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X. INDIA: FAMINE AND RELIEF

India's food consumption differs from that of most of the countries previously discussed in three important respects: (1) the average daily consumption of food in terms of calories is considerably lower—close to bare subsistence at a low level of health and efficiency; (2) a much larger percentage of the food is grain (probably 80–90 per cent); and (3) several different kinds of grain are extensively eaten in various parts of India.

Rice is the most important single food grain in India, yet on a cleaned basis it represents no more than half of the total domestic use of food grains. Wheat is of secondary significance, accounting for less than a fifth of the total cereal consumption. Millets, gram (chick-pea), barley, and maize together probably contribute at least twice as much to the country's food supply as wheat, but crop statistics for these grains are even poorer than the questionable statistics for wheat and rice.

The Northern Hemisphere crop year 1943–44 was a year of marked tightness in the food position of India. This meant, essentially a tightness in food grains. Food conditions had become disturbing in the preceding crop year, but no real crisis developed until August–October 1943, when hundreds and even thousands died weekly from famine in the province of Bengal. The Bengal famine and its subsequent relief was the outstanding feature of the Indian food situation of 1943–44; but probably more important for the future were the significant steps taken toward developing an all-India food policy that would prevent recurrence of famine conditions in that country.

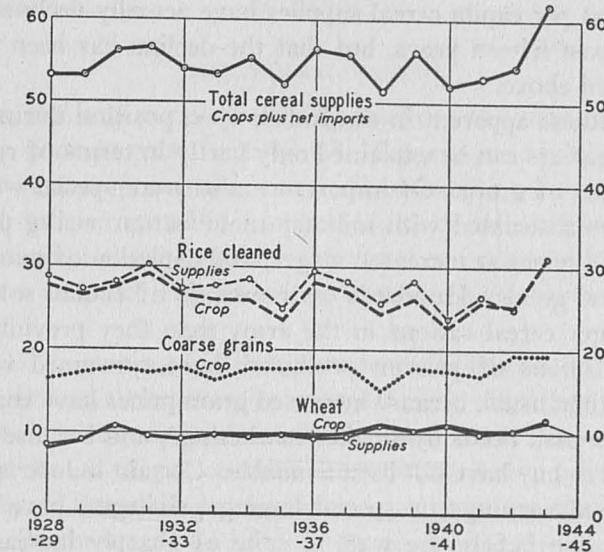
THE ALL-INDIA GRAIN POSITION

In various government and unofficial discussions of India's food difficulties of 1943, much has been made of the fact that the official statistics indicate a fair average level of food-grain supplies in India in the fiscal year 1942–43 and an excellent new crop of rice and of all cereals combined in 1943–44. The basic all-India supply figures (carry-overs disregarded) are shown in Chart 24. Certainly, these global figures carry no hint of the serious famine of 1943.

If, however, one is to take the official crop and supply figures at face value, it is also desirable to take account of the official census data on population, which seem to suggest that the Indian population has been increasing at the rate of about 5 million per year. Actually, we doubt

that the recent annual increase in population has been this large,¹ but there can be no doubt that it has been very substantial during the past two decades, primarily as a result of declining mortality rates.²

CHART 24.—GRAIN CROPS AND SUPPLIES IN BRITISH INDIA, FROM 1928–29*
(Million metric tons)



* Data for recent years in Tables 1 and 45, and from Great Britain, Secretary of State for India, *India (Food Situation 1943), Speech by the Food Member of the Governor-General's Council and Other Papers* (Cmd. 6479, 1943), p. 33.

The official statistics on population and on cereal supplies indicate the following changes during the past 12 fiscal years in pounds of grain per capita:

April–March	Per capita supplies	April–March	Per capita supplies
1932–33	345	1938–39	302
1933–34	337	1939–40	325
1934–35	344	1940–41	297
1935–36	320	1941–42	299
1936–37	341	1942–43	303
1937–38	332	1943–44 ^a	341

^a Preliminary, partly our approximation.

On this basis, the cereal supplies of 1942–43 look much smaller—small enough, indeed, to suggest that local famine conditions were practically inevitable in 1943, after old-crop stocks had been exhausted to

¹ There are several reasons for supposing that registration of the Indian population in the wartime census of 1941 was more nearly complete than in earlier censuses. The indicated annual increase in the preceding decade was 3.3 million.

² For an illuminating article on this subject, see Kingsley Davis, "Demographic Fact and Policy in India," *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* (New York), July 1944, XXII, 256–78.

meet the deficiencies of the two preceding years. But it is very difficult to credit the sharp downward trend in the per capita supply figures that brings the average for the first five years to 337 pounds and that for the last five years to only 313. In short, neither the total cereal-supply figures nor the per capita supply data present an entirely realistic picture. We infer that per capita cereal supplies have actually declined in India during the past fifteen years, but that the decline has been less sharp than indicated above.

The tightness apparent in the Indian food position during the past two or three years can be explained only partly in terms of reduced per capita supplies of grain. Of importance also were special wartime demand factors associated with military mobilization, rising prices,³ expanded employment at increased wages, and depletion of market stocks of consumers' goods. Hundreds of thousands of Indian soldiers have received larger cereal rations in the army than they previously ate as civilians. Millions of peasant producers have consumed or hoarded more grain than usual, because increased grain prices have enabled them to meet their cash needs by smaller marketings, and because the goods they wanted to buy have not been available. Certain industrial workers, with increased earnings or special buying privileges, have purchased more food than before the war, in spite of sharply increased prices. Finally, many grain dealers, merchants, and householders have kept exceptionally large stocks of grain on hand in anticipation of further price advances or of future exhaustion of market supplies. All of these factors have combined to increase the effective demand for grain during the past few years, thus adding to India's food difficulties.

It is clear from Chart 24 that India's total supply of food grains has never been significantly dependent on imports. The only grain imported on an appreciable scale before the war was rice, and the average net imports of this cereal amounted to only 1.4 million metric tons annually during the ten fiscal years ending in 1939-40. These imports represented about 5 per cent of India's rice supplies and less than 3 per cent of her total supplies of food grains. The cutting off of India's usual rice imports from Burma and other countries after 1941 thus had little effect on the grain-supply position of India as a whole.

On the other hand, certain areas—Travancore, Cochin, and the coastal cities of Bombay, Madras, and Bengal—had depended heavily in the past upon imported rice and were therefore seriously affected by

³ See International Labour Office, "Wartime Inflation in India and Its Social Repercussions," *International Labour Review* (Montreal), December 1944, L, 736-50.

the cessation of imports. To help meet critical shortages of grain in some of these areas, special efforts have been made since the spring of 1943 to import other grains from available sources—chiefly wheat from Australia. The quantities actually imported, however, have remained depressingly small, much smaller than the difficult food position warranted (p. 118).

THE BENGAL FAMINE⁴

Bengal, the largest rice-producing province of India, secured an exceptionally poor harvest in 1942-43. Destructive cyclones and plant disease cut that crop to scarcely more than 7 million long tons, as compared with an average of 8.7 million in the decade ending with 1938-39.⁵ Moreover, Bengal's position was further weakened by inability to secure her normal net imports of rice from Burma, estimated at 135,000 long tons.⁶

From the beginning of 1943, therefore, India's food experts recognized that Bengal's rice supplies were deficient. But they evidently regarded the deficiency as moderate rather than acute,⁶ a view more optimistic than the 20-25 per cent deficiency warranted in a war year characterized by an unusually heavy demand for grain for consumption and hoarding. By the spring of 1943, however, it became evident that shipments of grain into Bengal would have to be sharply increased to supply the minimum needs of the inhabitants of Calcutta and neighboring areas.

The Department of Food of the Government of India (established December 2, 1942) had been attempting for several months to procure from the grain-surplus provinces and states enough grain to distribute to the principal deficit areas. These efforts, however, had met with more difficulty than success, largely because the Constitution of 1935 was widely interpreted as giving to the provinces and states the powers and responsibilities connected with food production, procurement, and distribution. Rightly or wrongly the Central Food Department felt that it could go no farther than to *request* the co-operation of the local govern-

⁴ The following analysis must be regarded as tentative, pending publication of the report of the Famine Inquiry Commission appointed in July 1944 by the Government of India to inquire into the causes of food shortage and epidemics in India in 1943 and to recommend methods of preventing the recurrence of a food shortage (India, Bur. Public Information, "The Famine Inquiry Commission," *Indian Information*, Aug. 15, 1944, p. 146).

⁵ India, Dept. Comm. Intelligence and Statistics, *Estimates of Area and Yield of Principal Crops in India, 1938-39* (1940), p. 13.

⁶ Great Britain, Secretary of State for India, *India (Food Situation 1943), Speech by the Food Member of the Governor-General's Council and Other Papers* (Cmd. 6479, 1943), pp. 9, 15-16, 28.

ments in procuring and distributing food in line with the "basic plan" accepted by the Second Food Conference in February 1943. But under this system of operation, the Food Department failed to secure from the grain-surplus provinces sufficient grain to supply the essential needs of the deficit areas.⁷ Moreover, while some of the deficit provinces co-operated closely with the Central Food Department in attempts to secure and distribute efficiently their own local grain supplies, others (including Bengal) took virtually no effective action to meet their own food problems. Transport difficulties also interfered with the prompt movement of grain from surplus to deficit areas, and the shipments were constantly "too little and too late."

As the months passed, the situation in Bengal became worse and worse, even in the face of increased shipments to that province from other parts of India. In July 1943 shipments of food grains to Bengal approximated 112,000 long tons,⁸ but the need was so great that still larger quantities were urgently needed. In mid-July members of the Central Food Department made special arrangements for the North Western Railway to send to Calcutta 120 wagons of grain daily—a material increase over the quota previously established.⁹ These arrangements had scarcely been completed, however, before long stretches of rail lines and several important bridges were washed out by the Damodar flood. When officials of the Food Department decided to resort to ships for the movement of grain to Calcutta, they were able to obtain only two vessels, which promptly developed "engine troubles" after being loaded. Under these conditions, the quantity of food grains dispatched to Bengal during August 1943 was cut to 47,000 tons, or less than half the movement of the preceding month.

The Damodar flood acted as a "last straw" to bring the food difficulties of Bengal to a crisis stage. On August 24, 1943 the Mayor of Calcutta cabled Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt urgent requests to send food shipments to relieve the distress in that city.¹⁰ During the following weeks, death rates mounted sharply in Calcutta and neighboring rural districts. The British Secretary of State for India later reported that *recorded* deaths in Bengal reached 1.9 million in 1943—689,000 more than the average number in the five pre-

⁷ Many details of the difficult and unsatisfactory operations of the Food Department under this system were presented in a speech by the Food Member of the Government of India (Sir M. Azizul Huque) to the Central Legislative Assembly on Aug. 9, 1943 (Great Britain, Secretary of State for India, *India, Food Situation 1943*, pp. 10–16).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

¹⁰ *New York Times*, Aug. 25, 1943, p. 4.

ceding years.¹¹ With allowance for unrecorded deaths¹² and for deaths from diseases unassociated with food shortage, we infer that over a million persons died as a result of the Bengal famine of 1943.

These developments took place in the face of restoration of transport connections, which permitted average domestic food shipments to Bengal of over 111,000 tons monthly in September–October 1943.¹³ For some unstated reason, imports of food grains from overseas seem to have been insignificant during August–September, and even in the last quarter of the calendar year amounted to only 200,000 long tons.¹⁴

More effective steps were taken during these months to improve the procurement and distribution of domestic grain. The new Viceroy of India, inaugurated October 20, 1943, seemed more willing than his predecessor to take strong measures to relieve the distress in Bengal and to prevent recurrence of famine in the country. Reflecting this new attitude, the Government of India announced on October 13 that it had decided to take control of the food situation and that the provincial governments would be overridden if necessary.¹⁵

Viceroy Wavell's immediate plan for Bengal (announced October 28) included the following points: (1) the starving people of Calcutta would be sent to suburban rest camps, where adequate food and medicines would be supplied until they could return in fair health to their own villages, (2) the Indian army would be used to erect needed shelters, to move food supplies, and to distribute food and medical relief, and (3) a trained supply officer of the Indian army would be given the responsibility for improving the distribution of food from Calcutta to outlying rural areas.¹⁶ Effective prosecution of this plan promptly cut the death rate in Calcutta and increased the flow of grain to surrounding districts.

In late November and December 1943, the situation in the rural areas was greatly improved by the harvesting of Bengal's winter rice crop—one of the largest on record. And as the new rice began to move to market in December–January, the food position of Calcutta and other cities also improved. In Calcutta, the new-crop movement solved a

¹¹ Statement of L. C. M. S. Amery on Mar. 23, 1944 (Great Britain, *Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 1943–44*, Vol. 398, col. 1,030).

¹² Deaths were heaviest in the rural districts where records were least complete. See *New York Times*, Oct. 18, 1943, p. 4; Oct. 28, 1943, p. 10; and Nov. 22, 1943, p. 4.

¹³ According to statement by Mr. Amery on Nov. 4, 1943 (Great Britain, *Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 1942–43*, Vol. 393, col. 906).

¹⁴ Figure given by the Director of Food Grains (*Foreign Commerce Weekly*, Mar. 11, 1944, p. 28).

¹⁵ *New York Times*, Oct. 14, 1943, p. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Oct. 29, 1943, p. 6.

problem that government officials had found extremely perplexing—the problem of getting thousands of semistarving people, who normally lived on rice, to eat enough of the government-supplied wheat and millets to improve in health.

In order to permit the Bengal government to build up emergency reserves of rice during 1944, the Government of India agreed to continue to supply Calcutta and its suburbs with grain from outside areas. This agreement applied to a period of 13 months,¹⁷ during which the physical supply of rice in Bengal is supposed to have been more than adequate to cover the needs of greater Calcutta as well as of the surrounding districts. The wisdom of this decision was borne out by the persistently tight market position of rice in Bengal during 1944 and by the difficulties the Bengal government experienced in accumulating moderate grain reserves. The continued tight rice position must be attributed to the fact that millions of individual producers, merchants, and householders, with memories of the 1943 famine fresh in their minds, have rebuilt and increased their own private stocks of rice from the bumper crop of 1943–44. Moreover, domestic rice consumption has presumably risen under the influence of an increasing population and of the changed wartime position of millions of peasant producers and soldiers.

THE GOVERNMENT'S FOOD PROGRAM FOR ALL-INDIA

During 1943 the Government of India gradually developed an all-India food program, with a fair amount of co-operation from the various provinces and states. In many respects, the new program sacrificed efficiency of operation in order to preserve certain cherished rights and powers of the local governments. It lacked the strength that would have been provided by central procurement of grain, but in many provinces it had the needed strength of local-government support that might have been withheld if central procurement had been enforced.

In the development of the government's food program, the report of the Food Grains Policy Committee (September 1943) played an important role. The chief recommendations of the committee may be summarized as follows:¹⁸

First, the net supply of food grains for India should be increased by (a) forbidding exports, (b) securing imports of 1.5 million long tons in 1943–44 and

¹⁷ Statement of Mr. Amery on Apr. 6, 1944 (Great Britain, *Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 1943–44*, Vol. 398, col. 2149).

¹⁸ For an abstract of the report, see Great Britain, Secretary of State for India, *India (Food Situation 1943)*, pp. 20–26.

annual imports of 1 million tons thereafter, and (c) increasing the supply of domestically grown foodstuffs (mainly cereals) by various means.

Second, grain should be procured for distribution by the Central Food Department through provincial procurement machinery, if possible, with transport priorities given for such purchases. Procurement from producers should not be on the basis of requisition except as a last resort; and the government should undertake to increase the market supply of goods producers want in order to encourage increased production and marketing of grain.

Third, food grains should be rationed at not less than 1 pound per adult per day in all cities of 100,000 or over.

Fourth, statutory price control should be established for all major food grains in all the provinces and states, with some type of control by the central government over the prices set. Such provincial and state prices should be considered a first step toward the establishment of common regional prices.

Fifth, certain administrative changes should be made, including (a) revision of the formula for determining current supplies and deficits under the "basic plan," with scheduled reconsideration of the figures twice a year after the *kharif* harvest and again after the harvest of *rabi* crops, (b) assumption of sufficient powers by the central government—through the creation of a Food Board and an Expert Panel—to meet the accepted responsibilities for preventing the development of serious food shortages, (c) administrative reorganization of the Food Department, and (d) publication of a Food Administration Manual.

At the Fourth All-India Food Conference, October 13–16, 1943, the Central Food Department announced adoption of specific measures to carry out the major recommendations of the Food Grains Policy Committee.¹⁹ And in December, Viceroy Wavell reaffirmed his support of the government's new food policy.²⁰

Considerable progress has been made since October 1943 toward fulfilling most of the major recommendations. On October 5, 1944 the Secretary of State for India (Mr. Amery) told the House of Commons that all-India maximum prices had been set and were proving effective for wheat, barley, gram, and millet, but that no all-India price for rice had been established.²¹

In every important producing region, however, statutory controls have also been operating for rice. For wheat and several other grains, supplementary price guarantees have been given to producers in the form of promised support purchases by the Food Department at designated minimum levels.²²

¹⁹ "The Fourth All-India Food Conference," *Indian Information*, Nov. 1, 1943, pp. 238–39.

²⁰ Extracts of his speech at Calcutta on Dec. 20, 1943 may be found in *ibid.*, Jan. 1, 1944, pp. 5–7, and also in *Viceroy Outlines Government of India's Future Food Policy, Famines and Remedies* (Extracts from Speech of Lord Wavell made at Calcutta, December 20, 1943) (British Information Services 277, No. 3, DT, Washington, D.C., Jan. 10, 1944).

²¹ Great Britain, *Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 1943–44*, Vol. 403, col. 1144.

²² *Indian Information*, May 1, 1944, p. 502; "Central Food Advisory Council Meeting," *ibid.*, Aug. 15, 1944, p. 134; and Sir J. P. Srivastava in *ibid.*, Nov. 15, 1944, p. 608.

As early as April 6, 1944 Mr. Amery reported that rationing of food grains had been extended to 130 cities with an estimated population of 25 million.²³ On July 20, Sir J. P. Srivastava, Member for Food of the Government of India, stated that 226 cities and towns with an estimated population of 35 million were then subject to rationing controls; and on November 2 he told the Central Legislative Assembly that these figures had been raised to 460 and 42 million respectively.²⁴ Although the policy of the Government of India has been to encourage the establishment of legal grain rations no lower than 1 pound per day for adults, the rations actually established in many communities were substantially lower.

Despite these creditable achievements and further improvements in the government's system for procuring and distributing domestic surpluses, the Central Food Department apparently failed to build up an adequate emergency reserve of food grains. This was due primarily to the failure of grain imports to reach the recommended level of 1.5 million long tons. Only about 400,000 tons of food grains were shipped to India during October–July 1943–44, and not until July 1944 did the British government agree to arrange for shipments of another 400,000 tons to be completed by the following October.²⁵ Even this brought the total quantity promised to only 800,000 long tons for the 12 or 13 months specified; and the quantity *actually* imported was smaller still—only 649,039 tons (24 million 60-pound bushels).²⁶

The Food Department of the Government of India strongly urged that shipping be arranged for the 1.5 million tons of grain imports recommended by the Food Grains Policy Committee. Sir J. P. Srivastava, the Director of the Department, spoke time and again of the need for the full 1.5 million tons.²⁷ Other prominent officials agreed with him. In June a group of influential politicians and industrialists issued a joint statement urging the authorities to carry out in full the recommended import program; and on July 22 the Central Food Advisory Council, meeting in New Delhi, placed on record their “strong dissatis-

²³ Great Britain, *Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 1943–44*, Vol. 398, col. 2149.

²⁴ “Central Food Advisory Council Meeting,” *Indian Information*, Aug. 15, 1944, p. 133, and Srivastava, *op. cit.*, p. 609.

²⁵ *Indian Information*, July 15, 1944, p. 46; *London Grain, Seed and Oil Reporter*, July 5, 1944, p. 12.

²⁶ According to the Director-General of Food in India, the imports were as follows in long tons: wheat, 512,234; barley, 127,889; maize, 4,416; rice, 4,500 (*London Grain, Seed and Oil Reporter*, Nov. 17, 1944, p. 508).

²⁷ For example, see *Foreign Commerce Weekly*, Mar. 11, 1944, p. 28, and *Corn Trade News*, Aug. 2, 1944, p. 302.

faction” with the limited volume of shipments arranged for by the British government.²⁸

It is difficult to refrain from inferring that certain British officials in London or Washington, or the Combined Shipping Adjustment Board itself, either delayed or failed to expedite shipments of needed grain to India while a continued flow of less essential foods to Britain and the well-fed United States was being permitted or encouraged. If there were adequate official reasons for such action or lack of action, these should be publicly stated as soon as possible.

²⁸ *London Grain, Seed and Oil Reporter*, June 30, 1944, p. 657; “Central Food Advisory Council Meeting,” *Indian Information*, Aug. 15, 1944, p. 141.