

Experiencing the Famine of 1896-97 in Bengal: British Policy and Local Initiatives

Arka Deb Banerjee

Assistant Professor of History, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous)

Abstract: *This paper seeks to show how the varying flexibility of the colonial British famine administration and their openness to unorthodox means of resource acquisition determined the outcomes of coping and survival strategies of rural people during famines in 19th-century Bengal. By considering the implementation of the British Famine Relief policy on the one hand and local initiatives on the other, this analysis seeks to understand the myriad of factors that dictated the availability of resources. Through a reading of the district-level documents, this paper tries to conduct a comparative analysis of the experience of the famine of 1896-97 in two districts of Bengal – Palamau and Khulna and thus also highlights the daily experience of famine.*

Keywords: British Famine policy, Famine, Palamau, Khulna, Famine survival.

This paper tries to show how the experience of people suffering from a severe famine in Bengal at the end of the 19th century was determined by the differing degree to which the official colonial Famine Policy was balanced against the opportunities provided by indigenous knowledge and the local environment. Through a comparative study of the famine experiences of two districts of Bengal – Khulna and Palamau during the famine of 1897-1898, this study focuses on how the Imperial British famine policy was applied in extremely challenging situations, what room was made for the needs of the local people, how local initiatives were welcomed or rejected and what impact this had on the condition of the famine-affected people.

Late 19th century India was the victim of successive, horrific famines that killed thousands. Mike Davis in his magisterial *Late Victorian Holocausts*¹ highlighted the salient features: a willfully apathetic government, monstrously cruel 'relief' systems that killed more than they saved and a landscape of hunger and death that shocked the modern reader. After the disastrous famines of the 1870s, an official famine relief policy was created to guide the government in case of future catastrophes². This policy of course was fundamentally flawed. As Ambirajan³ has argued, emphasis was put on free-market mechanics and restrained governmental intervention. Smithian and Malthusian ideas were adopted, with measures like price

control, import of foodgrains and a ban on exports being judged as beyond government jurisdiction. The only form of relief judged suitable was the recruitment of victims to public works. These public works would constitute the primary mode of governmental relief in the famine of 1897. Lance Brennan⁴ has argued that the conjunction of the experience of the poor laws along with the logic of imperialism persuaded British rulers to keep famine relief out of Indian hands and even bind their own district officers through a strict set of regulations. Thus the famine policy that would come into operation in 1897-98 would emphasize relief through public works, strict limit on food doles (termed as gratuitous relief) an intensely top-down mode of operation that required sub-divisional officers, district magistrates and divisional commissioners to regularly report to their superiors and implement policy formulated in the capital.

Palamau

The Famine of 1896-97 was an extremely severe experience for Palamau. The crop scarcity of 1896-97 was two years in the making. In 1895 unseasonal rains had destroyed the monsoon crop and the same happened in 1896. Additionally, unfavourable weather, attacks by insects and disease also ruined the winter crops. This spell of bad weather continued well into March 1897 destroying a promising *Mahua* crop and the Mango crop. While this chain of disasters was raging the provincial administration remained quite ignorant due to a decision taken 3 years ago. From 1889 it had been the practice to receive from all districts a weekly weather and crop report. But in December 1894 this was discontinued in favour of telegraphic reports from 18 selected districts from which Palamau was excluded.⁵ It was only in late 1896 that the magnitude of the crisis became visible.

With the famine setting in, initial steps were being taken. the Divisional Commissioner of Chotanagpur, Forbes was getting increasingly anxious about Palamau. He forwarded a letter from the Deputy Commissioner of Palamau citing a probable deficit of 13.5 lakh maunds of food grain in Palamau between December 1896 and August 1897. Forbes disagreed with the figures, thinking the actual requirement may be higher.⁶ He embarked on a tour of Palamau to survey the situation. Two patterns became immediately evident. Firstly, in all the markets and fairs he visited the amount of rice/paddy on sale was sharply below the normal average. Palamau's internal economy of roving pack bullocks carrying loads of grain from larger to smaller markets and interior villages was getting severely affected as the bullocks were being turned away without a load. Secondly, Forbes' house-to-house searches revealed that though many villages had grain reserves in the hundreds of maunds, most of these were concentrated in the hands of one or two households, usually, the zamindar and the bania⁷. The vast majority of houses had little to no grain in reserve.

Both Forbes and the Deputy Commissioner were unanimous in complaining of the horrible transport and communications; Forbes pointed out the lack of even a telegraph line to Daltonganj. He stressed that Palamau

had no railways whatsoever, that in case of famine, grain would have to be imported by bullock-cart from other famine-prone districts like Gaya over 330 miles of 'third-class' roads where a single trip would take 8 days in normal weather and 12 days in the monsoon.⁸ It was in the hopes of somewhat remedying this hopeless situation that Forbes appealed for an emergency extension of the telegraph line as well as starting work on a railway line which would serve the dual purpose of relief work during the famine and protective work for future famines. The provincial government recommended two railway lines for Palamau to the Central authorities as alternative projects. One was the extension of the East India Railway Grand Chord line to Daltonganj, and the other was an extension from Dehri-on-Sone to Daltonganj. Unfortunately, since the provincial government had only gotten around to forwarding its recommendations in December of 1896, it was already far too late to save Palamau. Forbes accepted that the railway would probably not be finished in time to ease the supply situation but at least it could serve another purpose in the meantime. If the railway construction were to be started it would serve as a huge centralized relief work where thousands could be relieved at once.⁹ All his expectations were soon to be dashed. While the telegraph line was granted¹⁰, more information was sought before the railway could be constructed. Forbes was solemnly assured that construction could begin in January 1898.¹¹ This was a date after the prospective end of the famine when a railway construction would have little value as relief work was completely ignored. In fact, in addition to this discouraging information, Forbes was handed a note from the central government on why railway construction was not desirable as relief work.¹² It was thought that railway as relief work was a last resort, as much of the expenses were incurred not on workers' wages but on other heads, that before even earthwork could commence a full survey should be completed, plans should be drawn up, the actual work should only be supervised by railway staff etc. Undeterred, Forbes continued to insist on the relief work, citing 5000+ workers ready to work. All of his efforts were to no avail. The central memo had convinced the Lt. Governor that the railway was not needed and the entire project was shelved.¹³

Forbes realized that given the transport and communication issue, the principal problem would be to ensure the importation of grain into Palamau through the height of the famine. He came up with the idea of a government-incentivized importation scheme. He proposed that the merchants of Gaya, who had enough experience of long-distance trade should be contracted to import rice on a large scale from Burma. To compensate them for the extra expenses incurred in transporting it to Palamau he proposed a government subsidy of 8 annas/maund. He drew up a route of import from Gaya through Maharajganj where a checking station would be set up.¹⁴ This proposal was conveyed to the central authorities who immediately granted it citing Palamau as an exceptional case.¹⁵ However, then he raised concerns that the most isolated parts of the district might not be adequately supplied with grain and proposed the issuing of

advances at 6% interest to merchants to stimulate import into these areas and if no imports were available then the government would take up the burden and institute its own import scheme.¹⁶ This proposal which after all sought to institute and systematize not a general policy but one for exceptional cases met with an almost hysterical reaction. The central reply categorically forbade government involvement in any form. While it conceded that the Famine Code did make provision for government interference when normal imports were impossible, it ordered that, even in this impossible and exceptional situation, the government should still not interfere in private trade. The directive went on to state that there were no isolated areas in Bengal and the type of proposal mooted by the Bengal government was like a blank cheque that would allow numerous violations of the sanctity of free private trade.¹⁷ The Bengal government pointed out specific examples where stocks of grain were severely depleted with no prospects for import or merchants lacking the necessary capital to begin imports. Emphasis was put on the fact that this would be a scheme of imports in only specific exceptional cases and permission would only be given after necessary review.¹⁸ The Indian government finally conceded a very limited scheme of imports. It was only with this concession that Forbes' idea of subsidized imports in Palamau had any prospect of acceptance. Thus ideas of free trade had gained so much primacy that they even prevailed over administrative notions of famine relief that had already been codified into law.

While all this policy-based wrangling was going on, Forbes had been able to wrest one vital concession from the provincial government. He had the presence of mind to request that in the absence of normal sources of food, the people should be given the right to forage for forest products in protected forests.¹⁹ The proposal bounced around in government halls for a month and was then granted with the provision that no fire would be used in such activities.²⁰ This proposal proved vital to the survival of the people of Palamau. During the height of the famine – May to July of 1897, imports stagnated due to a particularly unfortunate rainfall pattern. Heavy initial showers of rain washed out the already bad hilly roads the carts and bullocks were labouring over, and then a prolonged dry spell kept the Sone River low enough to preclude import through cargo boats. At this point, according to a detailed report later sent by Forbes, the only thing that kept most of the poor people of Palamau fed was the unusual level of charity practised by the local zamindars and when even their reserves ran out, the ability of the people to forage in the forests for food. In the same report he admitted that such a diet if prolonged would weaken people and make them more vulnerable to disease, but, it would keep them alive when conventional sources had run out.²¹ With food supplies picking back up by September, the natural resources of Palamau had done their job. The people had been allowed to fall back onto their reserves and they could now once again hope to resume relatively normal business.

Thus, Palamau was beset by numerous hazards during the famine. An

unfavourable transport and supply situation, existing scarcity, stifling bureaucracy, and an unsympathetic government far more concerned with free trade than saving lives – it suffered badly, and the only reason more people did not die was due to the presence of a proactive officer like Forbes, the ability of the people to fall back onto their natural reserves, and most crucially their being allowed to do so.

Khulna

The most startling part of the famine hitting Khulna in 1896-97 was that no one had expected it. Unlike other districts severely affected in 1896-97, Khulna did not really have a famine track record. While folk traditions were recalling the great Bengal famine of 1770, the two great famines of the immediate past, 1866, and 1873-74, only affected small parts of Khulna.²² Thus it was not considered a famine-prone district. Khulna was a deltaic district of low plains crisscrossed with tidal rivers and creeks and dotted with *bils* or shallow pools of water. To the South were the Sunderbans.²³ A land of fertile soil, plentiful rain and well-stocked markets, Khulna was a far cry from the arid plateaus of the west. Neither was the entire district affected. Unlike Palamau with its huge affected area only the Satkhira subdivision of Khulna faced scarcity.²⁴ But within that area scarcity was so intense, the poverty so deep, that even a surplus crop in the neighbouring areas of the same district could do nothing to alleviate the situation.

Through July and August, signs of scarcity were gradually increasing in Khulna. As early as the first half of July, Kaligunj and Asasuni, the two worst affected thanas of Khulna in 1896-97 were reporting scarcity. To many observant people, the impending famine was becoming more and more evident with every passing day. Not, however, to the government. By August and September scarcity and impending famine were rapidly translating into intensive famine as it quickly became obvious that the crops were a total failure. The estimated output was below 25% of the normal. It became evident later that this too was an optimistic assessment. By October the lower-ranking officials were beginning to take notice, but unlike in Palamau the senior officers preferred to ignore it all. By the first week of October, the Divisional Commissioner Westmacott had received a report from the District Officer of Khulna, Phillimore. Phillimore forwarded a report by a junior officer regarding famine conditions in the district. Phillimore dismissed the entire report and asserted that instead of large-scale famine relief as demanded in the report a few loans would be enough.²⁵ He visited one thana Mollahat, notably not Kaligunj or Asasuni which were the worst affected areas. He argued that only people residing in the vicinity of relief works were participating in them thus arguing that distress was not really severe, that Mollahat had plentiful *bils* and could expect a 75% to 100% crop in two months. He was flatly contradicted by a report from an Indian junior officer Gati Krishna Neogi, SDO of Satkhira. He pointed out that in Kaligunj, Asasuni and Magura there was going to be a total famine. There had been no rain during the sowing season, and there

had been no rain in autumn. The SDO insisted there would be no production whatsoever from the fields of Satkhira, and that there would be no harvest to refill the vacant granaries.²⁶

The Calcutta government sent Mr. B.C. Basu, Assistant Director of the Department of Land Records and Agriculture to personally inspect the area. He found that in 1895, a violent storm in the Bay of Bengal had caused a powerful tidal wave that had swamped the low-lying lands of Khulna. A heavy layer of salt had been deposited all over the land. There had not been enough rain to scour the land clean of salt in 1895, and the rains of 1896 were few and far between, as well as the above-mentioned scarcity making fresh water irrigation impossible. The peasants had sown winter rice anyway, but neither June nor July saw enough rain for the salt to be cleaned up. By late August and early September, the peasants were desperate for rain as whatever little crops they had managed to grow were dying. Basically, the Satkhira subdivision did not have any standing crops whatsoever. The total food requirement for the affected areas till the next harvest was calculated at 17-18 lakh maunds. Of this around 8 lakh had been produced or earned by the people, but most of this had either been consumed or advanced as loan. So around 42,000 tons of rice would have to be imported. While Mr Basu was not worried about the import routes, he was worried about the ability of the people to purchase rice.²⁷

It was at this juncture that Mr Basu made two very crucial recommendations. Firstly, he recommended that the forest dues be relaxed so that the people could cut and sell wood from the Sunderbans. Secondly, he wanted the governmental monopoly on salt manufacture to be temporarily lifted, thus allowing the peasants to manufacture the very substance that had doomed them and thus earn their own salvation.²⁸ Just like the people of Palamau had been able to take advantage of their natural environment, the question was raised about letting the people of Khulna use the environment of the delta where they lived to their own advantage. In Palamau a short series of letters had ensured that the people were able to collect forest products and thus feed themselves during the supply crisis. However, when the request for relaxation of forest dues was referred to the Conservator of Forests, the Forest Department, in two letters made it clear that they did not think this would be a judicious measure. Firstly they laid out long and detailed calculations to show exactly how much profit was made from the average stack of wood, and how large was the government's revenue share. They argued that since only parts of Khulna were famine it would be impossible to identify which petitioners for relaxation were actually depressed. A more judicious method would be payment of cash by the government directly or the issuance of permits. But even this was, in the opinion of the Forest Department too complicated a procedure, involving hard work as well as paperwork on the part of the officials.²⁹ The implication was that the starvation of the people was a small price to pay to keep the burden of paperwork light. In the second letter, the forest department argued that the distressed people lacked the capital, resources,

contacts and even the physical tenacity to bring wood out of the Sunderbans. With these letters embodying the will of the Forest Department, the matter was dropped by the Lt. Governor.³⁰ The proposal to relax the salt monopoly did not even merit more than one letter. The Board of Revenue assessed the region, its population as well as the proposed staff for such an undertaking. In their opinion, the available staff and security arrangements were too little, and there was active danger of salt smuggling as well as large-scale illegal manufacture in the area after the famine was over. The risk to government revenues was deemed as too great and the proposal was rejected.³¹ Thus, very importantly Khulna was denied the opportunity to make full and productive use of the natural resources. This would have terrible effects.

One last effort was made to benefit the people of Khulna through the mobilization of local resources. G.C. Dutt of the Baptist Mission of Khulna proposed to Vincent, that the government lease Lot 226 of the Sunderbans to the famine-struck people of Khulna. It was a densely forested area that the people would then clear. The government could sell the wood and gain revenue. The people in the meanwhile could settle there and thus be relieved of their own salt-saturated land. Dutt saw this as a permanent solution whereas government relief was a more temporary solution.³²

The new District Magistrate, Vincent agreed with this proposal and wrote to his superiors supporting it. He knew that the main problem was that the area was heavily forested with Sundari trees which were regarded as vital sources of timber by the government. But he pointed out that this was only a small fraction of the entire Sundari stand of the Sunderbans. Vincent suggested a comparative study of revenue generated by forest land on the one hand and fertile rice land on the other. His concluding argument was fourfold. The government would benefit both in the short term and in the long term. In the short term, the government would realize all the revenue from the tree-felling as all timber would be acquired by the government and be sold at premium prices. In the long term, the fertile rice land would generate far greater revenue than forested land. In the very long term, Vincent considered the idea of reclamation of Sunderban land to be a progressive step. The people would also benefit as they would be relieved of the worst of the distress and would be assured of a steady income in the future. Against all these benefits, he set the result of inaction: the starving people were abandoning their salty lands and leaving for other areas. This desertion would badly affect the landlords and moneylenders who would never realize either rent or interest on loans. The rural economy would be ruptured.³³

The issue was referred to the Board of Revenue who discovered an 1895 decision that no Sundari land was to be alienated. The Board considered this precedent to be perfectly adequate and informed Westmacott likewise.³⁴ The government did not consider the radically changed circumstances between the two pleas. To them, the famine and prospective famine relief was a total non-issue. He even went to the extent of criticizing the local people for trying to get firewood from the forest as this would damage government timber.³⁵ The Lt. Governor put the final seal on the issue by summarily rejecting the

proposal.³⁶ The last lifeline for the people of Khulna had been severed.

Vincent raised another important concern with the Revenue Secretary. Khulna was a low-lying district vulnerable to flooding and water-logging in monsoon. Over 95% of the relief works were on tanks or canals which would be flooded and unworkable after the rains started in June. The scanty *Aus* rice harvest would be in August and the crucial *Aman* harvest would be in November.³⁷ Vincent was facing the conundrum of feeding a starving populace, without access to relief works during the monsoon months of June to October. His concerns however were not addressed. Instead, he was reprimanded for having excess people on charitable relief and told to reduce the numbers.

The situation during monsoon on the relief works panned out exactly as Vincent had predicted. With the onset of the rains the people had no choice but to leave in large numbers. Thus while the statistical returns showed only a few on the relief works³⁸, they concealed the thousands who were now thrown back on their meager or non-existent resources. This can be understood by comparing the number of people on relief works in the summer and monsoon of 1897, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. Thus for a large segment of the population of Khulna, the monsoon was a time of the darkest misery. Devoid of work or any means of sustenance their lives descended into the deepest pits of despair. While Vincent was labouring frantically to remind his superiors that low numbers on relief works did not mean a lack of distress but rather the very opposite, circle officers were neglecting their duties in the pouring rain. The most helpless, the physical and mental cripples on gratuitous relief often found themselves inexplicably forgotten. Even in this stark extreme of need the forest and its wood were denied to the starving masses. The vernacular press demanded land revenue suspensions and the granting of loans³⁹, but the loan process had always been faulty in Khulna. Most landlords continued to hold themselves apart, doing nothing for the people. Even those landlords who did take a hand were more interested in recovering their own interest instalments.

So for Khulna in 1897 everything that could have gone wrong, went wrong. From the saline flood that brought famine to an otherwise fertile district, to the delay in relief due to the willful ignorance and inactivity of the officials, to the denial of the use of natural resources that would have revitalized the local economy, to the monsoons obliterating all work with the administration helpless, to the landlords unable or unwilling to help, the poor masses never stood a chance.

Thus it can be seen that while Khulna and Palamau were encumbered by some common problems, it was the differences between their circumstances that created a difference in famine experience. Both districts suffered from an inertia-laden, often myopic superior administration in Calcutta and had unfortunate environmental hazards. The people of both districts had to labour under a stringent famine policy formulated to ensure minimal government expense and the logic of free trade that prevented officials from plugging clear holes in the conventional market network. But while Palamau had an enterprising local administration who continuously

tried to overcome the locational disadvantages and who made sure that the local people at least had the opportunity to provide for themselves from natural forest resources, in Khulna competent local administration was continuously undercut by incredibly shortsighted decision making from above. Most importantly the people of Khulna were repeatedly denied access to the natural resources that surrounded them. Wood, forestland, and even the salt that had doomed them could have been used for their salvation but at each turn, bureaucratic intransigence and the exploitative mentality of a colonial government repeatedly ensured that no relief would come. Thus they were doomed to starve amidst the natural bounty that could have saved them.

In conclusion, it can be said that this famine highlighted the configuration of power in colonial India in the late 19th century. Ideas, methods and policies of rule formulated at the Imperial centre were enforced with little regard for local realities, and such was the inertial power of the Empire that cases of individual competence and benevolence on the part of the administration could not save the people of India from its awful weight. The Indian people lacked neither agency nor initiative, but such was the reality of colonial rule at this time, that without embarking onto a path of open rebellion they could not employ either without governmental permission. Given the space to act, they could, in a limited way safeguard themselves from the scarcities imposed by colonial exploitation. But, like everything colonial, this too was incomplete, provisional and inadequate.

Table -1

The number of people on relief works in Khulna through the summer of 1897, shown on a week-ending basis.⁴⁰

Workers	31 st March	7 th April	14 th April	21 st April	28 th April	5 th May	12 th May	19 th May	26 th May	2nd June
Adult Men	13488	13100	15996	17736	16088	21106	21212	25784	29150	27451
Women	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Big Children	1023	803	1387	1572	1337	1888	1446	1377	1812	1605
Small Children	225	281	447	424	231	505	300	262	163	38

Table 2

Number of people on relief works in Khulna through the monsoon of 1897, shown on a week-ending basis⁴¹

Workers	9 th June	16 th June	23 rd June	30 th June	7 th July	14 th July	21 st July	31 st July	7 th Aug	14 th Aug	21 st Aug	28 th Aug
Men	30872	24256	10040	7096	4462	4261	1790	650	1812	751	800	199
Women	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Big Children	1847	1289	431	219	143	91	22	12	14	3	3	0
Small Children	424	168	77	62	16	9	5	5	2	0	0	0

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39. Report on Native Newspapers and Press, Bengal, 1897, R.N.P/27/ Week Ending 3rd July, *Mihir-O-Sudhakar*, July 3rd, p. 573
40. Compiled by the author from WBSA Proceedings Revenue August 1897, No. 484-85, 2S/10:27, No. 19G S.R., Calcutta 26th April, attached No. 214G Khulna 16th April 1897, No. 486-87, 2S/10:28, No. 31G S.R. Calcutta 6th May, attached, No. 77 S.C. Kaligunj, 1st May, 1897, No. 493-494, 2S/10:32, No. 40G Calcutta 26th May 1897, attached, No. 624G Khulna 17th May 1897, No. 497-98, 2S/10: 36, No. 49G S.R. Calcutta 10th June, attached, No. 893 Khulna 2nd June 1897, No. 503-504. 2S/10:37. No. 566 S.R. Calcutta 30th June, attached No. 1067G Khulna 14th June 1897
41. Compiled by the author from WBSA Proceedings Revenue August 1897, No. 503-504. 2S/10:37. No. 566 S.R. Calcutta 30th June, attached No. 1067G Khulna 14th June 1897. No. 505-506, 2S/10: 38, No. 9/1250, 1st July 1897, No. 507-8, 2S/10:39, No. G/109 S.R. Calcutta 24th July, attached No.____, A____, Camp Kaligunj 15th/16th July 1897, WBSA Proceedings Revenue September 1897, No. 27-28, 2S/10, No. 78G S.R. Calcutta 14th August 1897, attached, No. 1657G Khulna 2nd August 1897, No. 105-106, 2S/10:45, No. 84 G.R. Calcutta 23rd August, attached, No. 9874G Khulna 17th August 1897, No. 110-111, 2S/10:48, No. 91G S.R. Calcutta 9th September, attached No. 2048G Khulna, 2nd September 1897