of the roads like the Silkuri Road, the Lakhipur Road, the Umabandh Road and the Massimpur Road went under water. The town of Silchar was fully flooded by 16th May. Malugram and Tarapur were also completely submerged. The fate of the Vakil Bazar and the parade ground area was no different. Communication by land was totally cut off and the whole town of Silchar had the appearance of an island, gradually decreasing in size as the waters continued to rise. About the rest of the district also, there was serious destruction of property. Most of the houses were either carried away by the torrent or made uninhabitable. A severe storm on 16th further deteriorated the situation and added to the distress of the people. However, the situation began to show signs of improvement since 19th May as the amount of rainfall gradually decreased from the night of 17th itself. It was found out that the highest flood level reached during the floods of 1883 was five to seven feet higher than that of 1834. 54

53 Revenue and Agriculture A, July 1883, Nos.11-17

54 Ibid.
The flood of 1883 was a great social leveler. Whether Europeans living in the tilas or Indians living in the raised banks or flood plains, all were equally affected. The residences of the District Superintendant of Police as well as that of the Deputy Commissioner were partially submerged by water. The whole compound and garden of the Agent to the India General Steamer Company was also flooded. New police lines built on the tilas and the military ranges also could not escape the flood waters. The people in their turn fled and took refuge in these tilas, which were the only high grounds above floodwaters. Humans and cattle shared the same place and saved themselves from rising waters. For instance, at the Dudpatil tila, two hundred humans and sixteen hundred cattle coexisted. The tilas in the Barail range were also similarly crowded. Villagers also attempted to save paddy by placing it on the machans or in houses at relatively higher places. But, the storm of 16th blew the roofs of many houses and the continuous rain spoiled the rest of the paddy. Fortunately, however, there was no crop on the ground at the time except sugarcane. In spite of this grim situation, officials hoped for a bumper harvest of murali and dumahi rice seeds, which would be sown in June and July in the fields laden with fertilizing silt brought about by this flood.55

The official figure for death as reported by the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar Mr. J. Knox Wight was only twenty-two. The death of buffaloes and cattle was also not that significant as reported by Mr. Wight. According to him, mortality rate was less because of the enormous area covered by floods did not permit the bils to rise very suddenly allowing people enough time to save themselves. Moreover, numerous tilas and tea gardens, a new feature of Cachar’s landscape since the late 1850s, offered refuge to the distressed people. Had it not been for these, he opined, the mortality rate would have been much higher.56

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55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.
But, tea gardens themselves faced a unique problem. As the floods virtually destroyed all the stocks of food grains in the district, they faced imminent starvation. The *coolies* at the tea gardens kept no stock of food and were totally dependent on the weekly bazaars for their supplies. However, no bazaar could be held for many days due to floods. The Deputy Commissioner was constantly receiving appeals of help from the tea planters of Mainadhar, Dubhidhar, Narayandhar, Alni, Pathicherra, Silkuri, Sonai and other tea gardens. He was left with no alternative but to arrange for supplies from the neighbouring districts of Sylhet and Dacca. Lack of steamers and launches was another obstacle in the carrying and distribution of food to the affected people in the gardens and villages. The situation was so pathetic that people were eating wet paddy in the absence of food crops. It was also feared that an epidemic might soon break out in the district.57

The Deputy Commissioner appealed to the higher authorities in Shillong for permission to charter a steamer and also to Dacca and Sylhet for supply of food grains. But, both Dacca and Sylhet refused to send food grains in the teeth of popular objection which did not favour export of rice to other districts just before the commencement of rainy season. Deprived of the help, Wight turned his attention to Calcutta. He cabled to Messrs. Octavius Steel & Co., who had tea gardens in the district to sent up a steamer and supplies. The supplies were chiefly meant for the eighty thousand *coolies* at the tea gardens. Agents of other tea companies were also asked to arrange for food grains for their respective gardens. The problem was aggravated further as *mahajans* in the district were also busy saving their families rather than providing grains to others. Shortage of food crops forced many tea gardens to supply their coolies with only half rations to feed themselves. Many European managers went by themselves to villages to beg, borrow or buy rice for their coolies. The steamers also faced problem to reach Silchar quickly in the face of strong current. Fortunately, however, the launch Dove arrived at Silchar on 18th May from Sylhet. The current was so strong that the launch took four days to cover a small distance of 105 miles. The supplies, brought by it, were immediately dispatched to

the affected tea gardens. Between 23rd and 26th May, four more steamers arrived with supplies. They together brought about 7500 mounds of rice, which were again immediately dispatched to the gardens and mahajans for supply to the villages.58

About the distress of general population in the villages, however, the district authorities did not appear to be too concerned. As a matter of fact, the Deputy Commissioner reported to the Chief Commissioner that ‘the villagers needed no immediate help’. He went on to say that possessions of the people in this district were exclusively money and jewellery, cattle and paddy. And, of these, only the last was lost. At the same time, all the materials for building houses were easily available “at one’s doors” and houses could be built at a nominal cost by “few days’ labour on the part of the person concerned.” Moreover, with waters receding by the end of May and ryots returning to their homes, he hoped for the cultivation to commence soon. In his report, he further informed that in the less affected parts of the district, about ten annas of the stocks of grain in hand were saved in more or less good condition. Nevertheless, rice was distributed to few who actually needed it and in few instances, money was also loaned to those who did not have any previous credit and who were in a position to repay the loan in three to six months. The total amount given as loan was only Rs. 586. At the height of flood, 77 maunds and 23 seers of rice, and 4 maunds and 20 seers of dal and salt each, were distributed to the extremely needy involving a total cost of around Rs 263. Subsequently, another 107 maunds and 30 seers of rice were supplied to the distressed. In the end, the total amount involved in providing supplies and loan was Rs. 1280/- only. This amount was also promised to be recovered soon from the people. Be that as it may, relief to the tea garden coolies was considered more important by the colonial officials and the sincerity with which it was done showed how the colonial economy of Cachar depended on the services of these coolies in the plantations, mostly owned by the British companies. It may be noted that the Chief Commissioner while acknowledging the report

58 Ibid.
of the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar regarding floods further desired that he should report 'whether the tea interests of the district have suffered any serious loss.'

The damage done to roads and bridges was considerable too. The total estimated cost of damage in Sadar and Hailakandi subdivision was Rs. Nine thousand one hundred and forty five. Important roads that suffered damages were Barkhola Road, Katigora Road, Tarapur Road, Nimotha Road, Chattahawer Road, Manipur Road, East Hailakandi Road, Jahalnachera Road, Hailakando Road etc.

Although, the floods of 1883 were unprecedented in the annals of Cachar district, the saving grace was that it did not happen in July or August, which would have had much more devastating impact on the economy and lives of the people. It was the pre-monsoon showers of May, which caused the floods and sali crops, were still not sown.

In 1893, again, Cachar faced three waves of consecutive floods from June to August, which were considered by the British to be 'much heavier than any year since 1883.' But still the Deputy Commissioner did not find it 'necessary to make advances or start relief work'. He was of the opinion that villagers who had suffered due to failure of the harvest would find 'no difficulty in earning wages more than sufficient to support them'. The ample opportunities of work in the tea gardens and railway constructions in the district were hoped to be availed by the people to minimize their financial loss suffered due to floods. It is to be noted here that the construction of railway lines in Cachar commenced in right earnest only in 1892 with the formation of the Assam-Bengal Company. The section between Chittagong and Badarpur was completed by 1896 and within couple of years, it was extended to Silchar. While railways played a vital role

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Revenue B, January, 1894, nos. 95-98
in integrating isolated Cachar to world economy and served flourishing tea and strategic interests, its construction also provided a new source of employment to the inhabitants of the district in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The only question for the colonial state was to see if people would 'lower their dignity sufficiently to accept them'\textsuperscript{62} In any case, since 1893, the district faced no major threat of flood for almost two decades, which could require serious attention of the colonial state.

**The floods and the British in the Brahmaputra Valley:**

After the expulsion of the Burmese, the British inherited the great fertile valley of the Brahmaputra. This was a period when they were not fully aware of the resources and challenges of this newly conquered territory. The initial response of the British was to assess the impact of the Burmese and civil wars on the economy of Assam.

Francis Jenkins who was appointed the Commissioner and Agent to the Governor-General in Assam on 23\textsuperscript{rd} January, 1834 pointed out that because of the civil wars in Assam from 1780 to 1826, people had almost given up cultivation and lived on wild fruits. He went to record that famine and pestilence carried off thousands of people who could escape the sword and captivity.\textsuperscript{63} ‘All men of rank, the heads of the great Ahom and priestly families, had retired to one district, Gowalpara, having, with little exception, lost the whole of their property. With the nobility and gentry retired a vast body of the lower classes...’\textsuperscript{64} According to Anandaram Dhekiel Phukon, the Burmese massacred more than one-half of the population of Assam ‘which had already been

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
thinned by intestine commotions and repeated civil wars'. Therefore, for Anandaram, the 'British Supremacy' that was 'proclaimed' in the province of Assam was 'hailed' by every Assamese.

It is however, doubtful, how much the British hailed their entry into Assam. Economic viability of Assam was not yet ascertained. Their initial problem was to organize and assess the revenue system of Assam so that their earnings could be maximized and stay prolonged. They could immediately see that the whole province was not only under-populated but there were also large quantities of land lying waste. The settlement of wastelands was of paramount importance to them as more land under cultivation meant more revenue. Hence, proposals for wasteland settlement began to be formulated in the late 1820s itself. The discovery of tea in the next decade and the decision to commercially exploit it helped the cause of the British to settle many wastelands with the British entrepreneurs.

Nevertheless, one of the serious difficulties, which the government faced in its attempt to establish a well-regulated revenue system in the mid nineteenth century were the annual floods, which 'led to loss of crops, and compelled the ryots to migrate from one place to another.' At the same time, however, they also found out that common people who had to negotiate floods almost every rainy season, never considered it to be a problem and always appeared to be 'contented and happy'. Excessive rains, regular inundations and happiness of the people in rainy season in the Assam valley were the three noteworthy features noted early by the British. John M'Cosh, an Assistant Surgeon to Assam wrote in 1837, a valuable and picturesque account of all these features, which is reproduced below:

65 Ibid, Appendix-J: Observations on the Administration of the Province of Assam by Baboo Anandaram Dakeal Phookun, p.93
66 Bhupendra Narayan Choudhury, An Economic History of Assam(1845-58), Gauhati: Author,1959, p.6
The rains set in very early in Assam, commencing in the beginning of April; nor are they sooner over on that account but continue till the middle of October. Thus prolonging the rainy season to half the year. This long continuance of the rains, together with the heavy fog, renders the atmosphere extremely damp and salt, saltpetre and sugar melt and become liquid.

The Brahmaputra begins to rise in April: about the 1st July, it is swollen to its full height and the whole country is an inland sea; the average rise of the river being about 30 feet...The rainy season may be called the carnival of Assam; all the labours of the field are suspended; everyone seems happy and contented; and lives luxuriously upon haunches of venison, or steaks of the hog or the buffaloe....

But, this romanticism did not last long. English authors such as William Robinson, writing in the early 1840s gave a contrasting picture of these floods and pointed out, "the agriculture of Assam seems to suffer most from the imperfection of drainage. Those waters which traverse the valley, and are the chief sources of its fertility, often overspread the country in a manner extremely destructive." The latter perception ultimately gained ground and informed official policy making till the end of colonial rule. Such destructive floods happened very regularly in the Brahmaputra valley throughout the nineteenth century. For example, in 1845, the whole of upper Assam was visited "by, an unnatural and ... unprecedented inundation."

It may be noted here that in upper Assam, particularly in the Sibsagar district, nearly every stream was anciently bunded. These bunds or flood embankments in upper Assam not only protected the fertile lands from periodical inundations but also acted as highways of the country, the details of which was provided in the previous chapter. But, because of political chaos since the late 18th century, the maintenance of these great

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embankments were greatly neglected and according to Robinson, heavy inundations resulting from poor condition of the *bunds* had made valuable tracts of land abandoned.\(^{71}\)

In 1845, Major Mathie, the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, wrote to Jenkins that if the Bar Ali in the Sibsagar district could be repaired, floods from the Brahmaputra would be prevented and 'large tracts of excellent rice grounds will be reclaimed in places it is greatly coveted.'\(^{72}\) Accordingly, the Governor of Bengal sanctioned a sum of rupees one thousand for this purpose.\(^{73}\) It was probably one of the earliest instances of the British initiative in repairing Ahom embankments. Again, in 1847, the Bengal Government granted the sum of Rupees 3266-10-10 for the repair and construction of embankments in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.\(^{74}\)

The Darrang district suffered extensive inundation from the Nonai river from 1848 to 1850, which spoilt the 'fine' *rupit* and *aus* lands. This impelled the British in 1850 to grant a sum of rupees three hundred for the excavation of a canal to draw off the surplus waters of the Nonai river. In the same year, another grant of rupees three hundred was made for the repairing of a *bund* at Jorhat.\(^{75}\) Captain Reynolds, the Collector Darrang reported in 1851 that because of the ravages of the Brahmaputra in the district there was a perceptible decline in the quantity of land cultivated. In the same year, Captain Butler, the Collector Nowgong also reported that because of the floods there had been a gradual

\(^{71}\) *Ibid*, p.318

\(^{72}\) BRC, 26-3-1845, No.26, cited in Bhupendra Narayan Choudhury, *op.cit*, p.7

\(^{73}\) BRC, 26-3-1845, No.28, cited in Bhupendra Narayan Choudhury, *ibid*.

\(^{74}\) BRC, 7-4-1847, No.55, cited in Bhupendra Narayan Choudhury, *ibid*.

\(^{75}\) BRC, 21-8-1850, Nos.21 & 28 and BRC, 26-12-1850, No. 31 cited in Bhupendra Narayan Choudhury, *ibid* p.8
decrease in the revenue of the *chapari mahals* from Rs. 15,203-5-10 in 1844-45 to 11,623-3-2 in 1850-51.  

Such instances of floods in the mid 19th century can be multiplied but the point to be made here is that the British, in their efforts to maintain a regular supply of land revenue faced an enemy, which it could not defeat. The policy of building or repairing new or old embankments also did not prove to be very successful as the attempts were half hearted. Jenkins reported that with respect to *bunds* 'the desired benefits appear not to have been derived'. Still, they persisted in providing paltry sums for the said purpose.

The British were particularly interested in repairing embankments in the Sibsagar district. A sum of rupees two thousand was sanctioned in 1854 to repair the *bunds* on the Bhogdoi and Disang rivers in Sibsagar. Sometimes, force was also used to renovate the bunds in the district. For example, the Dehing *bund* was maintained by Major Holroyd, the in-charge of the Sibsagar district by forcing the *ryots* to renovate it in the 1850s. Another proposal was made in 1854 to appoint a scientific officer to take charge of *bunds* of upper Assam but the Bengal government did not give any importance to the idea. The same year witnessed the repair and reconstruction of not less than thirty-four embankments in Nowgong district by 127,800 *ryots* who voluntarily offered their service. Thus, not just the British authorities but also the peasants were very much interested to built embankments in the Brahmaputra valley in the mid 19th century.

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76 Bhupendra Narayan Choudhury, *ibid*, pp.8-9

77 *BRC*, 10-3-1853, No.14 cited in *ibid*, p.11

78 *BRC*, 23-2-1854, No.8 in *ibid*, p.14

79 *Revenue A, December, 1902*, nos.21-44.

80 Bhupendra Narayan Choudhury, *op.cit.*, p.14

But, this enthusiasm was not sustained after 1860s. The Assamese, particularly of the Sibsagar district, were constantly demanding the British to be more pro active in maintaining the bunds. In 1881, a survey was half-heartedly done by an Executive Engineer, but no action resulted out of his report. In 1888, the then Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, Mr. Knox Wight, wrote a note on the subject, discussing generally the system of embankments and pointed out that, owing to their disrepair, the district was losing greatly in produce and the government in revenue. Some 3, 00,000 bighas of excellent land, according to him, were lying waste, which were previously cultivated, due to the non-repairment of embankments along the rivers Dehing, Desang and Dikhu. He further pointed out that when the bunds were kept in repair, tea gardens had also come up in the region but once repairs ceased, inundation again started. Infact, one tea garden by the name of Gohani Pukri Tea garden demanded Rs. 1, 01,893 as compensation for damages done to it by the Dehing river, which was not properly repaired. Knox Wight wanted to repair this bund at an estimated cost of Rs. Six thousand to Rs. Eight thousand for he was sure that before long land revenue would double. Even the moujadar of the area concurred with his view. Knox Wight’s note obviously had the desired impact. Soon, an Executive Engineer, Mr. Bolinarayan Borrah, was deputed to study the condition and renovation of embankments in the Sibsagar district. Bolinarayan’s report of 1892 resulted in the expenditure of Rs. 1, 26,058 during eleven years from 1891-92 to 1901-1902, for the renovation of Dehing, Desang and Dikhu bunds and a part of the Dhai Ali, which helped in reclaiming a large quantity of land for cultivation.\footnote{Revenue A, December, 1902, No. 21} It may be noted here that this relatively large amount was in stark contrast to the meagre amount of approximately Rs. Twenty-five thousands that was sanctioned for the renovation of said bunds during the period 1869-70 to 1887-88.

However, the progress made in this direction was slow and incomplete as the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Sir J.B. Fuller, ‘has again had the matter under
consideration' in 1902. A committee was formed in October, 1902 with the Director, Department of Land Records and Agriculture, Assam as the President. Other official members were the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar district and Sri. B.C. Basu, Assistant to the Director of Land Records and Agriculture, Assam. The non-official members included three Assamese gentlemen of the district of Sibsagar viz., Srijut Ganga Govind Phukan, Srijut Kali Prasad Chaliha and Srijut Someswar Barua. Rao Sahib Matadin Sukul, the Executive Engineer was also a member of the committee. The committee was chiefly given the task of preparing a detailed plan for the restoration and extension of embankments in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts. At the same time, their impacts on the extension of cultivation and increase of revenue in the area were also to be looked into. The members were also asked to carefully investigate the effect of embankments in diverting useful silt from the land or in raising the river beds.

After thorough discussion a plan was approved for the construction of new and renovation of old embankments in Dikhu (both left and right banks) and Dehing rivers (left bank) during the season 1903-04, at an estimated cost of Rs. 1,53,000 which was sanctioned by the Chief Commissioner in September, 1903. The members were unanimous in their opinion that the benefits of bunding would be overwhelming and would go a long way in reclaiming vast areas of wastelands. The desirability of reclamation of lands by bunding was all the more necessary as large number of coolies, whose contract in the tea gardens had expired, were now willing to settle down in upper Assam. Interestingly, on the question of raising of river beds by silt deposit, Sakul observed that there would be no danger in the case of Assam rivers as their slope was much steeper than those of Bengal rivers and the normal velocity was such that silt could

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83 Ibid.
84 Ibid, No.34
85 Ibid, No. 21
86 Revenue A, September, 1904, No. 203
not be deposited. Basu, the other technical person, even went to the extent of saying that silt played no major role in the agriculture of Assam except for those villages, which were located on the banks, and therefore the proposed embankments would not harm the fertility of soil much. This was probably the last major intervention by the British in renovating or constructing *bunds* in upper Assam.

**Concluding Remarks:**

The British approach to floods and their mitigation in the Brahmaputra and the Surma-Barak Valleys in the nineteenth century show both similarities and differences. At the outset, we should remember the fact that the East India Company, which became the political master of these valleys, was not a charitable organization. Just like any other trading organization, which had assumed political power in due course of time, its main purpose was loot and plunder. It was always searching for new avenues to exploit the resources of colony and increasing land revenue demand was one of the ways to achieve that.

The district of Sylhet, which was a part of Bengal province until 1874 faced the full brunt of this revenue maximistaion process. However, the English East India Company encountered a major obstacle in Sylhet and that was flood. Recurrent floods resulted in loss of revenue as it damaged crops and killed cattle and humans. At the same time, as population in late 18th century Bengal was sparse, it gave an opportunity to flood affected peasants to migrate to other areas in search of agricultural lands, which were available in abundance. Accordingly, river training became a paramount necessity for the Company officials to attain any fixity of revenue collection and the best way to go about it, as it appeared to them then, was to build new or renovate old embankments in Sylhet. However, its implementation soon created a predicament in their minds. It was discovered that *bunds* were actually causing more problems of inundation and solving

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Ibid, Nos.184,191,193
none. Accordingly, their renovation was practically abandoned since the beginning of the nineteenth century. As the British failed to contain floods in Sylhet, they also gradually withdrew from providing relief to the distressed as could be seen in the late 19th century.

In the Brahmaputra valley, where the British could consolidate their political hold only during the 3rd and 4th decades of 19th century, they had to face a different kind of dilemma. The presence of ancient bunds, built during the Ahom age, were found to be very effective in flood management. But, their upkeep proved too costly and after much dillydallying, they took up the issue with some sincerity only in the 1880s.

Another significant development to occur in 19th century Assam was the discovery of tea and opening up of tea gardens, which had an important bearing on the way colonial state looked at floods. Tea gardens, particularly after the 1850s, created new opportunities of employment, which could be utilized during times of crisis. The entry of plantation sector in an otherwise agrarian economy that produced mainly for the local market was an important event in the economic history of Assam. But, its entry created other complications. The protection of tea gardens from floods became a major issue of contention between the tea planters and the colonial government. We have seen an instance when a tea garden in upper Assam actually demanded compensation for its losses suffered due to floods. At the same time, gardens became overwhelmingly dependent on the state machinery for supply of relief during floods and other natural calamities. The unity of interest between colonial administration and the tea planters was very much apparent. Whenever floods occurred, the colonial state machinery made it a point to investigate carefully its impact on the tea gardens. Railways, whose construction in Assam, commenced in the 1890s soon became the chief vehicle of human and cargo traffic in the province of Assam. Conversely, its role in aggravating floods became visible only in the second decade of twentieth century. Thus, the seeds of future problems of flood in Assam were sown in late nineteenth century itself by means of railways.