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# INDIA'S

# FAMINE

==== **the facts** ====

**by Ben Bradley**

*Twopence*

## “THE FAMINE YEARS”

“ In India serious complications, if not a general outbreak, are in store for the British Government. What the English take from them annually in the form of rent, dividends from railways useless to the Hindus; pensions for military and Civil Service men, for Afghanistan and other wars, etc., etc.—what they take from them *without any equivalent* and quite apart from what they appropriate to themselves annually *within* India, speaking only of the *value of the commodities* the Indians have gratuitously and annually to send over to Britain—it amounts to more than the total sum of the sixty millions of agricultural and industrial labourers of India! This is a bleeding process with a vengeance! The famine years are pressing each other and in dimensions till now not yet suspected in Europe! ”

(from a letter from Karl Marx to Danielson, February 19, 1881.)

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# India's Famine

*the facts*

by Ben Bradley

*“ The root cause of this nation-wide starvation is nothing else but the bankrupt economic policy of the Imperialist Government which has intensified the exploitation of the people during the war and has permitted unbridled profiteering by monopoly capitalist and trader. The Government alone is basically responsible for the vast hoarding of food grains which has led to their virtual disappearance from the market and mass starvation.”* THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA, February, 1943.

**I**N February this year the Communist Party of India drew attention to the very serious famine situation that had been developing for a period of more than six months previously.

Now, twelve months after the food crisis was apparent, Lord Wavell, the new Viceroy, it is reported, is taking energetic steps to deal with the situation. The securing of relief is a matter of urgency and must take priority over other questions. At the same time it is our duty to get to the root causes and take strong measures to prevent such a catastrophe recurring.

The Government has issued a White Paper on the question and a debate took place in Parliament on November 4th. The White Paper shows that no special steps were taken, and that although a number

of Food Conferences were called, nothing was done. The White Paper, instead of being a defence of the Government, is itself an indictment of their complete negligence. What are the facts of the Indian famine?

In August, 1942, India was facing a food crisis. Prices of food grains had more than doubled above pre-war level, and food in many cases had already vanished from the open market. The situation was rapidly heading for the worst crisis that India has ever known—and that is saying much, because India has suffered considerably in recent years.

The Government, however, were not concerned. They were too busy locking up many of the popular leaders of the Indian people. If the Government had acted with a fraction of the energy and decision to solve the food crisis as they had used to imprison India's leaders, a great many of those who died from starvation would have been saved.

## ***The Second City of the Empire***

The exact number of men, women and children who have died as a result of this famine will never be known. Over many months in the country areas of Bengal the death roll must have been considerable, but it was only when, forced by hunger, thousands of Bengali people came to Calcutta, that the terrible death rate broke through the official news and became known to the world.

**The death roll for many weeks now has been 2,000 a week in Calcutta alone. The most appalling tragedy is being enacted—deaths due to starvation, and now epidemics of cholera and typhoid add to the horror of the situation.**

Reports from Calcutta describe the scene. Tens of thousands of destitutes—men, women and children—roam the city or lie exhausted in the doorways and on the footpaths. Their misery becomes common-place to the people of Calcutta. Ian Fitchett, *Daily Express* reporter, describes the position as follows (October 12th, 1943):

*"Gaunt, hollow faces, razor-like ribs and shoulder blades, arms and legs like sticks, and children's grotesquely distorted stomachs, distinguish them from the better-fed city dwellers, though many of these are starving."*

The scenes are horrible in the extreme and almost unbelievable. The *Daily Express* reporter says (October 13th, 1943):

*"Ten minutes in one hospital ward was enough for me. 'Those depressed eye-sockets are an inevitable sign of death,' said a*

*doctor. On the verandah lay seven corpses awaiting the corpse disposal squad—burial for the Moslems, burning ghats for the Hindus. In death with their horrible pipe-clay limbs, there is little to distinguish them from the living inside. From what I have seen it would be impossible to go anywhere in the second city of the Empire and avoid the horrors."*

Women and children rake over the refuse heaps and search in the gutters for scraps of food. Many of them are too weak to reach the emergency food centres and die in the streets.

## ***Permanent Poverty***

The present ghastly situation of mounting deaths from famine in Bengal is merely an extension of a chronic crisis, and a striking example of what is in fact a national crisis for India.

The Bengal peasant dies in the streets of Calcutta because he cannot get food. But the present food crisis takes quick toll of the Bengal peasant because he has always lived on the verge of starvation—because he has no power of resistance.

The Bengal peasant has been poverty-stricken for generations. These peasantry are the poorest in the world:

*"1,500,000 people are dying every year in Bengal alone; on an average 750,000 children under 15 years of age die every year—about 15 per cent of the total deaths. Twenty-five per cent of this mortality is due to preventible diseases. The present peasantry of Bengal are in a very large proportion taking to a dietary on which even rats could not live for more than about five weeks. Their vitality is now so undermined by inadequate diet that they cannot stand the infection of foul diseases. Last year 120,000 people died from cholera; 350,000 from malaria; 350,000 from tuberculosis; 100,000 from enteric. On an average 55,000 newborn infants die every year of tetanus." (Official report of Dr. Bentley, Director of the Public Health Department, Government of Bengal, for the year 1927/8.)*

Nourished on a "dietary on which even rats could not live for more than about five weeks" the population can only put up a feeble resistance. From "Nutrition in India," by Mr. Aykroya, we get the following calculations, based on a careful study of the facts: "A cheap, well-balanced diet, though far short of western standards, would cost 5 to 6 rupees per adult per month." But the standard of living in India is far below that:

*"Even when dietary standards have been reduced to a minimum point which may be difficult to justify on scientific grounds, Indian dietaries are found to be deficient in terms of such standards."*

And again—"The haemoglobin content of Indian children's blood is some 20 per cent or more below European standards."

It is, however, fantastic to think of the Indian peasant being able to spend 5 or 6 rupees (*i.e.*, between 7/6 and 9s.) a month on food; and yet we are told that unless he can do so, or at any rate afford something like it, he will continue to be nourished on a diet that is far below a minimum standard.

It is difficult to assess from the figures that are available what the average income of the Indian peasant is, but various calculations have been made.

In Bengal today the average wage of the agricultural labourer is something between 1½ and 3 annas a day (1½d. to 3d.)—or 3 rupees to 6 rupees (4s. 6d. to 9s.) per month. Out of this he has to keep his family, and according to the last census report each earning member has an average of three or four dependants.

During the famine of 1936 in West Bengal, the sum of ½d. a day was given as relief to men and women who had no means of subsistence. This was considered, according to prevailing standards of living, enough to keep them alive.

In the census report of 1931, the gloomy admission is made that "A large part of the population of Bengal live at a very low level of subsistence, and that any increase in population must lead to an increase in distress unless the potentialities of the province are developed."

This picture of extreme poverty is not peculiar to Bengal. It is a chronic feature of India. The example of the dependants of the four peasant leaders of Kayyur, Madras, who were executed recently, is described in a letter sent by N. M. Joshi, the General Secretary of the All-India Trade Union Congress, to the Kayyur Dependants Fund. The mother and sister of the late Chirukandan are living in a thatched shed with no walls on the foundation of their former house which was pulled down by the police. Appu's family have leased property of five acres which brings in an income for the whole family equivalent to £2 6s. per year. In the case of Kunhambu Nair's family, they have property of four acres which brings in under £4 per year.

## Responsibility for Famine

The Earl of Munster, speaking on the Government's behalf, complacently stated in the House of Lords that "from time immemorial the 55,000,000 subsistence farmers in India who supplied the food needs of the population—one-fifth of the human race—had followed the practice of retaining a portion of their products

for family consumption, and marketing the surplus to pay their taxes and debts and to buy things. The amount of food grown was practically stationary from year to year in spite of an increase in population."

The Earl of Munster wants us to believe that the Indian peasant himself is to blame for the present situation. This accusation is also carried in the Government's White Paper. These slanders on the peasantry of India must be thrown back at those who make them. Mr. Amery, Secretary of State for India, wants us to think that the Bengal Provincial Government is responsible for the famine in Bengal. They are both attempting to evade the responsibility which is directly theirs and that of the Central (*i.e.*, Whitehall controlled) Government of India.

What is the actual position? It is true that the total yield of food crops has not altered very much over a number of years according to the Statistical Abstract. On the other hand, it is certainly not true that things have gone on from time immemorial without very serious things happening.

Famine has visited India on a number of occasions, in 1880, 1898, 1901. Three separate Commissions sat in connection with these famines. There have been other Commissions on Irrigation and other aspects of Agriculture. The most important was the Royal Commission on Agriculture in India which presented its report to Parliament in June, 1928.

On the question of Famine, this Report gives various causes and states that:

*"For long, Governments met it where and when it occurred. The modern view of the responsibility of the State was not reached until long after India had passed under the Crown, and it was not until the last decades of the nineteenth century that A DEFINITE FAMINE POLICY WAS FORMULATED. . . . Where Governments failed it was not to be expected that the individual would do better. . . . From no quarter was the cultivator provided with any spur to increased effort, and scope for enterprise or any reward for labour in excess of that determined by the needs of himself and his family."*

The present terrible famine has shown once again the failure of the Government as controlled and directed from this country. The Government of this country and its representatives in India are directly responsible for creating the conditions whereby thousands of Indians die of famine. The *Statesman*, Calcutta's leading official newspaper, estimates the number of deaths throughout the whole of Bengal between 9,000 and 11,000 a week.

Where is the "definite famine policy" of the Government, referred to in the Commission's report? Are we witnessing this famine policy now?

The Government's policy in relation to India is to keep things as they are, to protect the landlords, to maintain the system of land tenancy and revenue. That is why the terms of reference for the Royal Commission on Agriculture in 1928 were so restricted that it did not come

*"within the scope of the Commission's duties to make recommendations regarding the existing system of land ownership and tenancy or of assessment of land revenue, and irrigation charges, or the existing division of function between the Government of India and the local Governments."*

These terms of reference, incidentally, were signed by the notorious W. Joynson-Hicks.

Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy of India during the time this present famine was developing, was a leading member of the Agricultural Commission and is considered to be an expert on agriculture.

It is impossible for a Commission on Agriculture to deal fully with this question unless the system of land tenancy is included. The Bengal peasant has been bled white and ruined; under the present system possibilities of serious development are out of the question.

## Rents and Taxes

The system of land tenancy in Bengal is known as the Zemindari system. (Zemindar means landlord.) Under this system there is a hierarchy of landlords, sub-landlords, and sub-sub-landlords, which increases almost indefinitely. The Government is concerned only with a comparatively small number of landlords who own the very large estates, collect the rents and taxes and pass on the revenue to the Government.

In 1793 the Permanent Settlement Act was passed, land taxation was fixed for ever and a guarantee was given that no extra demand would ever be made on the landlords by the Government. The amount of revenue under the Permanent Settlement Act was fixed as follows: of the total amount being paid at that time by the cultivators as rent, ten-elevenths was fixed as the permanent taxation, and the remaining one-eleventh was allotted to the landlords as a reward for their labour in collecting rents. Instead, however, of improving the value of their estates by irrigation and roads, etc., the landlords set themselves to extract what they could from their tenants by increasing rents without making any improvements to the land.

From 1793 onwards landlords instituted case after case for the increase of rents. During the decade 1921-31 this process was still going on, and 200,104 cases for increasing the rent were instituted in the Civil Court. The result is, that today, the amount retained by the landlords out of the rents collected is three-quarters (instead of one-eleventh) and the amount handed on to the Government is one-quarter. £3 million is still the amount of taxation for which the landlords are liable, but they now collect £12 million in rents.

**The three main reforms advocated by the National Congress in Bengal, over a long period, were the liberation of the agricultural masses from the old-fashioned tenancy laws, the high rents and indebtedness, and the extension of education.**

In 1939 a Commission was appointed with Sir Francis Floud as Chairman, to examine the land revenue question with special reference to the Permanent Settlement, which had for more than a century held back the development of the agrarian system in Bengal. A majority of this Commission held that the Zemindari system and Permanent Settlement should be abolished and that all land interests should be taken over by the Government. The Report was published in 1940. Some discussion took place in the Bengal Assembly, but no action was taken.

Thus the process has gone on. Peasants are impoverished and become hopelessly indebted. The Earl of Munster should get his facts right about India—his picture of 55,000,000 subsistence farmers—from time immemorial—happily working to produce for family consumption, putting some grain on one side and selling the rest to pay taxes and debts is far wide of the mark.

In actual fact, the Indian peasants are being ground out of existence. The following gives a more accurate picture. Sir Thomas Munro, Census Commissioner of India in 1842 (and later Governor of Madras) found that at that date there was not a single landless peasant in India; in 1872 there were 7½ million landless; in 1921 they accounted for 22 per cent of the population engaged in agriculture; in 1931 they accounted for 40 per cent, and today the number is estimated at over 50 per cent (figures for all India).

These figures speak for themselves.

The system of land tenancy is imposing impossible burdens on the peasantry; but despite the fact that it is crushing the cultivator out of existence, the Government refuses to allow amendments to a system which, even on their own showing, should be swept away. This is the answer to the Earl of Munster and Mr. Amery—this whole corrupt system, with its landlords and moneylenders, who at the same time are the hoarders and speculators.

Stuart Emeny, in the *News Chronicle* of October 25th, 1943, explains how the Zemindari system has been one of the causes of the present disaster in the following way:

*“Normally the landlords pay their labourers partly in produce, but this year, because of fantastically high prices, they have sold their grain and paid their workers in rupees, paper instead of food. The rice passed into the hands of the merchants, who waited for a further rise in prices and then sold to other speculators.”*

## Government Policy

Although it was known over twelve months ago that a serious food crisis was developing, not only in Bengal but also in Bombay, Madras and other provinces, the policy of Mr. Amery and Lord Linlithgow (the Viceroy) was to do nothing. They stood by and watched the speculators taking advantage. Food prices mounted; black markets thrived; everything that was done only served the purpose of developing the crisis.

Military authorities and the United Kingdom Commercial Corporation purchased large quantities of grain from other than normal channels of trade. In some cases coercive measures were used. No attempt was made by the Government to control prices or to ration existing stocks. At the same time thousands of tons of wheat, grain and pulses were being exported. For twelve months or more it was a “free for all,” at least for those who could take part—the most corrupt elements—the monopolists and speculators, encouraged by the Government—and a state of chaos resulted.

## Mr. Amery “Did Not Know”

A question was put to Mr. Amery, Secretary of State for India, in Parliament on April 15th, 1943, by Mr. Sorensen, asking whether he would state the position of the famine-threatened areas of India; what further measures had been taken to secure food supplies and their distribution; and what was the present price of rice in these areas and elsewhere.

**Mr. Amery replied that he did “not know to what areas in India the Honourable Member’s question is intended to refer.” He was not aware that a famine situation was in existence then, or if he did was indifferent to it.**

The people of India are suffering today the effects of Amery’s rule.

The bankrupt and indifferent policy of the Linlithgow Government served to aggravate the already bad political situation. Food riots started, which were taken advantage of by Fifth Column elements; but fortunately the Communist Party was able to counteract this, and to prevent what might have developed into a situation even more chaotic and disastrous than the Indian people are facing today.

Amery and Linlithgow both try to pass their responsibility on. Amery, in his speech at Sparkbrook on October 15th, duly expresses a “profoundly disquieting shock” about people dying of hunger in the second largest city of the Empire. But Mr. Amery callously accuses the Bengal peasant of being responsible “by selling less of his produce” in order to commit suicide on the streets of Calcutta.

Or the blame is placed on the Bengal Government—in an attempt to make us believe that the Indian people are not capable of ruling themselves. **Let it be clearly understood that the present Bengal Government is in existence on sufferance; that it takes its orders from the Governor of Bengal and the Viceroy; and that the Viceroy takes his orders from Mr. Amery.**

As the British newspaper, the *Calcutta Statesman*, put it (September 23rd, 1943):

*“Under the present system of government, responsibility for the breakdown inescapably rests in the last resort upon the authority of Britain and its immediate representatives here. Every British citizen is necessarily shamed and sullied when his Indian fellow subjects die of starvation in Bengal.”*

Let every British man and woman ponder over these accusing words.

## The Indian People Act

The people of India with no effective voice in the Central or Provincial legislatures, many of their leaders in prison, and many obstacles and restrictions to overcome, nevertheless endeavoured to meet the oncoming crisis. In February this year an All-Party Conference was called in Bengal with representatives of Congress, Communists, Hindus and Mohammedans, which adopted a resolution demanding that the Government commandeer stocks of food, and called upon the people to form Food Committees.

The All-India peasants’ organisation called upon the Government to control prices of foodstuffs, and is taking the lead in organising People’s Food Committees and the formation of volunteer corps.

The Communist Party worked for the establishment of People’s Food Committees, consisting of representatives of all organisations.

These People's Food Committees met with considerable opposition from officials.

Volunteer corps were formed for securing and distributing food in Bengal, Bombay, Malabar and Andhra. The limited supplies of food were distributed at food centres and food riots averted.

**Big hoards of food held by profiteers were unearthed by the People's Volunteer Corps. There were cases in which attempts by profiteers to export grain secretly were exposed, and the grain distributed to the public at the proper prices. In Malabar stocks belonging to hoarders who were not prepared to sell their goods at controlled prices were seized by popular volunteers and disposed of at the proper prices.**

The Volunteers helped to organise the food queues. Government circles were alarmed when the situation in queues was at the point of explosion and consequently had to concede innumerable demands put forward by Red Volunteers working in the queues. High police officials issued orders in Bombay directing the police staff to co-operate with Red Volunteers in queue work.

The Communist Party at the beginning of the year put forward the following proposals:

1. All stocks of grain to be stored in public storehouses under the supervision of the People's Food Committees, which should take part in the control of supply and the regulation of prices.
2. Prices must be brought down to the purchasing capacity of the ordinary consumer. Those other necessities of life, such as cloth, kerosene, matches, etc., to be similarly reduced.
3. The peasant must be assured a reasonable price for his grain and protected from the rapacity of the village grain dealer. The honest trader must be freed from the clutches of the monopolist grain hoarder and protected, provided he conducts his trade on the basis of a reasonable rate of profit.
4. Since it is clear that only a National Government can solve the food problem on a national scale and that through the food crisis the entire nation is being ruined both politically and economically, the need for a National Government now becomes more imperative than ever.

In the meanwhile the present situation demands immediate and urgent measures. The British people must be moved by a sense of deep shame that the people of Bengal are passing through the worst famine that India has known for more than a century. Our sense of shame at what is happening today is all the more sharp when we reflect that British administrators are responsible and that Indian people who could have averted this tragedy have been denied the opportunity to do so.

## ***Immediate Relief Urgent***

We must demand action by the Government to bring relief immediately and save the lives of the Bengal peoples. Every possible means for bringing relief in the form of food supplies should be utilised. Even now the position is that thousands are doomed to die, whether food gets there or not, but the question of saving as many lives as possible is the urgent issue. The next three months will be vital.

Many offers have been made for wheat supplies from Australia. The Government must ensure that shipping space is made available.

In the meantime the Government should release for immediate use any stocks of grain and rice that they have stored in India.

The Government should take steps to force hoarders and speculators to release their stocks of grain and rice, and these should be confiscated.

The Government should ration on an all-India basis the existing supplies of rice and grain and see that prices are strictly controlled.

Transport facilities for conveying rice to various parts of India and throughout Bengal must be re-organised.

The Government should speed up arrangements for aid from the Army and Royal Air Force for the running of food convoys and dropping of food supplies from the air to inaccessible towns and villages.

In view of the spread of cholera, typhoid and malaria, the Government should take steps to arrange adequate supplies of quinine and medical supplies to meet the situation.

If the Government puts the above proposals into effect at once and continues its ban on the export of rice and grain, the present emergency can be met. To prevent the repetition of such disasters, much more fundamental steps must be taken.

## ***End the Deadlock***

The famine indicates to the world the complete failure of the British Government to rule India. As the Indian Communist Party Resolution states: "The famine results from the bankrupt economic policy of the imperialist government."

Wide sections of opinion in this country are strongly of the view that the present famine situation shows that the Government is incapable of dealing with Indian affairs. It is typical of its whole attitude to India which has resulted in mass illiteracy, lowest possible standards of living, miserable housing conditions, lack of sanitation

and social services, inadequate medical and hospital arrangements, and so on.

The problems facing India can never be adequately solved unless the Government is compelled to change its policy. The Indian people alone have the solution.

## **British Workers' Pledge**

This view was expressed by the vote of the Trades Union Congress at Southport this year, where the representatives of six million organised British workers unanimously passed a resolution, which affirmed the right of the Indian people to decide their own destiny and urged upon the Government

*"the imperative necessity of taking immediate steps towards a resumption of free and friendly discussions with the representatives of the Indian peoples with a view to reaching a rapid and satisfactory settlement of all outstanding questions."*

The resolution included the demands for the immediate release of all political prisoners in India and a Government elected on the free vote of the Indian people.

We wholeheartedly welcome this resolution. There is urgent need for demands it makes to be put into effect at once. The whole Trade Union and working-class movement must work to this end.

It is of paramount importance that the disastrous policy of political deadlock should be ended at the earliest possible moment. This is the greatest positive step that can be taken.

The Indian people must be allowed full opportunity to put forward representatives who will carry the confidence of the people. These representatives must have authoritative powers to enable them to relieve the present famine situation.

**This is vital and urgent, not only in the interests of the Indian people but also in the interests of the British people and the United Nations. It is of the utmost importance for all so that the war against Fascism can be brought to a speedy and successful conclusion.**

The forces of the United Nations are gathering their strength together in Bengal today to deliver a decisive blow to the Japanese; but the presence of famine, widespread cholera and typhoid, coupled with economic discontent and political unrest, must have a seriously adverse effect upon those forces about to make the attack.

The Communist Party maintains that this situation alone demands immediate action. The full support and mobilisation of India's people can and must be achieved. This can be secured:

1. by the Government releasing all Congress and anti-Fascist leaders;

2. by removing every obstacle to the establishment in India of a responsible united Provincial National Government;

3. by removing Mr. Amery, who is Secretary of State for India, and responsible for the disastrous policy which has produced the present situation.

For our own sake, as well as for the sake of the oppressed and poverty-stricken people of India, we must not let the present state of affairs continue.

India's people must be given the fullest opportunity to throw their whole weight into the fight against fascism and for building a new world.

By ending the deadlock, and recognising India's right to self-determination, we can make it possible for India's people to solve the food crisis and to bring the whole of the potentially powerful resources of their country into play on the side of progress.

Every British man and woman owes an obligation to the Indian citizens of the Empire, so many of whom have distinguished themselves in battle against the common enemy.

None of us can shirk our own responsibility: for it is our own Government which is to blame and which has brought so much shame as a result on our country.

We cannot save those that have died; but we can still save the living, if we act without delay.

Let every man and woman, every trade unionist, Labour Party and Co-operative member, now rouse their organisations to act with full speed, and to press the Government to bring about the necessary changes in its policy.