WOMEN'S ROLES AND STRATEGIES
DURING FOOD CRISES AND FAMINES

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INTRODUCTION

The unequal economic relationships between First and Third World countries and the larger inequality within Third World countries themselves has been responsible for stress situations for large classes in the people and kin particular women.

This paper focusses on the strategies evolved by women during economic crisis and food insufficiency. Some of these strategies may be drawn from folk memory while others are newly-evolved. They range from changes in food habits, in attitudes to food sharing with family and in, changes in customs and rites particularly those which are sustained by food presentation, changes in social norms and values including the postponement of marriage, the changes in attitudes to rites of passage, and breaking of taboos, where they exist, against participation of women in agricultural production or fishing.

It should also be emphasised that these strategies can hardly assure survival. Often their failure causes acute psychological stress. To bear witness to the slow dying of children and infants exposed women to the possibility of psychological breakdown (1). This paper demonstrates that when famine becomes severe, strategies such as abortion and

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(1) For a descriptive account of a food crisis.
    See Amrita Rangasami, "A Generation Being Wiped Out", *Economic and Political Weekly* 9(48), 1974, 1973-76.

infanticide are also resorted to. It re-evaluates the data in a socio-
anthropological study of a community in crisis to establish the
same (1).

A study of the social adaptations and strategems offers a method
of determining the presence of the crisis as well as its severity (2).
Early recognition is an imperative to the halting of developing famine
conditions in large parts of the Third World today.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first offers the
postulates within which famine and food insecurity are engendered. It
seeks re-examination of the customary resort to Malthusian explanations
of over-population and pressure on food resources. It also makes a brief
reference to the Indian context. The Second discusses famine strategies
in general - both those that are communal - and those that are gender-
specific.

The third, the main part of the paper is devoted to the re-evalua-
tion of the social anthropological work - the part study on famine. The
third is further sub-divided into three sections. The first sub-division
offers the economic context - and a brief reference to the history of
the crisis. The second describes the survival strategies and the role
of women during the crisis. The third discusses the data on infanticide.

1. POSTULATES

It should be stated at the outset, that in my view, there are mis-
conceptions about famine and food crisis, their nature as well as the
context within which such crisis are engendered. A common formula for
the analysis of famine and food insufficiency is the imposition of the
Malthusian notion of over-population, pressure on food resources and
decline in agricultural productivity and consequent fall in consump-

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(1) Raymond Firth, *"Social Change in Tikopia"*, George Allen Unwin,
    London, 1959.
(2) Jackson Kennel, A.J. "The Family entity and Famine among the 19th
    Century Akamba of Kenya : Social Responses to Environmental Stress",
    Journal of Family History, 1976.

tion (1). These premises need to be questioned. In my view in a large
number of cases, famine conditions erupt only where the aggrandisement
of land, water and labour deprives large classes in the population of
means of sustaining themselves.

In the application of the Malthusian formula, political, social
and economic determinants appear to be excluded. As for instance, and
I am considering the Indian context here, economic determinants such
as the shift in the pattern of cultivation to a capital-intensive, cash
crop production which leads to land grabbing ; political determinants
such as the limits on access to forest and pasture (curbs on movement
that persist since colonial times) social determinants such as class,
caste and gender that reinforce economic discrimination, a contract sys-
tems of labour that often stipulates migration as a condition of employ-
ment, a task-based wage which implies chronic food insecurity, and fi-
nally a life-support system of maintenance credit which can be termi-
nated arbitrarily. All these are responsible for exerting a continuous
'squeeze' (2) on peasant economies.

The Indian context varies from other parts of the Third World.
Although social security is not yet available, a system of relief, poor
in parts, yet halts the biological process. State intervention can also
prevent the crisis from attaining regional or macro-dimensions or
culminating in large-scale mortality. However continuing micro-distress
is a phenomenon that is often obscured.

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(1) Amrita Rangasami, "A study of some aspects of Famine accected among
    in India, M. Litt. dissertation, University of Delhi (un-published)
    1978.
    Firth, 1959, *op. cit.* : 52.
    See also Firth R., Spillius J., and Borrie W.D., The Population
    Studies Vol. X.
    Amartya Sen, For a setting aside of the explanation of "failure of
    food availability".
    See Amartya Sen, "Poverty and Famine", An Easy on Entitlement and
    Deprivation, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981.
(2) See Jackson K.A., *op. cit.* Jackson points out that the term for fa-
    mine among the *Akamba* of Kenya is Mayua, the pressing down of fa-
    mines. Famine is also known as *Ngambu* a term which is interchangea-
    bly used for land-thefts.

What is famine ? The present definitions are indeed strange (1). "Famine is true shortage of food so extreme". "What is shortage in one country is famine in another". "Famine is like insanity, hard to define, yet easy to recognise...". So declares the International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences. Since no criteria is offered to describe either 'famine' or 'shortage', the definition is at best a tautology which defines one in terms of the other.

Famine mortality, it will be widely accepted, is a biological process (2). The process has social and economic dimensions as well. Famine cannot be defined with reference to the victims alone who are only one of the participants in the process.

Famine is unlike natural disasters where the impact cuts across class barriers and may be shared by the majority though to lesser or greater degrees. It is a process during which, under the pressure of threat to survival, the assets of victim communities are transferred to the beneficiaries. Famine comes to maturity when all of the assets including the ability to labour have been transferred to the beneficiary. Such a process necessarily is long-drawn.

It follows therefore that the notion of famine as "a sudden collapse into starvation..." is also questionable (3). The studies of famines in the past indicates that the sudden collapse is a description only of the terminal phase when the state tends to intervene and relief operations commence (4). It has little to do with the actual process either biological or socio-economic.

(1) See Bennett, M.K. "Famine", in International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 5, ed. David L. Sills (New York) Macmillan & Free Press, 1968 : 322-326.
For a discussion of definitions of famine see Amrita Rangasami, "Failure of Exchange Entitlement Theory - A Response" (Forthcoming).
(2) See Porter A. (1889) : "The Diseases of the Madras Famine of 1877-79". Madras.
See also Mayer, J. (1971), "Famine Relief" in Famine, A Symposium, Swedish Nutrition Foundation, Uppsala : 179.
(3) See Mayer, J. op. cit.
(4) See Amrita Rangasami, "Disasters and Their Relief, Encyclopaedia of Ministry of Social Welfare, Government of India (Forthcoming).

Famine has clearly marked phases of onset, maturing and decima-
tion (1). The three phases can be illustrated with reference to adapta-
tions and changes in food habits alone. At onset, women shift to "sub-
stitute foods" including leaves and tubers that the cattle do eat. They
even resort to yams and roots that can "kill the appetite" (2). As fa-
mine matures, foods that are held to be posionous or toxic also become
part of the diet (3).

2. FAMINE STRATEGIES

As I have noted, the famine process comes to maturity slowly and
the strategies not only vary with increasing severity but there is a
sharp divide between strategies before the period of biological, psy-
chological and social collapse and those that come later. The strate-
gies utilised during phases of onset and maturity may be described as
survival strategies. The strategies of the last phase can only be loo-
ked upon as suicidal. I therefore refer to them as strategies of selec-
tive decimation.

Strategies, in general can be broadly classified into five types :
1. Nutritional
2. Social
3. Economic
4. Political
5. Psychological

Each of these can be further sub-divided into strategies that are
communal and those that are gender-specific. To reiterate, each of

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(1) See Amrita Rangasami, 1978, *op. cit.*
(2) See Amrita Rangasami, 1978, *op. cit.*
    Among the tribal communities in the Dangs, in Gujarat, (India) a
    bitter root known as *kand* is consumed because it can be kill the
    appetite for 2 to 3 days.
    See also Malinowski, E., Coral Gardens and Their Magic, Vol. I,
    India University Press, Bloomington, 1965.
    See Firth, *op. cit.* : 19, 61, 79.
(3) The Indian Famine Commission, 1880 Appendix.
    See Amrita Rangasami, 1978, *op. cit.*
    See also Gazetteer of Bombay, 1961 : 467.
    Gives an exhaustive list of berries, grasses and roots consumed as
    famine foods. It lists their toxic effects as well.
    See also Jackson, *op. cit.*
    Who refers to a famine known among the Akamba as Nzana, the scaly
    lizard - when men subsisted by consuming the lizard.

these would alter with increasing severity of famine. For instance,
food gathering, a specific women's task, the scouring for edible roots
and leaves in the first phase alters to foraging in the third - an aim-
less attempt to find food-like substances in rubbish.

I have already referred to nutritional strategies. The socio-eco-
nomic strategies include the breaking up of families substituting fe-
male labour for male and even labour of siblings. The political strate-
gies include protest (1) and in certain cases insurgency and revolt (2)
and widespread unrest.

When famine comes to maturity strategies become desperate, commu-
nities accept permanent change including permanent or long-term migra-
tion under terms of near-bondage, the pawning of all assets including
labour, the pawning and sale of children, the sale of roofs and hut, as
well as abrogation of funeral rites (3).

When the biological collapse is imminent wandering - sets in aban-
doning of infants (4). It is also reported - but these are symptoms of
biological and psychological collapse suicide is not uncommon (5).

Some strategies can also be institutionalised. But we need to
probe further order to establish whether stress situations may be a
contributory factor or the prime factor for such customs as women being

(1) See Smith, Baird, Col. Baird Smith's Famine Report, Exchange Press,
    Bombay, 1861.
(2) See also Amrita Rangasami, 'Mizoram - Tragedy of our Own Making',
    Economic and Political Weekly, April 15, 1978.
(3) See Amrita Rangasami, "The Paupers of Kholisabhita Hindupara - Re-
    port on a Famine", Annual Number, 1975 : 267-82.
(4) Geddes, J.C., Administrative Experience Recorded in Former Famines,
    Extracts from Official Papers, The Bengal Secretariat Press, 1874,
    Calcutta.
    "Mothers drop their children, and Mr. Ross (the Magistrate) has been
    obliged to post patrols after payment of wages to pick up any chil-
    dren that have bee left. Things must be had when maternal feeling
    ceases".
(5) Suicides both individual and collective have often been reported
    from affected areas.
    A famine in Madras Presidency was named after the Woman Nallathangal
    who drowned herself and her seven children.

apprenticed into prostitution (1). Other institutions such as right over life (Jeetad-alu) where children are pawned to a 'master', as in the weaving industry also needs to be studied. The probable correlation of rise in migration from India during the nineteenth century famines under the indentured system of labour to Fiji, Sri Lanka and Africa has also to be investigated (2).

A study of famine histories suggests that some of these strategies are common to different cultures facing stress situation and at different periods in history. The socio-anthropological document on famine in Tikopia is therefore worthy of study.

3. FAMINE IN TIKOPIA

In one respect, Tikopia is atypical. Male labour is critical, not only in agriculture and fishing but also in cooking. For example, the pressing of coconut cream is a male task. In 1953, it was also a pre-cereal economy. Food had to be procured and cooked almost on a day to day basis. The feeding of the wife and dependent kin was a male responsibility enforced by custom and sanction (3).

At the time of the famine 1952-53 Tikopia, an Island, was part of the Solomons Islands protectorate. Early in the century multinational

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(1) See Jackson, *op. cit.*
    Jackson makes a significant statement on the impact of famines on the family. He discusses "the way a range of family entities were compelled toward transformation under the exigencies of frequently severe..... environmental crisis....." ... families were dismembered and new families were established from the fragments of the old. Families formed alliances with kinsmen who might offer refuge, forming large house-holds.
    See also Rangasami, 1978, *op. cit.*
(2) Government of Madras, Epard Proceedings n° 585, February, 1877, Letter from Collector of Madura, on migration to Sri Lanka.
    "I have the honour to suggest , whether it would not be advisable to communicate with the Government of Ceylon regarding the fate of the streams of people still pouring into the island from Southern India..... It is estimated that one third of the able-bodied have migrated from South-West Ramnad...... This is the best thing possible, if people can be employed in Ceylon, but if they are likely to come back to us starving in a month or two, we must be prepared for them.
(3) See Firth, *op. cit.* : 61.

corporations had set up timber and copra plantations on the mainland as resource base for soap and other industries. The post war wave of anti-colonial movements spread to the Solomons as well and a labour strike was launched by the leaders of what was known as the Marching Rule move-ment (1). In order to break the strike obviously, Tikopia labour was recruited with British Government sanction. During the period of famine, sixteen ships, one each month called at the Island. Nearly one fourth of the working male population particularly young men were withdrawn, a factor which exposed their families to starvation. Tikopia subsisted on both Taro and fish, and with the fishermen away, an important source of food was eliminated (2).

The acuteness of the crisis can be illustrated with reference to the plight of one family. The family of Pa Tekara, a recruit to the Solomons had left behind an aged parent wife and three children. For the first of the children to die, a girl, there was wailing but no even was prepared. For the second, a boy of five years there was wailing and a small basket of food was separated off from the funeral of his grand-father who died on the same day. For the last a girl of twelve years there was no oven ; nor even any wailing ; there were no kinfolk at the burial ; the mother's brothers were busy with the funeral ceremonies of their own father. The mother herself half-crazed with grief was "wande-ring abroad without initiative". The body was buried by some young girls of the village who wrapped the body in a sleeping mat, "like a cat".

The attenuation of the funeral ceremonies, the inability of the family to provide food offerings to kin, the poor participation in the funeral appear to offer evidence of the severity of the famine condi-tions that faced the Tikopia. Firth merely refers to the disapproval of kinsmen of the father, "a feckless, arrant thief" (3). "Who had taken off to the Solomons".

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(1) Records of the British Colonial Office, 1948 : 28. The records es-
    tablish that The Marching Rule Movement placed emphasis on labour
    boycott. As the Colonial Office Report noted, "One of the Marching
    Rule's Policies has been to prevent workers engaging in the copra
    plantations".
(2) See Spillius, *op. cit.*
(3) See Firth, *op. cit.* : 61, 89.

4. STRATEGIES OF TIKOPIA WOMEN

Let me consider the adaptations and strategies of women in famine-stricken Tikopia. These can be considered both from the point of view of the classification offered earlier i.e. political, economic psycho-social and nutritive and in terms of adaptations of the different phases of famine. I can only mention the important strategies. The first, is political-women for the first time in Tikopia history, asserted themselves. They formed exclusive women's *fonos* (assemblies) and regular meetings were held to discuss the crisis on the island.

Firth points out "here was an interesting development, non-traditional, under the stress of crisis, by members of the society, having no formal channels of collective expression" (1). They also spoke out in the general assembly where hitherto they had been present but had never voiced an opinion. It is significant that the statement of the women in the general assembly contradicted the sociologist's assumptions on the causes of famine, but it received general assent. "We here are suffering from the famine of man created in the heart of the woods" (2). Famine was not attributed to nature but man.

The economic strategies were equally significant. Among the Tikopia, fishing boats were sacralised at the start of the fishing season and there was a taboo on women entering the boats. During the famine year, the women broke the taboo and participated in fishing operations. Social adaptations included abrogation of mourning periods, abstaining from dancing, the postponement of marriages and attenuation of funeral obligations particularly food presentation. These strategies however were communal rather than gender - specific.

The last and most critical set of "adaptations" was psycho-social. These can also be placed in the third phase of famine, the phase of selective decimation. Women according to Spillius, practised infanticide. There are some important points to be noted about the practice. Firstly, among the Tikopia, infanticide was held to be an offence, not of the category of homicide but yet a social offence. Abortion was also an offence. Women in resorting to the practice were guilty of violation of social norms and values.

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(1) See Firth, *op. cit.* : 104.
(2) See Firth, *op. cit.* : 81.

Secondly, infants, both male and female were killed. There was no gender discrimination. In other words, the practice could be attributed only to the famine conditions. Thirdly, both married and unmarried women resorted to the practice. In the case of the unmarried, the infanticide appears to have been necessitated by the fact that their men had been recruited and all marriages on the island had been postponed during the famine year. In the case of married women, it was clearly a response which can be attributed to the strategy of selective decimation.

"Most of the observed cases", states Spillius, "imply deliberate termination of life" (1). The women brought about still births, by applying hot stones to the belly. That this was abnormal is evident. In 1928-29, the number of pregnancies were 60 and the number of live births were 55. In 1952-53, though the number of women in the child bearing age 18-37, had increased from 195 in 1929 to 249 in 1952, the number of pregnancies were 62, but of these 14 were lost. There were only 3 genuine still births. Further, of 49 born alive, 11 died within a month. As Spillius recorded, "this heavy pre-natal and neo-natal mortality may be attributed to the famine conditions prevailing" (2).

Total deaths of infants under one year was 19, or 64.1 of infants aged 0 in the year 1952-53. Infant mortality was 286 per thousand live births. A further 16 deaths of children between 1-7 was also recorded. Again, this could well have been an under-estimate because, "in this famine year, full burial rites were not observed" (3).

5. TO SUM UP

I have argued that strategies evolved during food insufficiency could be communal as well as gender - specific. I have also stated that strategies vary with increasing severity of the crisis. I have also pointed out that there could be strategies of survival as well as strategies of decimation. In my view a careful monitoring of strategies might help formulation of relief policy to halt biological and economic deterioration of affected communities.

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(1) See Spillius, Borrie W.B., and Firth, *op. cit.*
(2) See Spillius et al. *op. cit.*
(3) See Spillius et al., *op. cit.*

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the strategies evolved by women during econo-
mic crisis and food insufficiency. They range from changes in food ha-
bits, in attitudes to food sharing with family and in, changes in cus-
toms and rites particularly those which are sustained by food presenta-
tion, changes in social norms and values.

It should also be emphasised that these strategies can hardly as-
sure survival. Often their failure causes acute psychological stress.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette communication met l'accent sur les stratégies mises au point
par les femmes dans le cadre de la crise économique et de la pénurie
alimentaire ; ces stratégies peuvent être notamment des modifications
des habitudes alimentaires et des attitudes dans le partage de la nour-
riture au sein de la famille, des modifications des coutumes et des
rites, particulièrement de celles qui sont relatives à la présentation
des aliments, des changements dans les normes et les valeurs sociales.

Il convient aussi de souligner que ces stratégies peuvent à peine,
en fait, assurer la survie. Leur échec peut souvent mener à de graves
tensions psychologiques.