

## **A Historical Study of the Flood of 1930 in Undivided Goalpara District in Assam**

***Roja Ahmed\****

*Floods are a recurring natural disaster in the northeastern state of Assam. The state of Assam is susceptible to frequent flooding owing to its geographical location and proximity to the Brahmaputra and the Barak Rivers and their various tributaries. The region bears the history of having faced some of the most unprecedented floods that caused mayhem in the region. One of the devastating floods that caused havoc in the region was the flood of 1930. This article presents a historical description of the flood of 1930, its impact on society and peasant economy during the colonial period in Goalpara, Assam. It has further located the reasons attributed to the devastating flood. The article also highlights the various traditional strategies adopted by the affected people in order to cope with the disaster.*

[**Keywords** : Floods, Goalpara, Assam, Brahmaputra, Disaster, Colonial period]

---

\* **Ph.D. Scholar, Department of History, North-eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya (India) E-mail: <ahmedroza9999@gmail.com>**

---

**CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCES, Vol. 32, No. 3 (July-September), 2023**  
Peer Reviewed, Indexed & Refereed International Research Journal

## 1. Introduction

The Earth is known as the 'Water Planet' since it contains surface water in abundance which makes up to 70%.<sup>1</sup> Since the beginning of life on earth, human race has faced natural calamities like floods, earthquakes, droughts, etc. Destructive floods brought about devastation in many parts of the world. India too has faced the ravages of flood since the past. The state of Assam has been extremely vulnerable to floods owing to its vast network of rivers. Being a low-lying and flood-prone region, Assam experienced frequent inundations. Even during the colonial period floods were a recurrent natural disaster that caused major devastation in the region of Assam. The work looks into the flood of 1930 in Assam that caused deluge in almost all districts in the Brahmaputra valley and especially the western part of Assam in undivided Goalpara district.

## 2. Methodology

The present work is historical in approach. The study is based on the examination of both primary and secondary sources. Data was collected from archives, official reports, gazetteers, books, journals, newspapers reports, articles, etc.

## 3. Flood of 1930

The flood of 1930 was exceptionally high and was considered to be the highest during the last quarter of a century. Heavy rainfall caused the Brahmaputra and its tributaries rise abnormally which caused unprecedented floods in different parts of Assam by the end of August. All the *chars* (river islands), *chapolis* (flood prone river banks) and low-lying areas were over-flooded.

Districts Affected	Villages, Towns, Mauzas affected	Crops Damaged	Overall Loss
Goalpara	Dhubri, South Salmara, Mankachar Kakripara, Jhagra- rchar, Shotimari, Jhalor Char, Jhaodanga, Assamkata, Bekadoba, Kalapani, Shadulabari,	Aus, amon	Cattle and human starved, roads, bridges, wells and granaries damaged
Nowgong	Laokhowa, Juria, Bokoni, Mayong	Sali, bao, jute	Cattle starved and many died, human casualties reported

Darrang	Tezpur, Biswanath, Gohpur, Kolongpur, Ballimari, Hetau, Bangalpota, Rowmari, Aparia, Kirakata and Bagh Chapari	Aus, jute	
Sibsagar	Panidihing, Thoura, Kowerpur and Jokaichuk in Sibsagar subdivision, Simoluguri, Teok, Chowkhat Hatigarh Baligaon, Parbatia of Jorhat subdivision, Dergaon, Missamara, Mahura, Bokakhat, Kaziranga of Golaghat subdivision, Majuli mauzas of Salamara, Kamalabari and Ahotguri	Sali	Human and cattle casualties reported, agricultural fields & granaries destroyed
Lakhimpur	Telahi, Kamalabari, Dhakua-khana	Sali	Agricultural fields and granaries destroyed

### 3-1 Impact on Goalpara District

The unprecedented flood of August, 1930 caused great distress in Mankachar and South Salmara in the Dhubri subdivision of undivided Goalpara district. The high flood caused devastation in these riverine areas.

The Brahmaputra started rising suddenly by the beginning of September, 1930. Excepting the hills, entire Mankachar town was flooded. Water entered almost all houses and in most cases reached the lower ends of the windows while in some other houses, water reached the house tops which made it unfit to live in. All local public buildings were badly affected. The entire market area of the town was flooded which made it impossible for anyone to go from one house to another without a boat. The Police Station office room was under 25'' of water while the officers' quarters were under more than 30'' of water. The aus and amon paddy were badly damaged. Some of the villages which were most severely affected were Kakripara, Jhagrarchar, Shotimari, Jhalor Char, Jhaodanga, Assamkata, Bekadoba, Kalapani, Shadulabari, etc.

From the town of Mankachar it was reported that water entered all the houses of the town including the M. E. School, Police Station building, *Daroga's* residence, dispensary building, sub-assistant surgeon's residence were all under water.<sup>2</sup> Shopkeepers left their shops isolated after their shops were inundated. One lessee of a

liquor shop requested that his shop be removed to a higher place when his shop was submerged in water. According to the people a flood of such intensity did not occur in the last forty years. The disastrous flood made the condition of the poor and the cattle deplorable. The people faced a bad economic condition. Coarse paddy was sold at ₹ 3 per maund, coarse rice at 5 seers to one rupee and jute at ₹ 3 to ₹ 4 per *maund*.<sup>3</sup>

The people engaged in agriculture were greatly distressed for subsistence and accommodation for themselves and were unable to find fodder for their cattle. The Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, Khan Bahadur Tajamul Ali visited the areas affected by the flood and reported that several villages had been submerged under water and in some cases the water had reached the roof of the houses. People faced great hardship in accommodating themselves along with their family members. Cooking meal was also a difficult task and some people who stayed in rafts built with plantain trees cooked their food in *chulas* (stoves) made with kerosene oil tins.<sup>4</sup> Some of the villagers were able to remove their cattle to high places on the Trunk Road or to some elevated places in the neighbourhood. Some stored straw stacked on *machans* (raised platform) or other high places in their homesteads to feed their cattle. Others who did not have fodder kept their cattle tied on the road. The situation was such that even if some people had paddy in their houses, they were unable to consume it because there was no place for the paddy to be husked. Deep economic distress made the cultivators sell their produce at the lowest prices. In Kalaichar bazaar, jute was sold at ₹ 1.8 per *maund*, goats from 4 to 12 each and fowls at about less than a quarter of the normal price. Sometimes even with such low prices, there was no buyer. Some people did not have place even to stock up small quantity of jute and paddy.<sup>5</sup> As immediate relief, the Divisional Inspector of Police distributed 58 *maunds* of rice to the distressed people who had no food stuff or means. The relief was stopped immediately when water started to subside and the people were encouraged to make their own arrangements for subsistence. Since the Ahu crop survived to some extent, the officiating Deputy Commissioner was of the opinion that the villagers would have sufficient paddy for their own consumption. The road connecting Tura and Rowmari was breached leading to dislocation of communication.

Another aftermath of the earthquake was that the sources of drinking water supply in the rural areas of Goalpara district was much damaged. Almost all the wells, the only means of water supply in the sub-division were silted up owing to the recent earthquake. This led to widespread scarcity of available drinking water in such areas. Numerous petitions from various villages of Dhubri subdivision praying for supply of water were sent.<sup>6</sup> The Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara wrote to the Chairman of the Local Board, Mechpara Wards Estate<sup>7</sup> :

In view of the widespread scarcity of drinking water caused by the earthquake by filling up the wells in the Mufassil, I would request you to consider the desirability of suspending all new works under P.W.D. and also of reducing the repair expenditure to the minimum and utilizing the funds so saved for water supply in the rural areas.

To this, the Chairman of the Local Board, Mechpara Wards Estate mentioned that the board did not have sufficient resources to resolve the crisis and that they will need assistance of the Government and the Zamindars of the concerned areas.<sup>8</sup> Portions of the Goalpara town was cut away by the Brahmaputra.

A report regarding the distribution of distress loan in Mankachar states<sup>9</sup> :

The cultivators have incurred some losses; but I think they have not been made destitute by it. The only help they require badly is in solving their water problem. I would suggest therefore that the local board may be asked to sink tube wells in the affected villages.

The reason of the severe flood of 1930 was attributed to the silting up of river beds and the sinking of the whole locality as a result of the occurrence of the Dhubri Earthquake of 1930.<sup>10</sup> The beds of rivers and *nullahs* had swollen up and the level of the flood affected areas had been depressed due to the earthquake. According to one villager of Mankachar, the *nullah* in front of his house was 12 cubits deep which later rose to 7 cubits which he claims was the reason for submergence of his village. At the same time the villagers claimed that the level of their village had gone down about 2 to 3 cubits. All the wells of Mankachar were submerged which had already been destroyed by the earthquake of 1930. Therefore scarcity of drinking water and as a result people started taking water from

stagnant pools and canals. As a consequences water-borne diseases started prevailing. The starving people and cattle were in a distressful condition.

### **3.2 Impact on Nowgong District**

In Nowgong high flood began by 30<sup>th</sup> August and kept rising till 4<sup>th</sup> September when it reached the maximum height in the district. The flood began to subside from the next day in the Nowgong district.

The areas which were severely affected by the flood were the low-lying areas namely Laokhowa, Juria, Bokoni and Mayong. The flood rose rapidly and had surpassed the height experienced by these people during the last 15 years. They built *machangs* (raised platforms) several feet above the floors and some even took shelter in the gables of their houses. In Bokoni and Mayong several houses were built on mud plinths up to 8 feet high above the ground level. Hundreds of houses in each mauza were completely submerged while some others were demolished by the current of the flood. The owners were compelled to seek shelter in other people's house or on available high lands. The well-to-do had boats of their own to move out and save their belongings while majority of the immigrants did not have a boat of their own. However, some of the villagers built rafts with plantain trees for supporting people stuck on the water. Two persons died in Laokhowa, three in Bokoni and five in Japori.<sup>11</sup> All these reasons made the economic condition of the flood-stricken people very distressful.

### **3.3 Impact on Darrang District**

Heavy and incessant rain caused the Brahmaputra to rise suddenly from 29<sup>th</sup> August, 1930 in the Darrang district. The river overflowed its banks and flooded the Southern mauzas of the Darrang district. Between Mangaldai and Kurua, only about a bigha of land was immune from flood in the Hitau, Bangalpota and Kurua *Chaporis*. Buffalo-*Khutis* (littoral swamp) got submerged under 3 to 5 feet deep water while rice fields were submerged up to 10 feet of water. Houses were damaged, washed away and in cases water reached the roof. The flooded villages and the *khutis* of the riverine area looked like islands floating in water. Granaries containing paddy were partially submerged in some areas. Most of the dwellers of Kurua Chaporis lost their stock of paddy and jute as it got washed away and the *baos* crops had been submerged under water. Some of the

villagers along with their cattle took refuge on a very narrow strip of high land on the bank of the Brahmaputra while others climbed up to the roofs of the houses. The residents of this *chapori* were settlers from Mymensingh. In Hetau and Bangalpota buffaloes and cattle were kept huddled together on narrow pieces of high land that remained above water. There was no fodder available and new born calves were washed away. Some of the Nepali settlers sent the women and children to *busties* (colonies) near Rangamati for seeking shelter.

A steamer was sent from Gauhati which evacuated around 400 cattle stuck in some *khutis* of Bagh *chapori*.<sup>12</sup>

### **3.4 Impact on Sibsagar District**

The flood of 1930 affected Sibsagar as well. Panidihing, Thaura, Kowerpur and Jokaichuk in Sibsagar subdivision, Simoluguri, Teok, Chowkhat Hatigarh Baligaon, Parbatia of Jorhat subdivision, Dergaon, Missamara, Mahura, Bokakhat, Kaziranga of Golaghat subdivision were affected. Cattle had been lost, granaries went under water and the contents had been completely ruined. Cases were reported from Bokakhat and Kaziranga mauzas where a number of cattle belonging to Miris and Nepalis were reported to have been drowned and granaries were entirely spoiled. The villages of Salmora, Kamalabari and Ahotguri of Majuli mauzas were also submerged where sali crops had been destroyed and cattle went missing. In Dhansirimukh, the Miris who were stuck in the roofs of their houses had been evacuated by boats. Two girls in Sibsagar and five people of Hatikhuli Tea Estate in Golaghat died because of the flood. In Sibsagar the Dikhow and Disang rivers rose to great heights and breached some bunds. It caused flooding of houses both in towns and villages. The Disang bund bursted at Koamara village and submerged all the transplanted crops. In Betbari mauza, the Dereka river submerged eight villages and destroyed the transplanted paddy. The Namdang area near Gaurisagar was also flooded.<sup>13</sup>

### **3.5 Impact on Lakhimpur District**

In Lakhimpur, the Ranganadi, Kakoi, Boginodi and the Subansiri Rivers flooded very heavily. The paddy fields in Telahi and Kamalabari mauzas as well as Kadam and Lakhimpur were completely submerged, in some cases up to six feet of water. Around 50 granaries also submerged till one foot of water. Granaries did not

exceed 1 and a half feet of water as they were raised on machangs. Cattle were kept on the roads with scanty fodder. The Settlement Officer who visited Dhakuakhana during the flood reported that the entire place was submerged in water and the sali crops were completely destroyed. Gohaingaon was also severely affected.<sup>14</sup>

#### **4. Relief**

As a precautionary measure Khan Bahadur Tajamul Ali, the Offg. Deputy Commissioner requested the chairman of the local board to disinfect the wells after the flood subsided.<sup>15</sup>

For people in Goalpara who had no means to purchase rice or other necessities were allowed to buy the essentials at the following rates per head<sup>16</sup> :

- Rice half a seer per day for adults
- “one powa” for children
- Dal “one chatak” for adults
- Dal “½ chatak” for children
- Salt “½ chatak”.

The above rates were fixed only for those people who did not have any means to purchase rice and other necessities. The DC ordered a hundred *maunds* of rice to be distributed to the distressed and deserving people of the flood-stricken locality.

For those who were not homeless but found difficulty in getting rice, it was allowed to sell rice either in cash or on credit.

Those villagers living in the border of Garo-Hills and finding difficulty in getting fodder for their cattle and having no grazing areas were advised to take their cattle to Garo Hills area. On request of the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, the Deputy Commissioner of Garo Hills relaxed grazing rules for the time being and allowed the flood distressed people living in of Mankachar, South Salmara and Lakhipur to take their cattle in the bordering Garo Hills area.<sup>17</sup> While some villagers took shelter with their cattle in the nearby Garo Hills, while those who could not do so, left their cattle tied in water which submerged half of their bodies.

Another concession of forest produce granted to the flood affected people was<sup>18</sup> :

- Any person in the districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Darrang, Kaamrup and Goalpara who has suffered loss of or



damage to his house or other buildings from the flood and who obtains a certificate to that effect from a sub-deputy collector or other officer authorized in that behalf by the Deputy Commissioner shall be allowed to remove free of charge from any reserve forest or unclassed state forest any unreserved trees, thatch, ekra, cane or bamboo required for his household purposes.

This means that even to collect the basic raw materials in order to rebuild their shelter by themselves, the concession was subject to the condition that the certificate is shown to the forest officer. The officer would advise the holder from where to obtain the materials required.

The officers were instructed to provide relief materials only to the needy people and only after they were satisfied after making enquiries. Any person claiming to be starving and asking for relief was not allowed to be given until proper investigation was carried out. The DC of Goalpara noted<sup>19</sup> :

The officers should be very careful and should allow relief where absolutely necessary. Some people are in the habit of exaggerating things, but officers should make enquiries and satisfy themselves before allowing relief to anyone that he deserves it.

## **5. Conclusion**

The flood of 1930 left its trail of destruction in almost all the districts in the Brahmaputra valley. The western part of Assam was hard hit. It has been observed that the riparian areas of western Assam especially Mankachar and South Salmara bore the brunt of devastating inundations owing to the fact that the riparian areas were subsided by the earthquake of 1930. However, the British considered it as an annual event and overlooked the distress faced by the natives. The colonial administration is criticized for lack of adequate measures to prevent and mitigate the impact of floods. Even though the colonial officials initiated some relief measures, those were insufficient and poorly executed. Most of the times the relief measures were slow and the natives adopted resilient strategies in order to cope with floods. Some of the colonial statements as shown in the article reflect the indifference of the British towards the plight of the people. Contradictory reports where the officials at one hand noted that the flood was devastating and on the other they mention it as not having

caused destituteness have also been looked into. It can be seen that during the flood of 1930 people made rafts made with plantain trees in order to escape floods. They even cooked and lived in these rafts for days. Building machangs and chang ghars was another traditional method adopted by the people affected by the flood of 1930.

### **Footnotes**

1. Steven Solomon, *Water : The Epic Struggle for Wealth, Power and Civilization*, New York : Harper Collins Publishers, 2010, 9.
2. Letter from Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara to the Revenue Secretary to the Government of Assam, Shillong, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 1930, 13.
3. Copy of report from Khan Sahib Muhammad Abdul Latif, M.B.E., Mankachar to the Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara, 6<sup>th</sup> September, 1930, 25.
4. Letter from Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara to the Revenue Secretary to the Government of Assam, Shillong, 10<sup>th</sup> September, 1930, 20.
5. Letter from Superintendent of Police, Goalpara to the Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara, 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1930, 36.
6. Letter from the Offg. Secretary to the Government of Assam to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, Shillong, 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1930, Assam State Archive.
7. Copy of letter from the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara to the Chairman, Local Boards, 28<sup>th</sup> July, 1930, ASA.
8. Letter from Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara to the Chairman, Local Board, 28<sup>th</sup> July, 1930.
9. An extract from the report regarding the distribution of distress loan in Mankachar P. S. made by Srijut K. C. Barua, Proby, R.A.C., Dhubri, 9<sup>th</sup> August, 1930.
10. Copy of report from Khan Sahib Muhammad Abdul Latif, M.B.E., Mankachar to the Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara, 6<sup>th</sup> September, 1930, 25.
11. Letter from the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong to the Revenue Secretary to the Government of Assam, 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1930, 63-65.
12. Letter from Sub-divisional officer, Mangaldai to the Deputy Commissioner, Darrang, 13<sup>th</sup> September, 1930, 42-43.
13. The Deputy Commissioner's report on floods in the Assam Valley Districts, 9<sup>th</sup> September, 1930, 47.
14. Letter from the Offg Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, 9<sup>th</sup> September, 1930, 59-60.

15. Letter from Officiating Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara to the Revenue Secretary to the Government of Assam, 19<sup>th</sup> September, 1930, 60.
16. Copy of letter from Subdivisional Officer, Goalpara to the Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 1930, 27.
17. Copy of letter from Subdivisional Officer, Goalpara to the Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 1930, 27.
18. Letter from W. A. Cosgrave, Officiating Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam to the Conservator of Forests, Eastern/Western Circle, Assam, 16<sup>th</sup> October, 1930, ASA.
19. Copy of report from Khan Sahib Muhammad Abdul Latif, M.B.E., Mankachar to the Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara, 6<sup>th</sup> September, 1930.

★