THE STUDY OF STARVATION AND FAMINE : SOME PROBLEMS

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The study of famine in the different disciplines appear to offer the following typical representations :

Famine is an extreme event, marked by disease and mortality (Economics, History, Demographic Sciences).

Famine is a period of psycho-social breakdown. (Nutrition Sciences, History).

Famine is a sudden collapse, distinct from poverty (Economics).

These representations are derived from and re-affirm the definition of famine in the social sciences. Famine has been defined as shortage of food so extreme and protacted 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 (Bennet 1968 : 322). Academic studies in a number of discipline identify famine as an extreme event, marked by elevation of mortality. (Firth 1959 ; Masefield 1963 ; Johnson 1973 ; Mayer 1975 ; Aykroyd 1974 ; Sen 1981). All these approaches affirm the stereotype in history and chronicle.

« As in 436 B.C. when thousands of Romans threw themselves into the Tiber, or in Kashmir in A.D. 918 when one could hardly see the water of the Vitasta, entirely covered as the river was with corpses. » (Sen 1981 : 39)

Mortality, it is declared is a necessary condition of famine.(Sen 1981). Famine as a condition of psycho-social breakdown is a recurring theme in the literature. Famine has been depicted as « disorganisation and deterioration in the family and the society » (Jelliffe 1971 : 58), « mental disorientation ... a disintegration of the personality with distressing results » (Aykroyd 1971 : 18) « unusual wandering of the people » (Government of Bombay, 1961 : 11), and « breakdown of

normal human relation and deviation from customs and mores » (Mollison, in : Jelliffe 1971 : 58). In general, famine has been described as a period of violation of normal human ties, during which cannibalism, necrophagia and such other practices have been reported. The notions of collapse, biological and psycho-social, and the mortality that accompanies it have reinforced each other as indicators to establish famine. It appears they also mark the distinction between poverty and famine.

Poverty and famine

The distinctions between poverty and famine are based on the premise that famine is an extreme event, often sudden and affirmed by an elevation of the mortality rate. « Famine is a sudden collapse of the level of food consumption. » (Sen 1981 : 41)

Consequently, « the declining trends in food consumption » as well as the normal or chronic malnutrition as distinct from "sudden collapse" in the level of food consumption « are identified with "poverty" ». Each of these adjectives and nouns have implication beyond the study of nutritional status of the famine-stricken. They appear to offer the social and economic indices of poverty.

Again such an event has to be of mass dimensions. The Paddock brothers (1967) stated the problem rather baldly. They were concerned with the need for marking the event as well as the need to establish its scale. « Perhaps when a man keels over and collapses for lack of food, then that can be accepted as the dividing line between malnutrition and starvation. Perhaps when whole families keel over, then it can be called a famine, » but added however, « that all this is bad scientific terminology. » (Paddock and Paddock 1967 : 50)

The difficulty seems to lie in the fact that human suffering due to starvation is attributed to poverty while biological collapse alone is identified with famine.

Since the « what » of famine is identified with biological collapse, the « when » of famine becomes difficult to determine.We have this account from a symposium on famine. « A famine is a famine. It cannot be confused with an ordinary chronic shortage situation or chronic under-nutrition and malnutrition – everybody knows it » (Aykroyd 1981 : 22). And again : « There is a sort of aura about a famine which is hard to define but which you feel when you get into a famine area. » (Ramalingaswami 1973 : 22)

I can perhaps refer to Hewitt's discussion of the study of « disasters » at the present time which he likens to Foucault's critique of the study of insanity in the nineeteenth century (Hewitt 1983 : 22). The comparison bears startling likeness.

The account in the Encyclopedia of Social Sciences reflects the ease with wich the problem has been solved. « Famine is like insanity, hard to define, yet easy enough to recognise. » (Bennet 1968 : 322)

Famine as « disaster » : a construct

It appears that there is unanimity within the disciplines on the nature of famine. Accounts in the different disciplines vary only in the terms of explanation. Thus anthropology considers famine as « the pendulum swing between population increase and food supplies. » (Firth 1959 : 53) History relies upon crop and weather data to explain large-scale mortality (Mollat 1986 ; McAlpin, 1983). Economics offers failure in purchasing power (Bhatia, 1968) and decline in entitlement (Sen 1981) as causes of famine.

Implicit in the study of « causes » is the notion of famine as an event, often seen in dissociation with the society. This approach to famine as an 'event' has received support from yet another area of study — « Disaster management » — which has devoted itself to the study of chronology of sub-events within the event. These include the breaking of the event into time periods such as pre-warning, threat, crisis, relief and recovery. There are a number of variations on this basic theme. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that the nature of crisis is not only known, but is common to a range of phenomena and consequently in a technocratic society, the mean of managing these phenomena are also known. Where famine is identified with natural calamity such as a drought or hurricane (Firth 1959 ; Spillius 1957) , the construct isolates the event in time and space and attributes the crisis to the 'trigger' usually looked upon as « unprecedented » or « unscheduled »

« The language of dicourse is often a good indicator of basic assumption. In hazards work one can see how language is used to maintain a sense of discontinuity or otherness, which severs these problems from the rest of man-environment relations and social life. That is most obvious in the recurrent use of words stressing the 'un-ness' of the problem. Disasters are unmanaged phenomena ... They derive from natural processes or events that are highly uncertain. Unawareness and unreadiness are said to typify their victims. » (Hewitt 1983 : 10)

This paper seeks to test the validity of these propositions. I propose to use the following method. I will fall back on socio-anthropological approaches to the role of food in society and, derived from that, consider its obverse the role of the deprivation of food — starvation —. Social anthropology has limited its study of the role of food to clan-based societies — « primitive economies ». I propose to extend the enquiry to feudal, colonial and capitalist societies. I shall use two indicators : the « rights » of members particularly in relation to access

to means of production and to the food produced by the society ; and the status of dependents in the society.

However, if I am able to demonstrate that starvation was indeed imposed in feudal and colonial societies, some questions remain. Does not the imposition of starvation involve mechanisms of expropriation that deprives the affected community even of that level of « surplus » required for biological reproduction ?

The expropriation of « surplus » from producers to non producers has come to be looked upon as a truism. (Harris 1959). That society only chose to expropriate the amount of produce or of labour time which remained after that required for « the lower margin of reproduction » for the labour force, and in the case of peasants, minimum caloric rations plus a sufficient amount to replace basic production equipment, plus the culturally defined physical subsistence of the family (housing, clothing) and that which is required for the needed social relations through ceremonial expenditure. (Wolf, in : Alcantara 1984 : 82)

« The maximum limits of the surplus corresponded to the minimum limits of biological and cultural sustenance, beyond which no family could go without jeopardising its present and future existence. » (Alcantara 1984 : 82)

It has been held that it is self-interest of society that dictates these limits. It might bring about a decline in the number of labourers and wages should rise, a prospect that should alarm society. It will not starve the peasants, argues Wolf, for they may rise in revolt. And finally as Marx believed, beyond a certain point, no elite would choose to extract an amount which threatened to destroy its source of income.

Society must therefore necessarly halt short of imposing starvation.

These propositions generate unease. It appears that self-interest can demand the political, social, economic and ideological enforcement of low levels of subsistence. Even if such enforcement should imply the jeopardising of the present and future existence.

For instance, it has been pointed out that the purposes of relocation of « surplus people » in South Africa were not the « attempt to retain, the structure of the "traditional societies" for the purposes of ensuring a wage supplement for the migrant labour force, but for purposes of reproducing and exercising control over a cheap African labour force by means of the political, social, economic and ideological enforcement of low levels of subsistence. Were they indeed for creating conditions under which people so dumped without resource, work or water, sewerage, roads, would die in large numbers along with large numbers of their children ? Under such conditions, Sharp argues, it is quite impossible for households whose wage earners are unemployed for long periods to meet the costs of their maintenance and long term replacement from other local sources. » (Sharp 1987 : 143) Again, such

relocation has enabled that the State's objectives be met : the millions of people have been physically removed to remote areas are not a major factor in the political process. (Sharp 1987 : 145)

Some other instances can perhaps be cited. For example, towards the turn of the century, the islands of the South Pacific were raided time and again by white traders who persisted in their trade even at the cost of depopulation in these areas.

History affirms that protest against starvation often termed 'bread riots' can be met with repression and indeed the acceleration of starvation. Starvation can also be imposed when elite groups are in conflict with each other. (Rangasami, 1978)

Can such conditions that pose a threat to the ability to reproduce itself be termed « famine » ? Oral history sources for famine affirm that it has the connotations of expropriation. Jackson reports that among the Akamba the term is used interchangeably with 'land thefts', *ngambu*. Famine is indeed referred to as *mayua* the 'pressure'. (Jackson 1976 : 276) Affected communities speak of the exigencies of famine which drive them into conditions of pawnship or bondage. (Rangasami 1978) However, these are articulated only in their oral history and not reflected in documented histories of the society. Do we need to reconsider the limits of expropriation of 'surplus' to enable a study of 'famine' ?

The duress in starvation

It has been pointed out that there is an element of duress involved in the expropriation of even that level of 'surplus' which assures sufficient for biological reproduction. (Harris 1959) The nature of the duress cannot be understood without reference to the use of food. A secure subsistence has been held to be the critical problem of the peasant. (Scott 1976)

It is my submission that where and when the expropriation extends beyond the 'surplus' it can be termed 'famine expropriation', to distinguish it from 'surplus expropriation'. Such an expropriation can be expressed in terms of incomes or assets including that ability to labour. It can also be expressed in terms of expropriation of rights or title political and economic.

This paper seeks to study 'famine' as 'pressure', duress and the reponses to such duress. Both literary sources and field investigation indicate that the affected can resist the expropriation. Civil disorder and rise in crime have ever been looked upon as 'sign of famine'. The starving can resort to sociocultural mechanisms such as 'joining households' (Firth 1959 ; Rangasami 1978) as well as the adapting to 'famine foods'.

In turn, these stratagems can produce counter stratagems such as repression, acceleration of starvation, as well as some attempt at pacification. Such a process is necessarily long-drawn. The terms of exchange affecting, the victim community and the deterioration in the terms of exchange become integral to the study of famine. As famine worsens, the victims surrender all semblance of right to assets of land or labour, for access to food. Arrangements such as becoming 'famine pawns' have been known to be institutionalised in certain communities where famines tend to recur. Famine enters the final phase when it is no longer in the interest of the patron or 'master' to provide even that moiety of protection necessary to sustain life. At that phase, the collapse is biological, economic and social. The victims are uprooted, their families fragmented, their villages abandoned. They then become vagrants, the celebrated 'wanderers' of famine.

Current stereotypes of famine affirm the terminal phase as « famine ». Such stereotypes depend upon visual affirmation such as emaciation as well as demographic evidence of elevation of mortality. How far are they representations of famine itself ? Famine can be considered a socio economic process during which starvation is imposed and accelerated. Its duration has to be mapped in relation to the objective of the beneficiary. As for instance the imposition of starvation during a siege which can last until the victims surrender. The mortality of the victims is not necessarily the objective. It could offer a mean of attaining it. Such a process is necessarily long-drawn. Famines have been noted as extending from three to seven years. (Walford 1878 ; Rangasami 1978 ; 1985)

My studies indicate that these can fall into clear phases : the initial phase which I have termed 'dearth', « when all things dear to the life of man are sold at high price (OED) ; a second phase which describeds the process of being starved, to deprive a person of anything necessary to life » and for the terminal phase which subsumes the physiological as well as the social, I use the term morbility a term which means the proportion of sickness in a given locality. (Rangasami 1978)

Demographic exercise

The demographic exercise required for the study of the process would not call merely for an analysis of mortality trends to affirm famine. It might need to examine other indicators such as the movement of population, the pattern of migration of labour or other relevant indicators to analyse the onset and deepening of famine. Sex ratios might change as well as age ratios of those that remain in the affected community. The analysis of such changes in the affected community would necessarily reflect the famine process.

Relief and society

The society or the State can intervene in the famine process. It has been ably argued that relief expands during periods of public disorder but contracts during periods of order.

The nexus of relief with periods of public disorder is indeed critical but the expansion of relief does not necessarily follow. It is only one of the options available. There are others. The state could provide relief selectively. It can intervene in the biological process and not in the economic. But the intervention does not terminate starvation much less restore the assets lost. The intervention occurs when starvation stigmata become visual and evoke 'pity and horror'. Its motives spring from 'charity' or 'humanitarian' notions. It imposes a limited form of starvation. It has to be seen in essential relation to the starvation process. It can legitimise the starvation process by reducing the stricken to dependence.

'Wandering' is looked upon as the 'sign' of famine. Consequently there are no indicators for the termination of famine. Famine is said to subside when mortality rates decline.

It is important to stress that such forms of relief can render famine chronic. Under such conditions starvation could become 'normal' or 'regular'. The study of 'relief' becomes relevant for the study of famine recurrence and persistence.

The corollary of focusing on the terminal phase is that the process preceding it can be obscured. As etymology affirms, the root of the term comes from the sanskrit *gha* meaning 'to abandon'. The representation of famine however, have masked its meaning. Therefore it has been variously attributed to a just providence — being the fruit of sin or to nature — the drought, the flood or the hail, frost as the case may be or the victims themselves — their tendency to multiply (Firth 1959) or their lack of purchasing power (Bhatia 1968), the decline in their entitlements (Sen 1981).

It will not be possible within the scope of this paper to consider all of these questions. I will limit it to the evaluation of current approaches, particularly in relation to the debate on famine within demand and supply side economic theories. I shall use available studies that seek to demonstrate famine as caused by natural disaster and crop failure and suggest that to replace the fall in food supply as the cause with the failure of income or 'entitlement' will not suffice to explain the nature of famine as a process.

I therefore wish to offer the following postulates for the study of famine : That famine is not an event but a process ; it must be necessarily seen in association with the society. That mortality is not a

necessary condition of famine. That it can at best be its terminal phase or even its consequence.

That famine and its relief must necessarily be seen in relation.

I wish to demonstrate these postulates with reference to two case studies, the one based on literary sources, the other on field investigation. The one describing the imposition of economic control over labour, the other political control.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first discusses food as a source of power and its relevance to the understanding of famine . The second outlines the famine process. The third summarises the inference that can be drawn from these studies.

It can be asked whether it will be possible to devise a method to study the role of society in a famine ? Can it indeed be established that society can and does impose starvation ? How does one approach its study ?

Food as a source of power

Anthropologists studying the role of food in 'primitive economies' have noted that « food becomes symbolic of the mystic force of the society, its protective yet dangerous power ».(Richards 1981 : 181)

For the study of food as a source of power, I wish to adopt Wolf's approach in comparing different modes of production and to enquire into « what happens in the encounters of differently constituted systems of interaction — food/society — predicated on different modes of production. » (Wolf 1982 : 77)

And within the limited scope of this essay, I summarise the inferences of studies undertaken for the comparison of the kin-ordered mode of production with the feudal and the colonial modes. I shall seek to demonstrate why famine is a recurring phenomenon in the colonial and feudal modes and not in the kin-ordered mode of production. In order to evolve means of comparison in the role of food, of kin-based with feudal, monarchical and capitalist-colonial societies I wish to identify three principal elements :

1. The rules that provide access to food as a right to all members of the society.

2. The norms and values that assure food to dependents and minimise differentiation of hierarchy and gender.

3. The penalties for violations of those rights and norms. The study of the kin-ordered mode is undertaken if only to establish the rules that assure access to food to the members of the society and to offer the means of studying the implications of not merely the absence of any of these rules in other societies but their replacement by mechanisms of expropriation.

Kin-ordered mode

These societies have legal rules of access to production systems, ties of kinship and reciprocity in transactions that sustain the society, the banning of market exchanges on goods necessary for survival, procedures and complex systems evolved to control hostility and reduce aggression, norms and values that assure food to dependents and the use of kinship terms amongst those divided by wealth and rank. Together these form a value system within which it is recognised that food is a source of power, but is used to protect the rights and members of the society. (Malinowski 1922 : 270, 279 ; Richards 1948 : 85-86 ; Radcliffe. Brown 1948 : 29)

Food as a source of power is expressed through hierarchical relations within the society, by enforced dependence relations particularly gender dependence. Norms and values enforce the chief to redistribute food stores. These norms include the extension of the filial sentiment to all of those relationships in social life in which one individual is directly dependent upon another for food. But how do these societies respond to the violations of the rights, including the most primitive property right, the ownership of food — « the chief form of possession which differentiates him from other members of the community » ? (Richards 1948 : 173)

As in other societies, with the assertion of property rights also came the notion of the violation of that right, the notion of 'theft'. Richards noted that the right was asserted only during seasons of scarcity. (Richards 1948 : 187) But as Firth observed, the social order was maintained not by imposing penalties but by avoiding them. « Theft was indeed stigmatised. But in a sense there was an idea that even a thief has grievances and rights — otherwise he would not have stolen. » (Firth 1959 : 86-89)

The Feudal mode

The feudal mode on the other hand presents a study in contrast. In a society divided between the empowered potents and the powerless indigens, food is a prime source of power. Food has social value. It establishes the social distance between those that eat and those who subsist. To those who had control over ressources, food implies a whole range of items including meat, fish, bread and wine. What did the poor eat in the Middle Age ? According to Mollat, « grape pips, hazel flowers and fern roots with an accompaniment of field grass. » (Mollat 1986 : 22)

Food transactions are not protected from the storms of the market place. Rather they are exposed to it. Limiting access to food could be achieved through limiting wages, imposing usurious terms of credit, by imposing taxes, by introducing laws on mortgages and evictions through the courts as well as laws on poaching and trespass.

The violation of property rights to food is termed theft. But unlike the kin-based society, reprisal is savage and swift. The thief is hung in a public place.

Property rights in labour include rights over the movements of labour.

As De Schweinitz asked, « Did a man own himself ? If he chose to leave his place of birth could he be compelled to return ? »

Those who violated ownership rights were termed 'vagabond' — « to be kept in the stocks, till he has found surety, till he returns to service. » (De Schweinitz 1943 : 8) Dependence was no longer defined in kindship terms or through other ties, politicals, religious or social. It was defined by a lack of relations, an absence of status or even ties of the remotest kind between those born within the society. While rules sustain inequalities in access to food and to means of production, religion legitimises poverty as the fruit of sin. (Mollat 1986)

Where rights are scarce society is devoid of a sense of accountability other than the obligation of charity. Charity, while promising salvation to the donor demeans the recipient. A new social category is devised — the beggar. Even such 'relief' is under political surveillance and control. Criteria are introduced. Beggars have to be 'registered' and they can no longer be looked upon as 'able-bodies'. Restrictions are imposed upon movements of beggars as society looks upon them as a threat.

Mechanisms of expropriation come into being. These include credit and mortgage calculated to deprive men of even that limited access to food and reduce them to abject dependence. Systems of advances against crop are devised. Under such systems, the eviction of the debtors becomes a recurring phenomenon. At times such evictions can take mass dimensions.

Mechanisms of social control are evolved. These include arrangements of dependence and control formed under extreme stress. At the present time, these are looked upon as 'mechanisms of social insurance' (Scott 1916) rather than as means of control. The duress that is explicit in the patron-client relationship needs to be further studied.

Goods necessary for survival fetch the highest prices during periods of crop failure periods (Kershaw). It was also at these times that the city gates were often closed to the poor.

Colonial mode

In the colonial mode, the State assumes a 'lord of the manor' right over land, water, pastures, trees. Every sphere of economic activity including cultivation, sheep rearing, fishing has to be undertaken only at the pleasure of the State and on condition of contribution to the revenues of the State. All of these become sources of revenue and intermediaries play a role in ensuring their payment. Debtor-creditor relationship are forged : the land or other asset are nominally held by the owner. Under these conditions the foreclosing of mortgages and eviction both by the State and the intermediary become common.

The State is not merely the landlord but also becomes the apex labour contractor. The control over labour is established not merely through a system of task-wages but often by making mortgages of land and labour a condition of employment. Human labour is harnessed for the building of railways systems, canals and roads. Coolies are also a source of income as 'exports'. Under these conditions evictions of peasants can acquire mass dimensions. Their protest and revolt is put down savagely. Their subsequent decline into mortality is 'hailed' as 'famine'.

History affirms that under these conditions famine is a constant visitor. Coherent studies of famine in the feudal mode are few. Yet the data on the recurrence of famine in Europe particularly during the eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is formidable. (Waldorf ; Kershaw ; Mollat).

The uprooting of the peasants and their scattering across the countries of Europe has been noted by many scholars. Mollat refers to these movements as 'tidal waves of poverty' that swept across Europe in the centuries. Sorokin alone observes the nexus of « the 'wandering' that knew no frontiers » with famine. (Sorokin 1942)

The recurrence of famine in the colonial mode is too well documented (Indian Famine Commission 1867, 1880, 1898, 1901 ; Bhatia, Sen, Alamgir to name only a few).

Two questions can be raised : first, how far am I justified in describing the process of pauperization and destitution as famine itself. How can famine be famine unless by visually affirmed emaciation as well as by mortality ?

Were not historians right in affirming the famine with the phase of psycho-social breakdown ? I can only respond to the question by offering two pointers. First, the affirmation of famine by the victims themselves ; second, the evidence on the imposition of starvation by the society as well as the need for its imposition.

In re-analyzing the detailed account of famine amont the Tikopia presented by Raymond Firth in his well-known work 'Social Change in Tikopia' (Firth 1959) I have only one objective — to seek to establish the need for the study of famine as a social process and not as it is represented in the study as a consequence of natural calamity.

I question three particular representations : 1. The study of the social structure and the specific economic relationships on which it was dependent that does not take into account the implications of gender differentiation in participation in food production. 2. The demographic exercise on labour efficiency that does not provide weightage to such differentiation. 3. The famine 'calendar' which limits the passage of famine to the hurricane and crop failure and the next harvest. The dismissal of famine as an 'episode' that does not leave its mark on social institutions and finally whether the period can be termed as one of 'social change and modernisation'.

In their stead, I suggest that the famine process be considered in relation to the withdrawal of male labour from the island of Tikopia. That the withdrawal of nearly thirty percent of the total male work force and probably nearly 100 per cent of the men of the age of maximum efficiency between 25 and 47 brought about a collapse of the Tikopia agronomy and consequently the decline into morbility of large numbers of its women and children. That their wages were not calculated to provide the means of biological reproduction. In fact as Firth affirms, in some families even if all of the men were away, their wages would not have provided adequate food.

The famine should be studied with reference to the pressure imposed upon the Tikopia for recruitment, the responses to that pressure by the Tikopia which took many forms : in particular, the resistance to the selection of men in their prime and picking men « who were arrant thieves ».

Also in relation to the political tensions on the island to the resort to famine foods, the joining of households, the practice of abortion and infanticide by the women, the widespread resort to theft as the only means of access to food : « Some people especially women whose husbands were away at work stole... they simply did not have food, others stole to widen the margin of safety ». (Firth 1959)

Background

Tikopia, an island off the Solomons was a British protectorate at the time of Raymond Firth's visit. The demand for labour and the raiding that accompanied it, brought about depopulation and led to a ban on the recruitment of labour in 1921, a ban which was lifted after World war II.

The demand for male labour came from the multinational, in this case Lever Brothers, who had copra plantations for soap manufacture on the mainland Solomons. The British Government directly benefited from the plantations as it had the sole monopoly for the purchase of timber and other products ; a monopoly which was lost in a system of public auction only in 1973.

The demand for Tikopia labour also had a political basis. In 1953, the year of the famine in Tikopia, there was widespread political unrest. The Marching Rule movement for independence took the form of economic boycott of the plantations. The Tikopia could offer a corps of docile labour critical during the period of the strike.

Even in 1929, the British Government was interested in a scheme of migration of the Tikopia. « Technically the government is interested in assisting Tikopia to make better use of their local resources and also in making Tikopia resources, especially labour resources, available to other parties. » (Firth 1939)

In Firth's view the Tikopia had looked upon the idea with distaste. They looked upon their land « as a single body of kinsfolk. The idea of any mass migration was viewed with extreme distaste by the Tikopia with whom I discussed it ». (Firth 1939 : 48) He added that the recruitment of labour prohibited by government ordinance, had a justification in the heavy death rate of the islanders in the past when brought into contact with new diseases.

Recruiting then would operate as a check upon the Tikopia population. But it would be a highly selective factor and would lead to serious disturbance of the social and economic structure through changes in the sex and age ratios.

Why did he set aside this reasoned opinion in 1953 ?

Let us now consider the postulates for the study of the Tikopia economy : the society.

As indeed Firth has stated, « the social structure, the political structure were clearly dependent on specific economic relationships arising out of a control of resources. With these relationships were linked the religious activities and social institutions of the society. » (Firth 1959)

Among the Tikopia, food is an important material manifestation of social relationships through which kinship ties and political loyalty, indemnity for wrong and canons of hospitality are expressed.

That consideration of what people eat leads to the examination of reciprocity between husband and wife, of methods of wider cooperation in work, systems of land tenure, ritual offerings to gods and ancestors for fertility.

In an economy that had no foodgrain and poor means of storage the daily harvesting of food was a necessity.

The household meal and the flow of resources towards it included contributions received from land and sea by labour as well as that received through ceremonial exchange.

What I wish to add are the implications of gender differentiation in the participation in the economy. In Tikopia the men alone could perform all of those tasks ceremonial and economic that went into the fishing, planting, the production of food. That in the distribution of food at feasts as well as daily propitiation of the gods with food as well as in all aspects of life, male pre-eminence was reflected. (Rangasami 1986). Further, the association of canoes with male gods implied that married women could not enter them.

« While in a household men and women may cooperate constantly in agriculture, social convention allows only a few specified ways in which a married woman of one household may work together with a man of another. »

As Firth stated, Tikopia did not practise any primitive communism. While it provided an economic base with a socialised concept of participation of owner in production, there was no idealisation of community rights, no attitude that the land should be the common property of all. There was a stark individualism enhanced by the differenciation of the family consisting of husband, wife and children as an economic entity with the responsibility for assuring food upon the male head of the family. As a consequence, if by any circumstance the men were withdrawn from the economy, their families could not be provided for by the society. The responsibility of kin was limited to assuring their share of food activities as well as fulfilling their obligations in ritual. The responsibility of the male head of the family were inforced through social norms as well as ritual.

Famine Calendar

Firth's famine calendar begins with the hurricane and crop failure in January 1952. It is looked upon as a short term crisis with recovery predicted with the new crop.

In response to a query from the British Government, the anthropologists predict recovery by September.

However between october and december the number of deaths rises and famine becomes severe.

This calendar is amended three times. Each time it is noted that the deaths persist due to circumstances that had failed to be taken into account. In September it is revised to aknowledge that in the absence of the men, their families had no access to the fish shoals that normally provide food in September. Recovery is again predicted for January and

March again with the new crop. The persistent hunger is attributed to the second hurricane.

In July when the anthropologist leaves, the « island is reported well on its way to recovery ». The basis for the claim is not very clear. The subsequent deaths of a further 200 in 1955 is attributed to an epidemic.

The socio-political construct of a disaster is imposed upon the event.

« The famine in 1952-53 may be regarded as nature's way of cutting back the population in a manageable size in terms of the available resources. » (Firth 1959 : 450)

« Speaking generally, then, one has the impression that though the famine of 1952-53 was abnormal in the long run, it represented a movement in a pendulum swing of relations between Tikopia population and food supply that has been going on for at least a century or probably more. In my opinion such changes in demographic pressure on subsistence are far more responsible for much of the structure of primitive societies than anthropologists have generally allowed. »

The period is limited primarily to the months following the hurricane and centers upon the weeks when mortality was recorded. There were 81 deaths on the island. The 200 deaths that followed in 1955 is not attributed to famine at all.

Demographic exercise

The demographic exercise undertaken shows an increase in population of the Tikopia from 1278 in 1929 to 1753 in1953. The pressure on food production is deemed to be evident even by the mortality. We are not provided production data. Nor are we told of previous hurricane years and crop failure. Hurricanes presumably are not rare phenomena in the South Pacific.

We learn that in 1952, the total population consisted of 920 males and 853 females. Of these, 791 were below the age of seventeen, 146 were over 58 years. Together they constituted the dependent population. There were 283 males and 253 females totalling 536 between the ages of 23 to 45 and 428 men between 15 and 57. By middle of 1952, 40 per cent were away.

When considered in terms of the effective male working force of the age span of « maximum efficency » as Firth put it, of twenty six years average, they constitute 38 per cent of the effective work force.

And it is reckoned there were about 300 households. The batches drawn in May and July were from among the married men. The voyage was referred to as the voyage of married men. We also learn that 40 or 50 households were suffering from acute starvation.

Firth states that out of the total work force of 428, 175 men were away, about 40 per cent. When considered in terms of the effective work

force they constituted perhaps an even higher percentage. These are also the age groups likely to have young children.

There were 89 recorded deaths between March 1952 and March 1953. Of these 71 were of women and children — 39 below the age of seven. Of the nineteen men who died, 12 were above the age of 58.

We do not have the sex ratio of the 200 who died in 1955.

Demand-side theories

If, as I have argued, the supply-side approach to the study of famines need to be set aside, can it be replaced by demand-side theories. Would it be possible to suggest that the Tikopia had to face famine because the wages they earned could not command the price of subsistence ?

Or could we state that the entitlement of Tikopia, which would include their earnings through the wages of the men and the contributions of women and children of food, did not suffice to meet their needs ?

To the question, « How are famines caused ? » Sen answers : « A person can be plunged into starvation if his endowment collapses either through a fall in the endowment bundle or through an unfavourable shift in the entitlement mapping. »

The importance of Sen's argument lies in his being able to establish that the shift in the main components of entitlements are responsible for causing failures and that it is necessary to take into account the entitlement relations within which the shift occurs, even though the 'data' may not be able to characterise these relations with any exactitude. Such an approach is useful because it can take into account those transactions sustained by norm and custom — those transactions that fall within the province of the sociologist.

The problems emerge not merely from difficulties of application of the theory to micro-economies or even economies that were then being monetised. The problems of application emerge even with the fact that the theory can reflect only one of the elements in the famine process, namely the decline in the entitlement of the victims. It has no means of reflecting the process of famine and that such decline is gradual and implies benefits to others.

The issue before us is, in a famine situation : do all of those elements that form the endowment bundle and its mapping network collapse together as in a disaster scenario ? Would each of these give way at a time ? And would such a progressive loss of each of these elements of the bundle, as for instance a decline in real wages, not represent a complementary gain for another in the entitlement network ? Should not such a famine theory, focusing particularly on private exchange and

trade, not reflect the fact that if famine represents losses to some, it represents gains to others ?

For instance, Sen states that destitution is the 'road' to famine. Analysing the Bengal famine of 1943, he points out that many rural families passed through marginal occupations such as paddy husking on their way to total destitution.

What the analyse fails to capture is that which is reflected in the evidence before the Famine Enquiry Commission. That the farmers were selling at the top of the market even while their fellow villagers were dying. That there was evidence of profiteering. (Nanawathi Papers : Bengal Famine Enquiry Commission, 1945) That death came at the end of a period of five years of transfer of lands from the poorer peasants to the farmers. That such a process was long-drawn and its beginnings can be traced to the transfer of lands ('land theft') assets five years earlier. Further that it has to be seen in the context of the rules legal and political as well as the norms of the society that can limit access to sources of food and legitimise the expropriation beyond the 'surplus' ; and in the powers available to the State to legitimise such expropriation.

The 'relief' provided could do little to prevent the mortality of millions of people.

The theory of exchange entitlements has no means of taking note of the role of the State as an actor in the famine process.

In sum, we need a theorical framework for the study of famine that can accomodate the nature of the process and the thrust and counter-thrust in the exchange between the victim and the beneficiary. We need to take into account the means available with the beneficary to legitimise the imposition of starvation, the expropriation of all assets and of the man-power which brought about a decline in all of the institutions of the Tikopia : in its economy based on reciprocity and kinship ties and in its religion dependent upon the male mediation and its polity. That the Tikopia, a kin-ordered society with norms and values that ensured food to its members and through its members to their dependents, has no means of coping with the starvation that was exogenous. The tragedy of Tikopia is being reenacted upon other surviving traditional societies. It appears that at the present time, famine theory has no means of studying them.

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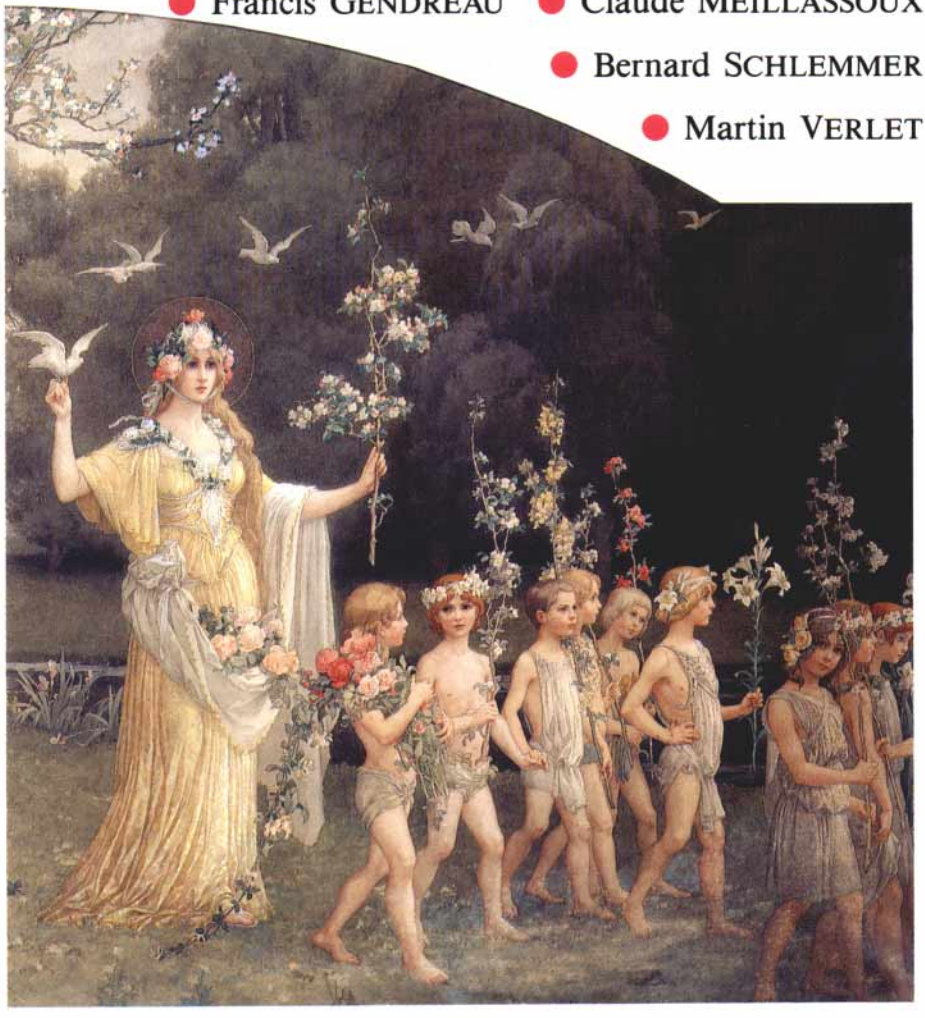

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