

## RESUME

The impact of the extensive crop-failure in Bengal during the winter of 1896 deepened into a famine, fierce in intensity, as the latent tensions of the peasant economy floated to the surface in the face of the crisis. As familiar relationships began to dissolve under pressure of an abnormal situation, new exchange-patterns emerged in which the food-entitlement of the subordinate groups suffered, both in quality and in size. Reviewed in terms of Professor Amartya Sen's theory of famine as a failure in exchange entitlement, the event of 1896-97 appears neither as a simple food crisis, nor as an exchange problem caused by coincidental shifts in the entitlement pattern, unrelated to crop-failure : it was, rather, a total economic disaster in peasant society marked by an erosion of existing values and obligations, yet receiving its impulse from the shortfall in agricultural production and the resulting decline in the availability of foodgrains.

Amartya Sen visualises two types of situations in which the existing pattern of exchange relations might fail, thus leading to abject poverty, starvation and famine. First, even when there is no crop-failure or food shortage worthy of mention, a deepening crisis in exchange relations caused by exogenous factors like wage-depression, unemployment or under-employment of labour, a rise in cost price and fall in profits in the production of certain commodities, or the enrichment of certain sections of society at the expense of others, could lead to a famine situation. Second, famine conditions could develop if a crop-failure and general decline in food-supply inflated foodgrain prices and correspondingly reduced the food-entitlement of different groups in the community ; thus, even here the famine is caused not directly by food-shortage, but only through its reactions on the existing pattern of exchange relations. Throughout his monograph, Sen emphasises the importance of the first type of situation, i.e. a failure of exchange entitlement leading to famine for reasons other than a general decline in food supply. Food shortage is no more than one possible factor in a cluster of variables, some of which might interact to cause strains and shifts within the framework of entitlement relations, and precipitate severe famine conditions "even without receiving any impulse from food production". (1)

### 1. Crop-failure and FAD :

In order to consider the Bengal famine of 1896 in the light of this theory, it is first essential to determine the extent of shortfall in the production, current supply and availability of foodgrains in that year. Food-crops covered 85.61% of the total normal cropped area in the Province, of which 47.74% was taken up by the aman or winter rice

---

1. Amartya Sen, op. cit., p. 158.

and 19.34% and 18.53% by the bhadoi and rabi crops respectively. In 1896-97, the estimated outturn of winter rice was 7 1/2 as, or 46.87%, that of bhadoi 10 1/2 as, or 65.62% and of rabi 10 1/3 as, or 64.56% of an average crop. The crop failure amounted to much more than 50% in the affected areas of Puri, Bankura, the Presidency Division, Chota Nagpur and the whole of the Patna Division except the Patna and Gaya districts. Crop statistics show that the highest yield of winter rice in the affected districts was only 9 as, or 56% as in Puri, while it came down to 1 1/4, 2 1/2, 3 and 3 1/2 as. i.e. 7.8, 15.6, 18.75 and 21.8% in Saran, Nadia, Muzaffarpur and Champaran, respectively.

The current supply and per capita availability of foodgrains in the famine zone went down considerably, due not only to this remarkable shortfall in food production, but also to the low yield and "carry over" stock of the previous year and the excessive exports from famine-hit districts, throughout 1896 - 97. For example, the three affected districts of Chota Nagpur showed a deficiency of 30% in 1895 - 96. In the Patna Division too, the deficiency of the previous year in Shahabad, Darbhanga and Muzaffarpur was over 30%, while in Champaran a large part of the crop, which was slightly better, was drained by a brisk export trade in grain. (2) An estimate of the current food supply has been made by the Collectors of the famine districts, by deducting from the total out-turn the amount required for seedgrain, and adding or subtracting the net balance of imports or exports, as the case may be. The per capita availability of food was next ascertained by considering the current supply in relation to the total population of the district, @ 3/4 of a seer of foodgrain per head, which, according to A.P. Macdonnell's estimate, would approximately be reduced to 1/2 a seer in crisis years. The figures arrived at by this method invariably show a vast deficit. To take only one example, the five affected districts in the Patna Division during Sept. 1896 - September 1897 showed a total deficit of 69,93,384 mds. and by April 1897 none of the North Bihar districts had more than 2 months' supply of food in hand. (3)

These statistics are no doubt subject to many reservations and cannot give a very clear index of the production or supply position of foodgrains in 1896-97. In recording crop outturns, for instance, the 16 - anna concept created great confusion, for the Government interpretation of it as a good average crop was never followed by subordinate officers or the peasantry, to whom 16 annas always meant a bumper or ideal crop. (4) Similarly, the calculations for the current supply and per capita availability of foodgrains were not always based on a uniform principle, and often took no account of the "carry over" from previous years, or of the inter-district trade by road and river. As the Commissioner of Patna noted, the figures for food stocks provided by the Collectors of Gaya, Muzaffarpur, Saran, etc. were

- 
2. Final Res. pp. 11, 16 - 18.
  3. LRP Aug., 1898, pt. II, pp. 933-35; FRFRO, Patna Div., paras 106-8
  4. DCAR, Rajshahi Div., 1897 -98, Dec. III, para 2.

extremely confusing, direct enquiries from the S.D.O s, the Police, the Opium Department and the indigo planters disagreeing hopelessly. (5) In spite of these qualifications, however, the data for 1896 - 97 is sufficient to indicate an overall food shortage in the fifteen affected districts, which was both real and determinate.

The phenomenal rise in foodgrain prices was a direct indication of the pressure on the food supply. In typical scarcity districts like Champaran, Santhal Parganas and Nadia, the price of common rice per rupee rose abruptly from about 15, 23 and 16 srs. in December-January 1895 - 96 to 8, 10 and 9 srs. respectively in December-January 1896 - 97. By the lean period, i.e. May 1897, they moved up to 7 3/4, 7 3/4 and 8 1/4 srs. respectively, as against 17, 13 and 16 srs. in May 1896. Thus prices had more than doubled in the scarcity districts, while even in regions beyond the famine zone the increase was more than 1/3 as compared to normal years.

## 2. Pull failure or failure in exchange entitlement :

Yet this crop-failure, though extensive, did not alone lead to famine. Rather, it accentuated the existing tensions and exchange problems which, in the last decade of the 19th century, tended to reduce the foodgrain entitlement of certain sections in the rural economy, whether in production, labour or trade.

Production-based entitlement to foodgrains tended to decline when a crop-failure or a fall in agricultural prices directly cut down the consumption of a subsistence farmer.

The Datta Committee, in reviewing the origin and nature of the rising prices between 1895-1912, analysed the relative movement of per capita agricultural income and the prices of the commodities generally purchased by the common peasants in Bengal and Bihar, and attempted a comparison of their respective index numbers. The result showed that while the index of agricultural income registered an increase of a mere 2% in the decade 1894-1904, that of commodity prices went up by 10.5%. Though conscious of the imperfections of the available data, Datta concluded, on the basis of the broad trend as indicated by them, that in Bengal and Bihar during this period "the rise in the cost of living has been all along more than the rise in the agricultural income, showing that the cultivators in these parts have been adversely affected by high prices". This applied particularly to foodgrain production, which covered more than 85% of the total cropped area, rather than to cash-crop cultivation, where the peasant traded his product for food. Thus, even during this period of low agricultural income in Bengal and Bihar, some of the cash-crop sectors, as in northern and eastern Bengal, showed that "the cultivators have obtained very large profits on jute and are

---

5. LRP Aug., 1898 pt. II, p. 933.

substantially better off than before". (6) Conversely, aman cultivation, which was extremely susceptible to drought and admitted of no second crop except for a few inferior pulses of the rabi harvest, had a much lower rate of profitability. Hence, mono-crop regions growing aman rice as in the districts of Bihar, Santhal Parganas, Birbhum, Bankura, the "Kalantar" in Nadia-Murshidabad and the Chilka tract in Puri, invariably showed a low index of prosperity and a high incidence of famine.

The real problem for the peasant or small tenant, however, lay not in the working of market forces, but in the basic contradictions within the rural society. Rising prices were seen to have "adversely affected" the peasants not only because the cost of living was high in relation to food prices as suggested by the Datta Committee, but also because the peasant economy was conditioned more by the rural power-structure than by secular market forces. In fact, though the agricultural income moved up by only 2% in 1894-1904, its rise during 1895-99 was as high as 7% in relation to a mere 2.5% increase in the cost of living. (7) Yet the rise in agricultural prices did not appreciably improve the peasant's position, for in most cases his surplus was not drawn to the market by a wholesome price-stimulus; it was, rather, extracted from him in the form of compulsory payments of rent and interest to the zamindar and mahajan, who ultimately sold it and benefited from the price-rise.

While high rent and interest payments and the lack of free market conditions thus reduced the entitlement of the small peasant, they gave the richer classes full scope to perfect their mechanism of control over the surplus in their three-fold capacity as zamindar, mahajan and bania. For example, the zamindars, as in the Bihar districts, tried to get a greater share of the rise in agricultural prices since the 1880s by converting cash rents into produce rents wherever possible, particularly in view of the common belief that the rent-rates in kind were not subject to the constraints imposed by the tenancy laws on cash rentals. (8) Similarly, the mahajans profited not only from the exorbitant rates of compound interest, but also by monopolising the local markets in their capacity as grain-dealers. (9) The loan and interest were often calculated in money while all transactions were in grain at prices fixed arbitrarily by the mahajan, who thus got the profit on the sale and purchase of the grain.

These facts indicate, as Datta noted, "that agricultural indebtedness has increased in the case of cultivators with small holdings, while

---

6. K. L. Datta, op. cit., vol. I, paras 435 -36.

7. Ibid., p. 183, para 436.

8. B.B. Chaudhuri, 'Struggle over Produce Rent in Bihar, 1793-1930' ' unpublished paper, pp. 10 - 12.

9. B. B. Chaudhuri, 'The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar, 1885 - 1947, ' I.H.R., No. 1 (July 1975), Sec. 5.

another section - the larger tenants - has improved, and instead of borrowing money they often lend it to their fellows". (10) This was reflected in the growing volume of land sales in this period. Between 1886 - 87 and 1895 - 96 sale-transactions were "nearly doubled in the case of raiyati holdings at fixed rates, and nearly trebled in the case of raiyati holdings with a right of occupancy". (11) Between 1885-1904, land sales increased by about 300%, a large number of them passing into the hands of the affluent peasants functioning as mahajans. According to Amartya Sen, "In empirical studies of actual famines, the question of precision is compromised by data problems ... and the focus here will be not on characterising entitlements with pretended exactitude, but on studying shifts in some of the main ingredients of entitlements. Big shifts in such ingredients can be decisive in causing entitlement failures, even when there is some 'fuzziness' in the entitlement relations". (12) Hence, the increasing shifts in the ownership of land, which was the basic ingredient in the production of foodgrains, caused a major change in production-based exchange-relations in the years preceding the famine of 1896, and sharply reduced the food entitlement of the debtor peasants.

This process of de-peasantization and the falling income of the average raiyat increased the labour surplus in agriculture, and forced corresponding cuts in the exchange value of labour. Industrial development was too slow to create any substantial scope for alternative employment, which was further reduced by depression in various agricultural industries like indigo production in South Bihar, date-sugar manufacture in Jessore, or the silk industry in Murshidabad. This, along with the seasonal nature of agricultural labour, reduced the total volume of employment and depressed wage rates in the closing years of the 19th century.

The Datta Committee notes : "the rise of prices has been fully met by a rise in wages" (13) and that "the rise has been greatest in rural areas". (14) The indices quoted by him move up from 104 in 1895 to 123 in 1900 in nominal wages, and from 102 to 115 between 1895 to 1904 in real wages. (15) These wage data, however, are confined to money wage-rates, i.e. to the more developed sector affecting only a fringe of the rural economy, to the exclusion of grain wages as well as the various forms of payments to bonded labourers.

The payment in kind generally tended "to keep down the wage inspite of higher prices". (16) The system was widely prevalent in Bihar and

- 
10. K. L. Datta, op. cit., para 389.
  11. Triennial Report, Registration Dept., Bengal, for the years ending 1898 - 99, para 12 of Govt. Resolution.
  12. A. Sen, op. cit., p. 49.
  13. K. L. Datta, op. cit., para 430.
  14. Ibid., para 407.
  15. Ibid., para 419, Table I.
  16. Gazetteer of Bengal, I, 1909, p. 72.

Orissa. In Bihar the wages were particularly low and had remained static for the last 20 years, despite the rise in food prices. Regarding Orissa, too, O'Mally reported in 1907 : "Measured by the quantity of grain given, there does not appear to have been any increase in wages paid to agricultural labourers during the last 30 years". (17)

A distinct case was that of the bonded labourers, who always received less than the market rate. The "Kamiuti" system of debt bondage was particularly notorious in the Chota Nagpur districts of Palamau, Hazaribagh and Manbhum. Debt slavery originated at the end of the 19th Century, and has recently been characterised as an attempt of early capitalism to raise the "absolute surplus" in agriculture without any new investment or real increase in labour productivity. The low density of population and a net out-migration of over 1,35,000 labourers per annum from the Lohardaga-Palamau region by 1891 greatly reduced the size of the available labour force. Without a social system of controls like debt bondage, i.e. the dependence and control of labour through indebtedness, the wage-rate would have risen sharply. By this system, the labourer was remunerated by 2/3 Kachha seers of whatever foodgrain his master found convenient to give. In harvest time he received about 15 Kachha seers in two days. It was clear that at this rate the Kamia could never save enough to pay off his debt, and served the mahajan through generations. (18)

Debt-labour on a daily, seasonal or annual basis prevailed also in other districts like Birbhum, Bankura, Nadia, Malda and Bhagalpur. The daily wage in Bhagalpur left the labourer underfed for about 3 months in a year. In years of drought his condition worsened, for instead of a fixed quantity of grain his wage dwindled to a small share of the crop reaped. The Collector of Bhagalpur noted : "These grain payments, though they suit the rural economy of the country, are of course the real danger to the population". As a result of the meagre surplus, the seasonal or annual employment of debt-labourers developed into a perpetual "attachment" to their employers. The size of such attached labour was 42%, 50% and 60% in Supaul, Banka and Madhipura sub-divisions in Bhagalpur. (19) In Bankura-Birbhum the attached labourers got 1/3 of the produce. In parts of Birbhum they had to surrender 25% of this share as interest on the grain advances received by them for their total annual requirements. (20)

Thus, at the close of the 19th century there were various types of constraints on the rate of wages whether paid in cash, kind or debt-

---

17. DG. Balasore, 1907, p. 121.

18. S. Mundle, Backwardness and Bondage-- Agrarian Relations in a South Bihar District, 1979, pp. 4, 91-94.

19. Dufferin Enquiry Report, Collector of Bhagalpur to the Com., 7 April 1888, paras 8, 13, 15.

20. Ibid., Collector of Birbhum to Com., Burdwan Div., 30th May, 1888.

contract. As a result, the exchange value of labour could not keep pace with the rise in agricultural prices. According to a more recent estimate, real wages rose by only 6% between 1891-1901, as against Datta's figure of a 15% rise by 1904, if the index for 1891 be taken as 100. (21)

There was also a definite decline in several areas of the trade-based entitlement to food. Such entitlement groups in the rural economy consisted mainly of local craftsmen, weavers, artisans, fishermen, goals and cash-crop producers.

Many of the rural crafts, like the weaving industry in Nadia and silk manufacture in Murshidabad, were suffering from great depression. In 1898 the District Officer of Nadia reports: "In almost all villages in this district there are a few families of Tantis and Jolahas. They turn out coarse cloth for the use of cultivators, but their number is gradually decreasing, and the profession is deteriorating on account of English-manufactured cloth, which is cheaper. In several villages which had a reputation for doing business in weaving, this industry is altogether abolished, such as Chakdaha, Tehata, Damurhuda and Dagalbi....." (22)

The silk industry in Murshidabad suffered not only from foreign competition, but also from frequent silkworm epidemics. In fact, during 1886-96, the noted expert, Nitya Gopal Mukharji, was engaged in active research on this problem. Ivory-carving also declined so that by 1901 there was not a single bhaskar in Mathra, and not more than 25 carvers in the entire district.

As to the agricultural industries or cash-crop production, the primary producers were always at a distinct disadvantage irrespective of market conditions. Like the subsistence farmers, they depended totally on unscrupulous middlemen and retailers, and had no direct access to the market. The cultivation of sabai grass by the Paharias in the Rajmahal hills is a typical case in point. The mahajans arbitrarily fixed the price of the sabai usually at Rs. 8 to 10 per 100 loads. The full price was never paid, the greater part of the purchase money being set against "old debts" i.e. the initial cost borne by the mahajan in clearing the sabai fields. Besides, the produce of the fields was grossly under-estimated, outside labour being employed to cut the grass. The Paharia neither had access to his field to enable him to check the number and size of the bundles, nor the freedom to sell his produce to any other mahajan but his own. In 1898 Government imposed a 1 anna royalty per maund of sabai, which was intended to be raised from the mahajans, who were making immense profits from the sabai trade. In effect, however, the Paharias had to bear the cost,

---

21. K.K.Ghosh, op. cit., p. 173, Table VI: 25; K.L.Datta, op. cit., para 418.

22. DG, Nadia, p. 92.

for the mahajans immediately reduced the price of sabai by 1/5. Thus, while the sabai exports more than doubled between 1901 - 1908 and the mahajans and contractors fast extended their godowns and presses in Sahebganj, the 'Paharias' entitlement was sharply reduced. (23) A.W. Stark, Deputy Collector on special duty, noted a distinct deterioration in the condition of the Paharia villages in Parganas Teliagarhi and Madhuban between 1881-1909. "There was scarcely a family that had sufficient grain in store to last them more than a month or two ; .... These people who lived in rude plenty in former days are now living from hand-to-mouth and depending on what they can manage to beg from their mahajans". (24)

These long-term developments other than food shortage were persistently reducing the production, labour and trade-based entitlements of various groups throughout the 1890s. It was against this background that the crop-failure of 1896 caused a total collapse in exchange-relations, and created conditions of acute starvation or famine.

Production - based entitlements were the first to suffer. Indeed, the peasant proprietor, cash-tenant and bargadar were deeply affected by the direct-entitlement failure. While rent collections went on as usual and the creditor refused to operate, the raiyat's surplus dwindled with the decline in the total size of production. The sown area contracted for the lack of seedgrain. Very little of the land in Khulna, and only 40% of the total cultivable area in Jessore could be sown in 1897. (25) In Khulna, Jessore, Chota Nagpur and western Athaisi and Banchas in Orissa, even well-to-do raiyats sold their cattle to beparis, mostly from Calcutta. (26) This extreme pressure on the cultivators was reflected by their increasing numbers on Government relief works. In Nadia, men of the cultivating classes were seen on earth-works, which was considered a most degrading form of labour in these parts. (27) Again, many of the labourers working on a tank near Assasuni in Khulna were cultivators of the better class, some of them owning 13 to 20 bighas of land, which lay fallow for want of seed and plough-cattle this year. (28) Many raiyats absconded under this pressure : for example, numerous deserted abads in Shyamnagore and Paikgacha in Satkhira, testified to the mass exodus

---

23. Bengal Revenue Progs., Sept. 1909, Nos. 1-2, p. 136, Patterson, S.D.O. Rajmahal, to Dept. Com., Santhal Parganas, 14th April 1908, para 3.

24. *Ibid.*, Sept. 1909, Nos. 1-2, p. 167. "Report on the Petition of the Hill Manjhis of Pargana Teliagarhi and Tappa Madhuban regarding the dealings of the Mahajans in the Sabai Trade" by A. W. Stark, 12th March 1909, para 34.

25. *Fam. Sel.*, VIII, pp. 290-91.

26. *Ibid.*, III, p. 233; VI, p. 404.

27. *Ibid.*, IV, p. 257.

28. *Ibid.*, VII, p. 266.

towards the "Namal desh" or new settlements in the Sundarbans. (29) It was not till July-August in 1897 that the mahajans and zamindars recommenced their lending operations and that, too, on stringent terms. This often ended up in distress-sales of peasant holdings. In fact, the vast increase in the registration of land sales by peasants in 1897-98 indicated the extent of their entitlement failure. The number of registrations affecting immoveable property increased by 15.28% in 1896-97, while sales and mortgages of land went up by 26.8 and 33.26%, respectively. (30)

Contraction of the sown area and reduction of agricultural operations naturally minimised the volume of employment for agricultural labourers. In the competition that ensued, wages fell sharply. In South Khulna paddy-cutting rates were reduced to 1/3 of the normal. At Bardal in Satkhira it fell to 1/2 of the usual wages. Instead of 3 annas and a meal a day, men worked for 2 annas and no meal (31) Although emigration increased, the closure of alternative fields of employment in such a year forced down wages. Thus, the lac trade, which supported many Kols and Bhuiyas in Chota Nagpur, fell off noticeably this year. About 25% of the lac factories in Manbhum closed down. Tea production declined to 586,524 lbs. from 1,110,312.5 lbs. in the previous year. The tussar industry in Raghunathpur and Singhbazar in Manbhum went down in competition with machine-manufactures. Due to the dullness of the coal market, 40 collieries stopped work this year. Mica production fell from 8,019 mds. to 7030 mds. while no copper and tin mines were worked during the year. Hence, there was a distinct fall in labour wages which, combined with the phenomenal rise in foodgrain prices, further strengthened the system of debt-bondage. (32) Likewise, due to the almost complete failure of the March bund, the silk filatures in Murshidabad closed down in the beginning of the lean season in March/April and would not open again till mid-July, thus laying off a very large number of labourers at the height of the famine. (33)

Labourers paid in grain were expected to be in a better position. But, in effect, their share in crisis years dwindled down with the decline in production. The Kamias, who were supposed to be relatively well-protected during a famine as they were maintained by their masters, were often ill-treated in such emergencies, as the employer shirked his responsibility to feed and clothe them. Moreover, a famine like

---

29. Ibid., IV, p. 239.

30. Notes on Administration of the Registration Dept. in Bengal, 1896-97. No. 429 p. - D. From C. W. Bolton, Chief Sec. to the Govt. of Bengal, to the Sec., Govt. of India, Home Dept., Darjeeling, 24th sept, 1898.

31. Fam. Sel., III, p. 204.

32. DCAR, Chotanagpur Div., 1896-97, Secs. VII and VIII, pp. 15-17, paras 44-53.

33. Fam. Sel., VI, p.230.

that of 1896-97 naturally gave the mahajan increased opportunities to expropriate labour by issuing loans in the later stages of the crisis, when raiyats had to borrow in order to survive, and to sow the fields for the next season.

The advent of famine was further marked by a growing trade-depression. The trade situation in Khulna-Jessore this year provided a distinct and typical example of this slump. Thus, at Naubanki, a large hat in Satkhira, all shopkeepers and traders were complaining in 1896 that business was extremely dull. The vegetable growers, fishermen, itinerant dealers in piece-goods, the goalas selling "dahi", the "moira" or confectioner and the trinket dealers (manihari) found their business all but gone. (34) At Jadabpur bazar in Bongaon, likewise, the books of cloth dealers showed a falling-off in the business to the extent of nearly 40%. (35) In Lakshmipara, Jaipur and Lohagara in Magura, too, the purchasing power of the people had been reduced and general trade suffered quite severely. The books of the cloth-dealer and confectioner in the local bazar showed a 25% & 40% decline in their respective trades this season.

Primary producers & servicemen suffered more than the retailers, for they had less of a profit-margin even in normal times. Fishermen everywhere complained of very low prices, and fish was getting scarce as the water became more salt and the rivers more rough on account of high winds. Fuel sold cheap, and the woodcutters in the Sundarbans had no capital to pay the forest dues. (36) Due to the norwesters, navigation was more perilous, so that services as that of the manjhis or boatmen suffered just as the effects of famine were first being felt in March/April, 1897. Hailstorms totally blighted the prospects of the mango crop in Bongaon in Jessore, as well as in Nadia and Murshidabad. (37) Hence, there was a sharp fall in the purchasing power of mango producers, fruitsellers and vendors. In Jessore-Khulna date trees were plentiful and the manufacture of jaggery was the chief agricultural industry. But the tapping season, which normally continued till mid-March, ended early this year for the weather was already warm by February. Bongaon in Jessore formed the westernmost part of the important date-palm tract of Central Bengal. Since November 1896 to February 1897, many of the raiyats subsisted on the income from these date trees, paid part of their rents out of it, and were able to avoid borrowing from the mahajans at least for three months. But, due to the dry nature of the soil, the yield of juice and jaggery also ruled about 8 to 12 annas lower per maund than usual. (38)

In regions with greater resources, the effects of depression were naturally less pronounced. For example, in Satrajitpur hat near

---

34. Ibid., III, p.200.

35. Ibid., V, p.230.

36. Ibid., III, pp. 200, 230; IV, p. 316; V, pp. 204-5; VI, p.220.

37. Ibid., VI, p. 239.

38. Ibid., V, p. 226.

Magura, where the "bhadrals" predominated, the sale of such articles as oil, fish, jaggery, piece-goods, etc. found a readier market. (39)

Due to this general fall in purchasing power, whether by production, labour or trade-based entitlement, effective demand for food ceased after prices reached a certain level. Thus, grain lay unsold at many hats as in the interior of the Patna and Chota Nagpur divisions, and ultimately found its way to the export-centres of Fatwa, Khusropur and Gurhwa. The problem is reflected most clearly in the nature and flow of the trade in foodgrains this year. The unprecedented extent and dimensions of the crisis reacted adversely on the local situation in 1896, and the terms of trade moved against the famine-hit districts of Bengal.

### 3. Response failure :

Several changes occurred in the direction of grain-trade, as surplus districts held back in apprehension of scarcity. Instead of exporting, they began to import actively and, by virtue of their greater purchasing power, succeeded in drawing grain even from scarcity districts: agents from NWP in the Patna and Bhagalpur Divisions and the Nakodas or Bombay merchants in Puri actively bought up local stocks, while grain flowed heavily from Rajshahi to Mymensingh, from Palamau and Bhagalpur to the NWP, and from Khurda to Madras. The deviations from the normal trade pattern were thus mainly in the form of exports from areas like Bhagalpur, Orissa and the north Bihar districts, which already had an organised trade-base in the export of foodgrains.

The excess of exports aggravated the problem in scarcity tracts, while raising prices to a famine level even in regions with a relatively good harvest. Meanwhile, the affected districts found it impossible to seek new sources of supply in the midst of a crisis, for the latter usually had prior commitments and did not find it profitable to divert their stocks to areas with low purchasing power. Problem tracts like Palamau, Ramnagar-Bettiah in Champaran, the Kalantar in Nadia, and the Chilka region in Puri had neither an organised trade-base, nor a resourceful trading community, free access or effective demand, which were essential preconditions for a quick and active response of the import-trade in foodgrains. The physical difficulties of transport and communication might have been overcome had the "pull" factor been stronger, assuring merchants of a reasonable profit-margin. This is seen in Champaran in November 1896, when exports to the NWP were checked as soon as local prices rose by over 16%. (40) The effects of the "pull failure" were heightened by the manipulations of local traders, and the limitations of government policy.

---

39. Ibid., IV, p. 313.

40. FRFRO, Champaran, ch. III, para 49.

The government's approach to the crisis of 1896-97 emphasises the role of theory in policy-failures. The supposedly beneficial function of the grain-dealer in reducing consumption by raising prices, as visualised by J. S. Mill, was not confirmed by facts. The expected fall in prices did not always occur on release of the hoarded stocks, for panic created an abnormal demand. Nor did the market forces conform to the theory of a price-stimulus drawing grain into famine tracts, without government interference. Too rigid an application of this policy, without regard to the distinctiveness of local problems, led to severe disagreements even among government officials. Yet even this dissent was not based on an accurate assessment of the problem. Thus, when imports in the famine zone fell far short of expectations, the explanation was sought in the physical problems of transport and communication, rather than in the more fundamental one of crop-related entitlements and purchasing power.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, it may be said that in 1896 - 97 food availability decline did occur in Bengal. But this alone did not explain the intensity of the problem. Rather, the crisis deepened into famine, as the scarcity of foodgrains forced a distinct change in entitlement relations. Government relief statistics indicate the extent of distress among different sections of the population. While relief works had to be opened in all the 3 districts of Khulna, Nadia and Jessore, their extent and duration was the greatest in northwest Nadia, where there was a larger population (about 1/5 to 1/3) of landless day labourers or petty cultivators depending mainly on wage labour. Likewise, in the acutely affected districts of North Bihar, particularly in Saran, almost the entire population consisted of labourers. In Palamau-Manchum, too, the pressure on relief works came mostly from landless labourers, especially from the floating population of the Kamias. The classes worst hit by the exchange failure were the agricultural labourers and marginal farmers, particularly their women, children, old and ailing dependants, whose food entitlement, already reduced by various social and institutional problems during the 1890s, collapsed entirely with the crop failure of 1896.

Thus, food shortage did not directly lead to famine ; it merely intensified the existing tensions, inequalities and entitlement problems within the peasant economy. It affected the supply position, while the change in exchange entitlements reduced the purchasing power or effective demand of a large section of the community. In analysing the famine situation of 1896 in Bengal, therefore, the decline in food availability and the failure in exchange relations appear not as contradictory, but rather as complementary factors leading to the crisis. While a decline in food supply would lead to starvation, the change in entitlement values determined the pattern of that starvation, i.e. which classes it affected and why, for a famine seldom, if ever, affected all groups within a given society. The

effects of food shortage were felt through an elaborate network of exchange-relations : some of them were long-term developments independent of the decline in food supply, which caused much regular starvation, reduced the economic staying power of certain sections of the community, and made them particularly vulnerable to famine ; others were short-term fluctuations directly connected with crop-failure, which caused a total collapse of the existing entitlement patterns, threw the entire economy out of gear, and led to a sudden outbreak of acute starvation or famine.