APPENDIX II

FOOD DISTRIBUTION IN BENGAL

In normal times, the conditions of supply and demand for food adjust themselves in such a way that no Governmental interference is called for even in a subsistence economy. But the composite Bengal which consisted of 1 lakh villages and had a population of 60 millions excluding Calcutta, was peculiarly situated. The non-producers who numbered as many as 25 millions along with the remaining 45 million growers of foodgrains were scattered in these myriad tiny villages. The movement of foodgrains from these growers to the retailers in Calcutta was a gradual process. The Famine Inquiry Commission Report on Bengal while summing up the system says that it is an "extremely complicated process by which food in Bengal is collected in small lots from millions of growers, transported, stored, dehusked, transported and stored again, and finally distributed through tens of thousands of retail shops to millions of households." Sir Knight says, that "the great mobility of the rice crop through these complicated channels was the key to the success of this process in normal times." With this background, it would be of interest of to study the circumstances prevailing in Bengal in 1942-43.

The spread of war to the Eastern borders of India and the entry of Japan, forced the Government to take two important steps in 1942 which aggravated the position. Under the "Rice Denial" policy, rice stocks presumed to be in excess over the requirements of the areas concerned were purchased from the three coastal districts of Dinajpur, Bakargunge and Khulna. Although only about 40,000 tons could be secured because of the low price offered, the food position was surely affected.

2. S. ne.ait., p. 70.
again, under the orders issued on May 1, 1942, boats carrying 10 or more persons were removed from most of the coastal districts. The number of such boats removed from circulation was not less than 25,000 and by the end of November, only one third of them were left plying in the area. Naturally this affected the transport position adversely and disrupted the normal system of distribution. To add to the difficulties some 125,000 persons who were put out of employment as a result of the "Denial Policy" were left penniless. The Government paid them a sum of Rs. 82 lakhs as compensation. But this meagre sum could be of little avail to these suffering masses. Most of the boats having been withdrawn physical and geographical conditions of the province stood in the way of an efficient communication system. Transport off the railway in a large part of the province was unable to meet the emergent situation.

Even those supplies which were coming into Calcutta were not properly distributed. "In August, 1943, food stocks began to arrive in Calcutta and were soon piling up, and this continued until the Army took charge in November." The malady during the period thus lay as much in maldistribution as in anything else. The importance of proper distribution would be judged by the fact that "by the time the troops were withdrawn in March-April 1944, they had handled over 70,000 tons of foodgrains and Army motor transport had covered 836,000 miles".

1. Sir Knight, op. cit., p. 92.
2. ibid., p. 101.