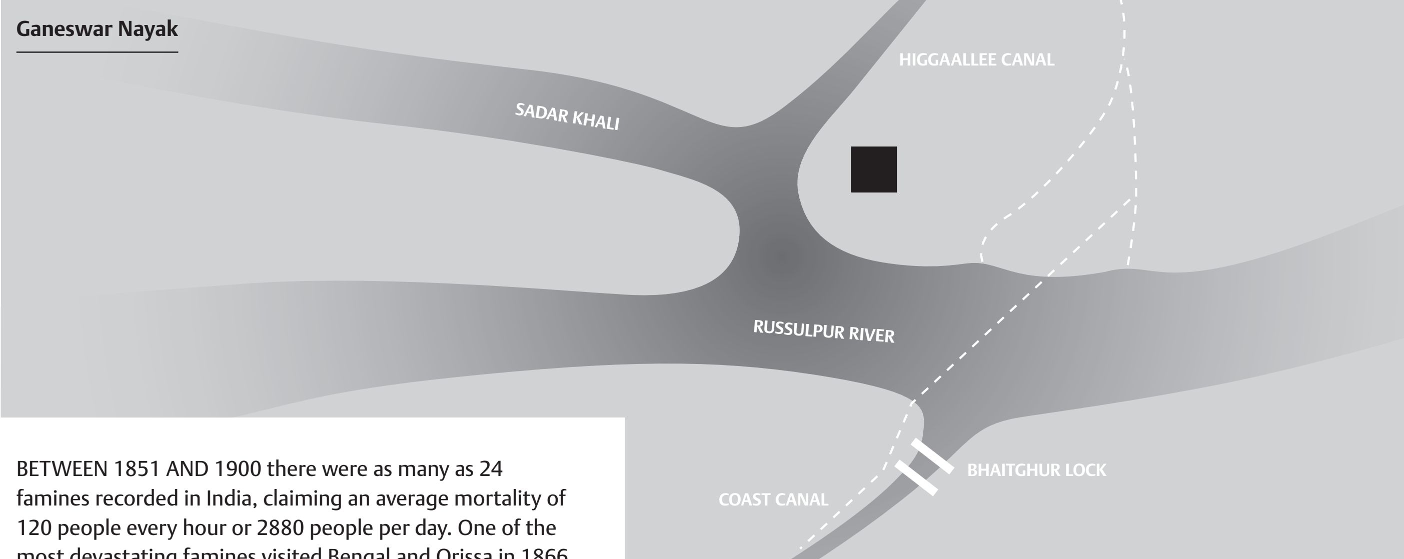
The Orissa famine of 1866

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



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.

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."*

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 seaface 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. It's 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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International student mobility

Most of what is written on the mobility of international students focuses on two particular topics: the means by which 'providers' access the 'market' and assure themselves a flow of paying clients; and the ways in which they may or may not be encouraged to accommodate themselves to what may be different styles of learning. Nicholas Tarling believes these topics would surely be better tackled in a wider context, and there are many others also worthy of research. One possible approach, he argues, is historical.

Nicholas Tarling

PEOPLE HAVE LONG TRAVELLED in order to pursue advanced study, in Asia as well as in Europe, for personal or professional reasons or both. Students in medieval Europe were, as Charles Haskins put it, 'singularly mobile and singularly international'[1]

With the major changes of the 19th century – the creation of nation-states and the advent of the industrial revolution – universities took on a wider range of disciplines and obligations. The 19th century also expanded the gap between the 'Western' states and the 'traditional' states in Asia and Africa, and many of the latter fell under colonial or pseudo-colonial control. Gaining the 'knowledge' that appeared to have contributed to that outcome was a motive among non-Europeans for securing a western university education, which initially at least could be done only by travelling, though not initially only to the West: Chinese and Vietnamese went to Japan, which, starting to modernise, had itself sent students to Europe and the US. In 1906, Japan was the host of 15,000 Chinese students, 8,000 of them on scholarships.[2]

Globalisation – which may be seen as an intensification of the 19th century changes – promoted a dramatic expansion of demand in the last third of the 20th century, and right at its close from the most populous country of all, China, when it adopted more of a capitalist and individualist road to modernisation. In 1979-80 1,000 Chinese students studied in the US, 20 years later, 60,000.[3]

A 'pay-at-the-door' approach

Motivation must, however, be seen from another angle as well, that of the 'providers'. Medieval European universities certainly accepted students from other parts of Europe, even those outside the Holy Roman Empire, as Haskins says, dividing them into 'nations' or guilds. No doubt one motive was the desire to advance scholarship, and probably, too, pride in achievements both individual and institutional (still a powerful motive). Was there also a monetary motive? There was a pay-at-the-door approach, though the sums were not large, nor driven by the need for buildings and equipment.

A sense of imperial obligation was something of a motivating force from the late 19th century. Students from other parts of the Empire were welcomed in Britain, though they were a relatively small number even in the then rather small university system. With the breaking-down of such formal structures as the Empire had, and the emergence of more and more independent member states, education seemed to be both a means of helping the new countries get on their feet and a means of holding the new Commonwealth together.

More generally, aid was seen as promoting 'stability' in the post-1945 world and also of fighting the Cold War that developed from 1946 onwards. In 1945, Senator William Fulbright introduced his famous bill in Congress: countries would be allowed to retain surplus US war equipment and buildings in exchange for contributing to a local educational programme. It began in Burma, and was amplified by the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, which allowed for bringing students to the States.[4] The Colombo Plan of 1950 is perhaps remembered above all for its provision of scholarships, a feature of this period, though that was not initially its chief purpose.

By the end of the 20th century, scholarships played only a small part in the international mobility of students. Elements in 'developing' countries were sufficiently wealthy to pay for or 'purchase' education overseas, and 'developed' countries saw reasons for selling it to them.

TOP: King's College, Cambridge University. BOTTOM: Clock tower of University of Auckland.

By the end of the 20th century, scholarships played only a small part in the international mobility of students. Elements in 'developing' countries were sufficiently wealthy to pay for or 'purchase' education overseas, and 'developed' countries saw reasons for selling it to them. The movement was associated with the concept of education as a 'commodity' to be bought, sold and traded in a market and with an ideology that (over) stressed that at tertiary level it became a 'private' good more than a 'public' one. But how did these associations develop?

Two countries have so far been the focus of research at the New Zealand Asia Institute. One is the UK. Our present conclusion is that decisions were made more on the basis of pragmatism that theory. The university and further education systems came under pressure from increasing demand at home and abroad at a time when Britain was in economic decline. Something had to give.

Public rather than private

The systems were essentially public rather than private, sustained by substantial grants from the Treasury, delivered through the University Grants Committee, or by local education authorities. Foreign students from developing countries were aided by full scholarships, under the Colombo Plan or otherwise, or by tuition fee scholarships administered by the British Council. But another, far greater source of aid, was indirect. Private students could also enrol, and, until 1967, they paid the domestic fee. And that covered only a relatively small proportion of the full cost of tuition. It was primarily in order to make savings that the Wilson government introduced a differential fee in 1967: overseas students would pay £250, as against an average domestic fee of £70. They would still be 'heavily subsidised'.[5]

The move, however, was seen as 'discrimination', and attracted much criticism. The £250 was raised once or twice in subsequent years, but not by as much as inflation. But the Labour government that had taken over in February 1974 was to face a major economic crisis. By 1976 the Government's search for savings covered spending departments like educations, and a very substantial increase in the fees for overseas students ensued. The fees for domestic students increased even more substantially, however, so that the differential was reduced to £100, further diminished by the decline in the value of the pound.[6]

The Conservative government under Mrs Thatcher, elected in May 1979, decided as part of urgent cuts in expenditure, to increase overseas fees for 1979/80 by 20% on top of a 9% increase Labour had announced.[7] Then, in November, it promulgated its full-fee policy.[8] New overseas students – but not EEC students – would pay the full cost of their courses from the start of the 1980/1 year. At the same time, the grants to institutions were reduced, making it necessary for them to recruit overseas students at the new fee levels. It was through this that they were drawn into the 'market'.

The full-fee policy was initially a regulative measure, the aim of which seemed to be to curb the influx, but it quite quickly became one, as Alan Smith and others put it, 'of even encouraging the influx provided that the students concerned pay'.[9] Ideology seemed to play no more than a supporting role.

The other country NZAI has investigated is, of course, New Zealand.[10] Alongside those on Colombo and other scholarship programmes, it accepted private students from the Colombo Plan area as well as the South Pacific, paying the low domestic fee, and so, like those in the UK, in effect subsidised by the taxpayer. The largest group came from Malaysia to study commerce and engineering. Predominant among them were Chinese Malaysians, deprived by ethnic quotas in their homeland of the opportunity it was deemed necessary to offer Malays.

By the late 1960s, their numbers had grown, passing 5 or 6% of the then relatively small university rolls. The New Zealand University Grants Committee set up the Overseas Students Admissions Committee, to allocate private overseas students according to quotas specified by the universities, starting with the 1971 intake. The New Zealand government thus took a different course to the UK on this matter: a smaller system made it easier to introduce centrally-administered quotas.

In the late 1970s, affected by economic and budgetary crises, the government changed course. It imposed a special fee of NZ$1500 on private overseas students. Its initial objective – influenced by UK precedents as well as its own necessities – was again to cut expenditure. NZ$1500 was not the full cost of a year at the university, but it was about half, depending on the faculty. Prime minister, Robert Muldoon, spoke of the earnings it would bring. In fact, it further reduced numbers, but that, after all, saved money.

The reduction in numbers by these two measures, coupled with the slow growth in domestic numbers in the later 1970s, prompted some ministers to consider a further step, not unlike the British, the sale of 'spare' places at full-cost to students more less from any country. That notion met a great deal of opposition. Education, it was argued, was not for sale. Within government and among bureaucrats the idea was contentious, and the necessary legislation had not been passed when the prime minister sought the dissolution of mid-1984.

The Labour government of the later 1980s first abolished the NZ$1500 fee, and then, influenced by free-market ideology, opened up the whole education system to private full-fee paying students, and encouraged private entrepreneurs to enter the field. But it was not until at the end of the 1990s, when Chinese students came in large numbers, that the full-cost venture showed its financial possibilities.

The other issue that attracts the Institute's interest relates not to origins but to impact. What effect does the movement have on the countries from which the students come, and on the institutions that receive them? In the past, returning students had – as some governments had feared – a major impact: they provided a source of revolutionaries in French Indo-China, in Netherlands India, in Siam/Thailand. Not much research seems to have been undertaken on the impact of the far larger number of students who studied overseas after the Second World War and returned home, a few notorious political cases aside, the Khmer Rouge leaders, for example.

Within institutions, while there are often large numbers of international students, they are distributed unevenly across the traditional faculties, the prime focus being on business and information technology. That may further emphasise the increasingly utilitarian nature of university study. It may also add to the difficulties of sustaining a university community, and enabling it to benefit from an internationalisation more genuine and generous than one focused surely too narrowly on numbers and dollars.

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