

## Na'anka famine in Odisha: The role of British Officers

<sup>a</sup>Prabhakar Malik, <sup>b</sup>Laxmi Kanta Mishra

<sup>a</sup>PhD Scholar, Department of History, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, Odisha

<sup>b</sup>Professor and former, H.O.D, Department of History,  
Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, Odisha.

### Abstract

Orissa now known as "Odisha" situated along the east coast of India enjoyed a topical climate and was susceptible to cyclones, floods, and famines throughout history. We have recorded evidence of Odisha being subjected to famine in the past first century B.C. corresponding to the time of Kharavela evidence for the same is found in the Hatigumpha inscription. The famine of 1866 was the most disastrous, its scenario was shocking and heartbreaking which happened earlier in Orissa. It is impacting 40,240 square miles in Odisha, which has an estimated population of 11, 855, 543. It is known as "Na-anka Durbhikshya.". This paper follows the British government's A major factor in the Orissa Famine of 1866 was the lack of diligence on the part of T.E. Ravenshaw, the then-officiating commissioner of Orissa, Sir Cecil Beadon, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, and the other colonial officers to read the obvious signs of the times. The 1866 famine exposed many of the administration's shortcomings. Officer President of the Board of Revenue's negligence made the situation worse by delaying the importation of rice, and the government's inability to deal with the devastating effects of the famines at the time was a result of a lack of resources and ineffective management.

**Keywords:** Famine, relief, artesian, rice, Commissioner

### Introduction.

The historical past of Odisha can be traced back to the third century B.C. when Ashoka invaded Kalinga in 261 B.C., this is evident from rock edict xiii. Immediately after the Ashok's invasion, Odisha entered a phase of primary state formation when the people understood the importance of state societies. Since then, there has been intense economic activity in different parts of Odisha along the major river Valles. Archaeological explorations undertaken during the last three decades have brought to light more than a hundred Chalcolithic and early historic sites that speak about the rich economic resources of Odisha. Rich accounts of the courage, patriotism, and charity of the ancient Kalinga people may also be found in Buddhist and Jain literature. (Panigrahy, 2020). Despite its rich economic base people have suffered a lot because of its climatic conditions and several natural calamities. So, we have evidence of natural calamities since the beginning of the first millennium A.D. The Hatigumpha inscription cogently provides us with information about a cyclone that had occurred prior to the accession of the Kharavela to the throne. Since then, Odisha has been subjected to cyclones, floods, and famines.

Odisha experienced many famines from 1806 to 1865 A.D. The famine of 1866 was the most disastrous, its scenario was shocking and heartbreaking. when we find heartbreaking and roaring threshes of stories. At that time village changed into funeral

groundswith the bones of infants which was a very horrible moment to see, when creatures like Jackals and Wolves felt a great satisfaction at the time of eating the flesh of human dead bodies. This moment was also very precarious when some helpless hungry fathers and mothers ate their own Children. After being unsuccessful in finding edible things, people were forced to eat different kinds of non-edible aquatic foods and tree leaves (Acharya,1925). Some historical records show that in the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 16<sup>th</sup> century Odisha suffered from horrible famines (Lawlor, 1867). In 1866 there was a terrible famine that affected an area of 40, 240 sq miles with an estimated population of 11, 855, 543 in Orissa (Mohanty,1993). It was called 'NankaDurbhikshya' as it occurred in Orissa during the ninth regional year of Gajapati Divyasingh Dev, the king of Puri (Das, 1992, p-51-53). Famine in the English substitute for Sk. 'Durbhikshya' literally means a condition in which alms are attainable with difficulty (Ganguli, 1933).

The famine of 1866 had its beginning in Puri at the beginning of October 1865. The signs of precarity were clearly visible from October 1865. Nonetheless, the uniqueness of this instance was that a matter of days determined whether the crops were successful. There was absolutely no rain after July 1865. When October 20th arrived and there was no sign of rain, the situation in the provinces grew dire. The rice trade was halted, and the bazaars in Puri and Cuttack were shuttered. (Lawlor, 1867, p 19). In 1866, Orissa witnessed a great famine commonly called, "NankaDurbhikshya". It was a man-made famine that hit hard at least three districts of Orissa, namely Puri, Cuttack, and Balasore. The gross negligence of the Govt, the selfishness of the Zamindars, and the greediness of the Mahajans aggravated the situation to such an unprecedented extent that the famine caused about ten lakh deaths, ten lakh lives – i.e. about one-fourth of the whole population of Orissa (MISHRA, 1992).

The famines that took a heavy toll on life among the poor were caused due to a variety of factors of which the principal ones were the growing proletarianization of the rural society and the impoverishment of the rural masses (Bhatia, 1991). The primary causes of the 1866 famine were the government's laissez-faire policy, which did little to stop the price increase, as well as the reduction in productivity, increasing expertise, and boarding, etc. And lastly, the agony of individuals was partly caused by insufficient alleviation (Mohanty,1993).

Famine in the history of Eastern India during East India Company rule has been a debatable aspect of Company governance with serious criticism of its failure to bring people their due entitlement. As Amartya Sen puts it in his entitlement and deprivation theory to counter argue the general assumption of food availability decline as a major cause for famine. However, long before Amartya Sen many regional and Western scholars also made do investigation on this topic. Even the government of Odisha has also come up with an exclusive series on it delineating the government's perspective. In fact, Famine provides a three-dimensional discussion of our colonial past in terms of Government, agriculture, and people. In other words, "famine study" is an excellent tool to comprehend polity, economy, and society in colonial and post-colonial India. The core idea of Sen's strategy is the "entitlement set" of a person, which is outlined as all the commodity bundles that may be gained from all the resources at the individual's disposal in a given society, according to that society's regulations. When an individual's entitlement set no longer includes enough food to sustain them, this is referred to as an "entitlement failure" and is considered to

be the root cause of starvation. The fact that "people establish command over food in many different ways (Sen, 1982).

Under native rule, starvation was a frequent and uncontrolled plague. Due to a shortage of funds and inefficient administration, the government at the time was unable to handle the disastrous impacts of the famines. The British continued to handle hunger in the same way when they came. There was no clear-cut plan in place for the delivery of aid throughout the first half of the 1800s. As a result, Orissa suffered significantly from the frequent occurrence of natural calamities. The only reason relief efforts were put into place was because of the chaos. The situation deteriorated further as a result of the dearth of income remissions (Bhatia, 1963).

To identify the reasons behind the 1866 famine, assess its negative impacts, and suggest ways to stop it from happening again, the secretary of state launched an inquiry. The Government of India established a Commission in December 1866. The Commission was presided over by George Campbell (later Sir G. Campbell, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal), a judge of the High Court at the time, and comprised Colonels W.E. Morton, R.E., and H.L. Dampier. The Commission's duties included not only identifying the causes but also devising preventive strategies to stop similar tragedies from happening again. On April 6, 1867, the Commission released its conclusions following its visit to Orissa (Bhatia, 1963).

The Famine Commissioners expended much energy explaining that the Lieutenant Governor refrained from interfering with market prices, that the board members were happy to issue directives to collect pricing data, and that even in June 1866, the board members remained opposed to importing rice. In June 1866, the board ultimately chose to import rice. However, following that, the rainy season had arrived, making it more difficult to import rice because of the rough water. The Famine Commissioners singled out the Board of Revenue, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, and the Commissioner of the Orissa Division for inappropriate behaviors (Mohanty, 1993).

The government was in dire need of imports to drive down costs. Regretfully, the laissez-faire mentality governed the revenue board members and Ravenshaw, who did not want to tamper with market forces. The Famine Commissioners expended considerable energy elucidating how the Lieutenant Governor refrained from interfering with market prices, how the board members remained opposed to rice imports as late as June 1866, and how they were satisfied with orders to obtain pricing information. In June 1866, the board finally made the decision to import rice. However, the onset of the rainy season and the choppy seas made it more challenging to import rice. The Famine Commissioners held the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, the Commissioner of the Board of Revenue, and the Commissioner of the Orissa Division accountable for their inability to act appropriately (Mohanty, 1993).

There was no famine rule in place to regulate how relief was distributed during the 1866 famine. However, there were other variables that affected the way in which assistance was provided. The most crucial element which we have previously discussed—was adhering to Adam Smith's principles. They said that the market will adjust prices to match the supply and demand of rice. Furthermore, the government was influenced by T. Malthus's population theory, which predicted impending disaster unless the population increase was reined back. Thus, as Ira Klein pointed out, "Millions of lives were lost in the 19th century because the demands of social

Darwinism and Malthusianism were stronger than the pull of humanitarianism on the government. “Consequently, the administrators attempted to reduce the cost of assistance. Another factor that affected the distribution of help was the Poor Law. They so carried on debating whether or not individuals in need of help ought to work. With the exception of Puri, the government did not start relief operations until May 1866 due to all of these factors. Relying on the Department of Public Work's normal activities was the main objective of the relief initiative when it initially started. The mode of payment was waged in cash. Afterward, light labour was assigned to physically fit persons. From building roads and embankments to excavating canals, a variety of work tasks were performed. The piece rate was implemented. Aesthetically fit people used to form gangs to complete specific tasks. In the past, when a task was completed, money was divided equally among all group members. Thus, women, children, and the feeble were not accepted by tribes. But while help was needed more for women and children, it was less necessary for physically fit individuals who had previously immigrated overseas (Mohanty, 1993).

People were therefore able to survive via their own efforts, and famines were unable to bring about ruin. Refusing to take immediate measures to alleviate suffering was the British famine policy. The Odia people suffered mercilessly from natural calamities as a result of British control and the progressive degradation of their standard of living. The following Table 1 displays the average price of rice throughout several time periods and illustrates the steady deterioration of the Odia people's situation.

**Table-1**  
**The average price of rice in Orissa (in seers)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Rice per Rupee</b>
1836-46	48
1846-56	58
1856-66	29
1866-67 (During Famine)	05
1869-70	02
1875	1½
1876-87	22
1886-96	19

Source: (Bhatia, 1963).

The Famine Enquiry Commission of 1867 also discovered that the majority of famine victims were agricultural wage labourers and that given the new conditions imposed on the nation by the British administration, it is reasonable to anticipate a gradual rise in the classes who may find it difficult to withstand a level of scarcity that does not reach the extreme of famine that affects the entire population (Bhatia, 1963).

## **Role Lieutenant Governor of Bengal**

On February 13, 1866, the Lieutenant Governor visited Puri. Ravenshaw was hoping to meet him then, but he had been busy planning Darbar in Cuttack till the last end. As a result, Mr. Barlow bears all the loads and greets people on the shore. Lieutenant Governor was greeted with a military band and fifteen Topa salami. A scholar read a welcome poetry on behalf of the welcoming committee. From there, the Lieutenant Governor was driven in a horse-drawn carriage to the collector's cottage across a flower-garlanded lane. Many impoverished beggars were there, and they were requesting rice from the ship rather than applauding the lieutenant governor (Das, 1992). But The Lieutenant Governor overlooked this issue and left it there. Unfortunately, British officers gave the governor a cordial greeting at the time the Odia's were starving. If the Lieutenant Governor would act immediately to stop the starving, we wouldn't have to suffer too much.

A letter from R.B. Chapman, the ESQ Secretary to the Board of Revenue, lower provinces, was sent to Ravenshaw, the Cuttack commissioner, on January 26, 1866. The letter states that the lieutenant governor disapproves of the labourers' payment in kind of salaries for the public work done in your division to assist those who are suffering from food scarcity. (Lawlor, 1867)

### **Role of Ravenshaw:**

Especially the British werethe ominous enemy ofthe Odisha people T.E Ravenshaw had neverwanted the unpleasant life of people due to the great famine of 1866 had to be changed, even though he never wanted the people of Odisha could released from this dead luck of famine. In my first touch of attention, I want to say that Commissioner Ravenshaw had never been wanted to come to Odisha from Panta. Even he has never been wanted to leave Patna. But he had no other choicebut to disrespect to order of the higher authority of the Board of Revenue. So, he bound to come to Odishaon 3 July 1865. Even when he arrived and settled in Odisha, he mentally failed much discontinuity. Hecries against the nearby Board of Revenue because of his promotion. After two months of his arrival to Cuttack, he had failed with the coming of the great famine of 1866. So, he became worried and he real case he was totally inexperienced with the current situation. His inexperienced outlook proved that when the Collector of Mr. Barlowwrote a letter on the current rice shortage in Puri, this time Ravenshaw tried to avoid the letter. Hisnegligentbehaviour was proved when the letter on the rice shortage of Puri. At that time, he was on the journey of the Garhajatastate. Another big foremost mistake of T.E Ravenshaw (Das,1992, p-51-53).

### **Role of S.C Beadon, Secretary of Bengal Government**

When Puri's Collector, G.N. Barlow, discusses the scarcity of rice in Puri, Ravenshaw informs him that most of the rice is kept in storage close to Zamindar. On 21 October 1865, T.E Ravenshaw wrote to A.C. Balley a secretary of the Board of Revenue, and wrote about the rise of the rice price. In response, Bengal Secretary S.C. Belly wrote on October 23 that the lieutenant governor wants to allow business to go naturally and that we could not force market vendors to sell at a loss. And be careful about that. It was the last word on this since the highest authority in the administration of Odisha was the Bengal government, the lieutenant governor above the board, and the board above the commissioner. A problem does not go to the Viceroy, the Governor General,

the General, or the Government of India if it is not urgent or serious. Barlow discovered after reading this letter twice that the government would not even permit him to mediate or set the price of rice (Das, 1992, p-72).

### **Colonial Officers:**

One of the main causes of the famine of 1866 was certain inherent defects in the British administration in Orissa. These defects were the executive had little contact with the masses and knew little of their material condition. The civil officers at that time had no previous knowledge of Orissa. Muspratt, the magistrate and collector of Balasore had joined early in 1865. In the month of February 1866, a new collector named Mr. Cornell had joined Cuttack. In July 1865, Commissioner T.E. Ravenshaw joined. The only officer having considerable experience in Orissa was G.N Barlow, an officer of 10 years standing who had been magistrate and collector of Puri for four years. Mr. Barlow, however, did ample justice to his duties till his departure in October 1866. On the ninth of May Mr. Barlow the collector, as Secretary to the famine Relief Committee, made an appeal to public charity through the Calcutta Press. A sum of Rs. 1000 was sent in answer to his appeal and this enabled him to open a relief house in town, to which cooked rice was supplied. Neither these officers nor the officer in the higher service had any special experience in dealing with the famine. Besides all the relief officials were ignorant of the language of the people and they did not know either the material conditions of the people or the economic status of the province. T. E Ravenshaw, the then officiating commissioner of Odisha, Sir Cecil Beadon, the Lt. Governor of Bengal, and Lt. Governor of Bengal were unable to read the clear signs of the times and their inability or unwillingness to do so was the prime cause of the mortality in Orissa Famine of 1866. The famine of 1866 greatly revealed the weakness of the administration and the neglect of the officer president of the board of revenue allowed the situation to aggravate by not taking early steps for the importation of rice. (Roy,1866)

The lack of administrating experiences among new colonial officers was also responsible for the famine of 1866. Except G.N.Barlow, the Collector of Puri other colonial Officers like T.E. Ravenshaw, the Commissioner of Cuttack, Mr. Masparrt, Collector of Cuttack, and the Collector of Balasore were inexperienced in administration. As a civil officer in Orissa, the only one of some considerable local experience was Mr. Barlow, an officer then of 10 years standing in the service, who had been four years Magistrate and Collector of Puri and who in this crisis did ample justice to his experience till his departure in October 1866. The worst thing is that T. E Ravenshaw joined himself as a Commissioner of Orissa in July 1865. Mr Muspratt, Magistrate and Collector of Balasore had joined early in 1865 and the new Collector of Cuttack, Mr. Cornell joined in February 1866. As a member of the Board of Revenue, Mr Trevor was succeeded by Mr Cocburn an officer who had previously had considerable experience in Odisha but he seems to have returned from England in December 1865. Such a terrible disaster happened in Orissa because of the lack of experience of the Sub-officers so they were unable to control the situation of the great famine (Das, 1992 p. 48-81).

### **Administrative system:**

The poor British administrative system also affected the province of Orissa. Along with the Orissa Division, the provinces of Bihar, Assam, and Bengal were included in

the Bengal Presidency. These provinces were managed by Lt. Governors until 1853, who were overworked from an administrative standpoint and had no assistance from the council or higher secretaries. As a result, he was unable to manage the administration of a small region like Orissa. To oversee Orissa's government, a commissioner was chosen. The Commissioner of Odisha and the Superintendent of the Tributary Mahals of Odisha simultaneously had a significant amount of judicial and executive power. As a result, he was unable to adequately administer each area of the province. Accordingly, "the most difficult problem that the administration had to face is the province's liability to loss of crops from natural calamities (Maddox Report, p,138). The province was plagued by natural disasters, there was no permanent system of land tax, and the periodic settlement varied periodically. In times of tragedies, the government was very reluctant to issue remissions, 'Remissions were prohibited starting in 1827 (before which there are no separate records for this area) and continuing until 1831. Therefore, the remissions from Government revenue alone were not "timely" enough to make up for the harm that the people had suffered. The number of remissions on the grounds of flooding and drought from 1832 to 1867 was about equal, totaling Rs. 6,25,844 for flooding and Rs. 6,18,660 for drought, for a sum of just under 12 1/2 lakhs. However, tight guidelines and Regulations were put in place to force individuals to pay taxes without understanding their true situation, which caused the province's economic situation and general material wealth to deteriorate during the course of the study periods (Bhatia, 1991).

### **Colonial Bureaucrats:**

Another foremost mistake of T.E. Ravenshaw was the Bureaucrats were giving very careless and wrong information on issues of rice storage. The bureaucrats had unfortunately said that rice is sufficiently stocked in the storage houses (Das, 1992, pp.61-64). But this information was factually wrong. These were the careless mismanaging attitudes of bureaucrats that purely showed in the Odisha famine. The Commissioner erred significantly. He should have thoroughly investigated how much paddy was stored in Orissa, who owned the stocks, and if they would be sold or distributed in the event of a general emergency before reporting to the government. Yet the death and confusion of three million Oriya's were predetermined by Providence. Was it conceivable that the Commissioner would make sense considering this? According to Ravenshaw, the aggregate output was just enough to feed on estimated population of 2.5 million in the year 1865-66 but famine occurred because the zamindars and traders hoarded grains. Which kind of rice was kept by the Zamindars for their exclusive use) the members of the Board of Revenue as well as the Commissioner of Orissa divisions zamindars and agriculturists had some rice throughout the famine but did not part with it at any price, since they kept it for immediate use or for the dependents (Mohanty, 1993).

### **Mismanagement of Relief:**

The British Government's relief was not adequate so much so that the lowercastes who went to relief centers died in greater numbers, secondly, the Bauries and the other castes left on daily wastes from hand to mouth where the raiyats had other assets like bullocks and brass vessels to sell before they were pauperized. In this famine, the raiyat's agricultural labourers and artesian all died in large numbers (Mohanty, 1993). The general outcome of the relief efforts in the Cuttack area, which has been

very generously provided, is illustrated by the following expert from Mr. Kirkwood's testimony: "Cuttack, Jajpur, Kendrapara, and Taladanda were the only four relief centers when he arrived. The additional centers were later opened by me. Twenty-three facilities were operational throughout the district by the end of July. By the end of July, such relief centers were hardly open and had limited supplies. Up until that point, not much help had been provided. The situation worsened in August due to the flood, which prevented boats from arriving and left us with insufficient rice to feed Cuttack. In comparison, more centers (i.e., new ones) opened in August and towards the end of the month were comparatively efficiently supplied. As a result, during the whole season, which lasted from around the end of August to the third week in September, there was only a tolerably acceptable quantity of rice in relief facilities throughout the region, and the lack of supplies was the main cause of the July relief shortages. In addition, lack of agency which was still being built at that time played a major role" (Lawlor, 1867 p. 79). At the beginning of December Ravenshaw suggested, the formation of the relief committee. On May 7, 1866, rice was selling at the rate of 0.14 per seer which rose to rate-0.2 per seer in the month of June officially. For the first instance, a person who had three annas was able to get little more than a seer, and later on, he was able to manage to get 5/8 seer per day only, but four adults required a minimum of two seers of rice to survive which was a drastic and measurable condition of that time. (Mohanty, 1993). In addition, there were limited relief centres compared to the population which was a major cause of starvation. The following population numbers are based on the 1854 census of three districts of Odisha (see Table 2).

**Table-2**  
**As per the 1854 Census**

<b>District</b>	<b>Populations</b>
Cuttack	12,93,884
Puri	6,13,536
Balesore	4,94,056
<b>Total</b>	<b>24,01,476</b>

(Source: Lawlor, 1867 p. 745)

There was a requirement for more relief centers with adequate storage of food grains. So, the unavailability of such centers made the matter worse for which the entire operating mechanism may be held squarely responsible. In July 1866, some arna chatras (eateries) were established (see Table 3) to provide cooked food in the interior



districts of Cuttack, Puri, and Balasore, which were not enough to survive in comparison to the population.

**Total No-3**  
**Cooked food centers from August to September 1866**

District	No. of center
Cuttack	43
Balasore	22
Puri	—

Source: (Lawlor, 1867 p,75)

### Conclusion

Widespread hunger, starvation, epidemic diseases, and rising mortality after the failure of the monsoon also led to the complete collapse of agriculture, affecting the lives of ordinary people and leading to social and economic distress. Therefore, droughts, farm failures, and plagues had been historically major sources of famines. In addition, the famine was caused by man-made preservation, illegal sales, and flawed economic policies. In addition, long-term hunger is due to revenue famine, poor management, and frequent bribe-taking in society which was another cause of destabilization during famine. Although government imports were desperately required to lower prices, the board of revenue members and Ravenshaw, of course, were firmly committed to the laissez-faire ideal and did not want to tamper with the workings of the market. The board finally decided to import rice in June 1866. However, the rainy season had arrived, and the waves were now choppy. So, the import was getting harder to understand. The famine commission held the commissioner of the Odisha division and the board of revenue responsible for their failure to act (Mohanty, 1993). Odisha seems to have been utterly ignored, depriving it of numerous benefits. Many talented individuals were made unemployed as a result of the administration's measures, which undermined the province's economic growth infrastructure. A turning point in the history of contemporary Orissa was the Famine of 1866–1867. The British authorities abandoned their complacent attitude following the investigation into the causes of about one million deaths. Socioeconomic issues including education, irrigation, and communication, among others, received some attention during the post-famine period. There are two factors contributed to the post-famine money wages rate increase: the reduction in general labourers as a result of famine mortality and the significant public works expenditures, which were made in all three districts in the form of building roads, embankment repayment, and other works (Mohanty, 1993). The 1866 famine, was an eye-opener for the British in Odisha to undertake steps for taking Odisha into the path of modernization. The famine commission reports and the debates that were held became virtually a blueprint for the British administration to follow in handling such situations in other parts of the coastal territories of India.

### Reference:

Acharya. M.P, *Odisha Itihas (Odia)*, Cuttack,1925,p.175.

Bhatia, B. M. (1963). Famines in India 1860-1945. A study in some aspects of the economic history of India. *Famines in India 1860-1945. A study in some aspects of the economic history of India.*

Bhatia, B. M. (1991). Famines in India: a study in some aspects of the economic history of India with special reference to food problem, 1860-1990.

Das , J.P. (1992) *Desha Kala Patra*. Friends Publishers, Cuttack

Ganguli, R. (1933). Famine in Ancient India. *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 15(3/4), 176-197.

Lawlor, M. (1867). *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire Into the Famine in Bengal and Orissa in 1866*. rep. HARDPRESS. Available at: <https://nvli.in/reports-proceedings/report-commissioner-appointed-enquire-famine-bengal-and-orissa-1866>.

*Maddox Report, Vol.I, p,138*

MISHRA, P. K. (1992, January). 'BREAD RIOTS'DURING THE FAMINE OF 1866 IN ORISSA. In *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* (Vol. 53, pp. 469-474). Indian History Congress.

Mohanty, B. (1993). Orissa Famine of 1866: Demographic and economic consequences. *Economic and political weekly*, 55-66.

Panigrahy, S. (2020). Social and economic life of Orissa during the colonial period 1803 1947.

*Roy. Shankar, Gouri ,Utkal Dipika(Odia Newspaper), part-1,1866,*

Sen, A. (1982). *Poverty and famines: an essay on entitlement and deprivation*. Oxford university press.