

**ON THE IMPENDING BENGAL
FAMINE: HOW IT WILL BE
MET AND HOW TO PREVENT
FUTURE FAMINES IN INDIA**

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On the Impending Bengal Famine: How It Will Be Met and How to Prevent Future Famines in India by Sir H. Bartle E. Frere

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ON THE
IMPENDING BENGAL FAMINE.

1877
R. G.

INTRODUCTION.

THE substance of the following pages was addressed as a Lecture to the Society of Arts on the 12th December, 1873, when very gloomy anticipations of impending famine in Bengal were justified by deficiency and irregularity in the usual rainfall.

The subject is one of permanent importance to the largest and richest of our Indian provinces, and indeed to the whole of India. I have therefore made some additions to the original address, including three maps, for which I am indebted to Mr. Trelawny Saunders.

Map. I. (facing the Title) shows the position of India with relation to the principal grain-producing countries of the East, and its connection with the markets of the world by various lines of steam communication.

The second (p. 51) shows the various provinces and great administrative divisions of India, and the lines of railway. An outline of Great Britain on the same scale in the margin, affords a means of comparison between the Indian areas and distances, and those to which we are most accustomed in this country.

The third (at the end), the map of Bengal, gives the main divisions of that province, with their areas and population. An outline of Ireland to the same scale will give some help in comparing the calamity apprehended in Bengal with the last great famine of which we have had

experience in these islands, as caused by a failure of the usual crops.

I have not made any alterations in the Lecture as originally delivered, merely on account of any subsequent changes in the prospects of the season. One great object of the Lecture was to show that famines are entirely preventible in India, as elsewhere; and the interest of any discussion of means whereby famines may be rendered almost impossible is scarcely lessened even should our best hopes be fulfilled,—should it prove that famine will not occasion the deaths from starvation of such numbers as we feared, and that multitudes may be saved by a timely fall of rain. Even the threat of such a calamity impending for weeks together is a terrible evil, and no pains or expenditure can be misapplied to insure the country against its recurrence.

I have only to add that my remarks can claim no official sanction. The facts are open to all who have studied the subject either practically or from published records. The opinions are those of the Lecturer. The only points on which I feel sure of the concurrence of all authorities in this country are, the anxiety with which they watch the progress of events in India, their entire confidence in the energy and ability of the Viceroy and his able Lieutenants, and their determination that no expense or pains shall be spared to mitigate or avert the evils which threaten the population of Bengal.

*22 Prince's Gardens, London,
December, 1873.*

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It is not now proposed to attempt anything like a history of Indian famines. The subject is one of the greatest interest, and there are ample materials for a series of most instructive historical papers, as will be seen by reference to the Reports and Blue Books noted below,* which are only a few of the many which might be mentioned. Neither will I attempt an essay on famines in general. My object is a purely practical one—to describe the mode in which, as far as we can now see, the impending famine in Bengal must be met, and to consider how such calamities may be prevented in future.

Limited scope of present paper.

I.

There are, however, some historical facts which should be borne in mind, for they will be found to have a special bearing upon what we shall have to consider hereafter.

Historical facts to be noted.

* Col. Baird Smith's "Reports on the Famine in the N.W. Provinces." Presented to Parliament, 12th Feb., 1862.

"Papers regarding the Orissa Famine." Presented to Parliament, 1867. Parts I., II., III.

"Supplementary Papers relating to Madras," 30th July, 1867.

See also Hunter's "Rural Bengal," 1868, and the same Author's "Orissa," and "Famine Aspects of Bengal," 1873.

These facts are:—1st, that years of famine or of scarcity rarely come singly; they generally occur in cycles now, as they did of old. The causes and laws of the periodical recurrence of seasons when, the usual rains being deficient or irregular, scarcity and famine ensue, are matters which it would be most important to have fully investigated; but at present we can only note the fact that the recent failure of the periodical rains and consequent threatening of famine may be the crisis, or it may be the end, of such a cycle; but we must also be prepared for its only being the beginning, and no human being can confidently anticipate that the present year of deficient and irregular rainfall may not be followed by worse seasons hereafter.

The second historical fact to be noticed, because of its present bearing on our question, is that famines, though they have become much more rare and less severe of late years in India, are by no means of unusual occurrence there or in any other country of Asia. In one or other part of that continent annually during the past forty years famine might be seen either approaching, scourging, or departing from, a large area, and from tens of thousands of practically helpless people; and, so far as we can at present judge, though we may yearly do much to mitigate the pressure, and circumscribe the area of scarcity and famine, it will take years of persistent, well-directed labour before India can be pronounced as secure from the results of scarcity and famine as most parts of Europe.

The third historical fact to be noted is that, though from the general fertility of the soil, and regularity of the rains, famines are not of such frequent occurrence in

1st. Famine years and years of scarcity rarely occur singly.

2nd historical fact. Famines not of rare occurrence in Asia.