Cause and Effect of the Frightful Scourge of Famine in India

Interesting Story Told by Dr. Josephine Eltzholtz, Who Has Spent Five Years of Professional Study in the Famine and Plague Stricken Districts of India.

NOT many weeks ago I came upon a band of children merry making in a leafy canyon of the Berkeley foothills. They were happy, healthy youngsters, as rosy cheeked and lusty lunged as any that ever romped up hill and down dale. Tired of this nook, they made for the next green knoll, leaving the remnants of their picnic luncheon behind them.

I watched them scampering off so full of life and health. I looked at the partly filled boxes and bags left behind—a dozen or more sandwiches, a hard-boiled egg, bits of cake and scraps of the odds and ends mothers tuck into the picnic basket.

Then somehow my mind went back to a scene in India that I witnessed just before I left that country. I was passing through one of the famine-stricken districts with several other people. By the roadside cuddled a heap that on nearer view proved to be several children. They were lying almost naked, too weak to sit up, their hungry-looking bones showing pitifully, their faces drawn and gaunt.

We gave them a luncheon which we were carrying for ourselves. At the most they had expected a coin or a bit of bread. To them our simple fare was a repast fit for the gods and as unexpected as though it had fallen from heaven itself. They devoured it greedily, even searching the ground for a stray crumb. We ourselves went without food until the next stopping place, when we satisfied our hunger, but never have we been able to erase the picture of those emaciated hunger-mad children. Whenever I see children cramming their little "tummies" full and gayly leaving the rest to the birds, I think of those hungry mites in India, who are grateful for a morsel.

Why should India be subject to such frequent famines? Is nothing done to mitigate them? These questions are constantly asked by the uninformed.

There are many causes of the Indian famines. Under former native governments famines were regarded as visitations from the gods, and therefore beyond the power of man. So the officials did nothing to prevent or lessen the ravages of famine. "There is no remedy but the mercy of God," said the officials. Famine gathered its frightful death harvest unchecked. People left to die did not complain against the officials, for, being fatalists themselves, they believed that human efforts were powerless against the anger of the gods.

The first great Indian famine of which there is any authentic record is the famine of 1770. Prior to that year the stories of natives and casual references in native chronicles are the only sources of information. In 1770 the records say that owing to a sudden failure of the periodic rains "the fields of rice became like fields of dried straw." The stock of seed grain was equally devoured, and when this was exhausted, leaves, grass and finally the dead supplied sustenance for the living. Official accounts further state that this famine resulted in the death of more than a third of the population.

The recurrence of famines in Southern India at intervals of about eleven years has suggested the ingenious theory that this periodicity accorded with the period of sun spot variation. Though ingenious, the theory is not credited by scientists. A report of an expert says that famines in India have arisen from several different causes, but the most general cause has not been failure of the usual rains. Storms and floods, swarms of rats and locusts, and the immigration of the starving people from distant distressed parts into districts otherwise well provided with food supplies are some of the causes enumerated by this scientist.

If I were asked to give what I consider the chief cause of the famine I should promptly say—fatalism. Fatalism teaches them to believe that whatever is must be, and they accept plague or famine without stirring hand or foot to stay its progress. Their sufferings are beyond imagination, but death holds no fear for them, so they offer no resistance to the scourges that plow through their ranks and carry off friends and relatives.

This indifference, founded on fatalism, runs through all classes. The Rajah or Nawab in a famine-stricken district will spend a fortune for his personal and selfish gratification, while around him his people succumb to the hunger wolf. He will load a favorite with wealth in jewels while outside his palace walls starving mothers must watch their little ones die for lack of nourishment. The Rajah's creed teaches him that the gods have sent the famine, so why should he open his coffers to allay it? Nor do the people expect it. No hungry mob stones a prince's palace. They take the good days and the bad days as evidence of the pleasure or wrath of the gods.

An English lady, a physician, was called to the palace of a Prince who ruled over a famine-stricken district. She saved the life of one of the newly acquired women in his harem, of whom he had not yet had time to grow tired. He begged her to be allowed to show his gratitude, and to his surprise the lady asked that he give a public dinner to the people in the immediate neighborhood, numbering several hundred souls.

The Indian Prince could not understand such a request, but he acceded to it, afterward, however, sending her the many valuable rugs and hangings which had decorated the apartment in the palace given over to her use.

Through her pleading this Indian Prince was finally made to partly see that human intervention is possible in a famine visitation. She induced him to put such a strict watch over the native overseers that they could not pursue the dishonest methods in that district by which they flourish on others. The native overseers are given a certain amount of grain to pay the poor who labor in the fields. The pittance of grain is measured out at the close of the day, and the wily overseer adulterates it with sand, so that the people only get a fraction of their due. In famine times grain is almost worth its weight in gold, so the overseer gets large profits for his dishonest pilfering.

It is only fair to say that the English Government has done all in its power to mitigate famine suffering, and also the outside world has put its hand deep into its pocket for this stricken nation. Mistakes have been made, but they were not through carelessness, but rather ignorance and lack of co-operation of the native dignitaries. To reduce to order and method a gigantic organization for the distribution of relief has been a herculean task.

The success of the humanitarian work is shown by comparing the death rate during the recent famines with that of 1876-78. Although the area and population affected in the earlier famine were somewhat smaller than in the recent one, the death rate was much greater.

It is often said that foreigners living in India soon become thoroughly unsympathetic and hardened to suffering. It is true that we become hardened to sights of suffering, for suffering in all its forms is ever before our eyes. But it is not true that the majority are unsympathetic. A calm exterior often hides an aching heart, but where there are so many calls on sympathy one must husband it and give it judiciously. I saw in a recent interview with Mrs. Harriet Tytler, who is now in New York trying to raise funds for an orphange in India, the following example of selfishness. I quote Mrs. Tytler exactly as she is quoted in the New York Herald:

"Just before I left India I saw, sitting outside one of the bazaars, a starving native family, consisting of mother, father, son and daughter. They were emaciated beyond description and seemed too weak even to raise their heads. An English gentleman tossed them a rupee. At sight of it the woman started up and then fell and rolled into the roadway—dead. The sight of the silver had killed her.

"One day I found a poor starved mother carrying her child to the bazaar to sell it. I bought the child and told the mother she might remain with it. My next door neighbor was an Englishman who had several dogs. He was in his garden feeding his puppies with milk.

"I asked him if he would give me a little of the milk for the starving woman.

"'No,' he said, 'I've only enough for my puppies.'

"I took the woman home and did for her and the baby as well as I could. A few months later the same gentleman came to see me one day. The baby had grown fat and handsome.

"'How much will you take for the baby?' he asked.

"'You cannot have it at any price,' I replied. 'When it was starving you would not deprive your puppies of a drop of milk to keep it alive, and now you cannot have it.'

"He was astonished, but repeated his offer. He wanted a healthy child, which might be trained to be a good house servant."

In my professional capacity and as an individual I have come across several cases of cruel indifference on the part of those able to alleviate the suffering. But never anything to equal this refusal to deprive a puppy of a little milk that a child might be nourished. I have generally found people keen to aid the natives, even to the extent of injuring their health, to say nothing of shrinking their purses thereby.

A great deal of activity is being shown in India to build irrigation works and thus protect it against famine from drought. By means of irrigation it is hoped to turn barren lands to fruitful fields. But it takes time and a vast amount of money to accomplish this.

The famine specter that for centuries has stalked through India will be crippled by modern methods, but it will be years, if ever, before it is entirely laid low.