IMPACT OF THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1897 IN AGRICULTURE AND TRADE OF COLONIAL ASSAM

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ABSTRACT
The paper attempts to elucidate the impact of the earthquake of 1897 on the trade and agriculture of colonial Assam. The paper is not limited to impact only, it also tries to analyse the responses of the colonial government in the aftermath of the earthquake. Assam lies in one of the most active seismic region in the world. This region has been experiencing innumerable earthquakes since time immemorial. The frequent earthquakes of this region have far reaching impact on the lives, history, culture, society and economy the people. On 12th June, 1897 Assam was struck by an earthquake of a great severity with magnitude of about 9.7 on the Richter scale. It destroyed a large numbers of masonry building, houses, telegraph lines, railways, roads, bridges and other government and private properties. The earthquake had a devastating impact on the river regime and channels. Trade and commerce of this region suffered considerably. Agriculture received severe setback. The earthquake had made thousands of acres of cultivable land by permanently covering them with sand and water.

Key words: Earthquake, Trade, Agriculture, Assam

1. INTRODUCTION
Human history represents endless struggle with the vagaries of nature such as earthquake, flood, tsunami, hurricane, cyclone, tornado etc. Assam is not an exception. Geologically, Assam lies in one of the most active seismic zone in the world. This region has been experiencing innumerable earthquake since time immemorial. The frequent earthquakes of this region have far reaching impact on the lives, history, culture, society and economy the people.

On 12th June 1897 Assam was struck by an earthquake of a great severity with magnitude of about 9.7 on the Richter scale. It had brought tremendous destruction of lives and property. About 1,542 people lost their life. The earthquake acted as a great social leveller. All the sections of society were equally affected by the earthquake. The paper attempts to elucidate the impact of the earthquake of 1897 on the trade and agriculture of colonial Assam. The paper is
not limited to impact only, it also tries to analyse the responses of the colonial government in the aftermath of the earthquake.

2. IMPACT ON TRANSPORTATION

The earthquake made impossible for the boat to ply by altering the waterways due to its devastating impact on the river drainage system especially on the Brahmaputra and Surma-Barak Valley. The earthquake was accompanied by extensive landslips and rock fall on hill slopes, subsidence and fissuring of the valley on ground, increase in river bed, changing of river course and widening of rivers. A great portion of bank had fallen into the river. An enormous amount of silt was thrown into the river by the subsidence of their bank. Rivers and water channels which were important route of trade were blocked and dried up due to debris, rock and silt deposited on it, there rendering unnavigable. For instance, the therria river, which was the route to the important bazaar of Bholaganj was completely dried up due to diversion of water to its sister stream (the Dholai). (Appendix VI, p.26) At several places an enormous amount of silting was thrown into the river by the subsidence of their bank and at certain places the rivers widened up. The sub-divisional officer of Sunamganj, for example, observed in his report that “the Surma and other rivers seem to have been widened” and deputy commissioner of Sylhet stated that in the Maulvi Bazar subdivision at the junction of Kusiara River, “the river appeared to have been widened up by some hundred yards” Earthquake was followed by incessant rain and flood. Deluge took place in many places due to incessant rain that followed after the earthquake. Several areas such as Goalpara, Dhubri, Barpeta submerged under water. Distress was more acute owing to the having been flooded. The Brahmaputra at Gauhati, as shown by the river gauge rose more than 7 feet. The entire village around Barpeta were submerged, the same state of things prevailed in all low-lying parts of the district which were drained by rivers and small streams, the beds which were up heaved by the earthquake; in consequence of the upheaval they overflowed their banks and flooded the neighbourhood. Springs gushing out from below the earth also flooded many villages. Several rivers have changes their course. Pagladiya and Puthimari abandoned their original river courses to join their original river course.

3. IMPACT ON ROAD AND RAILWAY LINE

The earthquake had equally affected the roads, railways and bridges which made the transportation of good and commodities difficult. The road from Shillong to Gauhati, 63 Miles in length, was very badly damaged for about half of its length, viz., between Shillong and Nongpoh, by landslips and fissures. The Assam trunk road, on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, and running through the Kamarup district, was very badly damaged, the road having subsided and cracked in many places, most of the bridge were destroyed. Gauhati branch and the line through and the south Sylhet the branch to Silchar were most seriously affected by the earthquake. The Titamari Bridge of gauhati branch, a high bridge made up of one span of 100 feet and two spans of 40 feet over a navigable channel was entirely demolished. Kopili bridge (3 spans, 100 feet, and 18 spans, 60 feet) was seriously injured. Other minor bridge minor bridge and culverts on the first 50 miles out of Gauhati were more or less damaged. Similarly, the portion of railways line running through South-Sylhet to Badarpur including culverts and larger bridges were damaged by the earthquake. The Tezpur Balipara tramway sustained serious injury and the little State Railway from Cheriaghat to Companyganj was more seriously damaged, and the cost of repairing was estimated at Rs. 10,000.
4. IMPACT ON CROPS
The earthquake made thousands of acre of cultivable land uncultivable by permanently covering them with sand and water. Agricultural crops and granaries suffered badly. In Sylhet, the spring crop known as boro rice suffered due to the subsidence of riparian land and by sand being thrown up through cracks and covering the soil, the loss was amounted to one-eighth of the harvest. Among the crops, Ahu rice sown in January to February which was fast ripening suffered most by the earthquake. The jack tree and paan (betel leaf) which brought the people a fair income could not escape from the devastation. Mr. Hamilton, who made a tour from Gauhati via Hazo to Nalbari, and then returned to Gauhati via Rangia and Patidarang mentioned about the damage done by flood and sand to Ahu crops in his diary. He writes: “Mauza Dharampur has lost nearly all its Ahu crop, and the land for growing is also made useless by the sand. Distress may be acute in this mauza, possibly a remission of revenue would be advisable.

Between the Baijali and Umgoria, Half of the Ahu and Ashra Dhan (name of a type of rice in Assamese terminology) were buried under ground. People were homeless, cloth less and foodless. Price went so high that only 15 seers of paddy had to be purchased at one Rupee. Many had no means to buy paddy at such a high price, thereby they had to live on jack, plantain, and mango fruits.

Babu Banga Chandra Chaudhury, Tahsildar of Baijali, Kamrup writes about severity of distress of the raiyats (peasants) in his diary: “Most of the people have no rice or paddy, even two days consumption, and those who have got some do not like to part with any quantity of the same.”

The Sub-Deputy Collector, wrote regarding some village in Mauza Paka, “Rice fields were sunk and under water, or were covered with sand. Fully two third of the ahu and at least one-half of the bao crop have been destroyed, and if the water rises again, as there are indication that it will do, it is apprehended that nothing will be saved. People sleeps on Bamboo Changs rose above water inside their huts, and also cook on similar structures or on raft made of plantain tree.”

Tea industries could not escape from the cataclysm. The damage was done to tea cultivation and manufacture of tea, both in the Assam and Surma Valleys. It is reported that considerable damage was done at Dhooli, Titabor, Sykatta, Bokahola, Dhekiajuli, and Hilika Garden.

5. IMPACT IN TRADE AND RISE IN PRICE
Consequently, prices of the food crops rose considerably. According to the report of A.G. Hallifax, Deputy Commissioner of Golapara, labour became expensive in Dubri and price of rice went up to famine rate. Many Bazars were destroyed by the earthquake. Traders and merchants had to suffer heavily while some were benefitted from the destruction by selling their good at a high price. In some places, prices of rice rose up to 8 rupees per mound which gave the vendors ample profit on the stocks they had in hand. For instance, the subdivisional officer estimated the loss of beparis (traders) and Marwari merchants of Barpeta Subdivision to be nearly Rs. 50,000. In some places, looting of crop was reported. At Nalbari, some cases of looting of paddy were reported, in which people at first seems to had offered money for paddy, and when refused, used violence. There is also report of looting from the other places. For instance, the house of Reverand Mr. Wiliam of Laitkynsew was looted.

6. IMPACT ON MINING
Lime- quarries and coal mines also sustained great loss. Seventeen persons were killed in Cherra coal mines due to collapse of the roof and feeble support. The Khasis had to lose employment due to the damage incurred by the earthquake to the limestone quarries. As a result, the limestone business of Khasi and Jayantia hill suffered considerably. Limestone was found all along the southern face of the hills as far as the river Hari, but it can be economically..
worked only where special facilities exist for its transportation from the quarries to kiln. The 
earthquake considerably increased the difficulty of transportation, and the limestone business 
suffered greatly. The output in 1904 amounted only to 123,000 tons and the loyalties 
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8. RELIEF MEASURES
Despite the destruction of Crops and food-stocks, there was very little scope for relief or relief 
works. Very few gratuitous reliefs were given. For instance, only Rs. 200 with some mound of 
rice was given to Reverend Mr. Williams of Laitkynsew, by the Deputy Commissioner of Khasi 
and Jaintia Hills to distribute among the refugees of Shella and War village. The peasants of 
Nagaon were severely affected by the earthquake of 1897. The native population of Nagaon 
who were battling with Kala-Azar, the earthquake had made their condition even worse. Despite 
complain of the distressed raiyats regarding loss of ahu crops and remission of revenue, 
Lieutenant-colonel Maxwell, commissioner of the Assam Valley District neglected their 
grievances. However, the reports reveal that some remission of revenue was made by the 
colonial in some severely affected areas as a measure of relief. Mention may be the district of 
Kamrup where the earthquake made thousands of Bighas of land useless altered the level of the 
country and permanently covering them with sands. An abatement of Rs. 60,000 was made in 
the land revenue of the tracts mostly affected. Similarly, In Mangaldai subdivision where the 
people were considerably affected by the heavy mortality due to Kala- Azar and the earthquake; 
in 1901, as a measure of relief the land revenue demand in that sub division was reduced by Rs. 
20,000.

9. CONCLUSION
The earthquake of 1897 had a devastating impact on the trade and agriculture of the colonial 
Assam. Agriculture suffered considerably by the earthquake. Thousands acres of agricultural 
lands were made uncultivable. Among the crops, Ahu rice suffered the most. Mining industries 
such coal and lime received suffered which resulted to unemployment among the natives. Even 
tea gardens could not escape. The earthquake had devastating impact on the transportation and 
communication. Rivers and channels which were important route of trade and commerce were 
destroyed. Roads, railways and bridges were damaged by the earthquake. As a result trade and 
commerce of the region received a severe setback. At some places Bazars and granaries were
destroyed. The prices of agricultural products rose considerably. Many merchants and traders suffered loss while some were profited by selling their stock at higher prices.

REFERENCES

[14] Ibid, 43.
[18] Appendix VI, p.27.