

Rice and 1866 Famine of Orissa: A Case Study on Balasore District

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ABSTRACT

Nineteenth century Orissa history is marked as a period of natural calamity and severe drought. The shortage of rainfall and the decline of food production created a horrific situation for the people of Orissa. From the ancient period, the people of Orissa were famous for their reach of rice cultivation, and till now, it is the primary food crop for most of the people of Orissa. During the 19th century, apart from being an important food crop, it was used as an essential item for trade and commercial activities. During the colonial period, society was feudal, and most of the benefits from trade were taken by the colonial Government, *Zamindars*, and merchants. Peasants came at the last of the list. This was one of the most prominent reasons behind the famine of 1866. Due to the high price of rice throughout the famine, lower-class people could not afford the high price, and they didn't have sufficient storage of food for any kind of emergency; as a consequence, lower-class people became the primary victims of the famine. Here rice will be used as an essential source to study the famine in Balasore district of Orissa which was one of the city which was greatly affected by the famine of 1866 along with Cuttack and Puri. Here in this article, we are subjected to study on the famine of 1866 in Balasore district, its rice production, its society and how it reacted to the famine, and how it overcomes the famine of 1866 in Orissa.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Projected the role of rice during the 1866 famine in Balasore ditrict.
- Condition of society during the famine, and administrative measures taken by the british government to improve the condition of Balasore.

Keywords: Famine, Rice, Orissa, Balasore, Starvation, Colonial Orissa, Common people

Till 1866 no famine of that magnitude had ever ravaged the socio-economic set-up of Orissa. The Orissa famine was the most devastating natural calamity of the century, which could only be compared with the Bengal Famine of 1770 (Bengal famine affected the lower Gangetic plain of India from Bihar to Bengal region). This famine suppressed all the previous famines in its character, and it exhibited the defects of the Bengal administration and lamentable neglect of the vital problem of the development of Orissa. The famine of 1866 in Odisha

was of greater magnitude than any natural calamity that had happened in Odisha earlier. It was called Naanka famine as it occurred during the ninth regional year of Gajapati Divyasingh Deva, the king of Puri. Though it affected the whole of the east coast from madras to

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Bengal, its impact was chiefly felt in the coastal districts of Odisha, i.e., that tract of land which stretched from Midnapur in the north to Ganjam in the south, these three districts were Cuttack, Puri, and Balasore.

The earliest English settlement in eastern India dates back to 1633 when they established their factories at Hariharpur and Balasore in Orissa,; from then, it became one of the important centers for trade throughout the British period. Rice was the staple food crop of Balasore as of all other districts of Orissa. Most of the people of Balasore dependent upon agriculture, and from the famine commission report it was evident that Balasore was the heavy exporter of rice compare to Cuttack and Puri. There were forty-nine principal varieties of rice cultivated. The Dalua or spring rice sown on low lands in December or January and reaped in March or April. It is a coarse red, unwholesome grain. Its principal varieties are the *dalua*, *laxshmi narayan*, *priya*, *bamanabaha*, *antankhal*, and *sarihphul*.

1. *Sathiya* rice, sown in high lands in May or June, and reaped in July or August; common throughout the district, its principal varieties are *dudhsara*, a free white, and *kalasuri*, a coarse red grain.
2. *Niyali* rice, sown in high lands in May or June and reaped in August or September; common throughout the district. It is a coarse but wholesome grain. Its principal varieties are *narda*, *kakhanuya*, *champa*, *parabatiya*, *gobra*, and *bandabanali*.
3. *Kandha* rice, sown on middling lands, throughout the whole district in May or June, and reaped in September or October. A white, wholesome grain, principal varieties are *maru*, *patmahadeo*, *geti*, *matra*, *chota*, *karthikali*, *aswini*, *padagaruya*, and *syamali*.
4. *Guru* rice, sown in low lands, throughout the whole-district in May or June and reaped in December or January, principal varieties *basudibhog*, *chainakhi*, *lakshmikajjal*, *gangabadi*, *gangajal*, *tulasikeri*, *dudsara*, etc.

No superior cereals have been introduced, however, nor have marked extension taken place in two quantities of land devoted to rice; it is the one great crop of the district. Balasore was very famous for its best quality of rice, and it produced not only a large quantity of rice but

also export to other regions. We have some record of the amount of rice exported from Balasore to the other areas from 1861 to 1865, which evident that it was primarily dependent on agriculture for its livelihood and produce a large quantity of rice every year. In the first quarter of the 19th century, Dhamara port was used for carrying rice and other items by the merchants. Vessels coming from different regions of Laccadive, Maldives Island brought coirs, coconuts, and cowries, and took back rice and earthen pots in return from Balasore.

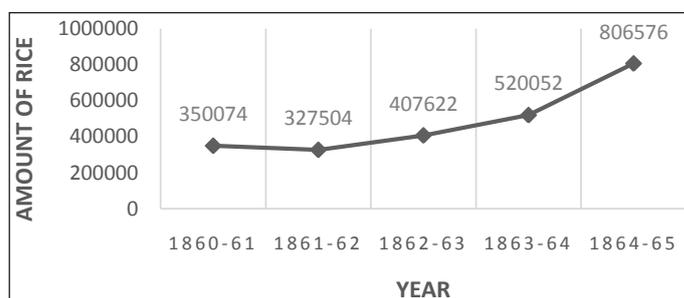


Chart 1: Total Amount of Rice Exported from Balasore (1860-65)

Source: Report of the Commissioner appointed to enquire into the famine in Bengal and Orissa, Vol-1, Part-1, p.47, Odisha State Archive

The above table shows that Balasore exported a large amount of rice compare to the other two districts of Orissa. After Balasore Cuttack exported came and then Puri. In the year 1864-65 Balasore alone Exported 8, 06,576 maunds rice, which became one of the major causes of the food shortage in Orissa. When in 1865, due to the lack of rainfall, crops were destroyed; there have been no food crops available for the people and which helps to raise the prices of rice in Orissa. It was the task of any responsible government to look after the trade commerce, import, and export of the commodities, but unfortunately, in Orissa, we could not find this type of management. The government followed the policy of non-intervention into a trade which ultimately resulted helped the merchants and rice stockholder to control the price of rice, and they did it according to their benefits.

Famine and Balasore

The rice crop of Balasore in 1864 had been an unusually good one, and the exports enormous. In 1865 no alarm seemed to have been felt regarding the safety of the

cold weather or sarad rice crop till September, or even later, prices still ruling at 23 to 20 seers per rupee. At the end of October, however, complaints were received from the *zamindars* that the crops were ruined; that the *raiyats* being to obtain advances, could not pay their rents; and the cultivation had blindly disposed of all their products and kept no stock in hand. In November, prices had gone up to 16 and 11 seers per rupee, and the distress became acute. Accordingly, a Relief committee was appointed, but it was considered that no immediate measures of relief were required. At the end of January, starvation appeared, the poor began to flock into the town, and the gratuitous distribution of food was commenced. In March and April, the number of starving people in the town rapidly increased; and on the 2nd may, the commissioner reported that, owing to the extraordinary rise in prices, it had been for some months beyond the means of the poor classes to procure sufficient rice to support life, and that they were eking out a miserable subsistence by eating roots, herbs, and leaves. The general population had fallen into a state of dejection and had lost all energy. They were swarming into the villages and there dying of cholera, dysentery, or hunger. Even in Balasore town, the organized relief was a scene of utter confusion; the starving crowd was beyond management.

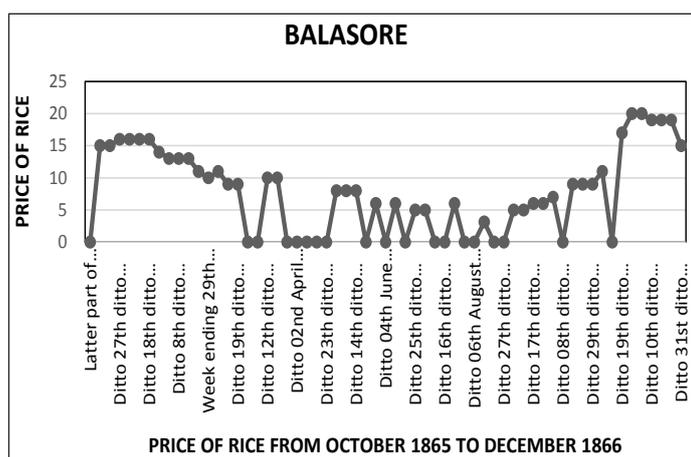


Chart 2: Approximate Prices of Common Rice in Balasore Given in Seers of Rupees

Sources: Report of the commissioner appointed to enquire into the famine in Bengal and Orissa in 1866, part-1, Odisha State Archive

It will be observed from the above chart that throughout the famine, the price of rice was high, though there are some local oscillations, the downward course of the average rate is singularly regular. The result of the price table for the space of five months in the best-supplied markets, and those most aided by government sales, the price of food, supplied in a very intermittent way, ranged from, five to ten times the ordinary or average rate. In the interior of the district, food was generally not be procured for money, and when sold, ranged up to about thirty times the ordinary price. As we have discussed it above that due to the absence of infrastructure and industry, most of the people of Orissa were solely dependent on agriculture. The ruin of the cottage industry and the close of the salt industry left the people nothing to do except agriculture. Apart from an agriculturist, other lower-class people were daily wage earner, and among the Artisan Castes included Kamar, (blacksmith), Sikalgir (entler), Kansari and thathari, Pathuria (stone cutter), Barhai(carpenter), Chitrakar(painter), Kumbhar (potter), Laheri (lac-worker), Kachora (glass-maker), Sankhar. The earning of these people were very low. Always their income fell short with their outlay. So it was quite a tough task for shaving food for these people. Ultimately when the crop fails, it severely affects the poor agricultural, artisans, and other lower-class people, those who have no other way except agriculture to live.

According to Gorachand Pattnaik, in his book the famine and some aspects of British economic policy, he wrote that the officers in charge of the Orissa division were no previous experience. General Muspratt was the Magistrate and collector of Balasore who joined early in 1865, ignorant about the geographical condition, people, and the language of Orissa. As an outcome of his attitude, he was unable to see the situation. Campbell commission appointed for the inquiry of the famine of 1866 in Orissa also pointed out the inherent defects of the British administration in Orissa. Due to the absence of a proper communication system, it was quite difficult to import rice; in addition to this, the rainfall in late 1866 added more to make the situation worse than anyone could imagine. Due to the absence of food, people started eating to the dead body, and people

started committing a crime so that they could go to jail, and where at least they could get some food to eat. When the British administration tried to understand the situation, it was too late to control; nearly one million people were died due to the famine.

When the crop failed in the year 1865, there was a sudden mismatch between the demand of food and the supply of food created a situation of scarcity and situation of food scarcity aroused by the zamindars, rice stockholders, and merchants who were mainly regulating the markets. But the rainfall in October turned the scarcity into famine. The situation could be controlled if the zamindars sell their rice initially. Ananta Dash, who was a primary victim of the famine of 1866, in his biography revealed that what was the thoughts of peoples regarding the famine. People's popular perception was that it was Lord Indra who was angry; that's why he stopped the rain. He also wrote that the people were not supportive of each other and did not share their food; people were suspicious of each other. People have nothing to eat, and they were merely looking like a skeleton.

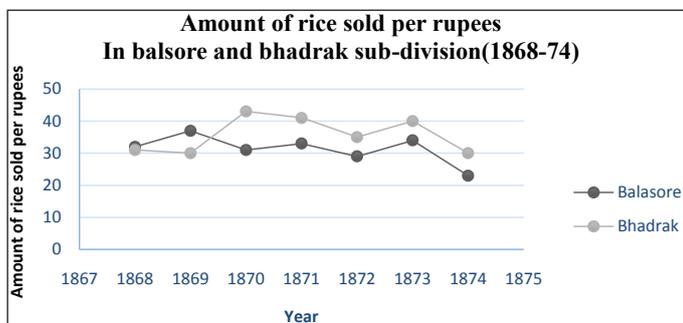


Chart 3: Statement Showing Average Annual Price and Pulses in Balasore District for Seven Year 1868-1874

Source: W.W. Hunter, *A statistical account of Cuttack to Balasore*, Vol. Xv

The above table is shown us the amount of rice sold per rupee at Balasore and Bhadrak sub-division in the year 1868 to 1874. After the famine in Orissa, the amount of rice increased a little in the year 1868, and the situation came under control. Here rice is sold per rupee in an amount of 31 seers. In 1866 the situation was worse; the amount of rice per rupee was sold an average of 10 seers. Till 1874 the amount of rice was quite stable throughout the Balasore district. From 1868 to 1874, rice was sold 30

seers per rupee in the Balasore district, and an amount of 33 seers per rupee was sold in the district of Bhadrak sub-division.

The government began to import grain in June, steamers being sent round by sea with large cargoes of rice, and by the end of July, 12,000 maunds had been imported. Private importations by land from Midnapur into the north of the district were also considerable, but still hardly sufficient to meet the demand from day today. Traders too began to import grain from Calcutta on pack-bullocks; but in the middle of June, this traffic was stopped by the rains, which made the unmetalled roads impassable. Rice shops were opened early in July in the town and at several places in the interior for the sale of rice to all corners at a low rate, but unfortunately, the relief operation received a check. At the same time, rainfall was started, and in Orissa, as we discussed, that the communication system was defective; there was no proper channel to communicate. Due to the communication problem, and heavy rain, the relief measure stopped someplace. It was quite challenging for the British officers to supply the rice bags into the relief centers. The table given below will show the amount of rice received in the Balasore district up to November 24th, and also shown in what manner the rice had been used, and also exhibits the extent of the relief operation in different months.

Maximum number of centers open for relief, eleven in the Bhadrak sub-division, shops those who have money to buy rice opened at seven places, at the relief centers one meal everyday was given. Below is the statement of the balance of stock of rice imported into the district of Balasore in 1867.

The coming of the new rice crop gradually relieved the distress. On November 5th the government sales were stopped, and the collector reported that public health was improving and trade reviving. The maximum number of centers for gratuitous relief, including 11 in the Bhadrak subdivision, was 22, the distance between them ranging from 5 to 22 miles. Shops those who have money to buy open in 7 places. The number of paupers ascertained to have died in the town of Balasore alone between June and October was 8,900, of whom 6,132

Table 1: Statement Showing the Extent of Relief Operation at Different Periods in Balasore, 1866

Month ending	Quality of rice issued				Out of quantity in col.4		Daily average of persons relieved		
	For cash to gov. dept. at full cost price.	For cash sold to public at market rate.	Transferred to relief committee.	Total of colm. 2, 3, and 4.	Quantity gratuitous distributed	Sold at cheap rate to related individuals	Number from whom light labor was exacted	Gratuitous related	Total of column 8 and 9
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
June 30 th	Mds. 100	Mds.	Mds. 2276	Mds. 2376	Mds. 1852	Mds.	Mds. 3175	Mds. 8207	Mds. 11,472
July 28 th	400	1796	4942	7138	3182	1885	3619	20,362	23,982
August 25 th	767	1,107	7242	9,116	4687	1736	4307	16,289	20,596
September 29 th	1,664	4480	16,071	22,215	11,349	3295	4307	30,927	35,234
October 27 th	1536	3013	17,026	21,575	13,016	3,394	6,028	33,503	39,591
November from first to 24 th	6	130	12,870	13,006	12,730	1332	5878	22,232	28,110
Total	4,473	10,526	60,428	75,427	46,816	11,643	4,552	21,945	26,497

Source: District Narrative Balasore, 1866, Odisha State Archive.

died in the streets and 2,768 in the hospital. The mortality in and about Balasore town and the famine sights to be seen there was more terrible than at any other place in Bengal or Orissa. The mass of paupers assembled was larger than it was elsewhere.

The famine of 1866 was the result of the ignorant attitude of the British government. The British government failed to check the administration process in Orissa. They were unable to control the market and did not check the price rate, import, and export. There was no system of maintaining any records. At the same time in Orissa, the sessional rainfall, heavy export of rice, defective communication supplement the British policy, which resulted in the worst famine, which killed nearly one million people all over Orissa. During the famine, when people badly need food, there was no food, and the British government unable to import food at the right time, which exposed their defective administrative system of the Bengal Government. The lack of communication between the people and the officers also rose as another important factor for the famine. British officers were new to Orissa, and they don't have any knowledge about the geographical condition of Orissa, which was also responsible for the famine.

The famines in Orissa were partly man-made in nature

as the British did not adopt any sound short term or long term measures of relief. R.C. Dutt, the president of the Indian National Congress in 1899 and the author of the two-volume books, *The Economic History of India* observed that during the British rule in India severe famines occurred once in two decades and there were many minor famines or scarcities in between two great famines. The utter neglect of agriculture and agriculturism by the colonial power further aggravated the situation. Before British rule, a major famine occurred almost every 50 years. From the 11th to 17th centuries, there were 14 famines in India, and from 1765 to 1858 there were 12 famines and 4 scarcities. During the period 1866 to 1908; India experienced 20 famines. Rice constitutes a major source for understanding the famine of 1866, and it exposed the defective administrative system in Orissa. The selfishness of the *zamindar* with grass negligence made the situation worse. The crop production was not bad, but some *zamindars* did not sell their rice at the beginning of the famine, which ultimately made the famine more furious and killed many innocent people in Orissa. Orissa famine of 1866 opened the eyes of the British Government; from famine onwards, they started focusing on the development of communication system, industry, agriculture, irrigation system, they also focused on the education of the

students and printing press, media also developed. Fakir Mohan Senapati, published from Balasore, *Boushadayani o Balasore Sambad Bahika* was a famous newspaper. The new elite comprising luminaries like Gourishankar Roy, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Pyari Mohan Acharya, and Madhusudan Rao, devoted themselves to the development of Odia language and literature. This famine brought the people of Orissa closer later, and they participated in the merger of the Odia tracts.

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