Na-Anka Durviksha:The Great Famine of 1866 in Puri District and Its Impact

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Abstract– Odisha faced several natural calamities from which the Na-Anka Durviksha of 1866 was a famine, which occurred in the whole of Odisha for a huge number of reasons, and Puri, being a part of Odisha, was not alleviated from this event. The situation of the society was such that from August 1865, the food grains were not available in the whole district. The main aim of the present paper, which is based on Mortality, Crime, and Migration, is that there was a huge amount of death due to starvation and famine, the shortage of food forced people into different crimes, and many people had to migrate from Puri due to the search for food.

Keywords-Collector, Famine, Food-Grains, People, Puri

Introduction

The natural disasters like drought, flood, epidemic, and cyclones have been regularly recurring in the history of Odisha. Their regular occurrence in the nineteenth century formed the backbone of the Odia people. The people of Odisha had been accustomed to various numbers of natural disasters. The most popular one was the famine that occurred in 1866, also referred to as 'Na-Anka Durviksha' (Famine) in the history of Odisha. The nasty situation was formed by the critical condition of the Socio-Economic development of Odisha for all kinds of generations. The Odisha famine of 1866 was the worst type of famine ever in the world. This particular disaster was performed under the carelessness of the British rulers and the occurrence of various types of natural and economic disasters. One third of the total population of Odisha had suffered and died terribly in just one year. The famine of 1866 is also renowned as "Na-Anka Durviksha", just because it happened in the ninth regnal year of the Puri King Gajapati Divaysimha Dev. The particular disaster had made such an unpleasant impression on the people of Odisha that it had kept such a tragic memory of it in their mind for at least several decades.

Unseasonal rain and monsoon disturbance, overdependence on rice as food grains, absence of food stock and heavy export system, ignored to the salt manufacturer, land revenue settlement policies, deforestation and environmental damage, weak infrastructural communication, scarcity of education and irrigation media void, political instability, defective administration system and poor relief response from the British Government were the reasons behind the occurrence of famine; whose footprints were initially traced at Puri.[1]

Condition of Society during the Famine in Puri

Before the famine, the ordinary rate of rice was approximately 30-35 seers in rupees.[2] In August, 1865, the rate of rice in Puri would sell in approximately 18 seers in rupees as ordinary rate in Puri district. It means that G. N. Barlow, who afterwards became in-charge of the district of Puri for four years as Collector, was thoroughly conversant with the situation of that district,[3] and asked for permission from the Board of Revenue to make an inquiry into the losses on the zamindari estate, which was rejected.[4] But in the middle of October 1865, the position of Puri became so desperate that the first scarcity of food-grains would be met. The markets were bare of food-grains. The rice as well as millet would sell in the measure of 8 to 10 seers, and 12 seers in rupees in the

area of Khorda Sub-Division, which could not be purchased by the people. Moreover, the price of food-grains would enhance approximately 30 times more from its original rate, which created a state of terror.[5]

During this period, the plight of Puri was so bad that in early November 1865, the Collector of Puri, G.N. Barlow reported that in certain parts of the district such as Nubbah, Gop, and parts of Chilika through Haridas and Bhoosoonpore, food-grains were unavailable, and people were surviving only on fruits and roots of different varieties of trees.[6] There were also reports from the police about the unavailability of rice at Nagpur market of Gop, and it was to be had at 7 seers and 8 seers in rupees at Banpur and Pipili.[7] Even people were migrating from their houses with families to Cuttack and other parts. The Collector also reflected that the distress reached an extreme level in Parikuda and Maluda, which were two estates between the Chilika Lake and the sea. So, he appealed to his government to allow the entry of food-grains to such areas, which was disapproved by the Commissioner of Odisha, T.E. Ravenshaw, who answered that it was the responsibility of the zamindars to alleviate the famine.[8]

This was the period of panic, when Ravenshaw left for the Tributary Mahals on his winter tour in December 1865, and remained away from the headquarters for more than two months. Because of his absence, the government business was held up for many days, when the condition of the people was already very deteriorated.

The Collector of Puri G. N. Barlow began his inquiry visit from the headquarters on the 3rd December 1865, where he visited the region of Satapada, Balabhadrapur, Nabapatana, Vutapatana, Nuagaon, Bajamunda, etc. He investigated the fact that the state of the people was very much deteriorated, especially children, to the extent that they eat only the leaves of the trees. He also saw the dead body of a child of only seven years.[9] After the Collector had visited the salt-bearing points on the 6th December 1865, he was bemused with the load of the contractors who engaged a dozen of workers and forty carts to make salt along the coast. Every cart was charged 7 annas per 100 mounds of salt, while only 2 paisa was received by each worker. Thus, he talked about the increase of the daily wage rate from 2 paisa to 4 paisa,[10] which was not ratified by the government.

The stock of rice was extremely weak within a short span of time at Puri. They preferred prison and death due to starvation. Additionally, people began consuming anything and everything in order to escape the pangs of starvation. The condition of the people worsened from bad to worse and reached the condition of famine. As soon as the condition of the famine became much more severe in the month of January 1866, the Collector of Puri reported to the Revenue Board that the board was giving them special relief. Additionally, he reported that the people died due to starvation in the number of 200 and 1543 from smallpox and cholera from Parikuda and Maluda area.[11]

In February 1866, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sir Cecil Beadon, began his tour of Odisha with the Secretary of PWD, Colonel Nicolls, and the member of the Board of Revenue, G. F. Cockburn. The delegates arrived in Puri on the 13th February and stayed there. The next day, he proceeded to Cuttack following the end of a small tour of the whole town of Puri and meeting with the Collector of Puri. But during this visit, there was no kind of probe on the famine condition by the administration.[12]

The “Hindu patriot” is considered to be the very first newspaper to draw the attention of the government toward this terrible famine. The newspaper placed an appeal in “Hindu Patriot” from Ramkshya Chatterjee, the Deputy Collector of Puri on 5th March, 1866, stating that the famine became clearly observable in all parts of the district.[13]

The situation has become so grave that in the month of May 1866, the suffering in the town of Puri has reached the extent that it has become impossible to leave it to the unorganized kindness of the Mahanta or the head of the religious houses there. The Collector of Puri gave a call through the Calcutta press on 9th May, making an appeal pertaining to the public kindness before the Famine Relief Committee, and the committee forwarded 1000 rupees, which is not even required to open a relief house in the town of Puri where hot meals can be distributed.[14]

Relief work

The government in Bengal could not provide any sort of relief assistance until the end of April 1866. Thus, when the Collector of Puri could neither find any assistance from the government, he formed a committee in early December 1865, of which the local men were members. This committee began the distribution of cooked food in Puri. However, the Commissioner of the Odisha Division noticed the potential risks of the distribution of cooked food and therefore banned the distribution of cooked food in February, 1866.[15]

The missionaries began the relief work in the famine too, especially the orphans. They created a sort of awareness in the society regarding the relief in the famine, and they gathered money by appeal to relieve the famine-stricken people. They also arranged an accommodation system in the Puri district to accommodate the famine affected people. They even teach them to weave cloth during their rest period.[16] The Famine Commission noticed that the missionaries did the massive work of orphans. On the other hand, the zamindars are looting the people to put their property or valuable material as mortgage and feed the grains. But none of the zamindars were alike. The zamindar in the Puri area of Parikuda estate did a wonderful work in this way because he started the relief work through the "Cooked Food Relief Centre" to the people.[17] They are feeding 15 children and 17 orphan girls too. They utilized their own resources to feed the famine affected people.[18] The zamindar of Krushnaprasad did the relief work in the way that was insufficient.[19]

Thus, the Puri temple and maths (monasteries) had an important role in relief operations for the affected people, such that they opened their relief camps right from the beginning of the famine till May 1866. The maths sold their grains to the East India Irrigation Company so that they would be distributed easily to the affected people. In fact, they also distributed Mahaprasad or "great sacred food" to people in exchange for their precious commodities. In fact, those people could not get Mahaprasad, and they waited outside their kitchen area in the temple, and they ate 'Peja' water which is nothing but boiled and unhygienic rice water drawn from their kitchen drains.[20]

But by June of 1866, the government could comprehend the critical situation of the people, and he understood that he made a mistake and must relieve the people immediately. At that moment, the price of rice was less than 6 seers per maund in Puri.[21] At first, the government sanctioned 6 lakh rupees, which was his first relief to the famine affected people of that last month of May. On 10th June, the government authorized the Board to draw the greatest balance of the North-West Province Famine Fund for the import of rice. Again, 20 lakh rupees were sanctioned by the government on 25th June.[22]

In July, a cooked food centre was started by Reverend W. Miller at Puri, in which thousands of people came every day to the centre. Some Pandas (priests) of the temple also came for food. Other than that, there were other food centres opened in different areas of the district. Specifically, 9 cooked food centres were opened in the Khorda Sub-Division under the Deputy Collector of Khorda, E. J. Barton.[23] Aside from providing food, cloth distribution was also initiated by four rich people. Srimahanta Mohan Das alone distributed 280 pieces of cloth to the people.[24]

Under the instruction of the government, Relief Committees have been formed in the districts. There are different cooked food distribution centres set up in the period of July to September. The total numbers of Relief Centres have been formed in Odisha were 88, where 23 centres have been opened in Puri district alone.[25] Further, in these Relief Centres, on an average, the people have been served daily food, which is 9012, where 4853 people have been involved in some soft works.[26] Even the feeding centres have become the temporary house of the people who have been houseless.

In August, the Board again dispatched one kind of food grain. But during that month, the monsoon had already started, and it had made things really tough for rice imports. In addition, during the same period there was a massive flood for which the distribution of relief had been completely suspended. In similar fashion, one other container full of rice had been provided during the month of October by the government. The importation of some 10,000 tons of food grain had been done in the whole state of Odisha by order of the government up to November. The condition came into control in October for one month because of the harvest of new paddy.[27]

Effect of Famine on Puri

Crime for food

The famine of 1866 saw food riots, lootings, and thefts in various forms with the main aim of getting some food somehow. The law-and-order situation became quite rigid during the famine period, especially food riots where Puri had its starting point. Hence the Collector of Puri felt that a special force was necessary to suppress the food riots.[28] On top of that, beggars engaged themselves in dacoity with respect to grains and foods. Also, when the number of beggars was put inside the city of Puri, nobody had the guts to bring paddy or rice outside because when beggars see them, they will grab them. The Magistrate of Puri made a point that the persons had looted some various shops as was quite common in the month of March and April of 1866. Also, he felt that Mahaprasad had been taken forcefully at mid-day.[29]

Interestingly, the involvement of the people was both in the form of looting and dacoity crimes and honestly admitting to the crime to come into the jail, since the people had nothing to eat at home and thought that at least the jails would provide some food to eat.[30] From the report submitted by Ramkshya Chatterjee, the Deputy Collector of Puri, the looting of shops, the snatching of the holy offerings from the temples, and the granaries were just burning down during March-April 1866 in Puri.[31]

A theft case involving paddy of the Puri division was committed before Ramkshya Chatterjee, Deputy Collector of Puri. The guilty parties confessed to the crime because of starving for two days with an empty stomach. Even the guilty parties filed a complaint against the petitioner because he had stockpiles of rice and did not agree to give any at any cost.[32]

According to Bengal administrative report, in the year 1866 as well as in 1867 in the Odisha Division, cases of dacoity were 363 and 37, theft as well as house breaking cases were 2742 and 1795, while cases of violation of specific laws were 3151 in 1866 and 864 in 1867. The report stated that in the district of Puri, “the lowest rate of dacoity as well as theft and house-breaking cases stood at about 51 and 1172.”[33] The district of Puri in Odisha was seriously affected in the famine of 1866, where the main aim of this crime was rice.

Mortality

Prior to the famine, the population of Mughalbandi as well as the Garhjat state of Odisha comprised 37 lakhs, out of whom one-third of the population met their untimely death due to the famine.[34] At that time, Puri was one of the most badly hit districts in the 1866 famine, resulting in catastrophic death tolls. Starvation, cholera, flood,

as well as the failure of relief, made the death toll reach an unprecedented level, resulting in depopulation in the particular district.

On 29 November 1865, G.N. Barlow, Collector of Puri, reported to the government that about 96 people died from Maluda and Parikuda, and there were two children who died at Baulani in the same month from starvation.[35] He also recorded in his diary that in December 1865, "he could pay a visit to Keuta Sahi (the area of the fishing community), like Satapada, Parikuda, Maluda, Tua, &c., was the most affected area of Puri district. Again, he recorded that the water of Chilika Lake could not satisfy them in fishing and such opportunities could not exist at that time to satisfy their basic need, for which they lost their life by pain."[36]

Equally, the reporter, Asst. Collector of Puri, stated that about 92 persons died, which is 309 out of the total population in a Brahmin village. Again, he reported that there were two persons surviving in a village consisting of 28 households.[37] The sale of land went up considerably because of the famine. A good number of Brahmins were selling their land and taking up other occupations because of the famine. The Pandas or the Brahmin priests of Puri benefited extensively.[38]

The Deputy Collector of Khorda's report indicated that the casualty of persons belonging to Hadi, Doma, Bauri, and the Lohar (blacksmith caste) was heavily dead. Second, after the Chasas, (cultivators/agricultural owners) Goalas, (cowherds) and Tantis (weavers), the other citizens of Orissa died just due to the absence of food.[39] Almost all people who are suffering from the famine are from the lower class or Dalit sections.

The famine also brought diseases, which began in the last part of February 1866 in Puri. In the interior areas of the district the death rate was increased day by day by the disease of Cholera. News came that approximately 163 died in Sorada and Nagpur of the village of Gop. With this, the area of Satyabadi, Pipili, Balianta, Kakatpur, and Astaranga were also gravely hit by the said incident. It was observed that there are 10-15 dead bodies of humans lining up along the road of Puri daily.[40] Overall around 35.81 percent of the population died by different diseases in the district of Puri.[41]

In Odisha, another catastrophic flood took place in the month of August due to the famine in its peak. The rate of death is increasing every morning as approximately 12 to 15 people's dead bodies are found in each and every lane of Puri city. The people in and around Gop, Khorda, Tangi, Parikuda, and Maluda areas also suffered severely. The fact is also seen that in Puri, one woman was fed the meat of the human's dead body while walking to Puri.[42]

According to the report filed by Deputy Collector Ramkshya Chatterjee, except Khordha, in the total figure of 4,01,501, 1,67,356 people died in Puri as far as October 1866. Further, it was also reported by G. M. Curry, Relief Collector, said that he could visit a village in Chilika on the 8 December, where he found that only 2 people were alive in a village where there were.[43]

Thus, the total mortality due to famine in the Odisha division was 8,09,564 or about 27 percent. But in Puri, the mortality due to famine was 32 percent. About 2,13,944 people died due to the famine from different places of the district, out of which 1,01,895 were cultivators, 73,734 were labourers, and 36,333 were artisans. Along with these, 4908 labourers also died due to famine in Puri town only.[44]

Migration of the people

In 1866, the famine led to a large-scale migration from their homeland, and a large number of people died on the way due to the unavailability of food. This dreaded famine brought an aimless migration of people from the Odisha division to the rest of the region, from which the district of Puri could not be differentiated. After the

beginning of the famine, people began their migration from the district of Puri to the rest of the regions until the end of the famine. The people from the district of Puri, who were badly affected by the famine, as they belonged to the working class or were involved in the manufacturing of salt, migrated to the rest of the districts, especially the Khorda estate.

Based on the report submitted by the Collector of Puri, the Chilika area was mainly dependent upon agricultural products and when there was a failure, the people used to move to Rangoon, Calcutta, and other parts. Along with it, people from the Gop area moved to the Cuttack area in search of food and employment in the month of October 1865. Likewise, he reported that about 992 people moved to other places from Parikuda and Maluda on 29th November 1865.[45] The women, children, and old people of the village had to be left behind there.

The population of Puri in 1865 was estimated to be 7, 79, 718 with 32, 113 people migrating from Puri to other places. However, people from the remaining area of the Puri district did not migrate into Calcutta and such places, rather they moved into the city of Puri for various reasons such as the fact that the 'Puri temple includes various activities such as vegetable, fire woods, banana leaves, clay pots etc.[46] It can thus be seen that people migrated from their birth places into other places due to famine.

Conclusion

Na-Anka Durviksha of 1866 was one of the worst famines that brought immense suffering to the people of Odisha and Puri, particularly. This famine took place due to several reasons. Puri, being an Important religious site, was most affected as numerous people in search of meals as well as devotees assembled there. This resulted in an abrupt rise in deaths due to starvation and the outbreak of diseases. Hunger and poverty resulted in an increase in crimes as people did not find ways to survive. Many people had to move from their own land to other places in search of meals and jobs. The famine resulted in disturbance in the social fabric and economic life of people and revealed the inadequacies of colonial rule as an administration system. Na Anka Durviksha of 1866 had a long-lasting effect on Puri and teaches an invaluable lesson on how assistance and management are required in natural calamities.

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