

★ SPECIAL BENGAL NUMBER ★ BEHIND THE MAN-MADE FAMINE....

by P. C. Joshi

"THE rice harvest in 1941 and '42 was exceptionally good, it was definitely in excess of local requirements". This is what Sir John Anderson, ex-Governor of Bengal and at present Member of the British Cabinet said in the latest House of Commons debate.

In a good year the normal deficit in Bengal never was more than 4%, i.e., negligible. This is what Prof. Prosanta Mahalanobis, statistician of international fame, told me. He is respected by all who know him for his personal honesty and intellectual integrity.

Amery's own statement in his latest speech is that after gathering last year's harvest and at the beginning of this year Bengal faced a deficit of one million tons, i.e., of only about 14% of its total needs.

Much more than a million tons has already been pumped into Bengal.

Why then have the entire body of poor, whether in the town or the village, been starving ever since March? Why then have five to ten thousands been dying every day?

Where lies the guilt?

LET us have a look at the policy the imperialist bureaucracy has followed towards Bengal. It has the reins of power and guides the country's economy. This will give us the key to where Bengal's rice has gone and why the people of Bengal are starving.

Even a third-rate economist will tell you that to introduce price-control without stocks in hand to enforce it, is madness. It will only make the market into a black-market, the trader into a hoarder and the price the people will have to pay will go on mounting higher. But this is just what the bureaucracy did and the folks responsible for this policy are not inside a lunatic asylum. How to account for this?

Whom Control Helped

The price-control was not meant to be enforced. It was only a device to buy cheap for the increased needs of the government because of the war, and let the trader charge what price he liked from the people. Not a mobilisation of the people against the hoarder, but leaving the people to the tender mercies of the hoarder, was the bureaucratic way to run Bengal. This is literally true. The number of persons put up for trial for breach of price-control would not amount to even a hundred, when for over a year no trader has been selling at control-rates.

Not one leading price-racketer has been arrested under the Defence of India Rules for being a saboteur on the economic front, for hiding people's food, for playing havoc with the nation's morale when the Fascist invader is just across.

The bureaucracy not only created the hoarder but made him the master of the situation. The price of rice in January 1942 was Rs. 6/- per maund. By the end of November it was Rs. 11/-. Finding the hoarder dictating his own price, the Central and Provincial Governments and the army began buying through their agents.

The hoarder fully exploited the situation. The normal trade-channels were in his hands, he cornered most of the 1942 winter-crop and in answer to the consumers' anxious query for rice gave the ready answer: the Government and the army have grabbed all the rice, but I will give you some at Rs. 14/-. This was in January, after the harvest, when the prices should have been lower than in November!

The total stock with the Government was so little that the Hq. Ministry before it fell removed all control and everybody, knows that the bureaucracy ruled Bengal, not Hq. The crazy idea was: Give the trader his price and he will produce the stocks; he did, but at Rs. 24/- per maund, more than double the rate he had paid the peasant. The scandal became irrepressible with news of starvation becoming a mass phenomenon. Hq. was



Muslim Peasant In Quepara Relief Centre, Chittagong

made the scape-goat and was kicked out. No news about food conditions was allowed to appear in the press.

That did not improve the situation which went on worsening. The same policy which had produced the mess inside Bengal was tried on a larger scale with the help of the Central Government. Assam, Orissa and Bihar, the neighbouring provinces, were declared free trade areas. The result was that only the hoarders inside these provinces benefited by it. They charged the fantastic prices prevailing in Bengal, in return for just a portion of their stocks. This could not restore Bengal to normal.

Hoarder On Top

Failure to handle the hoarder inside Bengal only led to appealing to the hoarder outside Bengal to feed Bengal; it only strengthened the hold of the outside hoarder over his own people. The bureaucrats did not tackle but extended Bengal's crisis.

When the *aus* (autumn) crop came, price-control was reimposed inside Bengal on August 26 but in 2 days rice disappeared from the market. Bengal's need was 2½ crore maunds per month and the *aus* crop was 5 crore maunds

in September-October the price of rice became Rs 10/- per maund in Calcutta and anywhere upto Rs. 100/- in the districts.

The reality was no more mass starvation but mass deaths, the whole country was starved. The bureaucrats thought of the scape-goat theory once again. Sir Juala Prasad went to Bengal and declared it to be a bottomless pit. Out came the League Ministry with the exposure that the Central Government itself had failed to send the promised

Why did the Central bureaucrats fail? In the major surplus province of Punjab, the hoarders demanded their own pound of flesh, their own price now, and even then promised only such stocks as they chose to voluntarily surrender, keeping back most of their boards to be able to demand still higher prices with a worsening situation.

Bureaucrats Helpless

The Unionist Ministry embodies the united front of the Hindu and Muslim hoarders who have always been traditionally pro-imperialist. The more the Central Government pressed it, the more loudly it threatened the Central Government with discontent in the families of the Punjab soldiers! It took months for the Central bureaucrats to get round their own allies, while Bengal went more and more into the jaws of death.

The stupid strategy of fighting the Bengali hoarder by relying upon the Punjab hoarder only meant dancing attendance upon the latter and surrendering to him instead.

The bureaucracy not only produced and strengthened the hoarder but has itself got reduced to complete helplessness before him. The hoarder has the administration in his pocket and the bureaucracy can't use its own government machine against him. By controlling stocks he gets the people at his mercy and by offering bribes he ensures that his control will not be disturbed.

The scandal is so vast that even New Delhi had to wake up and pass an Ordinance against corruption and delegate a special C. I. D. staff to do something to stop the rot.

The Central Government has now promised to send enough supplies to keep Bengal going till the winter crop is harvested but the problem is how it will reach the people. Corrupt officials will delay transport as much as they can, sabotage distribution and help the hoarders to take as much of it into the black-market as possible.

The army opening up its own stocks, offering transport and helping in distribution is good solidarity propaganda and knocks down the hoarders' main slogan that the people are starving because food has been taken away for the army. But the army can at best give temporary relief,

it cannot solve the problem which has gone beyond any partial solution.

As Malaya and Burma will go down in history as an example of what happens to colonial defence under imperialist rule, the tragedy of Bengal will illustrate what happens to colonial economy under its dispensation.

Bengal is so far gone that it cannot be saved without mobilising every honest Bengali against the Bengali hoarder, but no bureaucrat can look at any honest Bengali in the face: Bengal cannot be saved without rousing the deepest patriotism of the people outside Bengal to save themselves from Bengal's fate by rushing all aid to Bengal now, but the bureaucracy keeps the foremost patriotic leaders of the country in jail.

Imperialist policy led to the famine, the imperialist bureaucrats can't fight it. The hoarder is almighty and corrupt officials in key strategic posts guard him.

League Policy

IF the bureaucrats have transformed Bengal into the profiteers' paradise, what have the patriotic parties done to feed the people? What role have they played in uniting the people against the hoarder?

Rice was needed by the people both Hindu and Muslim; and it was hidden by the hoarders, both Hindu and Muslim. The problem was not Hindu versus Muslim but the entire people versus all the hoarders.

Would the profiteers get hold of the political parties as they had the bureaucratic machine, or would the political leaders of Bengal be bold enough to tell their own followers that the food thief was inside their own ranks and call out the whole people against the entire body of the hoarders?

The Muslim League Ministry began very well. It had supported the resolution for the release of the Congress leaders and for Congress-League unity. It had offered very good terms to Dr. Shyamasundar for a Coalition Ministry which he found unacceptable except that Hq. could not be in the Ministry. Sir Nazimuddin was even prepared to take in Hq. but Jinnah did not allow it. Dr. Shyamasundar however wanted to stick to his alliance with Hq. who did

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Keoratala Burning Chat : Bodies Awaiting Cremation

