



Rice, famine and society: A study on '1866 famine' of Orissa

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Abstract

Rice is an important food element for the Indian subcontinent. It has a deep historical root into ancient period of India. Since the second urbanization movement in Northern India rice became the staple food of many regions of this land. Basically, eastern region of India due to its plain land have been adopted rice as their main food. Orissa which situated in eastern part of India also followed the same. Not only food, rice has taken an important place in the Oriya culture, religion, and social policies. During British administration once Orissa had faced a severe shortage of rice. Nearly one million people were died due to shortage of rice in 1866 famine. Women and girl children were left house to save male persons of the family. To fill the empty stomach and control the pain of starvation, human was eating own children's body during this famine. Zamindar and landlord's role was negative in this food battle. Peasants, labourer, workers and lower-class people were suffered a lot. This paper is attempted to analyze the various factors which led the shortage of rice in the society and find out how its shortage caused the death of thousands of people during 1866 famine of Orissa.

Keywords: rice, famine, society, colonial Orissa, starvation, common people

Introduction

Nineteenth century witnessed the rise of British power in Orissa. They occupied and established their administration by defeating Marathas. Orissa which was predominately an agrarian region and famous for its best quality of rice production was witnessed the food shortage, malnutrition, hunger and mass death during nineteenth century. British government was not giving much importance to the welfare of the farmers or commoners. They were extracting money by imposing various taxes. Rice was the staple food of Oriya people and it had great contribution in the progress and development of Orissan people. Most of the people were agriculturist and agriculture was the only source of income for the most of the people in Orissa. Agricultural production of Orissa drastically reduced towards the middle of twentieth century. Due to the shortage of rain fall food shortage became a severe problem in Orissa. In the middle of nineteenth century Orissa faced severe drought situation, famine and decline of rice production made the lives of the people worsened. British government did not look after the people and their progress. Even during 1866 famine when people were dying in hunger and British authority was not serious to provide food to the people. Rice was produced and supplied to the other part of India and on the other hand there was no rice for the people of Orissa. Thus we can say that rice shortage led the society towards mass starvation and loss of lives in Orissa. As result of that when famine breakout in Orissa, most affected and suffering peoples were the poor, landless cultivators, weavers, artisans' classes. Thousands of people from these communities lost their lives in hunger and starvation. These groups of people were working privately and depended upon others for their livelihood.

In the year 1866 Orissa faced a dreadful famine called Na'anika Durbhikshya. Several historians have discussed the causes of the 1866 famine in the basis of the famine

commissioner's report. According to them, the main causes of the famine were premature cessation of rainfall, frequent settlements, unregulated export of food grains, and geographical isolation of Orissa from rest of the country, absence of suitable means of transport and communication, inherent defects of the British administration, lack of irrigation facility and absence of a trading class were some of the important reason behind the famine of 1866 in Orissa. The people suffered a lot as there was no other source of employment than cultivation nor did they have money to buy food available in the market by the government due to their limited purchasing power. Exploitation through various ways also had ruined their economy and quality of life. The state of Orissa has an agrarian economy. Agriculture forms the largest as well as the most important section of its economy. Rural development and socio-economic evolution of the state is mostly dependent upon on the growth and development of agriculture, so that a small disaster in the field of agriculture might affect a large number of people, can create famine, unemployment and economic crisis for the state.

It has been mentioned that the low land, between the hilly country and the sea, forms what are called the regulations districts of Orissa. These are three in number- Balasore, Cuttack and Puri. Nearly the whole of this region is of an alluvial character, a flat rice country. Mostly three type of rice were cultivated throughout Orissa. *Bialidhan* or upland paddy, *Dalua dhan*, and *Saraddhan* or low land paddy. Dalua rice cultivation regarded as the best rice and mostly this type of rice was cultivated throughout Orissa. It was grown on about 87 percent of the total cultivated area. As an agrarian state different types of rice were cultivated in Orissa. For the cultivation of rice people were solely dependent on rain fall as there was no other source of irrigation. The failure of timely rainfall destroyed the rice crops which threatened the life of millions of people. Due to

lack of food and starvation large number of people were killed and most of the people were from the lower section, and those people were solely dependent upon agriculture were mostly the famine victims. So it raises a question why these people were killed why not the privileged section people were killed in this famine.

During nineteenth century Orissa followed the feudal system of administration. After the British officers zamindars and merchants were the most powerful personalities in the administration. These groups of people were wealthiest in the society and peasants and lower-class people were under their shell. Orissa supplied rice to other provinces and all the benefits of trade and commerce were taken by the zamindars and merchants and the stock holders. When in 1866 famine broke out in Orissa it killed nearly one million people, and these people were belongs to the lower class people, peasants, artisans class, not a single merchant, zamindar were died due to starvation.

Role of Zamindar

Zamindars held one of the most powerful positions in the society. Their primary duty was to collect rent from the peasants. They collected much more whatever they were paying to the Government. They had only interested in the collection of land revenue. Many people were working under them mainly known as *Gumastas*. The majority of the people were depended on gumastas for the donation. In Orissa during 1866 majority of zamindars were Bengalis, who did not had any kind of obligation towards the raiyats. The agrarian economy of Orissa was further exploited by the colonial government. When the Government needed the support of the Zamindars for the relief of the people, little of them came forward. As already discussed that many of the zamindars were Bengali and little of them were Oriya, and the rich Bengalis did not extend their help towards famine victim Oriya people.

Rice stock holders and Merchants

After the zamindars the next important position was taken by the merchants. Since ancient time the merchants were famous in the name of *setthi* which means a person having the best. And they were also powerful and wealthiest people in the society. In Orissa also most of the trade and commercial activities were controlled by the merchants. During the famine the price of rice could be managed by the rice trader if they properly justified their duty. The local traders were wholly unenterprising, and they wholly unfair to trade. Both Oriya and Bengalese people wanted to buy in cheap rate and due to heavy production rice was available in cheap price also. However, when there was price rise in any reasons traders and merchants did not import rice from other region of India. They were doing if that was benefited for them. For trade and commercial activities all coastal towns in Orissa were not suitable. Puri was not a port, same time Cuttack was situated on the river bank. Only Balasore was the port town and famous for its navigation activities. But during the time of merchants and Zamindar did not help to the people. Instead of that they made hoarding of the rice for their business and future. Local traders also had not done anything for people during this famine period.

Famine and Peasants

From the ancient period the *Gahapati* or the land lords got their land cultivated by the slaves known as *dasa*, hired

labourers or *karmakara* and sudras. Here the peasants came last in the occupational structure of Orissa. Always they were working under the zamindars as their *gumastas*. Although Orissa was an agricultural country, but here the peasants were neglected and oppressed by the zamindar and by the policies of Colonial Government of Orissa of the periods. Salt industry was one of the most important industries of Orissa which provide employment to the people but due to the monopoly of East India Company it ultimately led towards the ruin of the industry. As a result of that the unemployed people had nothing to do for their livelihood expect agriculture. When famine broke out in 1866 in Orissa, the peasants were most affected community in the society. Of course, landless cultivators, weavers, artisans, and people those who were solely depending on the production of rice had lost their lives. These groups of people had worked privately dependent upon others for their livelihood. The wages were very low. When famine took place the price of rice rose rapidly for which these lower class people could not afford. Orissa was frequently visited by the natural calamities like flood, drought, famine etc, but there were no agencies to furnish from year to year fiscal and agrarian returns. There were very less government officials' engaged in administration and to maintain law and order. Agriculture and revenue matters were primarily look after by the local land lords or zamindar. However, nobody was there who could come forward for the help the peasants during this 1866 famine in Orissa.

The Daily labourers and wage earning *muleyas* (servants) belonging to the *Chasa*, *Sonthal* and *Khond* communities had hired land from the mahjanas on a temporary leasehold basis. The raiyats were compelled very often to borrow money to meet *kist* (installment of rent) during the off-season. According to Nathan, the revenue officer kotdes, reported that, "in Puri the royats did not pay his rent through the agency of the Mahajan, while J M Das in Jajpur also subscribed to this view. The peasant's indebtedness, begun on account of some natural calamity or social function, was perpetuated through high rates of interest rather than by his improvidence".

The condition of the tenants was very poor during the colonial periods. They were forced to work under the contractors and paddy dealers. Many times tenants were borrowing money and other agricultural tools from the money lenders and land lords with high rate of interest for the cultivation purpose. But in some years nature was not supporting for the cultivation. Drought, flood, and cyclone were the common phenomenon in the Orissa land. Even present time also Odisha have been facing sever cyclone, floods, heavy rain fall and draught kind of situation in every years. During colonial time rice was its main crop production which was generally cultivated in rainy season only. Once this cultivation failed due to drought or flood then peasants could not pay the interest of the loan and had to make mortgage of the land or other agricultural items for their livelihood and further preparation for agriculture. Statistically speaking, out of annual crop one tenth was destroyed by flood and one tenth by drought. The balance grain had to meet the arrears of interest due on them.

Famine and Society

In Orissa the famine had a horrible impact on society. Lower class people were majorly affected by the famine because the daily labourer, *chasa*, *mulia*, people had not any

kind of savings both in money and food. So in case the crop failed they cannot buy nor have their food.

The condition of the people of Puri districts like Parikuda, Maluda, Banapura, Chabiskuda and Bajrakota, were severely affected by this famine. Usually in November and December people must have rice in their home but due to the famine they had nothing to eat even they were not able to stand and cook something. Villages were empty, dead bodies were lying down everywhere. Mostly the women and children were left in home for death. People have not anything in their body expect their skin and they were merely looking like a skeleton. In some villages women were started eating the leaves and roots of the wild plants which were quite poisonous for health. Here the condition of the people was worsened than the animals. People were ready to do everything just to fill the empty stomach. People started eating the dead bodies lie down on the road. This seen was so furious and disheartened for the mankind. And raise a big question in front of the British administration and the privileged section of the society.

Pyarimohan Acharya, an eye witness of the 1866 famine of Orissa provides a horrible picture on it. He narrates about this famine in the following way:

"The towns were filled with the sorrowful shrieks of thousands of men, women and children who had been reduced to mere skeletons. The crematory grounds near the towns and villages were full of innumerable dead bodies and upon them the vultures and jackals feasted to their hearts' content. Men and women forsook their natural instincts owing to the unbearable pains of hunger. Parents cast away their starving children before wild animals to be devoured by them. Some even ate the dead bodies of their own children like, demons, Social evils such as murder, suicide etc., became a very common thing at that time. Some people tried to live upon wild shrubs and inedible materials".

From the above words we can feel the intensity of the famine, it completely changed the structure of the society, people started selling his own children, so that they can get some food to eat, many people committed crime like rape, murder so that they can get two time food in the jail. As a result of that jails were full of criminals. People both men and women, children were dying on the road, they were look like a mere skeleton. Most of the famine victims, for their work depended upon others. Due to the deindustrialization rural handicraft, art, weavers lost their position, which ultimately led them towards destruction.

Famine stopped the trade and commerce in Orissa, because Orissa was isolated from the rest of the world, there was only one road which connected to Calcutta but unfortunately it was also destroyed due to the heavy rain fall in Orissa. So it was quite difficult for the British administration to import rice from other region. When little amount food imported from other provinces the policy of distribution was not managed properly. It a deep impact on agriculture. Flood and famine destroyed the fields, rice crop in everywhere. Agriculture turned into dust. When people starting eating the green leaves, and unhygienic food, they were unable to digest, and lost their health and mental condition. Epidemic like cholera, and Malaria also did not spare others; many people came under health issues and lost their life. In colonial period there was no medical facilities for the people as a result many people died. Children were the easy victims of the famine, as they had no food, and children could not

bear the pain of hunger, without food they became weaker, lost their life.

Many people converted into Christian religion, and their number was increased day by day during the famine. People sold their utensils and whatever they had so that they can get some food. British Government could not properly managed the food center which were established to serve cooked food for the famine affected people and also relief operation in the rural areas was defective, as a result people did not get proper relief food. Although relief works were started in December 1865.

Progress

The famine opened the eyes of the British Government in Orissa. It exposed the defective administrative system of the Bengal Government. After the famine, the Bengal government inaugurated some major reforms in Orissa. The famine commission made some recommendation for the prevention of the famine in future. Many reforms were introduced in agriculture, irrigation facilities were improved, before the outcome of the famine there was no communication system and no railways in Orissa, and it was isolated from the rest of India. Communication facilities were improved. Water communication was also developed, the port false point was improved. The horror of the famine forced the authorities for the development of Orissa. British government started giving importance on the improvement of education in Orissa. Many school and colleges were established by the British government for the development of the students.

Conclusion

After analyzing the various issues and facts related to Orissa Famine of 1866', it can be said that the policy of distribution and supply of rice and other essential items were not implemented properly in time. Apart from the administrative failure this famine was took place due to both decline in agricultural output and decline in income of the people. However the conversion process during this famine is still not highlighted in historical studies. Why British officials were not serious, when people were dying in starvation during this said period? How missionaries had been converting poor, uneducated and hungry people into Christianity? These issues need more attention for study.

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