

The East Bengal Floods (1954 – 1956): A Comparative Historical Study

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[Abstract: This paper investigates the devastating flood that occurred in East Bengal between 1954 and 1956, focusing on the resulting socio-economic losses and the government's relief response. Caused by heavy monsoon rains and the overflow of the major rivers, the flood intensely affected the southeastern and central regions of East Bengal, including the districts of Chattogram, Barisal, Dhaka, Madaripur, Kishoreganj, Mymensingh, Patuakhali, Bhola, and Khulna. Vast areas were inundated, significantly damaging agricultural lands, housing, infrastructure, and other public facilities. The newly elected United Front Government faced immense challenges in managing relief operations constrained by limited resources and growing public dissatisfaction. Although relief was provided by the government, international, and voluntary sources, it was inadequate and often distributed inequitably due to political influence. The central Pakistani government also failed to respond effectively. Despite the magnitude of the floods, scholarly engagement with their long-term consequences remains limited. Despite the magnitude of the floods, scholarly engagement with their long-term consequences remains limited. This study, therefore, highlights the long-term consequences of the floods and the structural weaknesses in disaster governance that contribute to the broader struggle for regional autonomy and, eventually, the independence of Bangladesh.]

Key Words: East Bengal; Flood; Impact; Government measures; Relief;

1. Introduction

Between July and September of 1954, 1955, and 1956, East Bengal experienced a series of catastrophic floods that caused widespread destruction and severely disrupted daily life. Large cropland areas, homes, roads, schools, and hospitals were submerged, leading to food shortages, rising prices, and a breakdown in essential services. On August 2, 1954, floodwaters submerged the Dhaka district. In 1955, floods inundated 50,700 square kilometers, approximately 34 percent of the country. The floods of 1954 and 1955 resulted in 112 and 129 deaths, respectively (Source: Bangladesh Ministry of Flood Management, Disaster Management and Relief). The 1956 flood inundated around 24 percent of the area. During a public disaster, the government of West Pakistan and its senior leaders and administrative bodies could not take effective action. The heavy floodwaters and the severe communication barriers in the affected areas posed significant challenges to relief operations. Nevertheless, the Pakistani government initiated relief and rehabilitation activities. In addition, international organizations, donor countries, local

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committees, and voluntary groups also participated in the relief efforts and provided financial assistance. However, authorities conducted relief distribution poorly and inefficiently, which led to severe consequences for the people of East Bengal. Although Bangladesh has a long history of flooding, there is not much research on the severity of the floods of this period. Therefore, the paper explores the effects of the 1954-56 floods in East Bengal, examines relief distribution measures, and evaluates the actions taken by the government.

1.1. Aims and Objectives of the Research

The main objective of this paper is to analyze the nature, extent, and socio-economic impact of floods that occurred in East Bengal from 1954 to 1956. The paper further attempts to make a comparative historical analysis of the floods and their long-term consequences on East Bengal. In doing so, the current study also highlights the various crises, including food shortages, and the complications caused by relief efforts due to the floods. It focuses on the role of government, private policies, and political parties in the distribution and management of relief.

1.2. Research Questions

1. What were the socio-economic effects of the floods in East Bengal between 1954 and 1956?
2. In what ways did the flood contribute to several crises, especially disruption to public life and the emergence of food shortages?
3. What long-term policy or infrastructure changes emerged in East Bengal's flood control strategies due to these floods?
4. What were the significant challenges and complications encountered in the relief distribution process during or after crises?

1.3. Research Methodology

This research follows a qualitative historical approach to examine the socio-economic effects and policy responses to the 1954-1956 floods in East Bengal. The paper draws on two main types of sources. Primary sources include various newspapers and magazines from 1954 to 1956, especially *Daily Azad*, *Dawn*, *Pakistani Khobor*, as well as archival information such as gazettes, gazetteers, government orders and notifications, and district-level records. Secondary sources include books, articles, biographies, memoirs, journals, research reports, discussions, and reviews. Both the primary and secondary data were analyzed using the historical method.

2. Floods in East Bengal

During the rainy season, when water overflows rivers, canals, haors, and low-lying areas, submerging nearly all villages, causing extensive damage to lives, houses, crops, transport, and infrastructure, it is called a flood. Flooding, which inundates the surrounding plains, became one of the causes of public suffering. Each year, approximately 18 percent of Bangladesh's land area, around 26,000 square kilometers, is flooded. During a major flood, over 55 percent of the country is affected by floodwaters (Islam S. , 2003, p. 285). Since the establishment of Pakistan, the region has seen numerous major and minor floods. East Bengal experienced six major floods in 1954, 1955, 1956, 1962, 1968, and 1970 during the entire Pakistan period. Among these, the 1954 flood was particularly devastating. Therefore, this article focuses on the 1954 and subsequent floods of 1955 and 1956.

2.1. The Flood of 1954

Pakistan has experienced 11 major floods over the past 60 years, beginning in 1954. The damage caused by annual flooding, especially severe, abnormal events, has been substantial (Mst. Sifat Rumana, 2018, p. 107). Heavy rains that began in July 1954 flooded parts of East Bengal, and acute flooding occurred in August. The combination of monsoon rains and the overflowing of rivers from the Himalayas caused extensive damage throughout the province. Major rivers flooded low-lying areas, including the Brahmaputra, Jamuna, Padma, Meghna, and Shitalaksha. Districts like Dhaka, Narayanganj, Rangpur, Sirajganj, Pabna, Rajshahi, Mymensingh, Faridpur, Chattogram, Noakhali, Barisal, etc., were hit by the devastating floods (Dawn, 1954).

In 1954, the floods severely inundated both urban and rural areas. The overflowing Buriganga River flooded low-lying areas in Dhaka, breaching Sadarghat and Wais Ghat embankments. Floodwater inundated several houses on the Dhulaikhal. The banks of the Shitalakshya River, which flows past Narayanganj, were waterlogged overnight, with river levels increasing to unprecedented heights. Floods caused by the overflowing of the Brahmaputra River submerged the western and southern parts of Mymensingh (Dawn, 1954, p. 1). Water levels in both Dhaka and Narayanganj broke all previous records. Floods extensively covered Rangpur, Bogra, Pabna, and large parts of Mymensingh. The water depth in some rural areas is 10 to 18 feet, forcing many people to move to neighboring towns. A strong current swept away some houses in the Sirajganj subdivision of Pabna district. In North Bengal, the flood situation worsened due to the heavy flow of the Brahmaputra, Jamuna, and other rivers. Several areas of Nilphamari, Gaibandha, and Kurigram subdivisions are submerged. Railway tracks have gone underwater in several places. In Gaibandha, knee-deep water submerged all police stations, government offices, treasuries, and jute warehouses. Rising water levels in the Brahmaputra, Ganges, and Padma rivers increased flooding in Rajshahi, Mymensingh, Tripura, Pabna, Rangpur, Faridpur, and Noakhali (Dawn, 1954, pp. 1,8). Water submerged many of the Ramganj and Raipur police station's as well as Lakshmipur in Noakhali district. Floodwater submerged roads, houses, and educational institutions under 3 to 4 feet of water. In some cases, residents were on rooftops, while others took shelter in relief camps. The overflow of the Padma River completely flooded the northern subdivision of the Barisal district headquarters. Barisal city faced a major threat as water pressure shifted southward. Floods washed away vast paddy and jute fields in Jamalpur and Tangail districts. Various villages in Jamalpur subdivision were submerged, and people in unions such as Rohua, Bowler Char, Pakhimari, Kamar Char, Tulsirchar, and Chandkona of Sherpur police station were left in precarious conditions (Dawn, 1954, p. 1). The intensity of the floodwaters weakened building foundations, destroying earthen houses. On August 31, as the water levels of major rivers rose, new areas of Dhaka city and Narayanganj became submerged. By early September, rising water levels continued to worsen the flood situation across Dhaka, Faridpur, Tripura, Bogra, Pabna, Rangpur, and Mymensingh (Khorbor, 1954, p. 2).

2.2. The Flood of 1955

The floods of 1955 were more severe than those of 1954. In Dhaka, knee-deep water submerged streets, and floodwater reached the food grain warehouse in the Dhaka Mill Barracks area. The gradual deforestation in Assam and the continuously rising water levels in the rivers in Assam and East Bengal result in widespread floods during this season (Azad, 1955, p. 1).

Following the prolonged floods in East Bengal, people hoped the devastating floods would spare the region that year. However, even in 1955, devastating floods once again beat the area. Major rivers such as the Brahmaputra, Ganga, and Dudhkumar flooded, causing widespread inundation in several districts such as Kushtia, Madaripur, Bogra, Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Dhaka. In Bogra, floods affected around 95 percent of homes. Agricultural losses were widespread, with jute, *aman* rice, and *roya* rice completely submerged. In the Kalatia Union of the Keraniganj Police Station area in Dhaka district, floodwater rose to three feet, destroying every house. In many cases, water flowed over rooftops, destroying homes entirely. In the Faridpur district, the devastating floods occurred due to the catastrophic rupture of the Padma and Arial Khan rivers (Azad, 1956, p. 4). In 1955, the floods inundated approximately 50,700 square kilometers, affecting 35 percent of the country. Flooding covered more than 30 percent of the area within the Dhaka district alone. The flooding inundated about 20.76 percent of the country's total land area (Mahbub Hasan, 1995, p. 252).

2.3. The Flood of 1956

East Bengal generally experiences four types of flood: flash floods, riverine floods, rainfall-included floods, and storm surge floods (A. M., March 2003, p. 54). One of the reasons for the intense flooding in this area is its geographical position. Floods occur due to rising river water levels, resulting from natural processes and human intervention that interfere with those natural conditions (Husain, 1962, p. 23). Due to the summer heat, the melting of Himalayan snow causes water levels in rivers such as the Padma, Meghna, and Jamuna in East Bengal to increase. The mountain water and the rainwater added to it increased the river flow and water level, causing floods. In addition to natural factors, social factors such as unplanned urbanization, deforestation, and the obstruction of the natural river flows also contribute to flooding. Due to these reasons, that year, approximately 35,620 square kilometers were inundated, with 24.74 percent of the area affected by the floods (Mahbub Hasan, 1995, pp. 251-252).

3. Socio-Economic Impact of Floods Appeared between 1954 and 1956

The magnitude of the flood has far-reaching effects on the affected population. Demographic and socio-economic vulnerability, such as household size, educational attainment, labor force participation, and occupational status, are significantly smashed, adversely affecting land ownership and income status (Mst. Sifat Rumana, 2018, p. 7). When range and depth remain manageable limits, floods contribute to crop production. Beyond that, they caused widespread suffering, as seen in the flood of 1954 and 1955 (Husain, 1962, pp. 23-24). The figure shows the flood-affected area during the period under discussion.

Year	Flood affected area (sq.km)	Percentage of total area
1954	36,920	25.64
1955	50,700	35.21
1956	35,620	24.74

(Mahbub Hasan, 1995, p. 252)

3.1. Flood Damages and Human Sufferings

3.1.1 Widespread Destruction, Displacement, and Diseases

Jamalpur subdivision was among the worst-hit areas by the 1954 floods. Ten unions in the area experienced severe damage (Azad, 1955, p. 3). Mr. Fazlur Rahman, Former

Chief Whip of the Muslim League Parliamentary Party, said he had never seen the Brahmaputra River in such a condition. Authorities evacuated villagers, and disasters have damaged entire productions. The flood washed away the few remaining food grains and seeds as it submerged huts, leaving many residents without food or shelter for days. Thousands of villages and several towns in Sylhet and Tripura were also submerged. According to unofficial reports, more than 10,000 square miles were underwater (Dawn, 1954, p. 1). Heavy rainfall worsened the flood situation in Dhaka and Narayanganj districts. In Tripura (present-day Cumilla), the Brahmanbaria and Chandpur subdivisions were severely affected. People had to seek refuge in lofts or elevated places, as their houses deteriorated. In Daudkandi, Cumilla, the floodwater level rose to over 9 inches, affecting almost 3.5 million people in 130 unions. In Munshiganj, public infrastructure, including the subdivision office, civil court, post office, police station, college compound, and all main roads, was submerged under water. Local markets have collapsed (Dawn, 1954, p. 1). During the flood, the people of Sakta Union in Keraniganj, Dhaka, faced severe hardship. Many families live in lofts, but construction has become difficult because of a shortage of materials. Mud-walled homes crumbled in Dhamrai. Nine police stations in Sirajganj and six in the Pabna sadar subdivision were severely affected by floods. Tube wells and wells submerged due to severe shortage of drinking water, resulting in extensive disease (Azad, 1955, pp. 3, 4). An outbreak of typhoid occurred in Munshiganj, Kishoreganj, and Netrokona, while post-flood disease spread in Brahmanbaria, Chandpur, Sirajganj, Mymensingh, and Cumilla district (Azad, 1955, pp. 1, 6).

Homeless individuals in flood-hit areas have left their homes and taken refuge in relief camps. In Dhaka alone, authorities established 37 relief camps in 1955. The authorities accommodated most of those taking shelter, who were daily wage laborers, in over 1,100 relief camps (Azad, 1955, p. 3). Most of them were set up in schools due to the extended closure of educational institutions. Many could not return home after the floodwaters receded, as prolonged inundation had rendered their houses uninhabitable. In addition to the relief camps, flood victims took shelter on the major roads such as the Dhaka-Narayanganj and Dhaka-Demra highways. The situation was so complex that even women, who traditionally never left their courtyards, were forced onto the streets. With limited resources and no means to rebuild, many families built temporary boats and lofts within their flooded courtyards, struggling to survive under challenging conditions (Azad, 1955, p. 3).

3.1.2 Crops

Floods caused extensive damage to the *aus* crops in Chandpur. The rising water levels of the Shitalakshya and Buriganga rivers inundated the civil supply depots in Dhaka, Narayanganj, and Chandpur. As a result, the floods damaged a large amount of food grains. Mr. SS Baker, the Commissioner of Civil Service, stated that although the department has 2,15,000 tons of food grains, they have stored about 3,000 maunds of wheat and 2,000 maunds of rice in the Munshiganj warehouse. Almost all the jute factories and warehouses were submerged in water (Dawn, 1954, p. 1). About 250,000 residents of Khulna district were directly affected by the terrible floods in September. Floods destroyed sixty percent of the area's *aus* paddy and 30 percent of the jute. The flood destroyed seventy-five percent of the *aman* paddy. The betel leaves were drowned in water (Azad, 1955, p. 5).

Farmers in Pabna district sow *aus* paddy in Jaishtya, which usually ripens during Vадra. However, due to floods in the month of Shrabon in 1955, it was impossible to

harvest the paddy. As a result, water completely submerged jute, aush, aman paddy, and cash crops like raw chilies and turmeric. Although the farming community could make a living by selling utensils, livestock, jewelry, furniture, and some even sold land during the devastating floods of 1954, this was no longer possible in 1955. Because there have already been reports of hunger strikes in rural areas. In Faridpur district, the strong flow of the Padma and Arial Khan rivers has destroyed *aush* and *aman* paddy and jute crops in the coastal areas. The farmers could not harvest their crops as water entered the fields before the *aush* paddy was fully ripe. Although they could harvest a little, they could not bring the crop home due to excessive rainfall (Azad, 1955, p. 4). The floods swept away an entire year's harvest that the farmer had stored just a month or two earlier. Most farmers in the affected areas also lost their savings, which they had set aside to pay rent or buy seeds and fertilizers to restart farming (Arai, 2012, pp. 62-63).

The government report for 1954-1955 states that unfavorable weather conditions somewhat delayed the harvest of the vadoi and aman crops in the year in question. Due to severe floods in the province, farmers had to harvest the aush paddy ahead of schedule. The floods caused extensive damage to the expanded aman paddy crop in the entire province except Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. While the damage to jute was negligible, there was extensive damage to sugarcane. Due to floods, the average production of *aush* paddy in the entire province was 85% last year, but that year it had been 81%. Jute production had increased by 114%, 103% in the previous year. The average production of *aman* paddy in the entire province was 85% the previous year, but it decreased by 80% that year. On the other hand, the average sugarcane production in the entire province had decreased by 74% this year, instead of 80% last year (The Government of East Pakistan, 1954).

3.1.3 Transportation

Flooding of the railway lines suspended train services between Dhaka and other regions. On August 6, 1954, the flooding of railway lines near Tongi, about 20 miles from Dhaka, suspended train services between Dhaka, Chattogram, and Sylhet. Major roads passing through important commercial areas were also closed to traffic. As a result, rickshaw drivers in Dhaka capitalized on the situation by charging excessive fares (Dawn, 1954, p. 1). Mymensingh's flood had submerged railway lines in North Bengal, Dhaka, and Chattogram divisions, severing connections to Bashadurabad, Jagannathganj, and Goalanda Ghat. The Barisal-Kalijira road in Barisal was inundated (Dawn, 1954, p. 1). Rising water stopped traffic between Jamalpur and Sherpur. Two bridges collapsed near Gaibandha railway station, leading to an enhanced suspension of rail services. Newly constructed roads in urban areas suffered severe damage, with heavy rainfall dislodging bricks and stones (Azad, 1955, p. 3). In Khulna District, floodwaters submerged 100 roads and extensively damaged 150 miles out of 1,100 miles (Azad, 1955, p. 5).

According to official estimates, the 1954 floods caused damages of over 320 million taka (Azad, 1955, p. 1). A report published in the Daily Azad on September 5, 1955, said that the floods that year affected an area exceeding 22,000 square miles of East Bengal and endangered about 21 million people. Authorities valued property losses at over Tk. 40 million, including houses, cattle, crops, roads, and infrastructure. More than 13,000 primary schools suffered extensive damage, and over 500 high schools, madrasas, and colleges were damaged. The government said that property worth more than Tk. Dhaka city destroyed one hundred thirty million, with more meaningful crop losses amounting to Tk. 100 million (Azad, 1955, p. 1).

3.2 Impact on Agriculture, Food Production, and Commodity Prices

During this period, exploitation and deprivation immersed the people of East Bengal. Increasing the prices of essential commodities, black marketing, smuggling, corruption-nepotism, unemployment, police torture, exploitation of farmers, etc., made the life of the ordinary people miserable (Hossen, 2003, p. 74). The floods further intensified this hardship, causing commodity prices to rise even more and increasing a massive crisis in the lives of East Bengal. However, before analyzing the food situation during the flood, it is necessary to first describe the food situation in East Bengal during the 1950s.

3.2.1 Economic Disparities and Food Insecurity in the 1950s

East Bengal's food situation had been unstable since 1951. A famine broke out in the Khulna district due to acute food shortages. Provincial relief minister, Mafizuddin Ahmed, acknowledged the deplorable situation. Prime Minister Nurul Amin said that districts such as Faridpur, Sylhet, Khulna, Jessore, Mymensingh, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Barisal, and Dhaka were extensively damaged by cyclones, rains, and floods, promoting calls for both government and private assistance (Umar, 2nd Kondo, pp. 90-91). In 1952, damage to *the aush* and *boro* paddy in Chattogram and Rangpur led to an increase in the price of paddy and rice, reaching Tk. 50 per maund in Sylhet by May. The government often failed to explain these price rises, despite acknowledging a deficit of 158,000 tons. The situation later worsened due to flooding and the disruption of rice from Burma and India. During this time, robberies and food looting increased, primarily driven by the soaring cost of daily necessities (Kamal, 2016, pp. 40,98). The government's inability to ensure fair prices for agricultural products, especially jute, extends black market activity. Although the market sold rice at 40 to 60 taka per maund, circumstances forced many farmers to sell at very low prices. As a result, smugglers smuggled a large quantity of paddy and rice into India. Between 1948 and 1953, an estimated 36,000 tons of rice were smuggled into India annually (Azad A. R., 1990, p. 107). Despite clear signs of crisis, the East Bengal government failed to address food shortages worsened by natural disasters. Poor price regulation and inadequate support for farmers deepened the crisis, leading to inflation, black-market activity, and rice smuggling, revealing systemic governance failures beyond environmental causes.

From 1954 to 1955, agricultural and other production in East Bengal totaled Tk. 1,432 crore, nearly equal to West Pakistan's Tk. 1,431 crore. Despite the similarity in output, East Bengal's population was significantly larger, 48.1 million compared to West Pakistan's 40.2 million (Jahan, 2018, p. 31). East Bengal's similar output but larger population in 1954–55 led to lower per capita income, highlighting its economic disadvantage and inequality.

Looking at the annual production growth rate for 1954-55, we can see that:

Annual growth rate (percentage)	1954-55	
	East Bengal	West Pakistan
Agricultural production	1.1	1.9
Manufacturing	10.0	34.0
Other production	2.0	4.1
Total	1.7	3.9
Per capita	-0.6	1.5

(Jahan, 2018, p. 31)

It is evident that although annual production skyrocketed in West Pakistan, it remained absent in East Bengal, even though the need was greater there.

The per capita income of East and West Pakistan in 1949-1950 was 288 and 351 taka, respectively. In 1954 and 1955, East Bengal's per capita income had increased marginally to 294 taka, while West Pakistan's was 365 taka. During the same year, government expenditure in East Bengal was 2,410 taka compared to 9,200 taka in West Pakistan. In 1955-56, government spending increased to 4,510 taka in East Bengal and 13,620 taka in West Pakistan. Despite being a flood-prone and deficit-ridden area, government investment remained relatively low in the eastern region (Sobhan, 2017, pp. 26,81). Despite having a larger population and greater economic need, East Bengal received significantly less government investment and experienced much slower growth in production and per capita income than West Pakistan, revealing systemic economic neglect and regional disparity within Pakistan.

3.2.2 Food shortages or prices during floods

In the 1954 flood, rice was sold at 25 to 28 taka per maund in various markets of Dhaka. Although prices decreased slightly during this time, the purchasing power of the people did not increase. Turmeric, which sellers previously priced at 1 taka per ser, rose to 6 to 7 taka in 1954. Similarly, the price of chili increased from 1 anna per ser to 2 taka (Report, East Bengal Legislative Assembly, Eleventh Session, September 1953, 1954, p. 286). During the 1955 flood, the situation remained terrible. In Rangpur district, good-quality rice was sold for over 20 taka per maund, while lower-quality rice was available at 17 to 19 taka. Traders sold sugar in the open market for 41 taka per maund. Mustard and coconut oil are sold for 74 and 163 taka per maund, respectively. Prices of other necessary items, such as meat, potatoes, and salt, were also exorbitant (Khan, 1990, p. 147). In Gaibandha, the prices of daily necessities increased abnormally within 5-6 days in August 1955. The price of rice increased from 12 to 22 taka per maund (Azad, 1956, p. 3). After taking power in 1954 by expelling the Muslim League, the newly formed East Pakistan Awami League cabinet faced a severe food shortage in 1955. The government imported rice and wheat from Burma, Thailand, Australia, and other countries to prevent food shortages during floods from becoming famine (Ahmed, 1383, p. 133).

In the following years, food shortages and rising commodity prices continued in East Bengal. In 1956, the price of paddy and rice increased drastically in the Bagerhat district, with a similar report from Joypurhat, Noakhali, Sunamganj, Chandpur, Rangpur, Kurigram, Mymensingh, Chattogram, and Tangail (Azad, 1956, p. 3). The government might have prevented the shortage if it had dealt effectively with the food crisis. Due to government negligence, the price of rice rose again in 1956, reaching between 40 and 60 taka per maund. The situation worsened as floods destroyed *aush* and *aman* crops (Azad, 1956, pp. 3,5). In 1956, chili was sold at 34 to 35 taka per maund in Noakhali, and turmeric at 120 to 125 taka per maund. Traders frequently adulterated mustard oil priced at 3 to 4 taka per ser. Although experts warned that the price could climb to 10 taka per ser if suppliers did not increase the supply, the government failed to take significant action to control the market (Azad, 1956, p. 3).

Newspaper reports show that the price of salt rose extensively during this period, a staple in the limited diet of people with low incomes. In various districts of East Bengal, the salt price rose roughly from 3 annas to 16 taka, causing severe hardship. Some traders adulterated salt with substances like bone meal and sugar, making more profit, resulting in extensive health issues and even death in Narayanganj and Chattogram (Report, East Bengal Legislative Assembly, Sixth Session, November 1951, 1953, p. 144). A famine

occurred in East Bengal in 1956 due to food shortages. In response, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani demanded 50 crore taka from the central government to prevent a crisis and started a hunger strike from May 7, 1956. Considering that the situation would worsen, Union Minister Basanto Kumar Das demanded that Bhasani end his strike. Nevertheless, Bhasani continued rising during a critical period for the nation. As the famine worsened, hunger marches began in the region. At a session of the East Pakistan Awami League at Mukul Cinema Hall in Dhaka on 19 and 20 May 1956, someone proposed to form a united famine movement by combining various political parties (Ahad, pp. 211-212). On 4 August and September 4, 1956, police opened fire on hunger marchers under orders of Governor Sher-e-Bangla Sarkar, resulting in many deaths on the spot. This incident marked a point in East Pakistani politics. In the aftermath, activists held a militant protest against the shooting and commemoration in Dhaka in honor of the victims. Disturbed by the political unrest, Sher-e-Bangla invited opposition leader Ataur Rahman Khan to form a new government. On September 6, 1956, a coalition cabinet comprising the Awami League, the Ganatantri Dal, and the Krishak-Shramik Party, led by Ataur Rahman Khan (Ahad, pp. 213-214).

The Abu Hossain government, which came to power in 1956, failed to manage the shortage during the floods. Allegations arose that distributed permits among loyal supporters, allowing them to purchase government-stored rice at nominal prices. This rice was then resold in the open market at high prices, further aggravating the food shortage, and the situation went beyond government control (Ahmed, 1383, p. 136). In response, the government says that, by December 9, 1956, East Bengal had imported 14,366 tons of rice and 7,680 tons of wheat from Burma. Pakistan's Food and Agriculture Secretary, Mr. Dildar Ahmed, said the government had stockpiled 5 lakh tons of rice for East Bengal to alleviate scarcity and control prices (Khobor, 2200 Number, 1953, p. 3). However, no one formed a commission to investigate the reasons for the massive rise in commodity prices or propose corrective measures. It was not until February 1960 that the central government formed a Commodity Prices Commission. However, its jurisdiction was restricted to the western region, even though the price was higher in the eastern region. The western region leadership revealed this neglect but failed to address the intense inflationary pressures that East Bengal experienced (Islam N. , 2024, pp. 23-25).

4. Government measures: Relief and flood control

During this period, media reports emphasized the suffering of millions affected by the floods in East Bengal. Providing essential assistance became a top priority, but high floodwaters and poor communication infrastructure hampered relief operations. Despite these challenges, the Pakistani government launched relief operations, including financial aid, food, and medical support. On August 14, 1954, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Mohammad Ali, conducted an aerial survey of the flood-stricken districts of Mymensingh, Dhaka, and Narayanganj in East Bengal, assuring assistance to survivors (Khobor, 2200 Number, 1953, p. 1). Two main ways to deliver relief are government agencies and private volunteers. However, reports often cited inadequate aid, mismanagement, and corruption. As a result, donor countries increasingly turned to NGOs for more efficient and transparent aid delivery (Akash, Bonna: Poriprekhit, Karon and Koronio, 1991, p. 20). The Pakistani government's flood relief was marred by mismanagement and corruption, leading to a loss of public trust. As a result, international donors favored NGOs, highlighting how non-state actors often prove more reliable in weak governance contexts.

4.1. Government Relief

In August 1954, authorities established several relief centers in Dhaka to support flood victims. Relief squads organized by the police and municipal authorities relocated submerged people to safer places. Around 435 people took shelter at Anjuman-e-Mafidul Islam Girls' School and the Gandaria-H-E School, while about 2,100 individuals were evacuated and accommodated in 12 different relief camps. The authorities kept emergency rescue steamers on standby and sent 21 teams of relief officers to over 50 unions in the subdivisions. These teams distributed medicines, food, clothes, and money free of charge. By the end of August, relief camps across Dhaka sheltered around 1500 people and 1800 families. In the Narayanganj district, authorities evacuated extensively using launches and steamers (Dawn, 1954, p. 1).

On August 3, 1954, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Mohammad Ali, announced a grant of only 3 million taka for the flood victims in East Bengal. In addition, the government provided 10 million taka for direct aid and allocated 20 million taka to the provincial government. However, during the 1953-54 fiscal year, Pakistan's private sector recorded a trade surplus of 469.1 million taka, with an additional 6.5 million taka in June 1954 alone (Khorbor, 2200 Number, 1953, p. 1). The government of East Bengal approved 224,000 taka in relief fund for the flood-hit areas of Rangpur district, including grants and free agricultural loans. Free rice, milk, and medicine were also distributed among the affected population (Dawn, 1954, p. 8).

On October 4, 1954, Fatema Jinnah, Chair of the Central Flood Relief Committee, distributed 1,200 pieces of cloth at three relief centers in Narayanganj (Dawn, 1954, p. 1). On September 8, 1954, Prime Minister Muhammad Ali announced that the government would take necessary measures to help the flood victims of East Bengal, even if it meant delaying nation-building plans. Despite the significant losses, the Governor General of East Bengal, Iskander Mirza, said the region did not suffer much. Due to extensive medical relief operations, authorities reported no epidemics. Civilian medical teams vaccinated 3 million people, while Pakistani and U.S military doctors vaccinated another 1 million. Necessary measures have also been taken against typhoid and infectious diseases, resulting in no loss of life reported. The provincial government approved 30 million taka for charitable assistance, agricultural loans, and housing support (Khorbor, 2200 Number, 1953, p. 1).

Although the central government allocated 3.3 crore rupees for flood relief in 1954, no official aid reached the victims until August 11, 1955, when Governor General Iskander Mirza sanctioned 2.5 million rupees for East Bengal. The regional flood relief committee approved only 45,000 taka for the Dhaka district (Azad, 1955, p. 1). The initial government supply included rice, pulses, oil, and milk, which the government later followed, but the government provided minimal support for villagers. Considering the plight, Mrs. Fatima Jinnah visited East Bengal in 1955 and donated three lakhs taka. She also advised Mr. Rashid, Secretary of the Regional Flood Relief Committee, to establish shelter centers where needed (Azad, 1955, p. 1). Government relief efforts remained largely symbolic, such as selling 3,000 maunds of rice at a subsidized rate, and distributing chickpeas worth 1,000 taka far below actual need. The Public Health Department of East Bengal arranged for medicines and vaccinations in urban areas and dispatched medical supplies by steamer and train. In addition, the authorities appointed 12 sub-district health officers to rural areas. Despite the influx of flood victims into Dhaka's 30 relief camps, authorities gave only 8,000 cholera injections, indicating a severe gap between need and response (Azad, 1955, pp. 1,3).

In 1955, Mr. Hashemuddin Ahmed, Secretary of Agriculture, Food, Relief, and Rehabilitation of East Bengal, visited the flood-affected areas of Brahmanbaria and Jamalpur, urging local people to assist victims. He also conducted an aerial inspection for the haor areas in Kishoreganj, Netrokona, and Habiganj. He said that the government was distributing free of charge to flood victims and selling rice in the open market at a subsidized rate of 14 taka per maund (Azad, 1955, p. 3). Meanwhile, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, president of the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League, criticized the government for failing to distribute adequate rice and medicine to the flood-stricken. He also warned the government to implement the 21-point plan, which included specific measures for flood control in East Bengal (Azad, 1955, p. 5).

Due to the insufficient government assistance, the affected areas requested large-scale appeals for emergency relief, including Rajshahi, Rangpur, Noakhali, Mymensingh, Tangail, Dhaka, Pabna, Chittagong, Barisal, and Faridpur. In response, the government took action in September 1955. According to Food and Agriculture Secretary Hashemuddin, rice was sold at 14 taka per maund in affected areas, with 250,000 maunds released into the market. Additionally, 12,000 maunds of sugar were imported into Dhaka, while provincial sugar mills reportedly held 472,000 maunds, sufficient to meet demand for the next four to five months. Consequently, the government denied any sugar shortage or a high price (Azad, 1955, p. 2). Food Secretary Mr. Giasuddin Ahmed said that the government will sell rice at 10 taka per maund, and paddy at 6 taka per maund.

By mid-September, the government released 3.3 million food grains into the market, with 2 million maunds in reserve. Despite officials maintaining no food shortage, the increased supply suggested otherwise. Rice prices rise sharply to 26 to 27 taka per maund, a 50 percent increase. Mr. Giasuddin attributed the price hike to disruptions in transportation and communication caused by the floods and profiteering by corrupt traders. However, this statement was partially accurate. The communication breakdowns were temporary, and adequate supplies could have reached the market with better coordination. Instead, the government shifted blame onto opportunistic and corrupt traders (Azad, 1955, pp. 1,2). The government permitted individuals to purchase unlimited quantities from warehouses without setting fixed retail prices, enabling profiteers to benefit significantly. For example, buyers sold out the 50,000 maunds of paddy and rice allocated to the Kishoreganj subdivision within two or three days. Without price regulation, food-grains were resold at inflated prices, often changing hands multiple times, and increasing prices by more than 20 percent. As a result, food failed to reach the rural areas and remained inaccessible to people experiencing poverty. This mismanagement suggested that political considerations influenced food distribution and flood relief measures (Azad, 1955, p. 3).

4.2. Role of Non-Governmental Organizations and Foreign Aid

In response to the 1954–1955 floods in East Bengal, many organizations and individuals contributed to relief efforts alongside the government. International aid included medical equipment worth 10,000 Swiss francs from the Swiss Red Cross and vitamins valued at 5,000 Dutch guilders from the Dutch Red Cross. Red Cross depots in Istanbul and Geneva dispatched supplies. The Pakistan Red Cross Society distributed clothing and vitamin tablets, while four U.S. planes delivered Red Cross aid, including clothes, blankets, medicine, and multivitamins via Karachi (Dawn, 1954, p. 1). Local initiatives were equally significant. In 1955, under the leadership of Mr. Ajit Chowdhury, ten medical students from Chattogram provided free medical services in Cumilla. The Pabna Samiti in Dhaka sent a medical team to Pabna. Jamaat-e-Islami volunteers and students

from Islami Chhatra Sangh distributed food, clothing, disinfectants, and repaired infrastructure (Dawn, 1955, pp. 3, 2). Political parties such as the Krishak Sramik Party, Awami Muslim League, and Nizam-e-Islami Party organized relief activities. Ansar forces supported operations in heavily affected districts, including Dhaka, Noakhali, and Jessore. Teachers and students from various districts collected donations and distributed essentials. The Dhaka Memon Relief Committee, backed by industrialists G. M. Adamjee and Eobia Bawani, provided subsidized rice, clothing, and daily necessities to around 4,000 victims (Dawn, 1955, pp. 2, 4, 5).

4.3. Government measures to control floods

Around 2 million hectares (over 6 million bighas) of land in East Bengal lay fallow in the early 1950s, with 75 percent suitable for cultivation. To boost agriculture, authorities plan to install 50 high-power tube wells, especially in districts like Rangpur, Dinajpur, and Rajshahi. Haor areas such as Sylhet, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Mymensingh, remained submerged for 7 months annually, reducing crop production. Therefore, the government proposed cultivating over 4.5 million bighas of fallow land (Khorbor, 2200 Number, 1953, p. 1). In 1953, the Pakistan government launched the Indus Kotri Dam Plan and the Ganges-Kapotaksha Plan in East Bengal. However, East Bengal received little benefit from this Project, which aimed to irrigate and drain nearly 5 million acres (Khorbor, 2200 Number, 1953, p. 7). Although rarely addressed in early 1950s government documents, modern flood management policies emerged after two major floods struck East Bengal in 1954 and 1955, drawing international attention and promoting actions (Emdad Haque, 2019). Following the devastating floods of 1954 and 1955, which submerged about 60 percent of the country's arable land, or around 23 million hectares, Prime Minister Mohammad Ali inspected the flood-affected areas in August 1955. A flood control commission was formed in December 1955, chaired by Mr. Azimuddin, who estimated a five-year timeline for effective measures to control floods (Azad, 1955, p. 1). Although India and Pakistan agreed to a joint flood investigation, they never implemented the plan. The flood issue gained international attention in 1956 with the arrival of the United Nations Technical Assistance Mission (the Krug Mission), which analyzed the flood situation and proposed a long-term solution. One significant outcome of the Krug Mission was the creation of the Water and Power Development Authority (EPWAPDA) in 1959, based on recommendations made in 1957. Despite institutional activities, flood problems remained a significant challenge, and the Pakistani government could not implement an effective, lasting solution (Elahi, 1991, pp. 96-97).

5. Conclusion

From 1954 to 1956, devastating floods struck East Bengal, leading to unparalleled human suffering and widespread damage to infrastructure. These floods displaced millions, destroyed thousands of villages and key infrastructure, and exposed severe weaknesses in civil protection systems. The agrarian economy was particularly hard hit, with significant losses to crops such as *aus*, *aman*, jute, and sugarcane, resulting in food shortages and long-term economic hardship for rural communities. Government relief efforts, though present, were largely inadequate, poorly coordinated, and marked by corruption and political bias. Subsidized food and emergency aid often failed to reach the most vulnerable populations. In contrast, non-governmental and international organizations provided critical support, especially in medical aid, though weak coordination with state agencies undermined their efforts. Despite the immense destruction caused by the floods, the crisis did not lead to establishing adequate long-term flood control infrastructure or

disaster preparedness initiatives. The events of 1954–56 exposed the acute vulnerability of East Bengal under the administrative control of West Pakistan, contributing to growing political dissatisfaction and a sense of regional marginalization. Ultimately, the floods of this period were not merely natural disasters; they were emblematic of deeper political and administrative failures. The lack of coordinated relief, exploitation within food markets, and the neglect of rural populations fostered widespread and lasting public discontent. The inefficiency and apathy of the central government further reinforced the perception of East Bengal as an ignored and disadvantaged region. These experiences played a significant role in shaping subsequent demands for regional autonomy. They contributed to the broader political movements that would eventually lead to the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation.

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[সার-সংক্ষেপ: আলোচ্য প্রবন্ধে ১৯৫৪ থেকে ১৯৫৬ সালের মধ্যে পূর্ববাংলায় সংঘটিত ভয়াবহ বন্যার ওপর আলোকপাত করা হয়েছে, যেখানে আর্থ-সামাজিক ক্ষয়ক্ষতি এবং সরকারের ত্রাণ কার্যক্রমের প্রতিক্রিয়া বিশ্লেষণ করা হয়েছে। প্রবল মৌসুমি বৃষ্টিপাত ও প্রধান নদ-নদীগুলোর পানি বৃদ্ধির কারণে সৃষ্ট এই বন্যা পূর্ববাংলার দক্ষিণ-পূর্ব ও মধ্যাঞ্চল বিশেষ করে চট্টগ্রাম, বরিশাল, ঢাকা, মাদারীপুর, কিশোরগঞ্জ, ময়মনসিংহ, পটুয়াখালী, ভোলা এবং খুলনা জেলা মারাত্মকভাবে প্রভাবিত করে। বিস্তীর্ণ এলাকা প্লাবিত হওয়ায় কৃষিজমি, বসতবাড়ি, অবকাঠামো এবং জনসাধারণের অন্যান্য সুযোগ-সুবিধার উল্লেখযোগ্য ক্ষতি হয়। সীমিত সম্পদ ও ক্রমবর্ধমান জনঅসন্তোষের কারণে ত্রাণ কার্যক্রম পরিচালনায় নবনির্বাচিত যুক্তফ্রন্ট সরকার কঠিন চ্যালেঞ্জের সম্মুখীন হয়। যদিও সরকার, আন্তর্জাতিক সংস্থা ও স্বেচ্ছাসেবী প্রতিষ্ঠান থেকে ত্রাণ প্রদান করা

হয়েছিল, তবে তা ছিল অপরিণত এবং প্রায়ই রাজনৈতিক প্রভাবের কারণে অসমভাবে বণ্টিত। পাকিস্তানের কেন্দ্রীয় সরকারও কার্যকরভাবে সাড়া দিতে ব্যর্থ হয়। বন্যার ব্যাপকতা সত্ত্বেও এর দীর্ঘমেয়াদী প্রভাব নিয়ে একাডেমিক গবেষণা সীমিত। তাই এই গবেষণায় বন্যার দীর্ঘমেয়াদি পরিণতি এবং দুর্যোগ ব্যবস্থাপনার কাঠামোগত দুর্বলতাগুলোকে বিশ্লেষণ করা হয়েছে, যা পরবর্তীকালে আঞ্চলিক স্বায়ত্তশাসনের আন্দোলন এবং শেষ পর্যন্ত বাংলাদেশের স্বাধীনতার ভিত্তি গঠনে গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ভূমিকা পালন করে।]

মূল শব্দ: পূর্ববাংলা; বন্যা; প্রভাব; সরকারি ব্যবস্থা; ত্রাণ;