

THE CATASTROPHIC FLOOD OF 1968 AND ITS DEVASTATING EFFECT ON THE DISTRICT OF DARJEELING AND JALPAIGURI (WEST BENGAL): A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Krishna Barman

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Nakshalbari College, Darjeeling – 734429, India

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ABSTRACT

The district of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri are intersected by numerous rivers. The lateral distance between two rivers is ranged from 3 k.m to 30 k.m. The incidence of floods is not an uncommon phenomenon in this region. From very earliest times, the region is facing the problem of natural calamities especially floods. The incidences of flash floods are a very natural phenomenon but from very recent past the incidences of flash floods has increased tremendously particularly in the district of Jalpaiguri. Unlike flash flood, the incidences of catastrophic floods are not a common one. The flood of 1968 was a kind of catastrophic flood which did a great damage and destruction in the larger part of Jalpaiguri district and in some sections of Darjeeling district. The huge damage, destruction and deaths of lives (Human and livestock) had made the society and economy of the region crippled for a time being.

KEYWORDS: *Natural Calamities, Flood, Catastrophic, Damage, Destruction, Deaths, Loss*

INTRODUCTION

The incidences of floods play a very key role in creating misery in the life of people of India in every year. Between 1960 to 1981, out of 96 globally recognised natural disasters, India faced floods in serious manner in 28 times. After Bangladesh, India is the country which suffers most by the natural disaster like flood. According to official statistics nearly 50,374 people died during 1953 to 1987 only due to floods which mean an average death of about 1500 people was occurred annually during this period.¹ The Jalpaiguri district being situated in the Himalayan foothills and intersected by many Himalayan rivers has consistently been at risk to flood.²

The one of the major reason of flood in this region are the excessive rainfall within small duration in small catchments and incessant rainfall of a few days in bigger catchment. The concurrent dissolving of snow gathered on high mountains and precipitation in lower reaches along with a sudden bursting of artificial water storage which block the river channels in the hills caused by heavy landslides, often caused floods of destroying nature.³ The flood of 1968 which caused an unprecedented destruction mainly in the district of Jalpaiguri was the flood of this nature.⁴

P.C. Mahalanobis was the person who first made a systematic report on the rainfall and flood of North Bengal from 1870 to 1922. Before him, there was no systemic and arranged work on it. According to him “ Sudden and torrential downpours caused by cyclonic storms from the Bay constitute the most important direct cause of floods in North Bengal and have brought about all the great floods of North Bengal during the 50 years”.⁵

There have been many terrible floods in India since independence. One of the most notable floods was the flooding of the river Teesta in Jalpaiguri in 1968, which suddenly engulfed the city and changed the face of the city. The incident started on October 2nd, 1968. It has been raining profusely since the previous evening. Heavy rains occurred not only in Jalpaiguri, but also in the upper Teesta basin. Records showed that there was unusual rain fell in the basin between October 2nd and 5th. On late night of October 4th, 1968, the river Teesta suddenly entered the city. Those who witnessed or fell victim to the disaster fifty years ago could not erase this day from their minds.⁶

All the disasters became insignificance in comparison with the terrible catastrophic flood which also faced by the district of Darjeeling in 1968. Because of the relentless and heavy downpour of 1121.40 mm in between of third and fifth October, 1968 there were various incidences of landslides accompanied by unprecedented floods in the Teesta and other different rivers.⁷ On October alone, total 499 m.m. rain fell.⁸ The communication system was totally disrupted and had taken several days to come in normal condition. Several parts of the Hill-Cart road and NH 31 were totally washed away.⁹ Total breaches at 18 different places in between Siliguri to Darjeeling of Hill Cart road were indentified. Many bridges at important points such as the Rongpoo Bridge on the Sikkim border along the Teesta- Gangtok Highway, one -span concrete bridge on the Teesta near Teesta Bazar, Sivok railway bridge and several other bridges were either completely washed away or seriously damaged. Cracks appeared across the roads, railway track uprooted and several bridges were washed away in several parts in between Ghum to Darjeeling, Sonada to Tung, Kurseong to Tindharia and Bijanbari to Pulbazar due to heavy landslides. The road between Algarah to Labha also badly damaged. Landslides badly battered the roads at several places of Kalimpong, as a result the town was completely cut off from the rest of world for weeks. A huge number of houses were also collapsed in Kalimpong. Total road of more than 500 feet in length, railway line and many village hutments were greatly damaged by the landside on Girda Pahar near Kurseong. A huge number of people lost their lives during this calamity. According to official record the death toll on 12 October was 677 but according to unofficial reports, the death rate was much higher than the official estimate. Death of 61 people was reported only from Dhutooria Tea Estate of Toonsong division. It was apprehend that many people were buried under debris of slips in the tea estate of Sivok. Rising waters which whirled through the shops and places of Teesta Bazar destroyed 659 houses and made 543 families destitute.¹⁰ The Dudhia village of Kurseong police station was swept away. Huge losses were suffered by the power houses at Jaldhaka, Bijanbari and Fazi. According to the India Tea Association nearly ten to fifteen percent of the total tea areas in Darjeeling were damaged along with the loss of more than hundred lives and widespread damage of factories buildings and other installations.

The Teesta carried the waters of upper basins to the Jalpaiguri district. Around 6, 00,000 cusecs of water came down at a speed of 30 miles per hour to the Jalpaiguri district. As due to heavy rainfall landslides on a large scale was taken place in the whole Jaldhaka and Teesta basins and also in the basins of the Leesh, Gheesh and Chel, so river carried a voluminous quantity of silt, debris and huge logs of woods along with huge amount of water.¹¹

The magnitude of the flood of 1968 was mentioned in the UNESCO circular no. SC/IHD/VI/25 in the following manner- “ In most of the gauging stations the peak discharge of the Teesta river at Jalpaiguri bridge had been estimated as 18, 745 cusecs.”¹² Sivoke Bridge close to Siliguri divided with chunks of land on its sides and Teesta extended up to 2000 feet.¹³ Breaches had occurred in embankments at several places along the course of river Teesta. Breaches occurred in embankments varied from 35 m. to 201m.¹⁴

The embankment at Kathambari breached and the water merged into the river Chel and washed away seven villages in its pathway. The lower course of the river Chel known as Dharla started to rise and waters again exceeded the embankment four miles toward the north of Domohani and rushed to Mainaguri to the south west. The lower stream of the river Teesta was swelled by the excess water of river Dharla and due to pressure of excess water the south-east embankment of Domohani breached. As a result a huge number of people and cattle lost their lives. Another course which mingled with the river Keya via Barnes on the south inundated the whole Mekhligunj of Koch Behar district. Breaches had occurred nearly in all embankments of the district at several places along the river course. The nature of breaches was varying from 35 m to 201 m. not only the embankments, flood water caused damaged to spurs also. Two strong spurs which were constructed only just a year ago, were completely washed away and thirty of the permeable spurs were greatly damaged.

An extensive damage was caused to the railway lines, railway bridges, approach and guide bunds and also other engineering structures. The following table shows the total number of works affected during this flood:

Table 1

Sl. No.	Item	Total Number of Works Affected
1.	Total number of railway bridges washed away	3
2	Total number of railway bridges damaged	6
3	total number of approaches to the bridges washed away	23
4	total number of places where the railway sections were breached or washed away	56
5	Total length of railway sections were breached or washed away	15700m or 51,500ft
6	Total number of places where the railway lines were overtopped	6
7	Total length of railway lines were overtopped	20420 m or 67,000 ft.

(Source: Review of Floods in India during the past 75 years- A Perspective, p.116)

The complete direct harm to the engineering construction of Railway had been assessed about 4 crores. Great damages to road structures were caused by the floods. Altogether around thirty-two k.m. of the highways, thirty-seven bridges on the national highways, and 261 bridges and culverts on other roads were greatly damaged by the flood.¹⁵ The Old Anderson bridge which was an important structure of architecture was also collapsed due to the pressure of huge timber logs and trees that came down to the river from numerous landslides in the Upper catchment and got stuck against the bridge.¹⁶

The engineering structures of the hydro-electric projects on the Jaldapara, the Bijanbari, the little Rangit and the Fazi had endured massive damage because of floods.¹⁷ The catastrophic flood of 1968 affected about 420 square miles of Jalpaiguri district. The flood was so sudden that the people did not get any time to escape to a safer zone. Nearly ninety villages of six police station in the district has been inundated by flood water and affected 4, 25,000 people.¹⁸ Altogether 2700 human lives and 59300 cattle were lost during flood in the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri and of these, a total of about 2000 people died in Jalpaiguri town alone.¹⁹ The total assessed cost of the flood damage had been estimated about Rs. 26 crores.²⁰

During that time Jalpaiguri town was very small, most of the houses were single storey, tin shed. The flood waters entered the town at about two in the morning first through the Karola River. At that time the estuary of Karola was near King's ghat. It takes a while for the water to enter as there is an embankment there. Except one all the bridges over Karola River collapsed. As a result, the eastern part of Karola was separated from the western part. At the same time, the water of Teesta started entering from the direction of Rangdhamali with great speed. The whole town went under two to four and a

half meters of water. The depth of water was much higher in many low places. It was heard that the ground flood of Jalpaiguri Sadar Hospital was completely sub-merged; most of the patients could not be saved.²¹

During this flood a hundred acres between the Coronation Bridge and Jalpaiguri town under forest washed away. Large logs indeed entire trees having been brought down by the river must have been obstructed the opening under the bridge with outcome that the degree of water ascended higher and over-topped the embankment.²² A vast area of Upalchand forest was washed away during the great flood of 1968 when river Tista opens a new course through the Upalchand Forest near Kathalbari in Mal block.

The flood was so sudden that many people did not have time to prepare. At around 6 p.m. on October 3rd, it was reported that the water level at Anderson Bridge had risen 20 meters above the danger level. It was also estimated that the flood waters would reach the town of Jalpaiguri by two in the morning. But no warning notice or guideline had been issued by the Administration. If the flood warning had been issued in time, then many lives could have been saved. It was alleged that flood warning system was not work properly. But after the investigation it was found that flood warning system on the 3rd, 4th and early portion of 5th October of 1968 worked well and the gauge readers did their work till the last possible moment and send messages to the officials concerned until Teesta Bazar near Anderson Bridge was overtopped and embankment of Domahoni breached.

Perhaps the administrative authorities did not understand the depth of the danger or did not take the matter seriously. The administration and the common people of Jalpaiguri could not have imagined that water could enter the city by overtopping the three meter high embankment that is there to protect the city.²³ However, many people who lost their due to administrative negligence could have been saved.

The region especially the district of Jalpaiguri faced the incidences of catastrophic floods before and as well as after the flood of 1968. But in terms of devastation, damage and death of human lives and livestock it has surpassed the all events of floods that the region faced before and as well as after the 1968. The flood not only shattered the economy of Jalpaiguri district, especially the town of Jalpaiguri but also in many extents changed the society of Jalpaiguri. Many people lost their homes, arable land and became landless. The flood almost crippled the economy of Jalpaiguri. The flood not only incurred huge losses to society and economy but at the same time it equally affected the natural environment by changing the physical landscape of some parts of the region and physical face of river Teesta in some sections of its course. The impact of devastation, damage and losses was so high and intense that the people of this region still are not able to erase the memory of the incidence from their mind.

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