

PART I

FAMINE IN BENGAL

CHAPTER I.—THE FAMINE

1. The Bengal famine of 1943 stands out as a great calamity even in an age all too familiar with human suffering and death on a tragic scale. Between one and two million people died as a result of the famine and the outbreaks of epidemic disease associated with it. Many more who escaped death went hungry for many months, fell sick of disease, and suffered in other ways from the disintegration of normal life which the famine occasioned. Famine has, of course, been a common event in the ancient and modern history of India. As far as history stretches back, the country has been a prey to recurrent famines and during the nineteenth century a number of serious famines occurred. The terrible famine of 1769-70, in which it was estimated that 10 millions died out of a population of 30 millions, seriously affected the whole of Bengal, except the districts of Bakarganj and Chittagong in the south-eastern corner, but during the nineteenth century and the twentieth century up to 1943, Bengal was almost entirely free from famine.¹ The Famine Commission of 1880 included the eastern districts of the province, which suffered so severely in 1943, among the parts of the country which "enjoy so ample and regular a rainfall and such abundant river inundation as to ensure the safety of the crops in the driest years" The western districts are liable to scarcity but the only area which has been prone to famine from time to time is the district of Bankura on the western boundary of the province.

2. The most recent famines accompanied by high mortality took place in 1896-7 and 1899-1900. Thus, for over 40 years previous to 1943, India had been free from great famines. The relatively small famines of the last few decades occurred for the most part in rural areas remote from cities, were controlled by effective measures, and hence did not attract much public notice. Famine on a catastrophic scale had indeed faded from memory and was regarded by many as a thing of the past. In 1943 an enemy generally thought to have been finally vanquished reappeared in full strength and its victims thronged in their thousands the streets of the greatest city in India, Calcutta. The horrors of famine at its worst were clearly exposed to the public view. All this came as a great shock to the public in India.

3. The famine affected only the province of Bengal and, to a much less serious extent, the neighbouring province of Orissa. Its general course was as follows: during the early months of 1943, there were reports of distress from various parts in Bengal and apprehension on the part of District Officers that famine was imminent. In May and June it became clearly evident in the districts of Chittagong and Noakhali, situated on the eastern border of the province, and a steep rise in mortality occurred in these districts. By July most of rural Bengal was involved, the death rate in almost all districts being in excess of the normal. From this point onwards the number of deaths rose rapidly and the peak was reached in December, 1943. With the reaping of the *aman* crop in December and the arrival and distribution of supplies from outside the province during the closing months of the year, the famine was relieved, but the death rate remained high throughout the greater part of 1944. Severe epidemics of malaria, small-pox and cholera accompanied the famine. Of these diseases, malaria caused the greatest number of deaths.

¹We refer here to Bengal according to its present boundaries.