

Famine, Disease and Social Crisis in Colonial Odisha during Nineteenth Century, 1850-1900

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Abstract: *The Odisha Famine of 1866 was one of the most important events in the economic history of Odisha. It resulted in the breakdown of normal social relations and produced a series of dysfunctional behavioral responses. The focal point of this article is the great complexity of official responses to famine in colonial India, both medical and non-medical, and to look at the consequences of these responses for famine relief and famine mortality. Survival of lives like the use of "Famine foods" and wandering of search of food and work facilitate the spread of such diseases like cholera, dysentery, malaria and smallpox. The paper seeks to identify the spread of diseases due to starvation and malnutrition and created abnormal social and environmental conditions created by drought and an extreme crisis of subsistence.*

Keywords: Epidemics, Disease, Famine, Mortality, Odisha, Colonialism, Cholera, Dysentery, Small Pox

The British rule in India was marked by recurrent terrible famines and epidemics. Millions of human beings, large quantities of animals and their livestock were swept away by these famines in colonial India with the increasing intensity and alarming rapidity. Famines were mostly local events. During the pre-British period and the early years of British rule, the scarcity of food grains has been appeared due to failure of harvest and poor rainfall. The transport of communication and trade created a problem for smooth supplying of food grains and fodder etc. According to William Digby, during the pre-British period, serious famines were recorded in the years 1345, 1396, 1472, 1556-57, 1596, 1631, and 1661, it specified that a major famine broke out once in every fifty years.¹

The province Odisha was identified with the richness of culture in ancient and medieval Indian history. The land was plundered by different foreign rulers like Afghans, Mughals, Marathas and lastly Britishers. It is painful to mention that such a rich and cultured state had suffered sub-human living conditions during the Great famine 1866, popularly known as Na'Anka Durbhikshya. Odisha faces regular threats of calamities like droughts, floods and cyclones over the years. The growth of population, climate aberration, deforestation, large dams, greenhouse effects, pollution, displacement, water scarcity, etc is affecting agricultural production. The productivity of land was declining because of heavy rent, poor condition of cattle, lack of manure, lack of irrigation and lack of rotation of crops.

Famine and State Intervention: The Odishan Context

The East India Company ruled Odisha from 1803 to 1858 mostly fifty-five years. After the suppression of the revolt of 1817, Odisha remained in peace for the rest of the Company's rule.² The resistance to the British authorities in the hill areas was suppressed ruthlessly. While administrative developments in other parts followed more or less a general pattern of elaboration and improvement, Odisha seems to have been left singularly neglected, and thereby denied of many advantages. The

people of the princely states were left to suffer their indigenous system in inaccessible seclusion. The coastal areas of Odisha state had suffered a lot due to minimum administrative attention. Within 8 years of the end of the East India Rule in 1866, Odisha fell victim to a disaster that took away one-third of her population. It was the worst calamity that the people of Odisha suffered in the 19th century.³

The famine of 1866 affected an area of 40,240 sq miles with an estimated population of 11,855,543. It is estimated that 8 percent of the total population died in a single year. It had an area of 7,649 sq. miles and an estimated population of three million on the eve of the famine of whom at least 27 percent died.⁴

The district of Puri had suffered by great famine that Cuttack and Balasore.⁵ The outturn of the rice crop of 1864 had been short and this was followed by an utter failure owing to the scanty rainfall in 1865. In October 1865, prices were about two and half times their ordinary rates. The distress began to appear in many places subsisting on fruits and roots, while the rice was selling at famine rates. It was reported that on November 25, starvation occurred in *Parikud* and *Maluda* that the number of deaths was increasing and destitution prevailed. With the failure of crops of 1864 and the drought of 1865, the famine more severely felt in Puri. In October 1866, it was reported that 210 deaths⁶ had occurred in the year due to famine. During the floods of 1866, the river water was overflowed and busted in every direction and fifty-two wide breaches were created in the rivers. The previous failure of the crop of 1864, the drought of 1865 and the terrible inundations in August 1866, all combined to make the famine more severely felt in Puri than in any other district. The famine had reached its height in June, July and August. Despite the 1866 great famine, there were large famines that occurred in 1877, 1885-86, 1888-89, 1897, 1908 and 1918-20. The famine was visited in the district in 1897 and result in the loss of people by the floods and drought. The government was provided relief round the Chilka lake and Parganas of *Bajrakot*, *Malud*, *Parikud*, *Andhari*, *Manikpatna*, *satpara* and *Balabhadrapur*.

Famine Relief Policy:

At that time there was no famine code to regulate the administration. The first time Adam Smith Principles had taken into considerations. According to the principles, the market would take care of the demand and supply of rice by adjusting prices.⁷ Ira Klein⁸ pointed out, "Millions of lives were sacrificed during the 19th Century because the pull of humanitarianism on the government was not as strong as the claims of Malthusianism and social Darwinism. The first time the relief works started in Puri in May 1866 under the department of public works. The mode of payment was money wages. The nature of works started from the excavation of canals to the construction of embankments and roads. Women and children needed more relief more than able-bodied persons who could migrate elsewhere.⁹ The government finally did import rice from Burma. Some amount of wheat was imported as well. In the relief camps, food was served under very insanitary conditions leading to cholera epidemics. The inmates of the camps were pitched on the damp ground of Puri Beach. The famine victims of fever and pneumonia and died in large numbers. Thus the relief policy neither adequate nor people-friendly.

Towards Health Care:

The health care system was not well organized in the state. People were carried strung to bamboo poles to primary health centers kilometers away from the villages. The District hospitals were an ill-equipped and large number of shortages of doctors and paramedic staff. Death due to gastroenteritis, dengue, encephalitis, anthrax and malaria were still rampant in the rural and tribal areas. The epidemics were the annual visitation of the state. The Cultivators (raiya), agricultural labourers and artisans suffered from famine. For example, a small sample survey of 55 houses in a village near the town of Balasore had been conducted in 1866 to ascertain the impact of famine and cholera on different castes from October 1865 to October 1866. (Table. 1). The cholera was most rampant in the first phase of famine till June but after the heavy rain in July both Fever and Cholera played havoc.

Table-1

Statement Showing the Effects of the Famine and Cholera on Bhaskargange Village Near Balasore Town Between October 1865 and October 1866

Caste or Class	Persons in 1865	Persons Gone in 1866	Persons Remained %	Occupation	Remarks
Kodal	34	22	12 (35*)	All small Cultivators	Of these 3 persons lived together in one house and left together most probable to Calcutta
Gaur	25	20	5(20)	Pastoral caste	
Kandara	4	4	0	Landless labourers	
Raju	16	13	3(19)	Cultivators	
Khandait	30	25	5(17)	Cultivators	
Karan	13	12	1(8)	Petty Revenue Officials	
Teli	32	29	3(9)	Oil pressers	
Tanti	58	46	12(21)	weavers	
Maganta	31	31	0	Professional Beggars	
Musalman	17	13	4(24)	--	They lived together and migrated to Midnapur
Christians	31	28	3(10)	---	Altogether there were five households, their death which had occurred among them were either due to dysentery or cholera and not starvation.
Bhumi-Behera	3	-	3(100)	Not known	All of them lived together and the

					villagers did not know whether they had died or migrated.
Total	346	294	52 (15)		

Sources: GOB/Home/Public, October 1866, No350, from the Collector, Balasore to the Commissioner, Orissa division, October 11

Table-2

The following table indicates the total number of in-patients and out-patients at the Puri Pilgrim Hospital and dispensary

Year	Total number of in-Patients	Total number of out-Patients
1881	375	4,117
1882	377	3,750
1883	369	4,190
1884	465	4,035
1885	487	3,104

Sources: W.W.Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, New Delhi, 1876, p.176.

Animal Diseases:

The famine of 1866 was not only the loss of human life but also the death of a huge number of cattle. A huge number of cattle perished during the famine that created an ecological imbalance and also had a massive impact on the livelihood of peasants and agrarian structures. In coastal Odisha that during the calamities of flood and cyclone people sell the sheep and goat to pull the family for food. Puri district had a sizable population of horses in 1932. In British administration horses and cattle were used to transport their trading purpose. But all horses perished away after the advent of motors and the great epidemic of African Horse Sickness epidemics. The Livestock suffered from starvation and death due to several diseases in the famine of 1866. Cattle and buffalos were very prone to periodic outbreaks of Rinderpest. There were foot and Mouth disease of bovines. The other common diseases were Hemorrhagic, Black Quarters of cattle and Buffaloes. A load of the internal parasite was devastating without medicine.

In 1774, the East India Company started horse breeding studs, but it did not a success due to disease problems. The actual Western Veterinary medicine came to India in 1779 when 5 Veterinarians came from London to India. They have organized cattle, camel and horse breeding. The first Army Veterinary School was established in Poona in the year 1850. The third Veterinary College was set up in Calcutta in the year 1871. The fifth Veterinary College was commenced in Patna of Bihar in 1886.¹⁰ Babu Ananta Charan Routroy was the first Odia Veterinary Surgeon in the year 1909. The first Artificial Insemination scheme started in Cuttack Veterinary Hospital in 1949.

The Orissa Veterinary College started in 1955 and the National Rinderpest Eradication Scheme started in Orissa in 1958.¹¹

Mortality:

The mortality rate was also found uncertain because the first population census report started in 1872. Regarding mortality, the Puri recorded the highest number of death about 210,866 in the year 1866.¹² According to Mr. Ricketts, the then magistrate and Collector of the district of Balasore, 22,000 people and more than 50,000 head of cattle were lost their lives in the district alone. Dead bodies of men, women and children were found after the storm, interspersed with those of wild beast, birds and bullocks. In 1872 there was a large number of cattle were lost by the storms accompanying by a tidal irruption all along the coast. During the year the price of rice as high as 2 ½ seers to the rupees and 10,000 paupers succumbed to starvation and disease. The total mortality was estimated at 217,608 and 31,424 deaths due to different diseases.

The Secretary to the Government of Bengal remarked that old and young died in larger numbers in 1866.¹³ The Sanitary Commissioner of 1866 stated that the famine had affected the aged, sick persons. W.W.Hunter has pointed out that the rural population would enter a famine as a “frigate goes into battle, cleared of all useless and inefficient member.”¹⁴ T.E. Ravenshaw pointed out that in the localities in Cuttack such as *Koojang* and *Aul*, where the famine was very acute, the mortality was estimated to be 50 percent to 60 Percent of the poorer classes, and only 1/8 to 1/10 of the better classes.¹⁵

Table-3

Distribution of Total Famine Deaths and Class Composition of Dead Victims in District of Cuttack, Puri and Balasore

	Total Death	Cultivators	Labourers	Artisans
Cuttack	3,78009	1, 83,887(49%)	94,346 (25)	99,776(26)
Puri	2,13,944	1, 01,895(48%)	73,734(34)	36,333(17)
Balasore	2,17,608	1, 32,997(61%)	39,288(18)	39,795(18)
Total	8,09,561	4, 18,779(51%)	2,09,368(26)	1,81,414 (22)

Sources: GOI/Home/Public, January 1868, Nos.21-22, Part. A: Final Report on Mortality during the Late Famine.

Flood Drainage Committee:

In 1924 a Committee of Officials and non-officials was appointed to consider the problems of floods in Odisha and the method to be adopted to minimize their evil effects. In 1927, an expert committee of three engineers was appointed, Mr. Addams-William, chief engineer of Bengal, the chairman had examined the whole problem of floods in Odisha.

The following paragraphs are extracts from the committee report

“Coming now to the question of protection from flood, the only effective method of controlling the discharge in rivers is by the construction of retarding basins in the headwaters of all

the rivers. the cost of this method is prohibitive in the case of large rivers of the kind under consideration."

Social Changes:

Society is very sensitive to every individual. It is a construct of human beings and is moved by the challenges faced by them in everyday life. The famine of 1866 was a great catastrophe to influence each aspect of human life in Odisha.¹⁶ The social habits and behavior took up a new form to face the strong challenges of the time. Odisha's division came under British rule in 1803. The system of education, administration and economy remained in the doldrums leading to an alarming state. Several social changes also came due to the effect of the famine.¹⁷ Food scarcity was apparent due to the drought in 1865. The people of Odisha were not conscious enough to rightly place their grievances before the government. There was no general newspaper or any other media to raise the problem in the state. The famine-like situation was first visible in the district of Puri in the middle of October 1865.¹⁸ By the end of May 1866, the whole of coastal Odisha was in the grip of starvation, disease, death and crime.

Hunger in acute form does not recognize any social barrier. Men and Women in hungry stomachs took food in the free kitchen called '*Chattar*' breaking all barriers of caste and religion. Extreme insecurity caused mental imbalance which made them insane and sometimes inhuman. The society of Odisha was hierarchical, feudal and superstitious outlook. Lack of modern education, awareness and contact between the government and government ruled people in darkness. The dominance of the Bengali aristocracy in Odia society was inaccessible from the outer world. It is reported that Ramakay Chatterjee, the Deputy Magistrate of Puri and G.N Barlow, the Magistrate of Puri found about the acute scarcity of food in almost all parts of Puri including rural areas. The people had to live in measurable life, lived on fruits and roots of different kinds of trees and many people were leaving their houses with their families for Cuttack with a hope to get employment in Irrigation Company. Musprat, the collector Balasore giving the petitions of some zamindars for the remission of revenue.¹⁹ The life and property of the rich class was the frequent threat from the hungry mob in the villages. One of the men named Netro Senapati was threatened by them. The jail of Balasore was full of criminals and dacoits and some of the helpless people committed suicide due to minor crimes. By November 1865, people sold all their belongings to purchase rice. By March 1866 the people did not have anything in their house.²⁰

The people had suffered due to starvation. Many of them suffered from indigestion, cholera and lost their lives. The number of death surmounted everywhere and everywhere. Dead bodies were getting gathered in heaps surrounding the food centers. The sweepers, belonging to a very low caste of the society, were allotted the duty to collect the corpses lying here and there in the bullock carts and throw them to rivers. A gloomy scene of desperation, death and dislocation of social structure prevailed all over Odisha.²¹

According to the famous historian Pyari Mohan Acharya, the towns were filled with sorrowful shrieks of thousands of men, women and children. The crematory grounds of all towns and villages were full of dead bodies and upon them, vultures and jackals feasted their heart's content. Parents were giving their starving children to the hands of wild animals. Some of the people ate the flesh of

their belonging to mitigate their hunger like demons. Madness, suicide, murder and other problems had increased in society.²²

To get access to the relief, one needs to register in registered centers, those who did not have food coupons were deprived of food. In the autobiography of Ananta Das, he described how he had to take residues of food struck to the plates made of leaves thrown outside relief centers to satisfy his hunger. Stealing and snatching became usual cases in society. Caste and religion was not a barrier among the people taking food in the relief centres providing cooked rice (*Annachhatra*) to the famine-stricken people. It also reported that some of the high caste people did not get facilities for free kitchen in the relief centres in fear of losing their caste.

People were suffering from multiple physical ailments and dying like flies. The medical facility had not significantly insufficient to provide relief and remedy to those people. Drinking water was also very much scarcity. The policy of providing cooked food at a fixed place proved disastrous. This situation compelled the migration of people in search of food. The houses of these people were destroyed and the thatched roof was pulled off and used as firewood by the neighbor. Prostitution had a profession during the famine period. Some destitute women were forced into the profession of prostitution. Professional prostitutes at Puri were mentioned in the book of *Ha-Anna* of Kanhu Charan Mohanty.²³ The traditional social relationship was also breaking due to the scattered migration of people. Minor girls had been chosen as a profession in large numbers. Their number in Cuttack town was 132.²⁴ The British government had taken steps to rescue the minor girls below eight years of age and to rehabilitate them in missionary female orphanage. The government was providing financial help to the organization that took care of the orphans. A sum of Rupees three (3) a month to each boy up to seventeen years of age and girl up to sixteen years of age was granted for maintenance.²⁵ Sir Stafford Northcote, the then Secretary of state in India, admitted to the House of Commons

“The catastrophe is monument of our failure, a humiliation to the people of this country and to those of our Indians officials of whom we had perhaps been little too proud. At the same time, we must hope that we might derive from its lessons which might be of real value to ourselves, and that out of this deplorable evil, good of no insignificant kind might ultimately arise.”

A new class of intelligentsia came up to give leadership and face challenges of the time to establish the identity of Odisha. Many more journals were published in Odisha in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Gauri Shankar Ray has established the Cuttack Printing Company in 1866 and made the pioneering effort in publishing the famous weekly Utkal Dipika on 4 August 1866. Fakir Mohan Senapati Published *Bodhadayini O Balasore Sambad Bahika* in 1868 at Balasore. The philanthropic work of King Dhenkanal, Bhagirathi Bhramarabar Mahendra Bahadur was praiseworthy in providing relief to the famine-stricken people of Odisha. In recognition of his selfless services, he was conferred the title Maharaja by the Governor-General. The son of the soil like Gauri Shankar Ray, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Pyari Mohan Acharya, Radhanath Ray and Madhu Sudan Rao contributed to the development of Odia language and literature.²⁶

In the case of the socio-religious reform movement, Prasanna Kumar Ganguli started a Brahmo Samaj at Puri with about eighteen members in 1866. By the 1890s, various branches of Brahmo Samaj opened at Cuttack, Balasore and Puri. The Brahmo exponents interpreting Indian thought,

tradition, culture and history in response to European criticism. The concept of widow marriage was propagated by the Brahmo exponents.²⁷

Thus the society of Odisha underwent a revolutionary change during the famine of 1866. A new Odisha was emerging from the debris caused by the disaster and death that took the very root of its existence. Society was getting reconstructed with the change in its material and moral contents. There was also a strong sense of Odia identity which ultimately led to the birth of a separate province of Odisha. Casteless and idol less religion called '*Alekha Dharma*' became very much popular amongst homeless and destitute and conservative Odia society.²⁸

Conclusion:

In many ways, the famine of 1866 had brought fundamental changes in Odisha. A distinct new caste called *Chhatra-Khia*, or those eating in the relief kitchen was created, people from all castes subsumed under this caste.²⁹ The *chhatar-khias* were supposed to give a feast to the relatives and make some offerings to the goddess of the villages to be readmitted to their respective castes. The *Utkal Deepika* pointed out that in 1901, there were 488 males and 775 females belonged to this caste.³⁰ Thus within a period of six months from April to September 1866, a large number of people died of sheer starvation. It is estimated that more than a million people had died out of 3.7 million people. The causes of death were starvation and diseases such as cholera, smallpox, and diarrhea. The famine had a deep impact on social behavior in the Odisha division. It created new castes *chhatar-khia* which exists even today. It also brought some significant changes in the tenurial relations and the organization of agriculture. British had changed for constructing roads linking Odisha with Calcutta and Madras. Labourers got additional employment in Public works, canal works and finally in railroad construction till 1900.

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