FAMINES IN BENGAL DURING 1866-96: AVAILABILITY OR EXCHANGE CRISIS?

The broad outlines of the famine map of Bengal emerging distinctly from the above analysis of the local problems, were confirmed by the pattern of famines and scarcities which occurred in the region between 1866 and 1896.

As seen earlier, certain natural and ecological factors explained the high incidence of crop-failures in Bengal in the late 19th century; entitlement problems in rent, credit, trade and labour relations transformed such a deficiency into famine. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the interplay of these two factors, i.e. crop-failure and exchange failure, in causing or prolonging the famine situation at various points in time during the thirty years prior to the great famine of 1896-97 in Bengal.

Three major famines affected Bengal, Bihar and Orissa with varying intensity in 1866, 1873-74 and 1896-97. Besides, partial crop failures led to acute local scarcity and distress in different regions of the Province in 1875, 1884-85, 1888-89 and 1891-92.

The Orissa Famine of 1866: area and extent:

The famine of 1866 intensively affected a long stretch of land along the eastern coast, including a large part of Madras and Orissa, and several districts in western Bengal and Bihar.

Though the crops were deficient in central Bengal, distress was not deeply felt except in the western districts of Bankura, Burdwan, Hooghly, and to a greater extent, in Nadia. Due to its easy accessibility and proximity to Calcutta, even Nadia managed to escape the extremity of the famine situation.

It was only in the still more western districts of Orissa, i.e., in Cuttack, Puri, Balasore and the Tributary Mahals and in the adjoining region of Midnapur in Bengal, that the famine raged in all its intensity, so much so that the famine of 1866 is generally termed the "Orissa Famine".

The devastation was also felt in large parts of Manbhum and Singhbhum in Chotanagpur, and in Saran, Champaran and Tirhut in North Bihar. In fact, in the dry, laterite tract extending from the north of Balasore to the higher plateaus of Chotanagpur, bounded by alluvial plains on the one side and hill country on the other, the famine
reached an intensity second only to that in Orissa. The impact was less severe in the south Bihar districts of Shahabad, Gaya, Monghyr, Bhagalpur and the Santhal Parganas.

Out of a total affected area of 67,013 sq. miles, the famine was intense in 11,966 sq. miles in Orissa, western Bengal, and Chotanagpur, and severe in 11,450 sq. miles in the rest of Bihar.

1. **Food Availability Decline:**

The famine of 1866 in Orissa was marked by a most severe manifestation of Food Availability Decline or FAD, as indicated by an extensive crop-failure for two successive years resulting in low carry-over stocks, and the total inability of the local traders to cover even part of this deficiency by substantial foodgrain imports. There was thus an almost complete failure in the supply and availability of food grains, which was reflected in the frequent closures of the grain-marts; the purely nominal or fictitious nature of the price roll at the later stages of the famine, as no grain was available even at these high rates; higher prices of the foodgrains in the interior than in the coastal towns, showing an acute local shortage, and the extreme urgency of imports from outside; the futility of money wages at government relief works; the belated decision at some private relief works to make part payments in kind; and the inability of their contractors to arrange for such payments for their labourers, as no steady or assured supplies of foodgrain were available at any stage of the famine.

Orissa, and in fact the whole of the Lower Provinces, had a very low reserve of foodgrains in the beginning of 1865. The stock position in each district was determined by a number of variables, such as the current yield, the absolute food requirements of the people between one harvest and the next, the provision for seed, and the precise extent of the export and import trade in foodgrains.

1(a) **Low reserves due to deficient harvests:**

The size of the reserves or stocks in hand in any year was most closely determined by the nature of the harvest in the preceding year. Indeed, a shortfall in agricultural production leading to a diminished surplus, would naturally reduce the level of the reserves. The Famine Report of 1866 states that on an average the crop outturn had not been very large in Bengal for the past few years. In Bihar, the yield was low for the two preceding seasons; a large tract in Midnapur and the 24 Parganas was devastated by the cyclone of October 1864; further west, the laterite districts of Singhbhum and Manbhum, falling within the famine tract of the second degree, suffered

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from scanty harvests since 1861—the stock of grain in Singhbhum, never very substantial, began decreasing since 1862; Manbhum suffered from short crops in 1863 and 1864, while the early rice in 1865 was damaged by an excess of rain; the crop in Puri was considerably below the average in 1864, though Cuttack and Balasore had a satisfactory yield. Throughout 1865 the strain was felt in Puri due to the depletion of stocks, prices rising instead of falling as the crop matured. Rice, which sold at 35 seers per rupee in July 1864, went up in value to 18 3/4 seers in July, 1865. (3)

1(b) **Excessive exports**

There is, however, scope for doubt as to whether the low carryover stocks in 1865-66 resulted mainly from deficient harvests, or from a rise in demand as indicated by the growing volume of exports. The export fund in foodgrains might have been drawn primarily from the grain sold by the peasants to pay their rent, which brought an assured supply to the market at low rates at a fixed time of the year. Yet, as the demand grew, high export prices also cut into the surplus stocks, which were largely controlled by the zamindars and mahajan-traders in the form of produce rents, debt payments and a host of other levies determined by the rural set-up. Indeed, "the questions of export trade and of reserves re-act on each other so far that, generally speaking, increased exportation means diminished reserves, and increased reserves connote a falling off in the export trade". (4)

Mauritius, Burma, Ceylon, and various other countries in Asia and Australasia had begun to draw heavily on the rice reserves of Bengal in the 1860's. Within India, too, areas growing commercial crops like the cotton districts in the west, imported foodgrains on a large scale from Bengal and Orissa. Though cash crops could never really encroach upon the rice economy in Bengal, in certain areas, as in the rice-growing district of Monghyr, the best lands were under indigo, which was a potent cause of distress, especially in view of the increasing outflow of grain. The upcountry merchants bought grains for export as soon as they were reaped, and sold a part of it later at enhanced rates. (5) In November 1865, it was noted that though Monghyr and Bhagalpur had enough grain in stock, a fortnight's continued exportation would completely


5. J. C. Geddes, *op. cit.*, Cal. 1873; S. Misser, zamindar of Toolsipore, Monghyr, in reply to the Memorandum of Questions on the Famine of 1866.

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Prices rose mainly due to keen competition among the grain-dealers in supplying the markets of the North-West. In fact, in 1858 even a greater deficiency in crop output did not raise the price of rice to more than 15 seers a rupee (as against 10 seers in 1865), precisely due to the absence of exports to the North-West. Distress deepened in the northernmost parts of Bhagalpur, Darbhanga and Champaran adjacent to Nepal, as grain flowed into the North West and Nepal far in excess of normal years. Meanwhile, an important source of supply was shut off, as the Nepal government strictly forbade exportation in view of the crop-failure in the terai region. In Burhait in the Santhal Parganas the Santhals, frustrated by government inaction, kept prices down by combining not to sell grain for export to the North-West. (7) The Deputy Magistrate of Banka notes: "I believe the general outcry at present is not of bad crops, but of the scarcity of grain caused by export." (8) The quantity of rice and paddy exported from Calcutta and the outposts increased from 94,75,637 and 23,439 mds. respectively in 1855-56, to 1,91,86,522 and 2,64,860 mds. in 1864-65, an increase of more than double in the case of rice, and eleven times in that of paddy within a decade! (9)

Exports from Orissa were particularly attractive, for in spite of an increase in the price of rice, it was still rather low compared to most other provinces till the end of 1864. The Telinga "Koomtees" of Madras and the French trading house of Messrs. Robert, Charriol and Company, and later the Nakodas or Bombay merchants, were most actively engaged in this export trade. False Point recorded an increasing outflow of foodgrain. Exports grew in volume from southern Orissa to Ganjam and Gopalpur where the Koomtees cornered large stocks, and from northern Balasore to Midnapur, Hijli and Calcutta. (10)

The following statistics show that exports from Orissa had increased more than sixfold in the decade between 1855-65, and 1.7 times in the year preceding the famine (11):

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6. J. C. Geddes, op. cit.; A. Money, Commissioner Bhagalpur Division and Santhal Parganas, to the Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Lower Provinces, No. 148, dated Bhagalpur, 6th Nov. 1865.
7. Ibid.
11. Ibid., P. 13, para 47.
## TABLE I
Export of Rice & Paddy from the Districts of Orissa, in mds. of 80lbs. 1855-56 to 1864-65:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>BALASORE</th>
<th>CUTTACK</th>
<th>PURI</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1855-56</td>
<td>142,616</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>142,616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856-57</td>
<td>188,658</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>188,658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857-58</td>
<td>34,232</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>34,232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858-59</td>
<td>52,970</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>52,970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859-60</td>
<td>536,382</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>536,382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860-61</td>
<td>354,074</td>
<td>23,044</td>
<td></td>
<td>83,936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>461,054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861-62</td>
<td>327,504</td>
<td>69,880</td>
<td></td>
<td>46,780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>444,164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1862-63</td>
<td>407,622</td>
<td>36,696</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>449,134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863-64</td>
<td>520,052</td>
<td>29,464</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>549,516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1864-65</td>
<td>806,576</td>
<td>72,128</td>
<td></td>
<td>58,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>937,528</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This growing volume of the export trade in foodgrains thus had a distinct role in bringing down the reserves in the Province just before it was struck by the famine of 1865-66. For instance, though Puri suffered from such an extensive crop-failure in 1864 that the pressure was felt throughout the next year, it did not prevent a sharp rise in exports (58,824 mds. in 1864-65 as against 4,816 mds. in 1862-63). This factor was as much responsible as the deficient harvest for doubling the price of rice in Puri between 1864-65. The demand for exportation of foodgrains thus became a most persistent feature of the local economy since the 1850's, and "may be said to have reached its utmost height in the early part of 1865." (12)

1(c) **Crop-failure in 1865 - 66:**

It was against this background of low reserves that the crops failed extensively in the autumn of 1865, leading to a total breakdown in the supply of foodgrains.

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The rains were erratic and ill-distributed during the monsoon, and altogether deficient in the winter months. For instance, Puri had a total rainfall of about 36.3" in 1865, as against the yearly average of 60 to 65 inches. After an unusual and useless fall of 13 inches in May, it fell to 5" per month during the monsoon and ceased altogether in the crucial months of October and November. In Cuttack too, there was no rainfall at all in October - November, while in Balasore it stopped in November - December with a meagre fall of 0.30" in October. (13) The strain was felt earliest in Puri, severe distress spreading first over the traditional famine zone of Malud, Parikud, and the Chilka tract, covering the south-western, central and eastern parts of the district approximately. In October, the Collector of Balasore reported that the rice crop did not promise to reach even 1/8 of the previous year's yield. In Cuttack, too, there was widespread panic by mid-November, when reports were confirmed of a large-scale crop failure. The Orissa Commissioner's estimate of the divisional average at half of the usual outturn in November 1865, was deemed too optimistic by the Famine Enquiry Commission.

Distress, though less intense, spread over the rice belt of north Bihar, part of the moribund delta in western Bengal, the laterite tract stretching from Birbhum, Bankura and Midnapur across south Bihar, and up to the Chotanagpur plateau in the west. Not more than 1/2 of the crop could be saved in Nadia and the 24 Parganas, while in areas of severe drought it would not exceed 1/8 of the average outturn. (14) Prices rose sharply in Bankura in September, in apprehension of scarcity. In western Midnapur the Jungle Mahals adjacent to Orissa produced only 1/3 of a full harvest, while the usual cold weather crops completely failed. In large areas of the Patna, Bhagalpur and Chotanagpur Divisions, sowing was delayed due to the arrival of the monsoon so late in June. In July, however, the rains were so excessive as to injure the early rice. It ceased abruptly in September - October, causing a widespread failure of the winter rice and other crops growing on the highlands. In Manbhum, the cold weather crops were estimated to be between 1/3 and 1/2, and in some areas, as low as 1/4 of a full harvest. In north Bihar and Bhagalpur the unseasonable nature of the rain, more than its deficiency, caused intensive damage to the crops. The yield in 1864 and 1865 varied between 2/3 to 1/3 and, in vulnerable areas like northern Tirhut and Champaran, did not exceed 1/4 of the average outturn. (15)

14. Ibid, District Narratives: P. 40, para 4; Bluebook on Orissa and Bengal Famine 1866, Enquiry Commission, paras 3 - 4 on Presidency Division.
**2. Supply crisis as reflected in the price-movement**

The phenomenal rise in foodgrain prices reflected the supply crisis in the most real and absolute terms, there being a three or fourfold increase in the normal price range in most districts, during the lean months of 1866:

**TABLE II**
Course of price during the period of greatest pressure in each District of Bengal, 1866. (Quantities per rupee.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Period of greatest pressure</th>
<th>Highest price of 10yrs of increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Srs.</td>
<td>Srs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Srs.</td>
<td>Srs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>June-Oct 7 1/2 to 9</td>
<td>Aug. 7 1/2</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bancorah</td>
<td>June-Sept. 6 7 1/2</td>
<td>Ditto 6</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>June-Oct. 8 to 9 1/2</td>
<td>July 8</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midnapore</td>
<td>May - Sept. 6 9</td>
<td>Aug. 6</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooghly</td>
<td>June - Oct. 7 9 1/2</td>
<td>July 7</td>
<td>19 1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howrah</td>
<td>Ditto 8 to 10</td>
<td>Ditto 8</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Parganas-</td>
<td>June-Oct. 7 10</td>
<td>Aug. 7</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presi Nuddea</td>
<td>June &amp; July 8 to 9 1/2</td>
<td>July 8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dency Jessore</td>
<td>Ditto 8 to 9</td>
<td>ditto 8</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moorshedbad</td>
<td>June-Sept 8 9</td>
<td>July-Sept. 8</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinazepore</td>
<td>July-Sept 11 to 11 1/2</td>
<td>Sept. 11</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malda</td>
<td>April-Oct 10 to 11 1/2</td>
<td>July 10</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajshaj -</td>
<td>Aug- Oct 9 to 12</td>
<td>Sept. 9</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hye. Rungpore</td>
<td>July-Sept. 10 to 11 1/2</td>
<td>ditto 10</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bograh</td>
<td>July-Oct 10 to 11</td>
<td>Aug. 10</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pubna</td>
<td>May-Oct 1 1/2 to 11 1/2</td>
<td>June 9 1/2</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooch Darjeeling</td>
<td>Mar- Oct 7 8</td>
<td>Oct. 7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoochBehar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dacca</td>
<td>June-Sept 10 10 to 11 1/2</td>
<td>Sept. 10</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furreedpur</td>
<td>June-Oct 8 1/2 to 9 1/2</td>
<td>Dit 8 1/2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dacca</td>
<td>Backergunge</td>
<td>June-Oct. 8 1/2 to 9 1/2</td>
<td>Ditto 8 1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mymensing</td>
<td>Aug.&amp; Sept. 8 1/4</td>
<td>Aug. 8 1/2</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylhet</td>
<td>April-Oct. 8 to 11 1/2</td>
<td>June 8 23</td>
<td>68.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>May - Oct. 4 1/2 to 9</td>
<td>ditto 4 1/2</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>Sept &amp; Oct 11 to 14</td>
<td>Sept. 11</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chitta Moakhally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-gong Tiperra</td>
<td>May to Oct 11 to 14</td>
<td>Aug 11 24</td>
<td>54.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hill Tracts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Time Period</td>
<td>Rate</td>
<td>Duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patna</td>
<td>April to Oct. 8 1/2 to 11</td>
<td>Aug. 8 1/2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaya</td>
<td>May to Oct. 7 1/2 to 10</td>
<td>Ditto 7 1/2</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat Shahabad</td>
<td>April to Sept. 7 1/2 to 10 1/2</td>
<td>Ditto 7 1/2</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiharoor</td>
<td>April to Oct. 8 to 9 1/2</td>
<td>Ditto 8</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarun</td>
<td>June to Aug. 9 1/2 to 11</td>
<td>Ditto 9 1/2</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chimaparun</td>
<td>April to Aug. 6 1/2 to 9</td>
<td>Ditto 6 3/4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monghyr</td>
<td>April to Oct. 7 1/2 to 10</td>
<td>July 7 1/2</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bha gal Purnea</td>
<td>June to Oct 6 to 10</td>
<td>Ditto 7 1/2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pur Sountal - Pergunahs</td>
<td>Ditto 7 1/2 to 10</td>
<td>Ditto 7 1/2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuttack</td>
<td>April to Oct. 4 1/2 to 8</td>
<td>June &amp; July 4 1/2</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ori Pooree</td>
<td>Feb. to Oct. 5 to 9 1/2</td>
<td>June, July</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balasore</td>
<td>April to Oct 5 1/2 to 9 1/2</td>
<td>Aug. 5 1/4</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazareebagh</td>
<td>May to Oct 6 1/2 to 9</td>
<td>Aug. 6 1/2</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cho Lohardaga</td>
<td>July to Sept. 6 to 10 1/2</td>
<td>Ditto 6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonag Singhbhum</td>
<td>June to Oct 5 to 10</td>
<td>Ditto 5</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-pur Manbhoon</td>
<td>Ditto 4 to 8</td>
<td>Ditto 4</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(16)

Source: J. C. Geddes, Bengal: The crops of 1865-66 for comparison with those of 1873-74, compiled from extracts from official papers, p. 258.

As seen above, the longest duration of famine rates is recorded in Puri. The weekly returns in Orissa between October 1865 and December 1866 show that, for the space of five months in the best supplied markets, the price of food, supplied erratically, ranged from five to ten times the average rate:— (17)

16. Ibid., p. 258.
17. J. C. Geddes, Administrative experience recorded in former Famines, (hitherto referred to as Adminis. Ex.) Cal. 1874, p. 246.
### TABLE III
Approximate prices of common Rice in Poore, Cuttack, and Balasore given in seers (of Tolas 80 weight) per Rupee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week ending</th>
<th>Poore</th>
<th>Cuttack</th>
<th>Balasore</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latter part of October 1865</td>
<td>8 to 13</td>
<td>8 to 15</td>
<td>11 to 16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ditto 20th</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>12.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ditto 27th</td>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>12.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ditto 4th December 1865</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>11.25</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>13.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ditto 11th</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>11.25</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>13.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ditto 18th</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>14.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ditto 28th</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>14.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ditto 1st January 1866</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>13.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ditto 8th</td>
<td>13.50</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>13.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ditto 15th</td>
<td>12.50</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>12.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ditto 22nd</td>
<td>10.00</td>
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The price movement in Orissa had several distinctive features, suggesting a total exhaustion of food grain supplies in the region. Its sharp edge was felt most keenly by the poor, since the proportion of rise was the greatest in case of the coarser foodgrains such as common rice in Bengal, and jowar and bajra in the North-West Provinces. The problem was particularly acute in districts with cheap grain and low wage-levels. The rate of increase in such cases could be correctly gauged only in relation to the local range of prices. Yet the Board, viewing the problem from a metropolitan angle, often failed to allow for the extreme cheapness of grain prevailing in certain districts, so that prices were reported to be reasonable, when in fact they were alarming by local standards. This was most relevant in Orissa, where the price of rice was generally low compared to other parts of the Province. For instance, on 24th January, 1866, the Board of Revenue described the prices in Puri as being "happily insufficient to tempt exporters from the opposite coast", implying the existence of adequate reserves which kept the rates down. (18) Yet the Collector of Puri mentions that rice was not generally procurable. The prices current of the weeks ending 23rd and 29th January show rice selling at 10 1/4 and 8 3/4 seers per rupee respectively, which was four times its average price in the district. (19) Allowances also had to be made for seasonal variations in the price of rice, for the

cheap post-harvest rates invariably rose as the season advanced. Any contrary movement of prices would imply a major change in the supply position, as had happened in Puri when prices rose instead of falling, as the crops ripened in 1865.

Grain prices in the interior, as compared to those in the coastal towns and cities, further indicated the extent of shortfall in agricultural production. In normal times, the price of rice was always lower in the interior, and rose in the cities due to a complex of factors such as cost of carriage, middlemen's profits and greater purchasing power. Any reversal of this trend, as in January 1866, indicated a most serious exhaustion of stocks in the province. According to Mr. Barlow, the Magistrate of Puri, "it is one of the features observable in the famine" that "the city is the only place where a certain supply (small though it be) of grain is to be found, while in various parts of the interior, none at all is procurable". (20) Between October 1865 and December 1866 food, rarely available in the interior of Orissa, sold for up to 50 times the normal price. (21) No stocks existed in the localities of Nubbah, Gope, and around the edge of the Chilka via Haridas and Boosoonpur, while no rice was sold at the large mart of Lattaharan in Kodhar, indicating "the nakedness of the land". (22)

The price quotations showed sharp fluctuations and discrepancies, due to the lack of any assured supplies. This was most apparent in the Cuttak returns, the prices varying "from hour to hour and from one street of Cuttack to another". (23)

3. Response failure of the market:

The supply crisis was accentuated by a total failure of the market to respond to the price stimulus. As noted earlier, a distinctive feature of this famine in Orissa was the frequent closure of the grain marts rather than price-hikes by the local traders, reflecting an acute shortage in the availability of foodgrains. The Report of the Famine Enquiry Commission in 1866 notes this point: "Throughout this famine, from the very first, it was symptomatic of its character as rather due to scarcity of grain than scarcity of money, that each fresh accession of alarm constantly took the shape of stopping sales at the regular marts altogether, rather than of mere sudden enhancements of price". (24)

In Cuttack, rice selling at 8 seers per rupee on the morning of 21st October 1865, was no longer available at noon, all the grain

23. J. C. Geddes, Adminis. Ex., P. 244.
markets being shut down. Assured that government would not under any circumstances try to fix rates in the bazar, the dealers opened their shops the next day and proposed to sell rice at 12 seers per rupee. But, since the 22nd prices began to soar, and on 26th October the grain market was closed down once again. On 23rd October, supplies to Ganjam from Puri via the Chilka ceased entirely, resulting in a general closure of all the grain stores there. (25) On 26th October Mr. G. N. Barlow, Magistrate of Puri, wrote that while "dundeedars have combined, so as to altogether close the modees' shops" in Cuttack, "... we are so far better off at Poorree, that rice is being sold there, though at enhanced rates..." (26) Yet on 27th October Ravenshaw, the Officiating Commissioner of the Cuttack Division, mentions reports of a closure of the grain stores in Puri. (27) Even Barlow was concerned enough to write in a post-script to his deputy: "Write to me demi - officially always about this, and tell me if you see any indication of the buniah and dokandars closing their shops altogether. Try and persuade people to send out into the mofussil to buy in their own rice". (28)

Official reports tended to dismiss this trait as the usual dealers' combine in a lean season, to raise the price by holding back supplies. Thus, Ravenshaw believed: "There are large stores in the hands of dealers probably enough to supply the market for a couple of years... In hopes of gain the dealers .... agreed to keep all grain out of the market until the price rises to 8 annas per seer". Yet, the belief that a free flow of trade would eventually enable the demand and price stimulus to regulate supplies, did not allow for such sporadic closures of the market. Even Ravenshaw admitted: "... the total closing of shops is a somewhat peculiar feature in the present crisis, which I am quite at a loss either to account for or explain. The very fact of the exceedingly high prices now ruling .... ought to operate as an inducement to sell". (29)

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The behaviour of the market, though apparently confusing, was not unreasoned, for the price quotations had little relevance in Orissa in 1865-66. In fact, the weekly returns for Puri and Cuttack were more nominal than real, for grain was not available there even at these high rates.

The problems faced by the civil servants, jail authorities, etc. in feeding their staff and inmates, amply illustrate the point. In October 1865 the Judge, the Magistrate, the Commanding Officer, the Superintendent of the Light-House, and others in Cuttack complained of the difficulty experienced by their establishments in procuring rice. (30) T.E. Ravenshaw, the Officiating Commissioner of Cuttack, reports to the Secretary to the Bengal Government, on 27th October, 1865: "I have this morning received a letter from Colonel Owen, noting the difficulty he finds in obtaining grain for the troops and camp-followers in cantonments. The Judge writes that the vakeels of his court have petitioned, stating that they were unable to get rice .... My own office people tell the same tale; and my servants draw their daily rations from a few maunds of rice I happened to have in hand". (31) The Deputy Magistrate of Puri writes on 25th October, 1865: "It is to be regretted that we have no stock of rice in the jail at this time, and I am at a loss how to procure rice for more than eighty prisoners". (32) Even at the government relief works, where payments were never made in kind for fear of disrupting the private trade in foodgrains, the labourers could not obtain rice for their money. This was a case of "response failure" being greater than "pull failure" in the market, where cash wages could not being relief.

Amartya Sen remarks: "The rationale of cash relief rests on the assumption that "pull failure" is the main problem to deal with, and that the problem of 'response failure' will not provide a barrier to curing the entitlement problem through regenerating purchasing power. This need not always work, and the possibility of using this type of relief must depend to a great extent on the nature of the markets as well as the limits of bureaucratic management". (33) In Orissa in 1866, the market was too imperfect and the traders too apathetic to respond to any "pull" provided by the government, while the bureaucrats vied

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32. Baboo Ramakhoy Chatterjee to G. N. Barlow Esq., No. 68, dated 25th October, 1865.
with each other in emphasising the principle of "laissez faire", and would have nothing to do directly with the import or distribution of food.

On 15th January, 1866, Barlow speaks of "a danger likely to interfere materially with, if not actually put a stop to, the works," viz. - the want of food. (34) The labourers were extremely anxious to receive their daily wages in kind, rather than cash wages for task work. Yet the suggestions of Ravenshaw and Barlow to this effect were ignored by the Board of Revenue, lest grain payments should interfere with the flow of private trade. Even when part of the wages were paid in kind as in the private relief works at Kendrapara in Cuttack, rice for payment was almost impossible to procure and was mostly imported from Calcutta. (35) Thus, the Orissa famine of 1866 was a stark manifestation of FAD, resulting primarily from a lack of food rather than money.

Yet, the undertones of "exchange" or "pull" failure could not be altogether ignored, for they highlighted another facet of the problem, viz. - that of effective demand. Since the Province was drained of stocks, the only way the market could respond to the situation was through an active import trade in foodgrains. The government remained firm in the belief that "... If the market favours importers, rice will find its way to Poree without Government interference ...." (36) Prices in Orissa, however, were generally so low compared to neighbouring states, that even the prevailing famine rates were not attractive enough to draw supplies from outside. The Board's description of the prices in Puri as being "happily insufficient to tempt exporters from the opposite coast" had a mistaken emphasis, for the low prices implied a poor level of purchasing power, rather than self-sufficiency in stocks. (37) It failed to realise the magnitude of the problem, as prices considered alarming by local standards seemed reasonable in comparison with other parts of the Province. The exchange entitlement of a section of the population fell further in 1863 with the total cessation of the government manufacture of salt on the coasts of Orissa, which had given employment to many. As their holdings were not sufficient to support them, the "molungees" or salt manufacturers relied mainly on their wages of labour, the loss of which forced them to swell the ranks of the already large class of agricultural labourers in Orissa. Some of them went to distant works and to Calcutta in search of employment, and mostly worked as ordinary coolies to supplement their meagre earnings from land. This class was
thus most susceptible to famine, for the slightest derangement of the agricultural economy would throw them out of employment and reduce them to starvation. (38) As Mr. Barlow noted, the real state of affairs could not be determined "until you examine further down, and remember that there is a large class of people, the bournies, coolies and chases, to whom the prohibitive rate is equally starvation with the altogether non-existence of grain...." (39)

The problems of exchange failure were of a deeper shade in Bengal and Bihar, where food could still be had at exorbitant rates. In the famine affected regions of north Bihar, the classes which felt the severest pressure were the Dosadh, Ahirs, Domes, Kurmis, Nooniah, etc. - especially the last, 1/3 of whom were believed to have perished during the famine. The manufacture of salt petre could no longer sustain them due to high export duties and the competition of substitutes from Europe; hence, being thrown on to the general labour market where the demand was naturally slack during a lean season as in 1865-66, they were left with hardly any means of subsistence. Another group suffering from exchange failure was the large community of weavers in Hooghly, Birbhum and Midnapur. As the terms of trade moved against them, the weaving centres of Bishnupur, Jehanabad, etc. gradually declined, and the 'tantis' shut their looms to wander about in search of food and labour. For instance, while the Jehanabad subdivision had turned out cloth valued at Rs. 7,65,000 in 1864-65, the estimated outturn in 1865-66 was only worth Rs. 6,25,812. (40)

(4) The crisis deepens into famine:

The first signs of famine became apparent late in 1865. When mid-October passed without rain, the alarm became serious. The country ceased to supply the towns, and the grain - marts in Cuttack and Puri were shut down. Prices of common rice soared from 13 to 8, and 15 to 8 seers per rupee in Puri and Cuttack, respectively. (41) Even in Nadia, where the famine was less intense, people who normally ate thrice a day could now afford no more than one meal. (42) The government remained complacent in the belief that reduced consumption, rather than importation of grain, was a more practicable means of relief during famines. (43) Distress forced a change not only in the quantity, but

38. Ibid, p. 14, para 49.
41. J. C. Geddes: Adminis, Ex., p. 246.
42. Minutes on Famine 1866-67, Appendix, letter from R. Harvey Esq., Khalbolea, to the Collector of Nadia, dated 10th April 1866.
43. Ibid, Appendix, p 32.
also in the quality of food consumed—in the interior of Orissa as well as the famine belt in north Bihar, people took to eating roots, wild fruit and berries. (44) In Chotanagpur and portions of laterite western Bengal, the forest products normally supplementing the poor man's diet now became his sole means of subsistence.

Predictably, malnutrition and unwholesome food led to a spurt of diseases, mainly cholera. As the Famine Commissioners remarked, it was "quite impossible to distinguish between the mortality directly caused by starvation and that due to disease, directly or indirectly, connected with starvation, want, and bad food." (45) Cholera constantly accompanied want, breaking out first in southern Puri and then in Gope, eastern Cuttack and Balasore, in keeping with the progress of the famine. C.O. Woodford, Police Surgeon in London, remarked on the "immense mortality" in the Police Hospital as being the result of "dire destitution .... and, in nearly every instance, of actual starvation..." (46)

A natural corollary to starvation and disease was an alarming increase in the incidence of crime, especially in "grain plunder". In the Jungle Mahals of Midnapur during the first part of 1866, 21 out of 25 cases of dacoity involved grain looting. (47) The neighbouring tract of Balasore was also subjected to lawlessness and the plunder of grain, as starving migrants from Mayurbhanj swelled the ranks of the destitutes.

Panic gripped the public mind, and rumours began to circulate. At Dantoon, on the borders of Balasore, the lower castes were said to be eating raw cow's flesh and human corpses. The story was probably baseless, but its very circulation reflected the growing fear psychology of the local people. (48) The intensity of distress caused many to violate age-old social customs and accept cooked food at the government "unnochutters", though often at some distance from their homes, the Cuttack pundits demanding merely the payment of a few annas in redemption. (49) In Parikud, the "chashas" were burying instead of

45. Ibid. Pt. I, para 75.
47. Ibid., appendix, p. 107, para 11.
48. Ibid., Appdx., pp. 111-112, From W. J. Herschel, Magistrate Midnapur, to the Com., Burdwan Div. ; No. 52, dated 25th April, 1866.
49. J. C. Geddes, Adminis. Ex.; Note of Mr. Kirkwood on the "Recovery of Caste after Partaking of Cooked Food at a Poor House".

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burning their dead in December 1865 - a sure sign of distress. (50)

5. The policy of 'laissez - faire'

While the crisis thus deepened into famine, the government remained largely inactive. As noted, its policy of rigid adherence to the principle of laissez - faire, or non-interference in private trade, was based on a firm belief that the price-stimulus would naturally draw supplies from surplus to scarcity areas, through the channels of private trade. Having full faith in the political economy of John Stuart Mill, it maintained that "though the Government can do more than any one merchant, it cannot do nearly as much as all merchants". (51) Hence, it refused to disrupt private trade by importing any foodgrains into the Province, making no allowances for the exigencies of the local situation, and relenting only when it was too late to be effective.

The outlines of this policy were emphasised throughout the history of the famine. On 31st October 1865 Muspratt, Collector of Balasore, reported to the Commissioner that the merchants had no large stores in hand. In fact, the Telinghee merchants from the south, who had carried off the previous year's crops, causing a sharp price-rise, had to return from Orissa without any cargoes this season. (52) The Collectors of Balasore, Puri and Cuttack applied in very clear terms during October - November 1865, for permission to make enquiries in their respective districts, regarding the areas and extent of shortfall. The applications, however, were summarily rejected, the Commissioner and the Board concurring in opinion. (53)

In January, 1866, the Engineers of the PWD found it impossible to procure rice for the coolies on relief works, in return for their cash wages. Mr. Ravenshaw, learning of the situation from the district Collectors, sent the following telegram, of a most "important and emergent character", to the Board of Revenue on 31st January: "Famine relief is at a standstill. Public Works Department refuse to advance money to Collectors to purchase rice. Poori must get rice from elsewhere. May I authorise advance for this purpose for Cuttack, Balasore or Poori." The Board's answer of 1st February was short, sharp and decisive: "The Government decline to import rice into Poori .... All payments for labour employed to relieve the present distress are to be in cash." Mr. Ravenshaw conveyed the instructions to Mr. Barlow in Puri, pointing out that "to supply grain will interfere with legitimate trade". (54) The beginning of February 1866

50. Minutes on Famine, 1866, Appdx., p 49.
52. Ibid, p 28 para 90
was a crucial point, when government should have undertaken to import foodgrains into Orissa, or at least to enquire into the nature and extent of the shortfall. Works suitable for famine relief, such as raising of embankments, road repair and collection of metal could at this stage have been undertaken extensively and fruitfully, if the workers had received payment in kind. As the Famine Commissioners remarked, - "The whole question, therefore, is in this instance narrowed to one of food". (55) If the problem had been so viewed by the authorities in February, the crisis could perhaps be resolved and provisions made for the monsoon months, when the greater part of Orissa became virtually inaccessible both by land and sea.

It was only in mid-June, when the monsoon was in full force, that the government woke to the realities of the situation, and suddenly commenced imports. As late as 26th May, 1866, the Superintending Engineer in Cuttack was still complaining of labourers leaving the works throughout Balasore, Cuttack and Puri, as food was not procurable for their money. On 28th May, the Lieutenant Governor requested the Board to "give their renewed and immediate attention to the question of importing rice into the distressed districts" and for the first time questioned "their confident opinion that such importation is unnecessary". (56)

On 29th May, the Lieutenant Governor telegraphed to his Secretary in Calcutta, requesting the Board to send rice worth Rs. 1 lakh at once from Calcutta to Balasore, Dhamrah and False Point, and, if necessary, to "indent on a second lakh for the purchase of rice". (57) Importations now commenced on an emergency basis. On 10th June, additional cargoes were accepted for Orissa. On the 11th the Board was authorised to spend the whole balance of the North Western Fund on rice imports. A Government steamer arrived before the end of the month, with a cargo of rice from the Madras coast to Puri. The Government of India sanctioned an advance of 20 Lakhs for the importation of foodgrains into Orissa.

Yet these belated efforts were largely frustrated by the extreme difficulty of landing supplies at the coast and conveying them to the interior of Orissa at the height of the rains, no pre - arrangements having been made for their storage or transport. As the monsoon advanced, problems in communication forced several cargoes to be diverted elsewhere. The light government steamer, Nemesis, could carry only about 8,000 maunds of rice up the Balasore River till late in July. Supplies of rice from False Point took as much as 5 to 6 weeks to reach Cuttack. At Puri, the landing was so difficult that apart

55. Ibid, p 63, para 207.
57. Ibid, p 89, para 283.

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from a small supply obtained from the "Arracan", it took 7 weeks (9th July to 30th August) to unload one steamer, the "T.A. Gibb." A large cargo sent from the Madras coast on board the government vessel, "Tubal Cain", found it impossible to unload and, being caught in a gale, was forced to throw over part of her cargo and divert to the rice port of Akyab.

Balasore, deprived of these supplies, suffered from extreme want, rice being sold at less than 3 seers per rupee. In Puri and Cuttack, too, supplies of rice into the interior were cut off by unusually high floods. Private steam tugs and sloops, pressed into government service, could have been of some help in drawing and unloading rice, especially in the country around the Dhamrah, which was one of the worst affected and least relieved tracts in Orissa. False Point, too, was much closer to Calcutta by sea, than to Cuttack by land, and landing arrangements made with greater insight would perhaps have alleviated the distress to some extent. Yet, due to its total obsession with the "laissez - faire" theory and fear of unprofitable expenditure, the government failed to do the needful during the crucial pre-monsoon months. (38)

6. Failure of the "laissez - faire" policy, due to lack of:

(a) Foodgrain availability:

During the Orissa famine, the government insisted on too rigid an application of the general principle of laissez - faire, without adapting it to the specific needs of the local situation. Sir Cecil Beadon, later reviewing his policy in 1866, realised the grave error made by the administration in declining to import foodgrains into Orissa: "I am free to confess that in deciding not to recommend the adoption of this measure, I relied too much both on the resources of the Province itself and on the ability of private enterprise to supply a possible deficiency from other quarters, and that I believed that in Orissa (as in Bengal and Bihar) the question was one of money rather than of food". (39)

The first premise of the official policy, viz. that the Province was not lacking in resources or foodgrains, was based on a misconception of the level of local reserves. The officials in Orissa were not to blame, for their warnings went largely unheeded. In October 1865 Baboo Ramakhoy Chatterjee, Deputy Magistrate of Puri, had apparently been misinformed about the stocks held by local zamindars and "math" chiefs, which were thought sufficient to supply the district for two years. However, he entirely changed his opinion after personal inspections and called for immediate action by the government in

58. Ibid., p 91-92.
59. Minutes on Famine, 1866, p 9, para 15.
apprehension of famine. (60) Mr. Barlow, Magistrate of Puri, distinctly mentioned to the Commissioner that the sort of stocks supposed to be held in Cuttack had no existence in Puri. The Collector’s telegram from Puri on 24th November, 1865, was more explicit: "Starvation at Parikood, Mallood; deaths increasing .... Grain shipped to Metacooch better than money". (61) Mr. Muspratt, Collector of Balasore, apprehended that the rice would yield no more than 1/8 of last year’s crop, and categorically denied the existence of any large stocks with the local traders. He further describes how the Telinghee merchants, who had carried off most of the previous year’s rice, failed to obtain cargoes this year. (62) In fact, the Collectors of Puri, Cuttack and Balasore had applied in clear and unequivocal terms during October-November 1865, for permission to make enquiries in their respective districts, regarding the areas and extent of shortfall. The applications, however, were rejected by the Commissioner and the Board. (63) At the end of October the Commissioner received letters from the Judge, Magistrate, Commanding Officer, Superintendent of the Light House and others, noting their inability to procure rice for their establishments. They were duly informed that trade could not be interfered with. The government remained complacent in the belief that the dealers were withholding stocks, which would be drawn into the market by the price stimulus at the right moment.

This, in fact, was the most vital premise of the economic principle of laissez-faire, applied in rigid uniformity by the British Government to famine situations whether in Ireland or Orissa, without regard to local circumstances. According to this theory, the price differential would naturally draw supplies into the famine zones through a free flow of private enterprise, undeterred by official interference or regulations of any sort. Yet, contrary to all expectations, the behaviour of the market did not conform to this pattern during the Orissa famine of 1866. The reasons were complex and distinctive.

(b) big traders or import-base in foodgrains

The trading community in Orissa was neither large, nor resourceful. There were hardly any big grain merchants, and the existing volume of the local trade was definitely export-oriented. While the export structure grew more elaborate and dynamic with the increasing outflow of grain in recent years, Orissa had hardly any machinery or network for the import of foodgrains. Grain-importing districts like Saran were always at a distinct advantage in lean seasons, for it was

60. Baboo Ramakhoy Chatterjee to G. N. Barlow Esq., Magistrate of Pur, No. 68, dated 25th October 1865.
relatively easy to widen the existing channels of foodgrain imports. Without any established trade base or organisation, however, it was almost impossible to improvise on these lines, especially in the midst of a crisis. Even European mercantile houses like Robert and Charriol or Gisborne and Company failed to bring in supplies to any appreciable extent for, as the Famine Commission noted, "Trade does not very easily adopt new channels". (64)

In fact, to move against the established currents or directions of trade within a dateline was almost an impossible feat. In districts which normally exported foodgrains, the outflow persisted irrespective of scarcity and rising prices in the local market. The lack of import or storage facilities and distributing agencies, as noted above, as well as the need to honour previous contracts, prevented the merchants from diverting grain from the export fund into the distress zones. "The consequence is an apparent reversal of the law of supply and demand, -- grain leaving a dear market for a cheaper one". (65) Conversely, an import network could hardly be established in a year of crisis, for the surplus districts constituting the sources of supply would likewise have prior commitments, and were often reluctant to export in new directions during lean seasons. In 1866, for instance, distress was initially feared on a wider scale than had actually occurred, and a distinct tendency was noted in many areas of eastern Bengal and Bihar to withhold stocks in apprehension of scarcity. The rapid extension of cotton cultivation leading to an increasing demand from western India reduced the reserve of grain and enhanced its price in large areas of the NWP, while in the Punjab the size of the surplus was too small for the Lower Provinces, and difficult to convey over so long a distance.

(c) free access:

The physical difficulties of transport and communication were largely aggravated by the advent of monsoon, when Orissa became virtually isolated and inaccessible both by land and sea. On the land side there was hardly any source of supply, and the Mahanadi would be closed for several months to come. To the south, there was famine in Ganjam, itself an importing district. Puri could not be called a port, and there were no ships. In Balasore the traders were inactive till March, when the surf became heavy and access difficult from the north and east, so that local trade ceased altogether along that coast. European merchants, even big houses like Messrs. Robert and Charriol, who had formerly exported by way of False Point, would not risk unaccustomed import operations on such a coast; the risk multiplied greatly with the advent of the rains, and became overwhelming when the monsoon proper burst forth in mid-June.

64. Ibid, p 60, para 197.
The pattern might have been different to some extent, had the "pull" factor been stronger. As it happened, however, Orissa had a low level of prices and purchasing power, and even the local famine rates were not sufficient to justify such high-risk ventures. In fact, the very wide range of the escalation in foodgrain prices during 1865-66, prevented the inflow of rice into Orissa at the outset. As noted, the Board rested complacent in the knowledge that prices in Puri were "happily insufficient to tempt exporters from the opposite coast", without going into the depth of the problem of exchange and entitlement relations. (66) Though Sir Cecil Beadon later admitted his mistake in believing that "the question was one of money rather than of food", neither the level of grain reserves nor that of purchasing power was closely enquired into. While the rates in Puri were not high or stable enough to attract imports till the end of February when the south-west winds dislocated trade along its coast, Balasore, the only port where imports could have commenced to some extent, was the last to experience the extreme rise in prices. The price quotations, moreover, were largely nominal due to the non-availability of rice in general. Even in cases where it could be obtained, effective demand was severely limited by the low purchasing capacity of the local people. This "pull" failure was a most potent factor in the market mechanism, due to which the famine zones in Orissa could neither draw in supplies from other regions, nor divert grain from the local export fund.

No critical analysis either of availability or exchange crisis:

The policy of laissez-faire in Orissa seems all the more futile, in view of the problems noted. As the Famine Commissioners remarked in 1866, "In truth all question of interfering with private trade is set at rest by the simple fact, that there was at this time none to interfere with...." The Government failed to step into this void, and the toll was heavy in terms of lives lost. The urgency of FAD (Food Availability Decline) was ignored, while the issue of exchange entitlement was not considered in the proper perspective. The administration professed the need to generate purchasing power by opening relief works, but failed to pay for labour in the form most effective for the purpose, viz. in foodgrain. The Secretary of the PWD wrote to the Superintending Engineer on 30th December, 1865: "... the payments should be made in coin at the usual rates, and anything that may be necessary to enable these wages to purchase food advantageously will be carried out under local arrangement". (67) As noted earlier, this proved impossible and the non-availability of rice almost brought relief to a standstill. Another feature making government works unpopular was the attempt at task payment, for a starving and

enfeebled population, whether in Ireland or in Orissa, would naturally prefer daily wages to the enforcement of task works.

The Famine of 1873 - 74:

In 1873 - 74, famine again raged over several districts of north Bihar and Bengal, viz. - Saran, Champaran, Tihar, Bhagalpur, Purnea, Dinajpur and Bogra. It was less intensive in South Bihar and parts of northern and western Bengal, including Shahabad, Gaya, Monghyr, Santalib, Manbhum, Rajshahi, Malda, Pabna, Jalpaiguri, Murshidabad and Burdwan. The former covered an area of 26,950 sq. miles and the latter came up to 19,159 sq. miles, affecting a population of 10,700,000 and 7,064,650, respectively.

1. Crop-Failure:

The bhadoi crop had been indifferent in 1873, while the crucial hathiya rains failed over large areas in the Province, reducing the outturn of winter rice to about 3/80 of the normal in Bengal, and 7/32 of the usual outturn in the Bihar districts. (68) The shortfall was estimated at 3.75 million tons, the extent of loss being greater than in 1865 - 66. (69)

In north Bihar, Saran suffered from a more extensive crop-failure, the yield being 2/3 and 1/10 of the average bhadoi and winter rice, respectively. In Champaran, the bulk of the bhadoi crops were damaged severely. In Darbhanga and Muzaffarpur, the shortfall in agricultural production caused deep anxiety, in view of the abnormal weather conditions of the past three years. The failure of winter rice in Bhagalpur was most complete in Supaul subdivision, the yield nowhere exceeding 1/8 of the average. The food supply was reduced by about 70% in Purnea, the bhadoi and winter rice yielding 1/2 and 3/16 of the normal outturn, respectively. Manbhum had only a 6-8 anna crop of winter rice in the central regions, while the eastern parts had no more than 4 to 6 annas. Kurthi and oilseeds were a total failure except in the west. Other cold weather crops being far more deficient in 1874 than in 1866, the stock position in general was no better than in the latter year. (70)

In north Bengal, the unseasonable rains of 1873 caused widespread damage to the crops. The aus or autumn harvest was 1/2 of the usual outturn in Rangpur and Rajshahi, only 6 annas in Malda, and a total failure in Dinajpur. Winter rice, coming after such a bleak season,

70. A. P. Macdonnell, op. cit., pp. 204 - 5, paras 21 - 22; p. 358, para 15.

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yielded no more than 1/4 of the average in Malda, 3/8 in Rajshahi and Bogra, and 1/2 in Pabna. In Rangpur, it varied between total loss and 1/8 of the normal in the central tracts, and nowhere exceeded 1/2 of the average yield. (71) In the famine tracts of western Bengal, the aus and aman amounted only to 9/16 and 3/8 of the average in Birbhum, and 1/2 of that in Bankura, respectively. The Collector of Bankura thus compares the winter of 1873 with that of 1865: "... The crop this year in Moheshra is about one-half that of 1865-66, and... in the rest of the district the two years give about an equal outturn". (72) Burdwan reaped 1/2 of the aman crop, which constituted the principal food supply of the district. The Collector of Burdwan, comparing the shortfall with that of 1865, concluded that they were "about the same". (73) In Murshidabad, the aus crops in the lowlying eastern regions had an average 12-anna yield as in 1865, while the aman was only 1/3 of the average, i.e. 2/5 of the outturn in 1865-66. (74) Nadia had an average crop of the main staple or aus rice, while the aman came up to 1/3 of the usual outturn, the former being better and the latter deficient compared to the harvest of 1865-66. On the whole, the Collector thought that the district would be better off till March but worse since then, as compared to 1866. Lord Ulick Browne, Commissioner of the Presidency Division, wrote from Nadia in February 1874: "... taking crops all round, the general prospects are much the same". (75)

2. Supply failure and the price-movements

The magnitude of the loss was reflected in the price indices. In Shahabad, for instance, prices continued to rise till in February 1874 common rice sold at 12 seers to the rupee, which was 8 to 16% dearer than in February 1866. In Saran, market conditions in January 1874 were more stringent than in January 1866, graindealers hoping to reap an even greater profit than in the latter year, when rice and Indian corn sold at 300% above normal rates. In Darbhanga, the price of common rice reached the famine rate of 10 seers per rupee as early as in January 1874, while in 1866 this stage had not been reached till in April. By April 1874 it rose by another 20%, after which price quotations were merely nominal, no rice being available in the market. A similar trend is seen in the case of Indian corn, which formed the staple food of the labouring population. It sold at 18 seers to the rupee in January 1866, while the quotation for January 1874 is 13.9 seers. It rose to 14 seers in April 1866, while for the corresponding

73. Ibid, p 337, para 23.

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period in 1874 it moved as high as 12.9 seers to the rupee, which was
thrice the normal rate prevailing at this time of the year. (76) In
Champaran, the food staples sold at more than double the usual rates,
the quotations provided by Mr. Cockerell proving without doubt that the
prices of rice and Indian corn were on a level with those prevailing
in 1866. Thus, "in 1873 the failure in the crops was much greater
than in 1865," so that "notwithstanding all the aid given by
government till it commenced supplying the market, prices ranged as
high in the first quarter of last year as they did in 1866..." (77)
Mr. Macdonnell's calculations show an absolute deficiency of 227,000
tons of foodgrain in the Patna Division, which goes up to 370,000 tons
with the usual allowance for wastage.

In Monghyr, the prices of rice and Indian corn were double the normal
rates in January 1874, and even higher than those prevailing in
January 1866. Likewise, in Sonthalia, the prices current in the first
quarter of 1874 were higher than in the corresponding period of 1866.
The price quotations for common rice in Manbhum during the first four
months of 1874 were as high as those for the same period in 1866, the
downward trend since May resulting largely from the inflow of
government grain. (78)

In Rangpur, rice sold at Rs. 5 - 8 annas per maund in April, which was
four times the normal rate, while in the interior it rose to Rs. 6.
The price of rice rose to 3 or 4 times the normal rate in Dinajpur
during the lean months of May and June. In Malda, it was selling at
the prohibitive rate of 9 seers to the rupee at the end of April.
Famine rates prevailed all over Rajshahi district in June, with rice
being sold at 7 1/4 seers per rupee. The price of rice in Bogra rose
to 13 1/2 seers for the rupee in January 1874, which was 2 1/2 times
the usual rate. By June, it went up to 10 seers in distressed tracts
like Sherpore. Grain marts in the affected regions of western Bengal
show the same stringent conditions. In Birbhum, for instance, rice
sold at double the usual rates in January 1874, the tension in the
market continuing through the year. Relatively low rates in Burdwan
led to excessive exports, though the prices were high enough by local
standards to "cause sustained pressure on the people". (79)

3. Response failures:

While the crop failure was thus more extensive and prices mostly
higher in Bengal and Bihar during the famine of 1873 - 74 as compared
to the year 1865 - 66, private trade was almost equally ineffective in
supplying the deficiency. Once again the movement of the grain - trade

77. Ibid, pp. 108 - 9, para 36.
78. Ibid, p 358, para 17.
disproved the government theory that high prices would naturally attract supplies from surplus to scarcity zones. As in 1866, private trade in the famine tracts was hindered at various points by the physical difficulties of transport and communication; the underlying problem of exchange—failure and the lack of effective demand; and the persistence of the prevailing trade pattern, which made it almost impossible to cut through the existing lines of inflow and outflow, or to improvise a system of imports in the face of a crisis for normally surplus districts. While in 1866 all these points were brought to a sharp focus in Orissa, in 1873–74 the affected districts in Bengal and Bihar felt the problem in varying degrees of intensity.

The location of the affected tracts determined to a great extent the volume of their imports, as remoteness from the main channels of trade would heighten the merchant's risk and expenses, and hence lower his profit margin. For instance, Tajpur in Darbhanga attracted a steady flow of foodgrains for, unlike the Madhubani and Darbhanga subdivisions, it had a favourable trading position with easy access to Patna. Hajipur on the left bank of the Ganges, enjoyed the same advantage in relation to Sitamarhi in Muzaffarpur. Similarly, Saran and Champaran were commercially better placed than Muzaffarpur and Darbhanga. Saran could draw on the foodgrain traffic from the NWP and Nepal, while Champaran on the Gandak was approachable from Patna, the great trade centre of Bihar. Significantly, private trade was brisk in Saran in the early part of 1874, and showed a degree of vitality in Tajpur, Majipur and Champaran, unmatched in the rest of north Bihar.

As in 1866, the existing lines of the traffic in foodgrains persisted with great tenacity. Exports flowed unchecked from the distress zone of Sitamarhi, which failed to hold on to any of the grain passing through it from Nepal. In Bhagalpur the surplus produce from Madhipura, instead of being drawn into the affected regions of Supaul where famine rates prevailed, flowed out of the district to their usual destination. In November 1873, the Collector remarked on the "great exportation of rice that has been, and is, going on" from Madhipura, while famine loomed large over Supaul. (80) Monghyr, though blessed with a relatively satisfactory harvest, disposed of it according to prior commitments rather than the exigencies of the local situation. Ironically, in 1874 the lowering of railway freight rates by the government as an incentive to importation only succeeded in enlarging the volume of railborne exports. It was largely due to this that the export stream in Monghyr was fuller in 1874 than in ordinary years. The outflow of grain was "very general and heavy" in the Santal Parganas during October–November 1873, and even in February 1874 the export of janera (the chief bhadoi crop) continued.

80. Ibid, p 157, para 55.
Sometimes, exports went on to such an extent from districts with a reasonable yield, that the balance was overturned and famine rates prevailed. For instance, prices of rice in Jalpaiguri would never have reached 8 or 6 seers for the rupee by May 1874, but for the unprecedented scale of exports by traders coming in from Purnea, Rangpur, Dinajpur and Darjeeling. Rice being generally very cheap in the district, the local traders were so attracted by the high prices they paid, that even men from other professions, such as cloth-merchants and farmers, began to function as grain-dealers. (81) Similarly, excess of foodgrain exports from Burdwan raised its relatively low rates to such a level as to cause a persistent pressure on the local population.

Except for normally importing districts like Saran or regions like Tajpur in Darbhanga which produced only about half of its food requirement even in ordinary years, private trade hardly opened up any new lines of foodgrain imports to meet the demands of the famine situation. Even the established import trade in Saran found it difficult to attract the necessary supplies in 1873, as it normally drew upon distant regions like the NWP which, being harder hit by the famine this year, were apprehensive of exporting foodgrains. Again, in April 1874, the entire import trade in North Bengal from the Brahmaputra to the Ganges collapsed suddenly, as grain stopped flowing from its normal sources of supply in Assam, Coochbehar and Dacca. Caused probably by the prohibitive rise in prices in the latter regions due to excessive exportation, the closure of this trade led to a total cessation of grain movements in Rangpur - Dinajpur, and their partial paralysis in Rajshahi and Maida. Distress thus deepened into famine in the North Bengal districts, as indicated by a three or fourfold rise (7 1/2 to 9 seers for the rupee) in foodgrain prices between April and June, 1874. In fact, the extent of the rise in Dinajpur and Rangpur was unmatched in any other district but the very core of the famine zone in north Bihar, where private trade hardly functioned. Thus, though a strategically located district like Dinajpur had a most active export trade in grain, with easy access to the up-country and the west through the Punarbhaba and Mahanadi, and to Calcutta and the south through the depots on the Atreyi, Karatoya and Yamuna, private trade failed to utilise this network to bring in supplies in a crisis. As Mr. A.P. Macdonnell comments in his Report on the Foodgrain Supply in the districts of Bihar and Bengal during 1873 - 74, "There is perhaps no more curious phenomenon than this in the history of the famine - the tenacity with which regions that usually export held to accustomed trade routes, and the incapacity of local grain merchants to grasp their opportunity". (82)

82. Ibid, p 157, para 55.
Yet this relentless or persistent feature of "grain leaving a dear market for a cheaper one" becomes less of an enigma, on analysing the effectiveness of the demand and the relevance of the prevailing rates in the affected tracts. For instance, it was due to the low level of prosperity in Darbhanga, that grain continued to leave the district despite acute local scarcity in 1874, north-east Tirhut being by far the largest exporting tract in Bihar. Significantly, Tajpur drew in supplies on the strength of its valuable tobacco and potato crops. Likewise, Saran had greater resources than its neighbours, in the form of lucrative harvests of oil seed, opium and indigo, and the cash remittances sent home by the remarkably large number of its migrant labourers. Even so, as prices slackened in June in anticipation of the bhadoi harvest in Saran, the rates for wheat and bajra in the Benaras and Allahabad Divisions of the NWP went up to a level which made exports to Saran unprofitable. Similarly, imports into North Bengal stopped when prices rose to a higher level in Dacca, Coochbehar and Assam, which normally supplied it with grain.

4. "Pull" failure

The basic question was thus one of purchasing power, as private traders could not be expected to import foodgrain into the famine tracts, unless the local people could afford to pay the prevailing high rates. In Jalpaiguri, for instance, excessive exports led to the establishment of "an abnormal and fictitious market rate" much beyond the reach of the common people. Similarly, the Santhal Parganas failed to hold on to its bhadoi crop, which was whisked away in 1873, as in 1865, to more affluent regions with an effective demand. Supplies in the sadar subdivision in Muzaffarpur were drained by a continuous export trade to a point when the market rate "placed them out of the reach of large numbers of the community". In April 1874, the quotations for rice were merely nominal in large areas of Darbhanga, no local transactions being made at this price. In his report on the foodgrain supply in Bengal and Bihar in 1873 - 74, Mr. A. P. Macdonnell expressed grave reservations on the question whether the Patna Division possessed enough resources to raise its foodstocks from a two to six months' supply, had private trade been able to make good the deficiency. (83)

The question becomes particularly relevant during famines, due to the problem of exchange - failures in a crisis. A shortfall, whether in cash or food crops, caused a sharp dip in the purchasing power of the agrarian community, and had a deep-reaching impact not only on the fortunes of the peasant and agricultural labourer, but also on a wide range of rural crafts and services. The Collector of Burdwan, during a tour of the affected areas in April 1874, found the labourers in a wretched condition due to lack of employment. The more affluent classes like the goldsmith (Sonar) and barber (Napit) also complained of a

83. Ibid, p 90, para 48 ; p 137, para 35.
severe depression in their trade, the priest's services were required by few or none, while the weaver did not receive advances, and the chaukidar his money dues. (84)

Government policy in 1873 - 74:

The facts noted are enough to show that at the point when government decided to intervene in resolving the crisis, the crops were more deficient and the prices higher almost everywhere than in 1866. Government action proceeded along two main lines, viz. the sale of grain at fair rates in distressed areas, and the opening of relief works where payment was most often made in kind. The former countered the problem of FAD, or non-availability of foodgrains. It raised the public morale by neutralising the effects of inactivity and hoarding by private traders, and by stabilising foodgrain prices in the famine zones. Meanwhile, the latter tried to generate purchasing power and create direct entitlements to food for the local population. But for this government action, Macdonnell maintains, the Darbhanga subdivision alone would have had a mortality figure of 1,00,000. Mr. Steuart Bayley, then Commissioner of Patna, endorsed his estimate, stating that "for the whole division, these figures may be multiplied, in my opinion, by four or five". If, in 1865 the mortality had reached 1,32,307 in this region as mentioned in Mr. Cockerell's Report, the above estimate does not seem far-fetched. In Darbhanga, for instance, government action helped to prevent" a calamity far more ghastly than that which befell the district in 1866", as the range of prices was much higher this year. (85) Again, it was primarily due to government intervention that the population of Champaran were saved from a fate worse than in 1865, when an admittedly conservative estimate put the mortality figure at 56,000. Saran, too, drew heavily on government stores since June, when private importations visibly slackened. Of the total deficit of approximately 370,000 tons allowing for wastage in the Patna Division, the government supplied about 205,323 tons of grain and Rs. 87 lakhs in cash, the remainder being the measure of the people's suffering.

While south Bhagalpur was served by private trade, it never extended to the distress zones in the north, which depended entirely on government aid. Meanwhile, heavy exportation from Monghyr necessitated government action, but never to the extent provided in more remote areas; it was more moral than material in its impact, for the very willingness of the administration to throw grain into the market when prices were prohibitive, and to provide relief in other ways, eased popular apprehensions in the face of the crisis.

As imports ground to a halt in North Bengal during the first week of April 1874, government action varied in nature and extent in the

84. Ibid, pp. 338 - 339, para 29.
85. Ibid, P. 139, para 39; p 69, para 73.
different districts of the region. In Rangpur, where the suddenness of
its impact took the Administration unawares, the aid provided was more
remedial than preventive in nature unlike in Dinajpur, where it had
some inkling of the crisis. On Malda it had more of an indirect
effect, as the timely sales of government grain helped to break the
traders' combine in north Bengal by easing prices in Dinajpur, and so
ensured a steady flow of supplies into the dearer markets of Malda.

The affected district of Manbhum in Chotanagpur shows a price-level
similar to that of 1866 till April 1874, when the first consignments
of government grain reached Barakar. Moreover, it was precisely at
this time of the year, both in 1866 and 1874, that the drain on local
reserves from other famine-hit regions with greater resources brought
the people to the brink of starvation. The situation in 1874 was thus
similar to that of 1866, as indicated by the crop size, price indices
and movements of the grain trade. Yet the district managed to avert
the extreme suffering and mortality of the previous famine year, due
primarily to the prompt action of government in importing foodgrain.

Yet the Government policy in 1873 - 74 did not escape criticism in
bureaucratic circles, though it had successfully averted a repetition
of the disaster of 1866. The crisis of 1873 - 74 was described as a
"scare" rather than a "famine", although it had the potential for
greater misery over a more extensive area than in 1865 - 66. It was
ironical that the danger, when averted by timely government action,
was underestimated, and the administration criticised for blowing it up
beyond proportion. As Sir Richard Temple wrote later, "By irony of
fate, it was actually argued that the danger of famine could not have
been extremely urgent because it was successfully overcome". (86)
The real cause for concern was the extent of expenditure incurred by
government on the sale of grain at low rates, and the liberal wage
scales at relief works. The Famine Commission of 1880 estimated that
had relief been given on this scale during earlier famines from 1803
to 1873, the cost of relief would be £ 34 million as against the
£ 4 1/2 million actually spent. However, it was seen that reduction of
wages and raising of the "task" on relief works, as recommended by the
Central Relief Committee in April 1874, caused 3,50,000 labourers to
leave the works, about 1 lakh of whom edged dangerously towards
starvation. (87) This proved that if the relief works were to be
effective, the scale of wages would have to be determined by the
current prices and daily food requirements of the labourer, rather
than by budgetary considerations. A total of 6,615,601 persons were
employed on relief works from November 1873 to September 1874, the
cash wage bill amounting to Rs. 1,28,40,000 while Rs. 60,401 were
spent on grain.

86. Sir Richard Temple, Men and Events of my Time, p 405.
The government sales of grain at fair rates was criticised not only on financial grounds, but also from the viewpoint of economic policy. This criticism of government interference as a hindrance to private trade was, however, unjustified, as it confused cause with effect—it was only when private trade dwindled or ceased to operate that government importations commenced, as for example in Saran in June, and North Bengal in April, 1674. That private traders had no intention of bringing in supplies into famine zones, is apparent from the fact that the reduction of railway freights, introduced by government to encourage imports, was seized by them to subsidise and enlarge the volume of exports from distressed areas to more affluent regions with greater purchasing power. In fact, the government was too conservative in not prohibiting exportation from famine tracts, which partially neutralised the effects of its import policy.

The inflow of government grain, even in small quantities, gave a great boost to the public morale at such times, by making it evident that the administration was ready to undertake the responsibility during a crisis. As Richard Temple noted, even before April 1874, when "not a single public granary had been opened and not a pound of grain had been issued," the mere sight of "the long convoys of the government grain threading the way over the country" exercised "a potent effect on the public mind". (88)

Unfortunately, much of the goodwill was lost later due to the strictness with which government enforced the repayment of its loans, often causing great distress to the people in the post-famine situation. Moreover, Indians were seldom associated with famine administration, and the lack of agricultural statistics hampered relief work in many areas. Yet, inspite of these relatively minor flaws in policy and administration, the government action in 1873-74 was undoubtedly successful in preventing much misery and loss of lives.

Local scarcities between 1875 and 1896:

The early cessation of rains in 1875-76 caused a serious failure of the winter rice over a large area in Dinajpur, throughout the Sitamarhi and Madhubani subdivisions in Tirhut, and in the extreme north of Supaul in Bhagalpur. Though relief was ultimately required only in Madhubani and Supaul, the crop-failure, coming so soon after the famine of 1873-74, dealt a severe blow to the local peasant economy.

In 1884-85, distress was felt once again in the famine tracts of north and west Bengal, viz. in Bogra, Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura, Nadia and Murshidabad. The deficiency of the winter rains considerably damaged the rice crops in these districts, as well as in parts of

88. Ibid, Ch. II, p 21.
Gaya, Patna, Darbhanga and Chotanagpur. The crisis was not serious, relief measures being mostly limited to the old and infirm. In August—September 1885 floods in Nadia—Murshidabad and a cyclone in Orissa necessitated relief in the form of loans. In Burdwan Division the problem was of greater magnitude, affecting about 600 sq. miles in Burdwan, 200 in Birbhum and 170 sq. miles in Bankura, with a total population of 4,72,000. Yet the distress did not deepen into famine due to a satisfactory monsoon in 1885, and by November relief measures were closed throughout the Division.

Lack of purchasing power was a basic problem throughout the course of this scarcity. Stocks were available and prices stable, due perhaps to the limited area affected and its accessibility by rail, as well as to the fall in exports from India to Europe this year. It could not, however, prevent the inevitable crisis in exchange relations caused by the dislocation of agricultural functions and the consequent fall in the wages of unskilled labour, as seen most vividly in the districts of the Burdwan Division in the lean season of 1885. The road repairs and earthworks started in the form of relief measures by the District Boards in the affected areas were unpopular, a sizeable section of the labourers preferring to migrate to neighbouring industrial areas in search of employment. Hence, help was required mainly in the form of gratuitous relief to non—labouring classes, especially to aged persons, widows and children, who, as victims of the existing value system in rural society, were hardest hit by famines and scarcity. (89)

The distress in Bihar and Orissa in 1888—89 illustrated the problems of crop failure in two typically vulnerable tracts, viz. part of the rice belt running along the Nepal border in north Bihar, and the relatively inaccessible tribal regions of Angul in Orissa.

A failure of about 50% in the crucial hathiya rains in September — October 1888, caused extensive damage to the rice crop in Champaran, Muzaffarpur and Darbhanga. As little else but winter rice was grown here, widespread distress was felt, especially in a strip of land over 1,000 sq. miles in area, extending for about 90 miles along the Nepal frontier through the three affected districts. Prices soared in consequence, rice selling at 11/12 seers to the rupee in January 1889. The need for relief among the poor was "quite unmistakable", and the District Boards opened relief works in January, supplemented later on by works conducted by the revenue authorities. Heavy rains in June caused a decline in the numbers on relief, due to resumption of field operations. In July, however, floods dislocated grain traffic, rice sold for as high as 9 seers to the rupee, and relief works could not be finally closed down till the crops ripened in October. The crisis was thus averted by prompt government action, and was neither so

The same promptitude, however, was not seen in dealing with the situation in Angul and the Tributary states in Orissa. Angul, a Tributary state confiscated by the British in 1847, was remote and difficult of access from Cuttack, being 'cut off on all sides by hills and unbridged rivers. Rice was the sole crop, carried on by 'toila' cultivation with the hoe on the uplands. The population, about 1,00,000 in number, consisted of aboriginal hill tribes and semi-Hinduised castes such as Khonds, Savars, Santhals, Kols, Gonds, Pans and Bhuiyas, who subsisted mainly on forest products, temporary cultivation, and occasional field labour in the more open tracts. The problems of the tribal economy surfaced during agrarian crises, as in 1888 - 89. As in the Santhal Parganas, the uplands, though not very suitable for rice cultivation, were persistently being converted into rice lands, and hence were most vulnerable to drought. Again, like the Paharias in the Rajmahal Hills, their method of agriculture was primitive and wasteful, and gradually had to give way to plough cultivation by the superior castes, who began to encroach on the uplands. The loss of these lands forced the aborigines into field labour, the scope for which, however, was sharply reduced in case of crop failure. Simultaneously, the stringency of the new Forest Laws denied them access to jungle fruits and products, which had supplemented their diet for ages, particularly in lean seasons. They were thus perched too precariously on the brink of starvation, to sustain the pressure of crop failure. After two deficient harvests in succession in 1887 and 1888, when the yield was less than half of the average, distress was widespread, calling for quick relief measures. No effective action was, however, undertaken, till Sir John Edgar, Chief secretary to the Bengal Government, visited the area in July and advocated immediate and extensive relief measures. The cost was estimated at Rs. 41,000, while Rs. 15,000 were spent on the purchase and supply of unhusked rice from Cuttack. Though these measures and favourable rains finally eased the situation, it was more difficult, as the Bengal Government remarked, to "overtake a famine which has been allowed to get out of hand than to prevent starvation by timely measures".

A scarcity recurred in 1891 - 92 in the Patna, Rajshahi and Bhagalpur Divisions. Though a crisis was initially feared throughout these divisions, it ultimately narrowed down to the districts of Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Bhagalpur, Monghyr, Purnea and Dinajpur. In the affected parts of Bihar, the rice crop nowhere exceeded 50% of the normal and, due to the deficient rains in September - October 1891, totally failed on the higher lands as in large areas of Muzaffarpur

and Darbhanga. The winter rains, too, did not fall till February 1892, causing extensive damage to the rabi crop. Yet a full bhadoi crop reaped in 1891, coupled with the generally good harvests of 1890, mitigated the distress in the regions of north Bihar, where the bhadoi was largely sown. Prices of the chief staples rose to 11/12 seers to a rupee for rice, and 12/13 seers for wheat, though the commoner bhadoi grains could still be had at 16 to 20 seers per rupee, thus preventing a total crisis. Though the deficiency in the affected districts was almost as severe as in 1873, the cost of relief was about 4 lakhs, as compared to more than four times the amount spent on the same tract in 1873 - 74. The lack of purchasing power was a persistent problem. The Lieutenant Governor remarked after a tour of the affected areas in April, 1892: "The present condition of things may be described by saying that there is apparently food in the country, and that anyone can feed himself for an anna a day, but that the usual agricultural labour by which the landless classes earn wages is mostly at a standstill and they have to resort to the relief works to earn that anna." (91)

Conclusion: availability and exchange problems affecting the supply and demand aspects of the crisis, respectively.

The above analysis of famines and scarcities in Bengal in the thirty years prior to the great famine of 1896 - 97, confirms the fact that the features of FAD and FEE did not always flow in cross-currents. An agrarian crisis caused by a shortfall in production usually deepened into famine due to the failure in exchange - relations. With the advent of railways and the penetration of the market economy into agriculture in the late 19th Century, the effects of crop failure became less intense, but more extensive in nature: a famine or scarcity now came more often in the form of a sharp price - rise causing distress over a wider area as in 1873 - 74, 1884 - 85, 1888 - 89 or 1891 - 92 in Bengal, rather than absolute want, starvation and mortality in the famine tracts alone, as had largely occurred during 1866 - 67, due to the inaccessibility and distinctive trade problems of the affected regions in Orissa. Mr. R. Carstairs, Deputy Commissioner of the Santhal Parganas, wrote in October 1897: "... although facilities for communication and freedom of trade have, as was hoped, eased the strain where famine was acute, they have been enabled to do so by spreading it over regions which, in former circumstances, would have escaped, or suffered little". (92)

In this changing context the problem of FEE assumed a new dimension, though mostly as a sequel to the decline in food availability. A crop-

91. Ibid.
failure, for instance, caused an immediate shrinkage in field operations, and to that extent reduced the exchange entitlements of the small peasant and agricultural labourer; again, a sharp rise in food prices was not offset by a corresponding rise in the value of other items, which adversely affected the dealers in those particular commodities; in fact, an agrarian crisis would naturally cause an overall depression in rural trades and services, by reducing the purchasing power of the peasant community; the uncertain weather conditions causing a food-crop failure often damaged commercial crops like mulberry, mango or opium, thus closing a lucrative source of income in the cash-crop sectors. Apart from such linkage effects of an agrarian crisis, FEE could also be caused by extraneous factors unrelated to any shortfall in agricultural production. The depression of the coal and lac industries in Chotanagpur in the 1890's, or the decline in indigo cultivation in Muzaffarpur since 1896 due to keen competition from artificial dyes, are manifestations of this type of exchange crisis, though they were by no means typical of the late 19th Century economy.

The famine of 1896-97 makes an interesting study in this context, both as regards the failure in crops, as well as in exchange relations. The decline in food availability was very real, affecting not only Bengal, but nearly the whole country to a greater or lesser extent; the exchange crisis changed connotation in the different economic zones in keeping with their relative crop size and "pull" capacity, and the terms of trade moved accordingly.