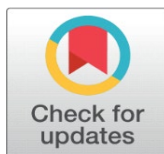
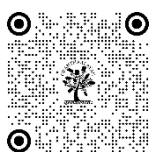


# 'BUSTING THE MYTH': A CRITICAL STUDY ON THE GENDER AND CLASS OF THE 1866 FAMINE OF ODISHA

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## ABSTRACT

One of the greatest famines ever reported happened in Odisha was the famine of 1866. The terrible famine claimed the lives of around one-third of the whole population. In the famine of 1866, massively affected the common people, such as poor people, daily wage earners, lower class people, and farmers, who suffered highly because of their low purchasing power. In studying the impact of the famine on vulnerable groups in a society, gender often ignored, however, it is a well-known fact that the poorer sections of society are the first ones to fall victims. The study examines the multidimensional aspects of the gender issue that include mortality, fertility, migration, nutrition and deprivations faced by women in general and girl child in particular during the 1866 famine of Odisha. In the epidemic phase of the famine, female deaths were highest. Women of low caste suffered the most as they did not possess ornaments to sell and certainly not enough to sustain themselves for a long time. This study also signifies revisiting the cataclysmic experience of the 1866 Famine in Orissa that saw increasing mortality rates among the females, crimes against women, food riots, distress sale of land, distress migration, prostitution, child abandonment, eating of famine foods which had toxins, cannibalism, and even rebellion.

**Keywords:** 1866 Famine, Women, Odisha, Caste, Class, Mortality Rate, Food Crisis



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Famine has been defined as shortage of food so extreme and protracted as to result in widespread persisting hunger, notable emaciation in many of the affected population, and a considerable elevation of the community death rate attributable at least in part to deaths from starvation. Famine is defined as an increase in mortality caused by widespread malnutrition in a region. A series of catastrophic famines devastated the people of India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When it came to conducting business in India, the British people had a ruthless economic objective that did not involve consideration for the local populations. Famine was a huge worry and concern for the British during the late nineteenth century. From 1765 to 1858, we have seen a significant increase in the number of famines, as there were recorded twelve famines and four scarcities, and between 1866 to 1908 nearly twenty famines India has witnessed. Under the British Raj, India suffered countless famines, and Orissa, among some major states which was highly affected by the famines and other natural calamities.

### 1.1. THE ORISSA FAMINE OF 1866

One of the greatest famines ever reported happened in Orissa was the famine of 1866. The terrible famine claimed the lives of around one-third of the whole population. Since it happened in the ninth year of Gajapati Divyasingh Deva,

the ruler of Puri, the severe famine is also known as the Na'anka famine. Although it had an influence on the entire east coast from Madras to Bengal, but Cuttack, Puri, and Balasore in Odisha were the main coastal regions where it was most noticeable. Its severity was so terrible that about a third of the population died. The ghastly nature of the famine displayed the serious defects in the Bengal administration, and lamentable neglect of the vital problem of the development of Orissa.



**Figure1** Famine Photo of India collected from Deccan Chronicle

In light of the famine commissioner's reports from 1866 and 1880, numerous historians who closely examined the Orissa famine of 1866 have identified some of its primary reasons. They claimed that Orissa's geographic isolation from the rest of the country, the absence of suitable means of transport and communication, flaws in the British administration, a lack of irrigation facilities, and the absence of a trading class were the main causes of the famine. They also claimed that food grains were exported without regulation, and another thing was the people suffered greatly in the famine due to the lack of other work opportunities besides farming. In the famine of 1866, massively affected the common people, such as poor people, daily wage earners, lower class people, and farmers, who suffered highly because of their low purchasing power, they were unable to purchase food from the government-run market and could not cope with the high price of rice during the famine and became the primary victims of the famine.

From ancient period, Orissa, was predominantly an agrarian province well known for its high-quality rice production. With the abundance of rice, it was clear that rice was Orissa's main meal and that it had a significant impact on the region's growth and development. During nineteenth century the people of Orissa were struggled with food shortages, malnutrition, and hunger-related deaths. Among such natural calamities the famine of 1866 was the most well-known because of its severity, and over many decades, it had wreaked havoc on Odisha's socio-economic structure.

According to the words of Tirthankar Roy in his article "Were Indian Famines Natural or Manmade?" he argues that during the 19th century we witnessed a series of major famines, and harvest failure was a major reason behind these famines. He defines that man-made famines were outcomes of colonial politics and natural famines happened as a result of geographical barriers. Famines are often man-made in the sense that they are caused by political factors, because food is traded in large volumes and more cheaply. On the other hand, 'natural' depended on geographical factors.

In The "Economic History of India", a two-volume book written by R.C. Dutt, the president of the Indian National Congress in 1899, noted that severe famines occurred in India during the British colonial era once every twenty years. The colonial power's complete disregard for agriculture and agriculturists made matters worse. The British failed to implement any sensible short- or long-term relief measures, which contributed to the famines in part.

"The Natural Calamities in Orissa in the 19th Century" by Braja Bandhu Bhatta, is an important book where the author has listed a few causes, which were responsible for the outbreak of the famine. He noted that the 1866 famine was more caused by a lack of grain than a lack of money. When the harvests failed in the month of 1865, the food that had been stored was largely insufficient. He emphasised the large rice export, one of the important factors that contributed to the start of the famine, more than the others.

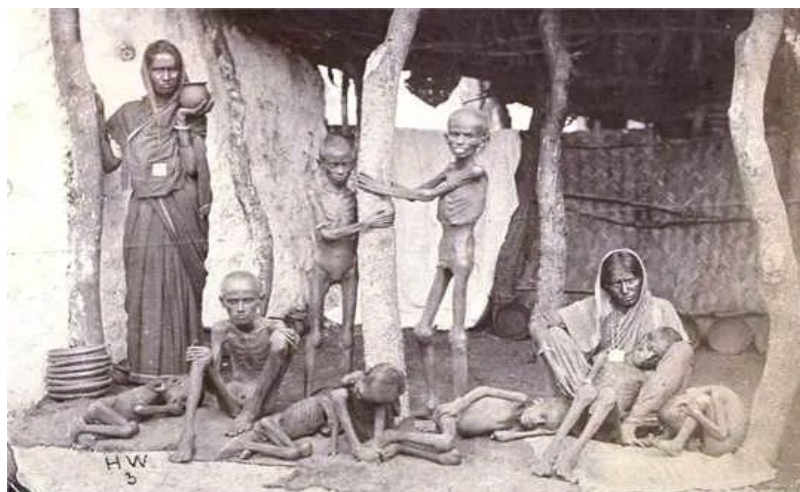
Gorachand Pattnaik wrote in "The Famine and Some Aspects of the British Economy Policy in Orissa 1866-1905" has given the main cause for the famine of 1866 was the heavy export of rice, and lack of food which ultimately created a high price. The policy of the government and several factors came together in an unfortunate way to bring about the great famine of 1866.

Ananta Das's biography is one of the most important primary sources that specifically gives us information about the great famine of 1866. In his biography, he wrote about the famine and sufferings of the people in Orissa and also described how he became a victim of the famine and his hard struggle for survival. It was widely believed that Lord Indra was upset and that's why he stopped the rain. The social condition during the famine is reflected in his work.

## 2. FAMINE AND WOMEN

Women and girls are often the hardest hit by famine and other emergencies. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), nearly 60% of the 309 million people who are extremely hungry in the world are women and girls. In nearly two-thirds of countries, women are more likely than men to report food insecurity. Here are some reasons why women are more likely to be affected by hunger during famine. The first one will be Gender-based discrimination: Women's access to aid can be undermined by gender-based discrimination. Traditional roles: In some countries, tradition dictates that women eat last, after all the male members and children have been fed. Household responsibilities: Women spend 85–90% of the time spent on household food preparation, including cooking and chores. Some of the effects of famine on women include, Malnutrition, Anemia, food consumption, early child marriage. Malnutrition during pregnancy can increase the risk of stillbirths and low birth weight babies, which can increase the risk of death. Women are also more likely to have anemia, a diet-related iron deficiency that can cause organ damage if left untreated. Women-headed households may report a significant decline in food consumption and have to skip meals. Some families may resort to early child marriage to sustain themselves.

Famines were often accompanied by prostitution, child abandonment or infanticide, aberrant food practices, and massive migration flows. Some of these factors could act in favor of women; others could be detrimental to them. Women were largely excluded from publicly speaking about their experiences, however, records of their labor and other contributions are being analyzed as more of these records are being treated as valuable insight about the role of women in colonized societies. Women were also affected by the famine at higher rates- they were given smaller amounts of rations due to the belief that women did not need to eat as much to survive. They died of malnourishment at higher rates, and then were largely excluded from speaking about their experiences. Records of their labor and other contributions were seen as worthless for much of history, and only recently are they being treated as valuable sources of insight.



**Figure 2** Famine picture India: collected from Sambad Newspaper site

Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel 'So Many Hungers' is a story of human plight and suffering during the great Bengal famine of 1943. It also has the Quit India Movement at its focus and shows Gandhi's impact on Bhattacharya. The idea of the 'New Indian Woman' based on Gandhi's principles is perpetuated through the story by the means of its female characters. It is a tale of people caught in tragic predicaments and their response to this situation. This essay examines the novel's female characters and studies the situation of women during the famine. It also highlights how Bhattacharya advocated for women participation in the freedom movement through his characters and created close ties between India and the woman protagonist in his story. A critical analysis based on a close reading of the story reveals several layers in Bhattacharya's narrative and offers an authentic account of one of the most critical moments in the Indian history.



### 3. GENDER, CASTE AND CLASS IN 1866 FAMINE

In the middle of nineteenth century Orissa faced severe drought situation, famine and decline of rice production made the lives of the people worsened. British government did not look after the people and their progress. Even during 1866 famine when people were dying in hunger and British authority was not serious to provide food to the people. Rice was produced and supplied to the other part of India and on the other hand there was no rice for the people of Orissa. Thus we can say that rice shortage led the society towards mass starvation and loss of lives in Orissa. As result of that when famine breakout in Orissa, most affected and suffering peoples were the poor, landless cultivators, weavers, artisans' classes, daily wage earners, and mostly it affected the women. Thousands of people from these communities lost their lives in hunger and starvation. These groups of people were working privately and depended upon others for their livelihood.

The book *A Hunting tragedy: Gender, Caste and class in the 1866 famine of Orissa* by Bidyut Mohanty ascertains understanding famine as a process to comprehend who starved during the famine and why. The book engages the reader in understanding the Orissa Famine in 1866 that had its worst impact on the poor, in particular the agricultural labourers, weavers, salt workers and fisher folks, invariably belonging to the lower castes who were marginalized and deprived. This book signifies revisiting the cataclysmic experience of the 1866 Famine in Orissa that saw increasing mortality rates, crimes, food riots, distress sale of land, distress migration, prostitution, child abandonment, eating of famine foods which had toxins, cannibalism, and even rebellion. By referring to the memories of traumatic experiences of the everyday strategies to cope with the famine, which are narrated in several anecdotes in autobiographies, and the literary works including poetry and fiction by Fakirmohan Senapati, Anant Das, Mayadhar Mansingh, Jayant Mahapatra, the author reiterates the need to understand the 1866 Famine in Orissa as a haunting tragedy. Several districts such as Puri, Balasore and Mayurbhanj saw food riots, looting of shops, and burning of granaries of the zamindars after the harvests. Despite caste prejudices, people stole cooked food from the kitchens of unknown people.

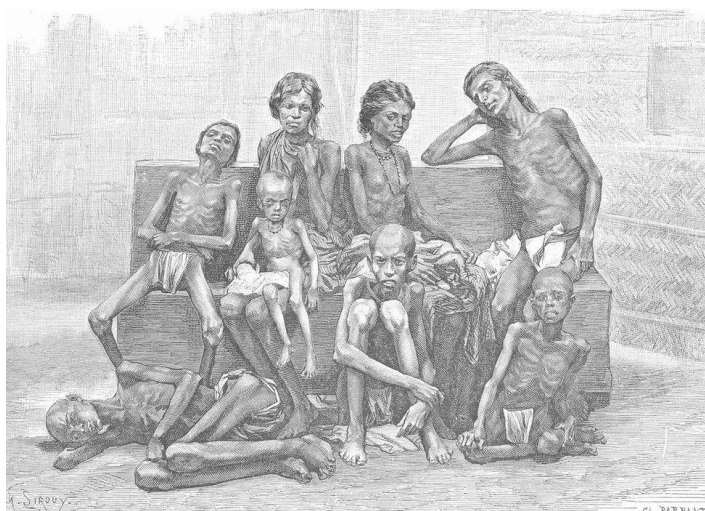


**Figure3** Famine in India, 1900 collected from BBC site

The starved also snatched sacred offerings from the Jagannath Temple. People across castes congregated at the main gate (Singhadwar/Lion Gate) of the temple to share the cooked food offered as Mahaprasad. Mohanty describes how people crowded at a particular open drain despite the unhygienic condition to have peja - the starch water strained from boiled rice that flowed through the drain to the river. The study suggests how the eating of famine food such as wild grass, edible roots, and tubers which have toxic elements (identified by the Indian Famine Code 1880) become a regular food habit. Several writings of Gopabandhu Das in the *Utkal Dipika* (the Oriya newspaper) state that people of low castes such as Panas, Kandara and Gokhas were eating wild berries instead of rice. Households consumed 'seeds' saved for harvests despite the dilemma of not breaking the tradition of preserving Goddess Lakshmi. Families mortgaged their utensils and ornaments with traders and money lenders to buy ragi. Since the price of cattle feed increased, the cattle were in a famished condition and were sold at a cheap rate. The Daily labourers and wage earning muleyas (servants)

belonging to the Chasa, Sonthal and Khond communities had hired land from the mahjanas on a temporary leasehold basis. The raiyats were compelled very often to borrow money to meet kist (installment of rent) during the off-season. According to Nathan, the revenue officer kotdes, reported that, "in Puri the royats did not pay his rent through the agency of the Mahajan, while J M Das in Jajpur also subscribed to this view. The peasant's indebtedness, begun on account of some natural calamity or social function, was perpetuated through high rates of interest rather than by his improvidence".

The condition of the tenants was very poor during the colonial periods. They were forced to work under the contractors and paddy dealers. Many times tenants were borrowing money and other agricultural tools from the money lenders and land lords with high rate of interest for the cultivation purpose. But in some years nature was not supporting for the cultivation. Drought, flood, and cyclone were the common phenomenon in the Orissa land. Even present time also Odisha have been facing sever cyclone, floods, heavy rain fall and draught kind of situation in every years. During colonial time rice was its main crop production which was generally cultivated in rainy season only. Once this cultivation failed due to drought or flood then peasants could not pay the interest of the loan and had to make mortgage of the land or other agricultural items for their livelihood and further preparation for agriculture. Statistically speaking, out of annual crop one tenth was destroyed by flood and one tenth by drought. The balance grain had to meet the arrears of interest due on them.



**Figure 4** Antique print of Indian famine victims, 1885 Collected from BBC site

Mohanty highlights how women were deeply entrenched in the patriarchal values which morally compelled them to serve more food to the male members of the family. Besides the distribution of food, women were discriminated against in terms of health care, education and wages. In the epidemic phase of the famine, female deaths were highest as people with a lower level of nutrition were more prone to malaria. Women of low caste suffered the most as they did not possess ornaments to sell and certainly not enough to sustain themselves for a long time. Women could not enter the relief centers because of the unruly crowd. Among those who managed, many stayed back after the famine was over to do odd jobs in the centers. There is evidence that shows that women suffered when men migrated and several women took to prostitution.

#### 4. DIFFERENT ESTIMATES OF MORTALITY AND SUFFERINGS

The mortality data also riddled by uncertainties, because nobody knew how many were living before the famine and how many were dead or missing. (the first population Census started only in 1872). No on the spot enquiry was done during the famine, but two important estimates are available on mortality: estimates of the deputy collectors which were submitted in July 1867, and that of the authorities of the Famine Histories, 1885. The authors of famine and histories pointed out that the survivors were put at 20,86,000 in 1867, the absolute number of death was put at 8,09,561. It is likely that the estimate done by the authors of famine histories was too low because they had considered the starvation phrase of the famine which continued till the end of 1867.

The Secretary to the Government of Bengal remarked that old and young died in large numbers in 1866. The Sanitary Commission of 1868 stated that the famine affected the aged, sickly and infirm in particular. The evidence of sex-differential mortality is not unambiguous. A clergyman named Buckley who was very active during the famine had setup many orphanages and recruited many orphans. He reported to the famine Commissioner that the orphanages boys looked healthier than the girls, and also had a lower death rate. The commissioner of Orissa division reported the observation made by the collector of Balasore that more males than females had disappeared. Hunter, on the other hand, gave a very different picture of the famine mortality. He mentioned the death rate of the women and children (of both sexes) was higher than for men. On the basis of the slender evidence available it appears that the male death rate was not higher than the female death rate in every age group in 1866.

The emigration statistics for the famine of 1866 were collected in June and July 1867, along with the statistics of mortality. The Zamindars were given forms to fill-up information on the death statistics. According to Bidyout Mohanty the Zamindars has not performed their duty in a proper way. They have not record the number of female death.

There were many reason responsible for the higher death rate of female during 1866. T.E. Ravenshaw the then commissioner of Orissa mentioned in one of his report regarding a seen outside the relief center opened for the famine distressed people. He has written that there were so many people inside the relief center, mostly the male people could able to cross that crowd and get into it. On the other hand the women, children and sick man were left behind and were struggling to get inside the relief centers. People were snatching each other's food and the women were only crying and begging for some food. Some people were eating dead body of a human. T.E. Ravenshaw while returing from cuttack the famine situation was out of control in Puri and Balasore. People in these places were meraly looking like a skeleton. Most of them were women and children. Because most of the man in search of food stated migrating from Orissa to different other places, whereas the women were left alone at home. Women carrying their children were dying in front of the eyes of Ravenshaw. People sold their utensils and whatever they had so that they can get some food. British Government could not properly managed the food center which were established to serve cooked food for the famine affected people and also relief operation in the rural areas was defective, as a result people did not get proper relief food. Although relief works were started in December 1865.

From the above words we can feel the intensity of the famine, it completely changed the structure of the society, people started selling his own children, so that they can get some food to eat, many people committed crime like rape, murder so that they can get two time food in the jail. As a result of that jails were full of criminals. People both men and women, children were dying on the road. The Jail mortality that year touched a higher figure than it has ever reached since the famine year 1866; and the Inspector-General of Jails, in treating' ofthe fact, points out that not only was the mortality high among the jail population, but that the year was to the common knowledge, and by general repote, one of much sickness. Cholera was unusually prevalent, and it is admitted by experts that in any period marked by unusual cholera mortality a low state of the general health is almost invariably observed.

Pyarimohan Acharya, an eye witnessed of the 1866 famine of Orissa provides a horrible picture on it. He narrates about this famine in the following way:

"The towns were filled with the sorrowful shrieks of thousands of men, women and children who had been reduced to mere skeletons. The crematory grounds near the towns and villages were full of innumerable dead bodies and upon them the vultures and jackals feasted to their hearts' content. Men and women forsook their natural instincts owing to the unbearable pains of hunger. Parents cast away their starving children before wild animals to be devoured by them. Some even ate the dead bodies of their own children like, demons, Social evils such as murder, suicide etc., became a very common thing at that time. Some people tried to live upon wild shrubs and inedible materials".

Towards the end of October 1867, the situation was getting normal, and the impact of the famine was also reducing. The lives of people also getting shaped, and they were returning to their workplace, but unfortunately some people could not getting over the famine for the rest of their life, among them the widows, those who lost their husband in the famine, the orphans who had lost their parents. According to a report some prostitutes of Cuttack adopted around 200 girl child, and now they are also following the same profession for their living.

After analyzing the various issues and facts related to Orissa Famine of 1866', it can be said that the policy of distribution and supply of rice and other essential items were not implemented properly in time. Apart from the administrative failure this famine was took place due to both decline in agricultural output and decline in income of the people. However the conversion process during this famine is still not highlighted in historical studies. Why British

officials were not serious, when people were dying in starvation during this said period? How missionaries had been converting poor, uneducated and hungry people into Christianity? These issues need more attention for study.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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