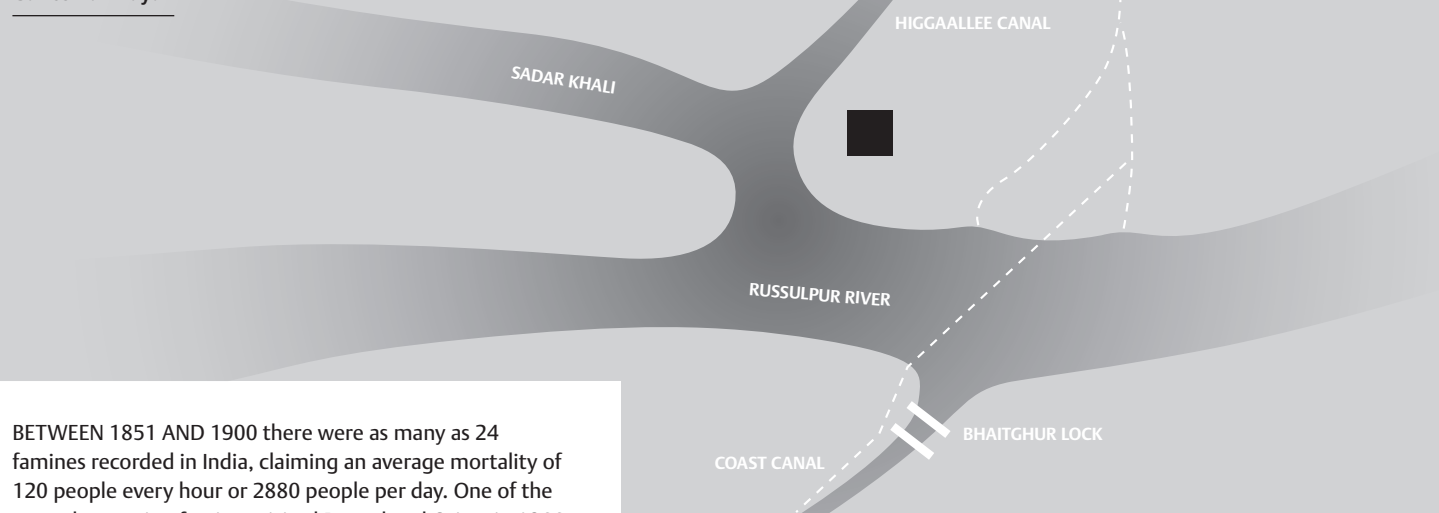


# The Orissa famine of 1866

Famine dominates the pages of Indian economic history. In 1866 one of the most devastating famines – known as the *Na Anka* famine – visited Orissa, killing a third of its population. Subsequently, a Famine Commission was formed and its recommendations constitute an important milestone in the economic history of Orissa. The development of roads, railways, ports and navigable irrigation canals became a priority. Ganeswar Nayak argues that this focus on transport and communication in colonial Orissa was the precursor for the province's socio-economic transformation.

Ganeswar Nayak



BETWEEN 1851 AND 1900 there were as many as 24 famines recorded in India, claiming an average mortality of 120 people every hour or 2880 people per day. One of the most devastating famines visited Bengal and Orissa in 1866. (At this time, Orissa was under Bengal Presidency. Orissa became a separate province in 1936). The *Na Anka* famine affected the entire eastern coast from Madras upwards, reaching far inland. The total area affected was estimated to be 180,000 square miles, with a population of 47,500,000. The distress was greatest, however, in Orissa, at that time practically isolated from the rest of India. The people of the state were dependent on winter rice crops for food, and the rainfall of 1865 was scanty and ceased prematurely. Food stocks ran short. Yet the gravity of the situation was not realised by the Government which underestimated the size of the population requiring food. The reality of the situation was eventually grasped at the end of May 1865, and then the monsoon set in. Transport by sea was extremely difficult, and even when grain reached the coast it could not be transported to effected parts of the country. At great cost, some 10,000 tons of rice was imported, but this did not reach the people until September. Meanwhile the mortality rates soared. At least a million people died in Orissa alone.

Orissa's troubles did not cease in 1866. Heavy rains that year caused flooding which destroyed rice crops. When relief operations eventually kicked in they were characterised by profusion and an unprecedented absence of checks. Altogether about 40,000 tons of rice was imported. Even the most generous use could not dispose of half of this; and while it cost four times the usual price to procure the residue had to be sold for almost nothing when the monsoon of 1867, followed by an usually fine harvest, put an end to the famine in 1868. In two years about 35,000,000 units were distributed to the people on the eastern coast, at a cost of 95 lakhs (just over US\$200,000), two thirds of which was used to cover the expense of importing grain. Adding together the loss of revenue in all departments, the famine in Orissa was said to have cost about 1.5 crores (US\$10.5 million).

## The Famine Commission of 1866

An inquiry was ordered into the catastrophe and a commission was appointed in December 1866. It consisted of George Campbell, (then a High Court judge, later to become Lieutenant-Governor General of Bengal), as President, and Colonel W.E. Morton and H.L. Dampier as members. They were instructed to report on the causes, circumstances and extent of the famine and to recommend corrective measures as far as possible against the recurrence of a similar catastrophe. The Orissa Famine Commission submitted its report on 6th April 1867. On 2nd August, Sir Stafford Henry Northcote, Secretary of State for India, winding up a debate on the famine in the House of Commons said:

*"This catastrophe must always remain a monument of our failure, a humiliation to the people of this country, to the Government of this country and to those of our Indian officials of whom we had perhaps been a little too proud. At the same time, we must hope that we might derive from it lessons which might be of real value to ourselves, and that out of this deplorable evil good of no insignificant kind might ultimately arise."*

ABOVE: The Coast Canal, 1889 June 1-17. Sources: PWD/CW/IV-A.

RIGHT: The Wheel of Konark. The Sun Temple at Konark, Orissa built in the 13th century, is one of the most famous monuments of stone sculpture in the world.



## The recommendations

The Famine Commission of 1866 directed attention to the state of communications in Orissa. It recommended measures to improve the means of communication not only as insurance against famine but also for the resurgence of Orissa's economy. The commission's report constituted an important landmark in the economic history of Orissa. It acknowledged how isolated the state was from the rest of the world; how inaccessible it was to trade, and what the terrible consequences of this inaccessibility could be during famine. With these facts in mind, the commission suggested the early execution of a trunk road from Calcutta to Cuttack. Further, it recommended steps to make irrigation canals, such as the Kendrapara canal, navigable and the development of several ports.

## Roads

Before the outbreak of famine in 1866, there were just over 99 miles of unmetalled roads in Balasore District. In Cuttack District, there were 80 miles of district roads; and in Puri District 74 miles. The Commission gave the utmost priority to the development of roads in Orissa, recommending that imperial and local roads be surveyed as early as possible and funds be assigned for their maintenance and repair. In the post-famine period, some important provincial roads (connecting one province to another) were developed, the most important of which – from a commercial and administrative perspective – was the Cuttack Trunk Road which lies partly in Balasore and partly in Cuttack and runs across eight major rivers.

After 1887, it was the turn of Orissa's district roads to receive attention. The District Boards of Cuttack, Balasore and Puri were constituted and assumed responsibility for the construction, repair and maintenance of all classified roads. In 1912 Orissa had 80 miles of metal roads, 856 miles of unmetalled roads and 698 village roads. By 1933, just prior to becoming a separate province, Orissa had 664 miles of metal roads and 1652 miles of unmetalled roads.

## Railways

The development of the railways was undoubtedly a milestone in the economic history of Orissa, but this did not come immediately after the famine of 1866. It is noteworthy that the Famine Commission emphasised the need to develop roads, ports, inland navigation and post and telegraph rather than railways.

In fact, the province of Orissa had to wait until April 1887 for any significant progress on this front. Then, the Bengal Nagpur Railway company (BNR) was awarded the contract for the construction of railways in Orissa. By the time a detailed survey of the line from Cuttack to Calcutta had been ordered five years later, in November 1892, 360 miles of extension to the tracks had been completed.

One of the first, and most important, fruits of this labour was the role the railways played in distributing food. Although the construction of the railways acted as a potent factor in the decline of maritime trade, this was arguably countered by the stimulus it provided to agriculture production. Moreover, by directly connecting

Calcutta with Madras, the railways enabled people to go further afield for education and employment. In short, the development of the railways was key to the political, social and economic transformation of Orissa.

## Ports

Orissa has just over 260 miles of coast line, dotted with numerous ports. However, the absence of a good port with protected anchorage was clearly a factor in the 1866 famine. Quite simply, Orissa's ports were not suitable for use. In the rainy season steamers were unable to land cargo on the surf-beaten shore. So the rice could not be imported in large scale through the ports of Orissa to provide relief to the famine stricken people. Ports were of little use when exposed to bad weather or any kind of emergency. Furthermore, they were inaccessible to the standard type of European vessel as they offered no protected anchorage of any kind.

Following the 1866 famine, a number of ports were developed. In fact, False Point, in Cuttack District, was eventually considered to be the best harbour along the entire coast of India. This investment not only stimulated trade and commerce but also opened up communications with the outside world. It should be noted, however, that the introduction of the railways saw Orissa's ports go into decline.

## Inland navigation

The Famine Commission also recommended making Orissa's irrigation canals navigable. It warned the government of the urgent need to complete construction of the Kendrapara Canal, as a means of providing irrigation to a large tract of the countryside and a much needed communication link between Cuttack and the Bay of Bengal. As a result, a number of canals and waterways were developed in Orissa, including the important Coast Canal which connected the river Hooghly at Goenkali (45 miles from Calcutta) with Matai at Charbatia. It ran along the seafloor at a distance varying between two to ten miles from the coast. Its length in Orissa was 92 miles. The canal was partially opened for traffic in 1885 and completely in 1887. Its estimated cost was Rs. 44,74,941 (about \$US95,300). Its construction was undertaken both as a valuable insurance in times of famine and as a lucrative trade route. In fact, it was anticipated that all the import and export trade of Orissa could pass along this canal, yielding revenue of over Rs.2.5 lakh (about \$US5,300) per annum. By the end of 1929 Orissa had 205 miles of navigable inland waterways, which meant 205 miles of communication. As with the ports, however, inland navigation declined in Orissa with the coming of the railways.

## Conclusion

The roads, railways, ports and navigable canals constructed in the post-1866 famine period in Orissa brought an end to the state's geographical isolation. Export and import trade received new impetus and the fact that Cuttack was now only about a 12 hour journey from Calcutta had a salutary influence on the consciousness of the people of Orissa. Changes in transport and communication provided not only for the material development of the population but also for their intellectual development, as people travelled outside of the province for studies and business. However, there were also less favourable side effects. Increased communication and trade links allowed for an influx of foreign products into rural areas. This was to be the death-knell of indigenous industries. The salt, leather, and silk industries in Orissa all but disappeared. Poverty and lack of industrial progress compelled many to migrate to different parts of Bengal. That said, the net result was that these developments provided security against another famine by facilitating mobility of labour and importation of food.

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