

INTRODUCTION

The Colonial rule was largely responsible for the resourcelessness of the people of India. British economic exploitation, the decay of indigenous industries, absence of modern industries, high taxation, drain of wealth to Britain, backward agrarian structure leading to stagnation of agriculture and exploitation of poor peasants by zamindars, princes, moneylenders, merchants and the state led to the eventual growth of poverty and stagnated the economic life of the people. When scarcities, drought occurred, people having no saving could not be able to face the situation, soon starvation and famine occurred. Ramesh Dutt has rightly said, 'the failure of rain destroy crops in particular area, it is the poverty of the people which bring on severe famines'.¹ W. W. Hunter also admitted, 'every decade several millions actually perish by starvation.'² The Congress attributed this to 'the unsatisfactory administration of British Government'.³ All sections of people suffered from colonial rule Poverty, ill health, illiteracy and low productivity form a vicious circle which in turn perpetuates economic underdevelopment. Therefore modern states with different socio economic system are taking initiative in organising social overheads. This could not be expected of an alien rule. Ramesh Chandra Dutt has rightly said "the empire gave the people of India peace but not prosperity; that the manufacturers lost their industries, that the cultivators were grounded down by a heavy and variable taxation which precluded any saving; that the revenue of country to large extent diverted to England and that recurring and desolating famines swept away millions of population."⁴ The followings are the various aspects of economic exploitation of India:

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- 1 Ramesh Dutt, *The Economic History of India 1837-1900*, Vol. II, London, 1903, p.vi.
 - 2 Dadbhai Naroji, *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, London, 1901, p. 136.
 - 3 John Murdock, *The Indian National Congress Resolution of 13th session*, Madras, 1898, p. 128.
 - 4 Ramesh Dutt, *op. cit.* p.xv.

DECLINE OF INDIGENOUS INDUSTRIES

After Industrial Revolution the British imported their industrial products, then they erected tariff walls behind which they could nurture their infant industries.⁵ The high import duties and other restrictions imposed on the import of Indian goods into Britain and Europe during 18th and 19th centuries combined with the development of modern manufacturing industries in Britain, led to the virtual closing of European markets to Indian manufacturers after 1820.⁶

The British policy of exporting raw materials injured indigenous industries of our country. They could get raw materials for their industries in their homeland. The flow of patronage from the local rulers also ceased when they were replaced by the British officials. Consequently the indigenous products could not compete with the cheap machine made goods and indigenous industries began to decline.⁷

Lancashire cotton fabrics first deprived the Indian weavers of their oversea markets, then competed with them in the home market. Under the increasing influence of western taste and fashion a few could afford them in preference to English goods. In Berhampur demand for tussar and silk declined and the common Chicacole muslin which was once very popular also declined due small demand.⁸ Besides the decay of traditional industries was not accompanied by the growth of modern machine industries as was the case in Britain and Western Europe. Consequently the ruined handicraftsmen and artisans failed to find alternative employment. The only choice open to them was to crowd into agriculture. The gradual destruction of rural handicrafts also broke up the union between agriculture and domestic industry in the countryside and this contributed to destruction of self sufficient village economy.

The tragedy was heightened by the fact that the decay of traditional industries was not accompanied by the growth of modern industries as was the case in Britain and Western Europe. Consequently the ruined handicraftsmen and artisans failed to find alternative employment. The only choice left open to them was to crowd into agriculture and domestic industry in the countryside and this contributed to the destruction of self sufficient village economy. Thus the British conquest led to de industrialisation

5 Dietmar Rothermund, *An Economic History of India from pre colonial Time to 1806*, New Delhi, 1983 p. 507.

6 Bipin Chandra, *Modern India*, New Delhi, 1983, p. 183.

7 *Ibid.*

8 T. J. Maltby, *Ganjam District Manuuel*, Madras, 1918, p. 195.

of the country and increased dependence on agriculture which became a major cause extreme poverty of the people.⁹

COMMERCIALISATION OF AGRICULTURE

From 1860 onwards, the nature of agriculture was transferred from subsistence to commercial farming. The farmer no longer produced for his domestic consumption but a good proportion of land was ploughed for the purpose of export. The development of transport and foreign trade led to the introduction of a variety of new crops such as tobacco, groundnuts etc.¹⁰ The foreign demand for these agricultural products of India increased to a great extent but the enormous increase could not bring about development of agriculture in India because the farmers and agricultural organizations of India lacked the required resources for technological improvement. The reason for transition of agriculture from a basis of family self sufficiency to a basis of commercial gains is many and varied. In the first place the need for some cash earning had arrived in the village owing to the introduction of cash assessment in the system of revenue collection as well as to the greater use of money for credit purposes. Secondly, the growing commercial classes flocked to the villages to secure crop for trade and their insistence led the villagers to plant cash crops.¹¹

The growth in exports and the consequent rise in price could not benefit the small farmers who had a small margin of surplus from the produce of his tiny farm over his own requirements for sale in the market. Very often he was not the master of the piece of land that he cultivated and was therefore unable to effect improvement or carry out technological change in his farming practices. The growth of cash crops was also encouraged by the government to meet the raw material requirement of British Industry.¹²

HIGH LAND REVENUE DEMAND

Heavy assessment of land revenue was one of the main causes for the deterioration of agriculture and consequently contributed to the growth of poverty in India. The demand of land revenue was as high as one third to one half of the produce. The evil of high revenue demand was made

9 Bipin Chandra, *op. cit.* 184.

10 G. Kaushal, *Economic History of India, 1757-1966*, New Delhi, 1979, p. 19.

11 V. B. Singh (ed.) *Economic History of India 1857-1956*, New Delhi, 1956, p. 124.

12 D. Bhattacharya, *A Concise History of Indian Economy 1750-1950*, New Delhi, 1979, p. 47.

worse by the fact that the peasant got little economic return for it. the Government spent very little on improving agriculture. It devoted almost its entire income to meeting the needs of the British Indian administration, making the payments of direct and indirect tribute to England, and serving the interests of British trade and industry.¹³

The harmful effect of an excessive land revenue demand were further heightened by the rigid manner of its collection. The estates which were attached for arrears of revenue could not be sold immediately for want of purchasers. ¹⁴ There were few rich people who could afford to purchase large tracts of land by paying huge money. So the Government divided the attached lands into several divisions and advertised them for sale.

In the later years the Company Government ordered the introduction of royatwari settlement in the land reverted to Government under zamindari system.¹⁵ But the rots suffered from increase in the assessment of land revenue and the rigidity of collection

TECHNOLOGICAL BACKWARDNESS

At the opening of 19th century agricultural practices were highly defective and were largely based on customs and superstitions. The implements used for agriculture were few and simple. By far the most important implement used was plough. Its construction was - a crooked tree or branch or piece of wood with a pointed end to which a pair of bullocks was yoked by means of a single wooden pole and yoke.¹⁶ the other implements commonly in use were sickle, the hoe, harrow, several kinds of levelers a manavelty, the axe, seed dril, rake, gorru, a small quantaka or grubber and lever. The application of manure was little known and imperfectly practiced, while seed selection were seldom or never practiced.

INDEBTEDNESS

The Famine Commission of 1880 has described the indebtedness of the landed classes as a serious evil and admitted that indebtedness increased to the great extent during the British administration. The Commission attributed the origin of debt among landed classes to various causes; among

13 Bipin Chandra, *op.cit.*, p.185.

14 Letter from J. Hanurbury, Secretary Fort St. George to Chief Secretary to Government dtd.10 August 1815, pp.15- 16.

15 Revenue Letter to Fort St. George,dtd.12.4. 1815.

16 A Sarda Raju, *Economic Conditon in Madras Presidency*, Madras,1941, pp.53-54.

◆ which the most prominent are failure of crops due to drought, expenditure on marriage and other ceremonies, general thriftiness, an improvident use of sudden inflation of credit, the exaction of an oppressive body of middlemen, and administrative errors such as unsuitable revenue settlement.¹⁷

The money-lender was largely helped by the new legal system and the new revenue policy. In pre-British times, the money-lender was subordinated to the village community. He could not behave in a manner totally disliked by the rest of the village. The rate of interest was fixed by usage of public opinion. Moreover, he could not seize the land of debtor; he could at most take possession of debtors personal effects like jewellery or parts of his standing crop. By introducing transferability of land the British revenue system enabled the money-lender or rich peasant to take possession of land. Even the benefits of peace and security established by the British through their legal system and police were primarily reaped by the moneylenders. The moneylender also used the power of purse to turn the expensive process of litigation in his favour and to make the police serve his purpose.¹⁸

STAGNATION AND DETERIORATION OF AGRICULTURE

As a result of overcrowding of agriculture excessive land revenue demand, growth of landlordism, increasing indebtedness and the growing of impoverishment of cultivators, Indian agriculture began to stagnate and even to deteriorate resulting in extremely low yield per acre.¹⁹

Overcrowding into agriculture and increase in sub-infeudation lead to subdivision and fragmentation of land into small holdings most of which could not maintain their cultivation. The extreme poverty of overwhelming majority of peasants left them without resources with which to improve agriculture by using better cattle, seeds, manure, fertilisers and improve techniques of production. Nor did the cultivator, rack-rented by both the Government and the landlord, have any incentive to do so. After all the land cultivated was rarely his property and the bulk of the benefits which agricultural improvements would bring was likely to be reaped by the horde of absentee landlord and money-lenders. Subdivision and fragmentation of land also made it difficult to affect improvements.²⁰

17 Indian Famine Commission Report, 1880, Calcutta, pp. 130-3122.

18 Bipin Chandra, *op.cit.*, p. 186.

19 *Ibid.*, p.186.

20 *Ibid.*, p.189.

The Colonial rulers were more concerned about their own benefits and of their country. The British exploited the economic resources of India in various ways to such an extent that India was impoverished. The peasants, weavers, craftsmen, artisans, labourers all most all sections of people suffered from harmful colonial administration. Rural handicrafts were destroyed, agriculture was commercialised, money- lenders exploited the debtors. zamindars fell into arrears, peasants became landless. People were under dire poverty. Consequently when famines occurred people could not withstand the ravages of famine.

Chapter-1

SCARCITY, FAMINE AND STRAVATION

FAMINE: DEFINITION AND DIMENSION

The word “famine” came into English through Norman French from the Latin ‘fames’ meaning hunger. The Indian Famine Commission 1867 has defined famine as “suffering from hunger on the part of large classes of the population.” The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines famine as “extreme and general shortage of food causing distress and death from starvation among the population of a district or country.” Ancel Keys, the author of *The Biology of Human Starvation* writes: “Famine denotes the semi starvation of many people – a substantial proportion of the population of some sizeable area.”¹ All these definitions recognize the fact that famine is a catastrophe afflicting a large number of people over a large geographical area causing distress and death as a result of shortage of food.

FAMINE AND HUNGER

“Hunger” is an emotional word associated with fundamental bodily sensations which impel living things to seek for food in a multitude of curious ways. Whether these sensations are pleasant or not depends on their duration and immediate prospects of quelling them. Famine victims are indeed hungry, especially in the early stages of famine, but the obsession with food which accompanies established famine is something deeper than mere hunger. In the ordinary sense of the terms, “hunger” and “famine” are far from being synonymous.²

FAMINE AND STARVATION

The word ‘starvation’ can simply be defined as “the result of lack of food”, has a good deal in common with the word “famine”. In fact “mass starvation” and famine mean much the same thing. But usually the word

1 W.R. Aykroyd, *The Conquest of Famine*, London, 1974, p. 1.

2 *Ibid.*, pp.2-3.

starvation is more limited in its range. Complete starvation brings death in about ten weeks to a previously healthy man. Half starvation and semi-starvation which may be applied both to individuals and groups usually denote a fairly advanced degree of starvation though the fraction has no physiological significance. Starvation occurs in a variety of circumstances and has numerous causes. It is a manifestation of many wasting and lethal diseases, medical terms for it include "cachexia" and "marasmus". It may be self imposed, brought out by the voluntary act of an individual. Famine on the other hand is considered as an act of god and nature.³

FAMINE, SCARCITY, SHORTAGE OF FOOD AND NUTRIENTS

Food is not only essential for maintenance of human life and bodily activity but is also fundamental to the structures of dominance and dependency. Its importance is felt at all levels of society both by those who suffered directly for want of basic sustenance and those whose authority, security and profit are threatened as the indirect consequence of shortage of food, nutrients, calories leading to scarcity, mass starvation, death and famines. However famine is different from scarcity, shortage of food, calories and nutrients. Scarcity can be relieved by adequate supply of food to the deficit area. But when scarcity develops into an extreme stage it is called famine. Malnutrition weakens the body's immune responses. There is a diminished resistance to infection and a reduced capacity to recover from it afterwards. The young and the old already the most vulnerable members of the community are especially susceptible to epidemic attack. Pregnant and lactating women are at risk because of the high nutritional demands made on their bodies.⁴

Famine is a disaster of horrific kind, replete with human misery on a massive, almost unimaginable scale. Famines have been powerful engines of historical transformation, driving some societies to the verge of extinction, impelling others into wholesale migration or radical economic, political and social change. The persistent fear of hunger, the recurrent threat of starvation, reinforced by the periodic visitation of famine itself have profoundly influenced human society throughout the ages and helped to find out elaborate strategies for survival, subsistence and collective security. Famine is one of the most pervasive and arguably one of the most

3 *Ibid.*

4 David Arnold, *Famine, Social Crisis and Historical Change*, Oxford, 1988, p.23.

emotive words in our historical vocabulary and in itself makes it all the more difficult to isolate its meaning and wider significance.⁵

Famine is an event which makes everything in the life of those affected different, from the one they have in a normal period. In desperation of their hunger people turn to unfamiliar or forbidden food, homes and fields are deserted, families disintegrated wives and children are abandoned or sold into slavery or prostitution, corps of dead bodies lied in streets. The exact time when famine started and ended is difficult to say. But even in that period of abnormalities, people try to cling to their former cultural norms and social relations. In India the caste Hindus even in time of famine could not agree to eat beef nor to accept food prepared by low caste cooks at relief works and charitable food centers. So a historical understanding of the subject cannot be complete without a study of these socio-cultural parameters of the people affected.

CAUSES OF FAMINE

Famine is caused by different reasons, some of which are natural and some artificial. Among natural causes of famine are the flood, cyclone, earthquake, drought, wind storms, volcanic eruption, frost and snow, crop and livestock diseases, war, civil commotion, over population, unemployment, poverty, poor communication, drastic and sudden change in agrarian organization, debasement of coinage, rise in price of food stuff, excess exportation, inflation, ill conceived action on the part of Government are among the artificial or man-made causes of famine.⁶

Among these causes of famine, the main cause is the scarcity of basic food which increases the cost of food. Poor people cannot buy the food at high cost and die of starvation. Before mechanical transport was invented effective supply of food to deficit areas was not possible. So, scarcities soon develop into famine causing heavy mortality of men and animals. The terror it caused will remain in the memory of the people for long for peasants, labourers and pastoralists particularly whose very existence depends on harvest, a failure of rainfall make them worry, anticipating the possible scarcity and famine. Besides the above classes, the weaver, merchants even the middle class professionals are directly or indirectly affected by famine. So famine has become an important subject for discussion not

5 *Ibid.*, p.5.

6 Minati Sahu, *Famines in South Orissa 1800-1900 A.D.*, Berhampur, 2003, pp.9-11.