

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Scope of the Study :

Famine was a recurrent feature in British Indian history, which grew in frequency and dimension since the 1860's till, by the turn of the century, it became the most critical problem threatening the entire peasant economy.

Of the many famines in eastern India between 1896 and 1911, that of 1896-97 was the most devastating. The crop failure was particularly extensive, affecting not only Bengal but the United Provinces, Central Provinces, Bombay and Madras. The area in acute distress measured about 125,000 sq. miles, with a population of 34 million. This reacted sharply on the local situation, for the fear psychology took a stronger grip, and the terms of trade moved against the famine-hit zones of Bengal.

Most studies of famines in British India analysed the general background of famines, rather than the actual phenomenon and its aftermath. Even the analysis of the general background did not always emphasise the vital question of the difference in regional problems and economies, especially of the tribal areas. In fact, the famine problem in this period has generally been given a political slant by both the nationalists and the British, who summarily dealt with it as a sub-topic in general studies of India's economic condition under British rule.

This study will focus not only on the background and causes of the famine of 1896-97 in Bengal but also on its development and intensification, with special reference to the distinctive problems and responses of the different economic regions.

Earlier Famine Literature

British officials of the I.C.S. on the one hand, and anti-government and nationalist writers like William Digby, R.C. Dutt and Dadabhai Naoroji on the other, were mainly concerned with the political controversy as to whether and how far the British colonial policies contributed to the local famine situation.

The works of G.W. Forrest and C.W. McMinn are typical examples of the official version of famines in British India. Forrest's emphasis is on Government policy and relief measures during the famines of 1866, 1873-74, and 1896-97 in Bengal. Though supporting the Government policy of non-interference with private grain-trade during famines, he admitted

the danger of applying such general principles without regard to local circumstances, as was apparent during the Orissa famine of 1866. (1) The study by C.W. McMinn represents a deeper shade of political bias. By his own definition, it is "not a monogram on famines" but an attempt to "expose" the alleged famine falsehoods "employed by several Bengali writers and Congress orators to blacken the character of English officers and administration".(2)

Contrarily, critics of the government deal with famines mainly as an effect of the economic policy and principles of the British Administration. R.C. Dutt emphasises the over-assessment of agricultural land in British India as the main cause of famines; Naoroji focuses on the bullion drain from India to England; while later writers like K.C. Ghosh and P.C. Ray elaborate on particular aspects of the British policy, such as the export of foodgrains and non-interference of the Government with private grain-trade during famines. As noted, all these famine histories have distinct political overtones.

B.M. Bhatia and H.S. Srivastava have concentrated on a more detailed and secular study of the problems in rural society which were, however, aggravated by the policies of the British Government. Dietmar Rothermund, Asok Sen, etc. have focused on the twists of tenancy legislation in the context of peasant agriculture in the 19th century.

Michelle Burge McAlpin, in explaining the frequency of famines in Western India between 1870-1920, challenges such views and underlines the role of climate in causing crop failures. This approach, based on rainfall statistics and climatology, emphasises the natural or ecological, rather than the institutional or policy background, to famines. According to McAlpin, the rainfall was unusually short in the Bombay Presidency during 1898-1906, which accounts for the frequency of famines in this region at the turn of the century. For example, the rainfall index shows a decline of 20% between the periods 1886/1897 and 1898/1906, and 6% only during 1907 to 1916.(3)

The "population" theory or traditional analysis of famines, however, emphasises any reduction in the total output, current supply and per capita availability of foodgrains as the focal point of famine. It is based on the Malthusian theory of a fast-increasing population bearing down with unrelenting force on the available resources of the land. Developing the argument further, the "neo-Malthusians" held that this mounting demographic pressure disturbed the ecological balance, leading to exhaustion of the soil, erosion, deforestation, and a host of

1. G.W. Forrest, The Famine in India, Windsor House, 1897, p. 16.
2. C.W. McMinn, Famine Truths - Half Truths - Untruths Calcutta, 1902, p. 39.
3. Michelle Burge McAlpin, 'Dearth, Famine and Risk : The Changing Impact of Crop Failures in Western India, 1870-1920,' Journal of Economic History, XXXIX, No. 1 (March 1979), p. 45.

related problems. Hence, "... whenever the limits set by nature are ignored, and there is unwise and violent interference with man's agricultural-economic environment, nature reasserts herself with destructive energy." (4) This view directly links crop-failure and the consequent decline in aggregate production, with food shortage and starvation.

Amartya Sen in his theory of the "Failure of Exchange Entitlements", questions this approach of Food Availability Decline or FAD, as he calls it. He criticises it as being too gross and simplistic, which fails to take note of the finer distinctions of income distribution and changing entitlement values in a market economy.

There may be various types of entitlement to foodgrains in a rural economy, viz. -- direct or production-based entitlement as of the landed proprietor, big farmer, small peasant and tenant-cultivator producing food staples, who command varying proportions of the crop grown; trade-based entitlement as of cash-crop cultivators, fishermen, craftsmen, weavers, retailers, etc. who meet their food requirements by selling their respective commodities; and own-labour entitlement, by which one enjoys the production-based and trade-based entitlements related to one's labour power.

According to Sen, most famines are caused less by a decline in food supply than by a coincidental shift in the existing pattern of exchange relations. Several case studies of recent famines, as in Bengal in 1943, Ethiopia in 1973-74, Bangladesh in 1974, and the Sahel countries in Africa during 1968-73, show that as food prices rise due to partial crop failure or other exogenous factors, the values of different commodities, including labour, not only remain static but begin to fall due to a variety of other reasons. This results in a sharp contrast between relative rates, as of food-grains on the one hand, and of labour and different commodities on the other, thus further limiting the purchasing power or "foodgrain entitlement" of the wage-earner, and of the dealers in those particular commodities. Famine is viewed not only as a food crisis, but as a total economic disaster : 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." (5)

The peasant's attitudes and responses to such falling entitlement-levels during a crisis, have been underlined by the "subaltern" approach to famines. Morris. D. Morris breaks new ground in analysing the Indian peasant's flexibility and "rational adaptations" in the

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4. B. N. Ganguli, Trends of Agriculture and Population in the Ganges Valley, London 1938, p. 45.
 5. Amartya Sen, Poverty and Famine : An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation, Oxford, 1981. p. 158.

context of crop-failures. (6) R.C. Cobb at one point admits that the peasant's fear of dearth was not irrational, famine and scarcity being "the greatest single threat to their existence..." (7) David Arnold's study of peasant attitudes and responses in the context of the Madras famine of 1876-78 tries "to use the crisis of the famine as a window onto subaltern consciousness and action." (8)

James C. Scott views the pattern of interactions between the labourer, the peasant-proprietor and the landlord, or between the debtor and the creditor, as part of a "moral economy" in rural society. (9) Viewed in terms of "reciprocity", this patron-client relationship, as Paul Greenough calls it, emphasised the patron's moral obligation to protect the client in return for his services, acknowledging in the process his "right to subsist." (10) According to David Hardiman, however, this seemingly permanent relationship was based not on a static system of reciprocal morality, but on a dynamic and unequal class conflict. In analysing the interaction of the Bhils with the Shahukars of eastern Gujarat, he shows how, especially in case of tribal societies, such relationships represented the meeting of two alien cultures at specific points in time, to fulfil the historical needs of the moment. (11) The kamia-malik relationship in south Bihar is defined by Gyan Prakash as being juridical or contractual (debt-based) in form, economic in content (labour-control), yet expressed in terms of reciprocity. (12) As Arnold points out, an unequal relationship based on such conflicting interests could not stand the stress of a crisis like a famine, war or revolution, for "crises heighten social realities: they rarely negate them." (13) In the shake-up which followed, the existing ties and obligations in rural society were dissolved, giving way to a new exchange-pattern, in which the entitlement of the subordinate groups suffered in every instance.

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6. Morris D. Morris, 'What is a Famine?' Economic and Political Weekly, IX, 2 Nov. 1974, pp. 1855-64.
 7. R. C. Cobb, The Police and the People: French Popular Protest, 1789-1820, London 1970, pp. xvii - xviii, 215.
 8. David Arnold, 'Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action: Madras 1876 - 8,' in R. Guha (ed.) Subaltern Studies III, OUP 1984, p. 64.
 9. James C. Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia, New Haven, 1976.
 10. Paul R. Greenough, 'Indian Famines and Peasant Victims: The case of Bengal in 1943-44,' Modern Asian Studies, 14 : 2 (April 1980), pp. 205-35.
 11. David Hardiman, 'The Bhils and Shahukars of Eastern Gujarat,' Subaltern Studies V, p. 50., 1987.
 12. Gyan Prakash, Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India, CUP, 1990.
 13. David Arnold, op. cit., p. 64.

A sense of betrayal and "moral outrage" during such crises provoked the peasants into various forms of grain-related crimes, as discussed by David Arnold in his monograph on famines, and described most vividly by David Hardiman in his study of the Bhil uprising at Jhalod in September, 1899. The peasant's protest against exploitation, however, did not always assume a violent form; a surer and more effective means, as pointed out by J.C. Scott, involved the prosaic or "everyday" forms of resistance, such as poaching, pilfering, slander, arson, sabotage, evasion or desertion. (14) Aditee Nag Chowdhury-Zilly elaborates on vagrancy and peasant desertions as a form of protest after the famine of 1770 in Bengal. (15) According to Gyan Prakash, such flights marked "an enduring pattern of resistance" by the kamias against exploitation by their maliks in south Bihar.

Logic of the Study :-

The present work, though analysing the apprehensions and responses of the subalterns in the face of a looming subsistence crisis, does not deal with it from the viewpoint of any specific group or community. The focus is, rather, on the event in its totality, i.e. on the development and intensification of the famine in itself, and the crisis of identities that ensued.

To see the famine in its proper perspective, it is further essential to shift the emphasis of study from Government policies to the inherent problems of an agrarian society, with its delicate balance between agriculture and ecology; the complex inter-relationships as between zamindars, tenure-holders, occupancy and non-occupancy raiyats, agricultural labourers, whether free or bonded, artisans, mahajans and traders; the working of the rural market system, and the mechanism of surplus control. Hence, an in-depth study or a close-up of the peasant economy in the context of famines, is historically relevant.

In the process, 'climate' appears as a major variable, but not the focal point of famine. The local rainfall pattern in Bengal does not suggest any marked change or deterioration at the end of the 19th century. True that the proximate cause of crop-failure has always been the lack of adequate and timely rainfall, as in the scarcity years of 1884, 1891-92, 1895-96 and 1896-97. But crop-failure alone did not lead to famine; it merely intensified the chronic problems in the rural economic structure, which eventually led to the crisis.

14. James C. Scott, Weapons of the Weak : Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance, OUP Delhi, 1990.

15. Aditee Nag Chowdhury - Zilly, The Vagrant Peasant : Agrarian Distress and Desertion in Bengal, 1770 to 1830, Wiesbaden : Steiner, 1982.

The 'population' theory, too, underplays this vital aspect. Population growth as a factor contributing to the famine situation in any region cannot be studied in isolation, but only in the context of its socio-economic environment. For instance, though about 1/3 of the population perished from the ravages of the Black Death in Europe and of the great famine of 1770 in Bengal, the former revived due to the favourable trends of urbanisation and capitalist farming, while the latter suffered more intensively from the negative effects of a colonial economy. Again, the loss of population from malaria in the "moribund delta" of Bengal during 1850-1900 coincided with a decline in agricultural productivity, due to the simultaneous presence of other depressing factors like the decaying river-system and recurring cattle murrains (16). Besides, by directly linking famine with a decline in the total volume of foodgrains available, the population theory ignores the disparities in its distribution, for a famine seldom, if ever, affects all classes in a given society.

In the final analysis, therefore, the emphasis falls mainly on the social framework of agriculture, which rendered the peasant economy peculiarly liable to famines. The very fact that a crop-failure could so deeply affect the exchange structure as to create a crisis of such dimensions, is a reflection on the existing anachronisms in the peasant society, which were slowly but surely undermining the production, labour and trade-based entitlements of various sections of the rural population.

The present work attempts to review the famine of 1896-97 in Bengal in terms of the theory of exchange-entitlement. The three background chapters focus respectively on : the distinctive features in agriculture and ecology, especially the crop-pattern and irrigation, in explaining the high incidence of crop-failures in the region; the inequalities and entitlement problems in the rural economy, which transformed the crop-failure into famine; and the interplay of these two variables, i.e. crop-failure and exchange-failure, in causing and prolonging the famine situation during the thirty years preceding the crisis of 1896-97. In the process, a distinct emphasis is laid on a study of the Orissa famine of 1866, as a stark manifestation of FAD, or Food Availability Decline. The analysis tends to show that an exchange crisis resulting exclusively from coincidental shifts in market-based entitlements, independent of foodcrop production, was by no means typical of the 19th century peasant economy in Bengal. Applied to the famine of 1896-97, FAD and FEE thus seem to lose their force as counter-arguments and appear, rather, as supplementary factors leading to the crisis.

16. B.B. Chaudhuri, 'Agricultural Production in Bengal, 1850 - 1900 : Co-existence of Decline and Growth', Bengal Past and Present, v.88, 1969, pp. 157 - 170.

A critical assessment of the nature and extent of crop-failure during the year of famine confirms this hypothesis. The magnitude of the problem, as seen in Chapter IV, indicates that the decline in food availability was both real and determinate. Attempt is made in the next chapter to show how this shortfall reacted on the peasant economy to create an exchange crisis of grave dimensions, as reflected in the price movement, the growth of a psychology of scarcity, and the varied responses of the peasantry in the face of imminent disaster. Chapter VI traces the increasing intensity of the famine as indicated by the behavioural pattern of socially dominant groups like the rent receivers, mahajans and traders, who exploited this fluid situation to further reduce the entitlements of their subordinates, by perfecting their mechanism of surplus control. Chapters VII and VIII analyse the reactions of the government and of the grain-trade in creating entitlements to, and increasing the availability of, foodgrains in this context.