

CHITTAGONG ARMOURY RAIDERS

Reminiscences by Kalpana Dutt

Here is a book that will be a proud possession of every Indian that loves his country, for these memoirs present the story of those who have written with their very lives one of the most stirring chapters in our country's march to Freedom. Herself one of them, Kalpana Dutt narrates in a simple but moving style her own impression of the comrades-in-arms with whom she has fought and suffered. Here too is revealed the remarkable story of her coming over to Communism, a story that answers why almost all these brave Chittagong revolutionaries, both the leaders within prison-walls and their followers who are outside are to-day within the Communist Party, which can thus claim to be not only the historic but the living heir of their glorious patriotic traditions.

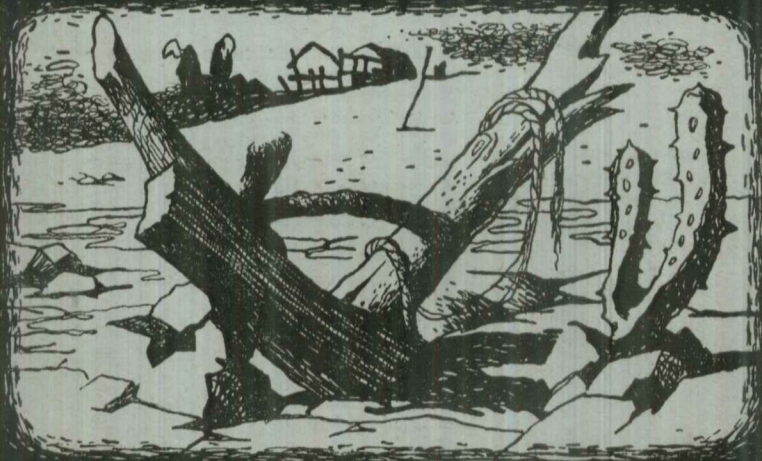
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1945

RURAL BENGAL in ruins



by **BHOWANI SEN**

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RURAL BENGAL IN RUINS

A storm seems to have blown over Bengal. In 1943 when thousands of hungry, emaciated men and women from the villages began a long queue of agony and death in Calcutta, the bankruptcy and corruption of an alien bureaucracy stood exposed before the entire world. In 1943 Bengal lacked only six weeks' foodstuffs, which certainly does not warrant such an unprecedented havoc lasting all through the year. In course of a single year 35 lakhs perished out of hunger, and 12 to 15 lakhs of men, women and children were turned into beggars. For a morsel of food men sold their wives and children and fought with the dogs in the drains and dustbins for a share of the crumbs and the leavings. And yet the Government and the ninety per cent of our countrymen did not save the remaining ten.

The Famine Enquiry Commission has declared that 15 lakhs have died as a result of the famine, but out of this very famine, the big merchants have made a surplus profit of Rs. 150 crores by selling the very rice for the want of which those 15 lakhs had to die. This is a telling testimony to the fact that the political deadlock has only strengthened the lowliest of the land and with them their lowliest instincts.

Foreign rule and the *zemindari* system have joined hands to fleece Bengal's peasants and craftsmen, they have not helped to build up her agriculture and industry. These twin burdens have forced a huge chunk of Bengal's population to struggle on semi-fed or underfed. When the war brought fresh burdens upon their already drooping shoulders, there was no way of escaping the death of millions.

The bulk of those who perished in 1943 came from among the peasants and the agricultural labourers. And these two sections also form the bulk of those who are

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

BHOWANI SEN, author of this pamphlet, is the Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of India. Entering political life even as a student, he joined the terrorist revolutionary movement in Bengal and spent nearly the whole of the thirties either in prison or internment. Revolutionary urge for freedom and patriotic desire to serve his people brought him into the Communist Party. During the last three years of hunger and devastation in Bengal, Bhowani Sen has been one of the very few of her sons to offer a correct lead to her people through a clear understanding and indefatigable service. Here in this short compass of forty pages, he not only touches upon all the various aspects of the collapse of Bengal's rural economy but also gives a call to the Bengalee people, Bengal's parties and her leaders to put their shoulders together in a common effort to meet the common catastrophe.

Translator's Note

This pamphlet was originally published in Bengali in May 1945. In the Bengali edition, passages quoted from English were translated into Bengali, from which again they have been re-translated into English. As it has not been possible to look up the original English references, it is likely that the passages in the present edition may not tally word for word with their original, but the translations as far as possible try to give a faithful rendering.

Bombay,
October 23, 1945.

NIKHIL CHAKRAVARTY.

EIGHT ANNAS

still surviving as destitutes. Why is it that the very people that grow the food were the first to fall and were the most severely hit? Four and a half crores out of Bengal's six crores are peasants and 90 per cent of Bengal's arable land produces paddy. And yet why should there be such a devastating famine in this very Bengal?

NEMESIS OF PERMANENT SETTLEMENT

Twenty years' average upto the year of the famine has shown that the extent of paddy lands in Bengal is a little over 2 crore acres, and the amount of rice grown therein comes to about 23 crore maunds. Bengal's six crore inhabitants need 30 crore maunds of rice a year, 27 crores according to other estimates. The curious thing is that side by side with this deficit coming up year after year, enormous stretches of land in Bengal yet lie uncultivated. The Floud Commission Report reveals that there is still 37 lakh acres of arable land lying fallow in Bengal. According to official calculations, every acre fetches 12.4 maunds of rice. If the 37 lakhs of fallow arable acres are permitted to be cultivated, they would add up another 5 crore maunds to the total annual rice-output in Bengal.

Such a large tract is left unused only because the *zemindar* is the owner of the land and refuses to spend a single copper on the land for cultivation. What he demands is that the peasant should pay him the *salami*, the rent, and at his own expense, clear the land, irrigate it and fertilise it. But the Bengal *kisan* has not got the means to pay for all that: lands with natural irrigations alone are therefore cultivated; plots that entail heavy expenses for irrigation are just not touched. Only 6.2 per cent of the entire arable acreage of Bengal is drained by the Government irrigation arrangements, while in other parts of India the Government covers a considerably larger acreage through its irrigation projects.

In the Punjab, 55 per cent and in Madras 33 per cent of the entire arable acreage is served by the irrigation arrangements. The innumerable rivers, canals and marshes in Bengal have no doubt reduced the expenses on irrigation; yet 37 lakhs of acres remain fallow owing to

lack of irrigation and manures, only because the dominant interest of both the Government and the *zemindar* is just to extract the rent from the peasant, and nobody spends anything on the land in the interest of the country as a whole.

The imperialist exploitation coupled with the *zemindari* fleecing have so thoroughly impoverished the bulk of Bengal's peasantry that the amount of land held per head by them is extremely meagre, so meagre that its produce does not meet their annual needs, and they have to depend on the outside market for their food. Most of the rice stock coming into the market is owned by the *zemindar*, the *jotedar* or the stockist. Had the tiller of the soil been able to meet his own need out of the produce of the very land he tills, the peasantry would not have been hit at all even if the price had soared to Rs. 100 a maund. But thanks to the Permanent Settlement, the peasant has been systematically impoverished during the last one decade, and with his impoverishment his land has passed on to other hands. Most of the peasants are now forced to buy from the market. The Floud Commission furnishes the following account of how many peasant families have how much land:

(A)	Less than 2 acres of land	46 per cent families
	2-3 acres	11.2 " "
(B)	3-4 acres	9.4 " "
	4-5 acres	8.0 " "
(C)	5-10 acres	17.0 " "
	more than 10 acres	8.4 " "

A family cannot have its annual requirement of paddy met from its own land with less than 2½ to 3 acres. None of the 57 per cent of families have got more than 3 acres of land. The first impact of the famine knocked them down.

Every year 10 crore maunds of the entire yield of rice comes to the market. Who controls the sale of this amount? It is not Group (A) of the above list—i.e. 57 per

famine; despite lower yield, whatever there was was locked up by the profiteer in his godown.

Distribution became the charge of a bureaucracy which from its top to bottom is tainted with corruption, a bureaucracy whose objective is not service of the people but exploitation and repression. At that time the Congress, the League and the Mahasabha were engaged in fratricidal bickerings, most of the patriots thinking that they had no part to play so far as distribution was concerned. And so the famine spread like a forest fire all over Bengal.

PEASANT HAS LOST HIS LAND

It is the good earth which is the very life of the kisan—nothing is more sacred, nothing more attractive than it. He would sell everything in his home, but his land he would not sell unless he was helpless and it was the only thing left to sell. Of those who have thus been thrown off the land, 15½ lakhs are still in a state of destitution. From the account given by the Government Sub-Registrars it is learnt that the sale of plots fetching Rs. 250 or less have totalled Rs. 10 crores worth of land. That is, during 1943, the poor peasants of Bengal have sold Rs. 10 crores worth of lands. (Refer to the table on page 7 which takes into account only the famine-devastated areas).

Not more than one per cent of the kisans who have thus lost their land, have got it back, not even by means of the legal provision for restitution. In 15 areas alone, 5 lakh kisans have sold off Rs. 10 crores worth of land in the course of a single year. In these areas, the number of plots with occupancy rights comes to 4,26,683, and that too only those whose price does not go beyond Rs. 250. The largest number of land transfer ever taking place in Bengal previous to this, was in 1923 when the number of plots sold (not restricted to plots worth less than Rs. 250) came to 3,14,000; even in the years succeeding the economic crisis of 1929, the number remained at lower than 2 lakhs. The displacement of peasantry from land had never before taken place on such a large scale as in 1943. The experts have concluded after proper enquiry that

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS OF LAND SALES DURING 1943 (Of holdings valued at not more than Rs. 250)

Name of the area	Tenancy Land			Tenancy land with occupancy rights		
	No. of sellers	Price of sale	No. of holdings	No. of sellers	Price of sale	No. of holdings
24 Parganas, Sadar and Diamond Harbour Sub-divisions	19,438	46,68,132	14,848	4,85,58	90,55,951	39,091
Faridpur District	1,770	2,51,452	1,453	84,252	1,20,74,432	76,202
Contai, Tamaluk Sub-division (Midnapur)	12,818	28,36,058	10,968	49,090	65,87,805	43,449
Howrah Sadar and Uluberia	4,723	14,82,875	3,455	28,860	51,23,433	20,086
Burdwan Sadar and Kalna	9,462	21,40,731	6,697	21,745	48,08,848	15,667
Satkira Sub-division (Khuina)	940	2,24,281	672	6,995	18,97,234	5,104
Kandi Sub-division (Murshidabad)	3,024	4,82,863	3,030	14,662	17,95,875	12,770
Nilphamari (Rangpur)	484	61,495	370	33,268	27,06,381	31,997
Narayanganj, Manikganj, Munshiganj	996	2,19,637	671	1,12,917	2,32,07,412	87,089
Noakhali District	2,728	3,41,324	2,102	22,884	34,82,044	19,011
Hooghly Sadar and Arambagh	1,572	3,85,954	1,177	9,736	17,21,052	6,111
Chittagong District	227	81,405	180	13,443	22,08,215	11,501
Bakurganj Sadar and Bhola	401	92,363	325	29,338	59,04,430	23,985
Tangail Sub-division (Mymensingh)	132	26,028	98	19,224	31,17,366	17,649
Chandpur Sub-division (Tippera)	1,171	1,86,641	757	23,405	52,12,983	17,021
Total	60,436	1,34,81,239	46,758	5,13,831	8,89,03,079	4,26,683

5 per cent of the peasantry have sold off their entire property. Another 11 per cent have sold off a portion of their holdings. This land has been bought by the **zemin-dar**, the **jotedar** and the contractor. It is these people who piled up tons of gold through the war. Most of the peasants who have quitted their land have begun to be engaged as day labourers on others' holdings, and the rest have turned into beggars. Through the same occupation of cultivation, the simple relation of rural life has been smashed up and has given place to a heart-rending contrast of enormous property side by side with appalling destitution. From brothers to each other they have turned themselves into slaves and masters.

KISANS YOKED TO PLOUGH—NO BULLOCKS

Among those who would rather starve and beg than give up their land, there are many who do not have the bullocks to plough their land. Even under normal conditions it was the well-off **jotedars** who had most of the bullocks. 50 per cent of the bullocks in Bengal were owned by the remaining four-fifths all together. Many of these driven by the sight of hunger gnawing at their women and children had to sell their bullocks to buy rice. During 1943-44, twenty per cent of the bullocks either perished or passed into the hands of the non-tillers. A bullock which cost Rs. 50 before famine now costs Rs. 200 to Rs. 250 and even at that price it is scarce, and where available, most of the peasants have not got the means to purchase it.

The Government has sanctioned cattle purchase loan for the peasants but its unbelievable meagreness is evident from the fact that in an entire union, the sanctioned grant has come to Rs. 1,000 only, that is, the total price of 5 to 6 bullocks! At this rate, it comes to less than one bullock per thousand kisans. In many cases, the few kisans who had got the money could not secure a bullock because there is no arrangement for supplying bullocks. Goaded by want, the kisan has eaten up the cattle loan. And now, repeated reminders are coming to him from the Government to pay up the loan. So, instead of securing

the bullock, the kisan has just added to his burden of debts.

The scarcity of cattle is so acute and the desire to live on the part of the kisan is so strong that at places the spectacle of the kisan yoking his own son or brother to the plough has been witnessed. But not all can do such a thing, and so there are cases where the kisan has sold off his holding owing to want of cattle.

AGRICULTURE AT STANDSTILL

Those who are fortunate to have cattle cannot always afford to provide nourishment to the cattle. The price of oil-cake even in the year of the famine was at Rs. 10 or 11 per bag, now it cannot be had for less than Rs. 17 or 18. The prices of agricultural implements have gone up by 3 to 4 times.

According to the estimate of the Agricultural Department of the Bengal Government, the cost of paddy cultivation per acre in 1937 in the districts of Rajshahi and Bogra was Rs. 18-9, in Birbhum Rs. 25-8. Calculating on the basis of the amount of agricultural requirements mentioned in that estimate, we have worked out an estimate of the cost of cultivation in 1944. In 1944 the cost of cultivation in Rajshahi-Bogra has gone up to Rs. 57-6 per acre, in Birbhum to Rs. 67-9 per acre. According to this, the cost of just producing a maund of paddy comes to Rs. 5. In some of the districts, the cost of producing one maund of paddy comes to as high as Rs. 7. Under such conditions, the poorer sections of the people cannot obviously afford to purchase the rice that is sold at a price that guarantees a profit, in addition to the cost of growing it with hired labour.

In normal conditions, even where the poor peasant sold off his land, the **jotedars** could supply rice at a cheap rate after having grown it with hired labour and having kept a margin of profit. But such conditions no longer prevail.

The land of the poor peasant is passing into the hands of the **zemin-dar**, the **jotedar** and the contractor. If they want to make it a commercial venture to raise

crops by means of hired labour, on a large scale, then the price of foodstuffs would rise rather than fall, while the poor peasant finds it impossible to retain his own holding. Agricultural implements, cattle, manure—everything has disappeared from the market. This is the picture of agriculture at a standstill.

But for the present, cultivation would not be stopped on that account. 65.9 per cent of the peasants till their own soil themselves with the help of their families. They would carry on with cultivation whether the cost of cultivation is covered by the sale of the produce or not. Other peasants and *jotedars* too will not leave their land fearing an outright loss. They would carry on with cultivation in the traditional way, but how long could things go on in this way?

The urge to survive goads the peasant to continue with cultivation somehow or other, and the land is not left untended. In the very year of the famine, he has raised the crop in every acre even when he was almost dying of starvation. So, in 1944 the fields were found to be overflowing with an unbounded yield, as it were. We only notice the golden crop in the field and the appearance of rice in the market, but we do not realise at the same time the changes brought about in the life of the peasant and in that of the village community. The propertied peasant is today dependent upon the prosperous peasant in the village or upon the *jotedar* for his land, his cattle, for oil-cake and even for seed. He has to sell himself at any terms to secure land, cattle and seed, or he would be reduced to a day labourer. The propertied peasant is today being reduced to become a day labourer, a debt-serf or a slave. Bengal's rural community is mainly a community of propertied peasants—today it is being reduced to a community of landed serfs.

WANT AND UNREST IN EVERY HOME

From the home of the peasant, the craftsman or of the middle class—peace and contentment have gone for good. Because of rationing in Calcutta, the black-marketeers could not run away with the rice this year. The

bumper crop of last year has staved off famine from the villages even though the Government has shirked the responsibility of supply. But that does not mean that the cost of living has come down—rather, it has gone up compared to 1943.

Cloth cannot be had in Calcutta, leave aside the mofussil. Black-market sells a pair of *dhoties* or *saris* at Rs. 20 to 25 and none but the fortunate rich can get it. The village women have to remain in semi-nudity owing to lack of cloth, and reports have come of husbands divorcing their wives on that account. Cases are not rare of ladies from *bhadralog* families having to put on rags from torn quilt-covers or loin cloth. As with the rice queues of 1943, the cloth queues of 1945 are turning into big jostling and fighting crowds.

In 1943 there was at least the arrangement for *khi-churi* (for gruel) distribution with the opening of kitchens. But in 1945 there is no arrangement for cloth distribution. The Government have announced that even in case of rationing, they will not be able to grant more than 10 yards per head per year.

Mustard oil is about to disappear from the market. The control rate for mustard oil is Re. 1-5-6 a seer, but it cannot be had at the control rate, it is being sold at Rs. 2 per seer in the black-market. The control price of salt is 0-3-6 a seer, but most people have to buy from the black-market at 0-6-0 a seer. In 1944, the price of salt went up as high as Re. 1 a seer, and only after rationing the price has come down. The supply of sugar has been reduced. In the villages good and clean sugar cannot be had at all, the villagers have to buy the worst quality sugar—full of dirt and inedible—at Re. 1 a seer. There is rationing of sugar and salt in the villages, but only the influential people in the village get it while the illiterate poor are left out. Even middle-class householders have practically been forced to give up fish and milk.

Every family has been hit by this scarcity, but nothing has hit a middle-class family more than this. The increase in their earnings has been far outstripped by the rise in their expenses. So the burden of debt has grown in every

poor family in the village. The data collected by the Kisan Samiti workers show the increase in indebtedness in the worst of the famine-affected areas:

Description of the family.	Percentage of families in debt in 1943.	Percentage of families in debt in 1944.
Kisan Families	43	66
Various Craftsmen	27	56
Miscellaneous	17	46

From this account, some developments may be clearly discerned: first, at present more than half the population in the village are indebted to a section in the village. Secondly, in course of one year since 1943 the amount of rural indebtedness has enormously increased. Thirdly, nowadays the debts of the various middle-class families have increased more than of any of the others. The means of livelihood are daily dwindling as the expenses are going up day by day. There is no way of escape from this indebtedness. It will culminate in the enslavement of most of the villagers to a section of the village rich.

Middle-class families are going to pieces on the impact of the crisis. For the last 50 years, the joint families in Bengal had been disintegrating. This crisis has precipitated the collapse. The dominant problem of every middle class *bhadralog* is to survive at any cost. The earning that is made in schools, in literary pursuits, in small trading or in ordinary employment in the *mofussil* does not suffice for anybody today. With that earning one cannot maintain five dependents. So, everybody is going their own way in pursuit of fresh earnings. Those without any earning do not nowadays get the same amount of help from friends and relatives as in the past. Thus, self-interest, selfishness and meanness are vitiating the peace and harmony of middle-class homes.

For the last one hundred years, it is the endowment and charity of the middle class that have built up Bengal's education and culture. It is their initiative, care and service that have kept up the corporate life in the village; the village library, sports, entertainments, ceremonies and

festivals have infused life into communal existence. Today the life of the same middle class has cracked up, the village school, sports, entertainments and even the village library today are in most cases left untended. A tremendous transformation is taking place inside the life of the village, and this transformation is not towards growth, nor towards life, but towards ruin and death.

EXTINCTION OF VILLAGE ARTISANS

The poor peasant is struggling with the little that he has for his very life. Many among the educated middle class are tirelessly trying for jobs abroad. Village craftsmen, like the fisherman, the leather worker, the blacksmith, the potter, and the weaver, are almost going extinct as a class. They received the worst shock during the famine, and today too they are having to face the biggest obstacles to rehabilitate themselves.

Chittagong's fisherman population numbered 29,000. During the famine, 25,000 fishermen came to the relief kitchens; of them nearly 8,000 have since died of hunger. Most of the rest are even today wandering about like destitutes. Without shelter, without their fishing nets, without boats, with families disintegrating and relatives torn apart from each other—such is the plight of Chittagong's fishing community. A local worker has given the following description of a village in Nadia district:

"Gadgacha is a village in Nadia district, with a population of 30 families. The total number of heads in 1942 was 149. At present there are 98 in the village of whom 38 are boys and girls. . . . During the year of the famine, they lost their nets, their yarn, their boats, etc. The marshes in this area have gone into the hands of the *zemindars* and bigger contractors. Fishermen have to pay rent for fishing and the rate of rent is exorbitantly high." (Janayuddha, 6th December, 1944.)

In Kumarbhog Union of Dacca district, out of 50 houses in a fishermen's locality, only 30 still survive. Half the people have perished. Only 5 or 7 families have got

fishing nets, not a single one has got a boat, and none have the means to hire a boat. In the fishermen's locality in Dakshin Medinimandal, only two-thirds of the population have survived.

Drummers, carpenters, washermen and such other groups are in the same plight as the fishermen. In *Janayuddha*, (Vol. 3, No. 7), Subhas Mukhopadhyaya gives the following description of village life in Vikrampore in the district of Dacca:

"The nights are no longer filled with the sound of drums in the drummers' para (locality). In the past, they used to be called from such distant places as Chittagong and Mymensingh, but nowadays festivals and ceremonies have practically died out.

It is doubtful if a quarter of the festivities held in the past takes place today. Leather work is almost closed. Carpentry is also at a standstill. The cane sells at Rs. 3 to 3-8, but there is no buyer in the market. Besides, owing to transport difficulties, import of cane from Assam has practically ceased, while the supply from Faridpur side is held up with people being afraid to proceed there because of the virulence of malaria in those very areas. The drummers' para in Tangibari village is almost wiped out."

Among the village craftsmen, the condition of weavers was so far the best of all. There are 2 lakhs of weavers in Bengal, who with their families would form a community of 12 lakhs. Weavers supply one-fourth of Bengal's total requirements of cloth. Today the whole of Bengal is faced with cloth famine, while the weavers are lying idle owing to lack of yarn.

In the district of Bogra "in the village of Dashtika, 200 weavers' families live. The total number of looms is 173 and 25 persons have got 4 to 5 bighas of arable lands. During the famine 50 of them had to save themselves by eating at the town relief kitchen, while the epidemics have car-

ried off 60 more. Of 25, 13 have turned into day labourers by selling off their total of 52 bighas of land. Nearly 100 weavers have somehow carried on by mortgaging their looms to one or two prosperous and rising weavers. Not only at Dashtika, but in all the villages of the district, such is the plight of the weavers." (*Janayuddha*, 15-3-45.)

Such examples can be multiplied.

Weaver's yarn, blacksmith's iron, fisherman's net, potter's earth, shoemaker's leather—every article of need for the village craftsman has gone into the blackmarket. Only those who are fortunate enough to collect raw materials from blackmarket, can carry on with their traditional hereditary crafts. Leaving aside the question of getting the destitute back into society, even those who still survive in society are themselves heading towards destitution.

The very same village craftsmen who have so long struggled against foreign imported goods and the factories in our country, are today on the point of extinction as a result of the war crisis and famine. In our country, machine industries have not grown up to a sufficient degree—at least, there is not enough industrialism as to be able to absorb the village poor or to meet the demands of our people's requirements—while, on the other hand, the crafts of the village craftsmen are about to be closed down. The village craftsmen are in a helpless state, being reduced to paupers without a prop.

Thanks to foreign rule, Bengal's economy and society were already being undermined and weakened year by year, and these have not had the strength to stand up to the strain of the war crisis. War had not sullied Bengal's soil, the foreign invader could not set his foot on Bengal, and yet the impact of the crisis has sent Bengal's society and economy tottering like a house of cards.

RELICS OF THE FAMINE

Famine has visited India many a time. But each of the previous waves of famine was merely a crisis lasting for a year. Crop failure might have led to scarcity one

year, and the crisis disappeared with the coming in of the new crop with the new year. None of these famines left behind any permanent scar upon the society. The Bengal Famine of 1943 was not mere food scarcity of a year. With the country in bondage, the regime of the bureaucracy coupled with the influence of the Permanent **Zemindari** Settlement had so crippled Bengal's agriculture, industry and even social life, that the war crisis led to famine. The disintegration started by the famine has shaken the entire social structure to its very roots, and that process of disintegration still continues—long after the famine itself is over. This wound shall not be automatically healed up, it would take a long time to recover, and to bring that about Bengal's social fabric has to be rebuilt afresh.

According to official reports, out of Bengal's 6 crore population, the famine severely hit the lives of 2 crores. There are 90 sub-divisions in Bengal, in 29 of which the famine appeared in its worst form. Bengal's total area is 82,955 square miles, of which the entire people in 21,665 square miles were very severely hit by the famine (vide Famine Enquiry Committee Report, p. 96).

Thirty-five lakhs have perished in the famine. Those who have survived present the problem of the day. Experts opine that 10 per cent of the population in the devastated areas are yet destitutes. Well-known statisticians have shown that 12 lakhs of people are still destitute beggars. The number of impoverished but not totally destituted comes to 60 lakhs. Of them, 27 lakhs are agricultural labourers, 15 lakhs are poor peasants, 15 lakhs village artisans, and 25,000 school teachers. Besides there are people from other classes. In a word, the main fields of social and economic activity in practically one-half of Bengal have been ruined by the famine.

It is impossible for these destitutes to rehabilitate themselves on their own because the entire social life is today in a state of complete anarchy. The peasant, the artisan and the middle class—the economic and social position of them all is precariously threatened, everyone

is engaged in a desperate life-and-death struggle individually.

The destitute is recruited from every section and class of society. He is not a professional beggar: only two years back he was one-among-the-ten in society and like the others, had his own home, his family, his occupation. As the famine overtook him, he at first spent off his savings, and then dragged on by borrowing. When he could no longer get any loan, he sold off all his property—movable and immovable and finally pauperised, trudged into the relief kitchen. As he took to the road, the old family ties of the wife and children were broken, there remained only the desperate animal effort of everybody to fill his own belly. Even in the dustbin and the drain man and dog have scrambled with each other for the leavings.

The shock of this brutal transformation wiped off all yearnings for property, family, religion and society from his mind. The mother sold off her own son, the husband his wife. Had this vast army started looting, then in one moment the whole of Bengal would have been turned into a jungle infested with ferocious beasts. It was not that there was nothing to loot in the country—rather the rich have enriched themselves in this very period. But these destitutes came from the villages, saturated with the love of peace and honesty, characteristic of rural society. They are the inheritors of a great and ancient civilisation, and standing even in the queue of death, they kept up within themselves the last streak of civilisation, the unbounded fortitude of our village civilisation kept them away from the path of looting.

HOUSEHOLDERS TURNING INTO BEGGARS

There has hardly been any concerted effort to rehabilitate the destitutes into society. Agriculture, crafts, commerce—everything is at a standstill. And yet everybody is thinking: what is to be done; nothing can be done; there is no way out. Those upon whom prosperity has smiled thanks to the war, only think of minting gold by any and every means. And over our destiny there presides a bureaucracy that has nothing to do with people's ser-

vice, and whose sole concern is to maintain its own domination unimpeded. Under such circumstances, rather than the destitute being reinstated into the householder, it is more than likely that the householder is turned into the destitute. So, for the last two years, the broken-up middle-class families have swelled the ranks of nomadic beggars, without homes and without the ties of society.

The following data collected by relief workers reveal the dangerous increase in the number of beggars:

Name of the sub-division.	No. of families investigated	Percentage of beggars among the total number of families		
		1939	1943	1944
Tangail	269	.55	1.1	2.21
Tamluk	478	4.00	7.33	8.33
Diamond Harbour	269	1.72	3.69	6.78
Hooghly	244	2.1	2.1	2.9
Narayanganj	233	2.71	2.79	5.15

Compared to 1939, the number of beggars has doubled in Tamluk and Narayanganj and gone up by four times in Tangail and Diamond Harbour. From the experience of the 15 worst-affected subdivisions, it may be safely said that in every subdivision, seven per cent of the families, on the average, earn their living by begging. This is possible only in the country where man has lost the urge to serve the country. For the country in which people take to begging so rapidly and in such large numbers, it is obvious that their natural economy has broken to pieces.

EPIDEMICS

Those who could somehow survive the famine were caught in the grip of epidemics.

The Publicity Department of the Bengal Government has announced that upto September 1944, 12 lakhs have died of epidemics. That means that the tide of death that the famine brought to Bengal in 1943 has continued unabated through 1944, thanks to epidemics.

Famine and destitution have so ruthlessly sapped the vitality of the Bengalees that today any and every disease

takes on the proportion of an epidemic and death-rate mounts to unprecedented levels.

The first wave of epidemics came in August-September 1943 along with the famine. The famine-stricken people were infected with cholera and dysentery as they had started eating inedible and rotten foodstuffs.

There is no record of the number of deaths as a result of this, only a faint idea could be had from some of the hospitals working then. About this time, diseases spread so rapidly in the villages in Rangpur district that the Kisan Sabha workers out to combat the famine were incapacitated by diseases. The local leaders and workers of some of the powerful Kisan Samiti bases lost their lives through cholera and small-pox. Those who stood up against the famine could not stem the march of the epidemics. In those very areas where the famine appeared in its worst form, as for instance in Faridpore, Chittagong and North Bakerganj, came the epidemics with their trail of death, as in Rangpur.

The second wave of epidemics came in December 1943 and lasted till February 1944. The dominant ailments this time were malaria and small-pox. Malaria took such a virulent form that the death-rate this year far surpassed any previous records. In the first four months of 1944, malaria took a toll of 2 lakhs of deaths in Bengal. This account is collected by the Bengal Government's Health Department. In seven of the districts of North and East Bengal, small-pox assumed the proportions of an epidemic, and in the first three months of 1944, in those seven districts alone, 45,000 people died of small-pox. The figure for these districts for 1943 was 1,000 only. In the district of Rangpur it became impossible to hold hats or markets or meetings and demonstrations owing to the prevalence of small-pox, and small-pox victims could be seen roaming about the streets like the hungry destitutes of a few months back.

From April to June, the tempo of epidemics lessened to a certain extent. But with the first burst of monsoon the third wave of epidemics was upon us. This time it was malaria. Practically every district of Bengal was at-

tacked. At its peak in September, nearly half of Bengal's population was suffering from malaria. In the suburbs of Calcutta, at Narkeldanga and Beliaghata, malaria affected every home. The relief workers got the following account by collecting the data from some of the localities in the mofussil:

Name of the sub-division	Percentage of population affected
Tangail (Mymensingh District) ..	47
Tamluk (Midnapore District) ..	33
Hooghly ..	8
Meherpur (Nadia District) ..	9
Narayanganj (Dacca District) ..	15

Such widespread epidemics not only leave behind a trail of death, they hit agriculture and industry and increase destitution in the community. Many able-bodied persons became completely incapacitated through repeated attacks of disease. At many places with the incapacitation of 10 per cent of the earning persons, their dependents only swelled the army of the destitutes. Hunger in 1943 and disease in 1944 have reduced many families into beggars and have increased the number of deserted villages.

Death coming like the tidal wave is engulfing village after village and driving women and children in a state of helplessness to the mire of destitution. There is no estimate of how many thousands have been crippled for good as a result. Professors P. C. Mahalanobis and K. P. Chattopadhyaya are collecting data about the aftermath of the famine on a wide scale. The day when such data will be published, there will be revealed to the world the story of the staggering tragedy that has befallen our great and ancient nation.

In the villages of Bengal, the birth-rate is falling, and death-rate has begun to outstrip the birth rate. Below is given the report from two villages taken from the vital statistics kept by the District Boards:

Year	Chittagong D. C. (Per thousand)		15 unions in Kusthia P. S. (Nadia Dist.) excluding Kusthia Municipality (Total number)	
	Births	Deaths	Births	Deaths
1942	22.1	21.07	2,826	3,285
1943	15.1	47.05	2,381	4,503
1944	13.92	28.6	1,234	2,778

This may be taken as the portrait of the famine-devastated areas. Should the Bengalee race go out of existence in this way? Perhaps it won't be extinct, for the desire to live, to exist is strong in man, and so the destitute and the diseased will struggle to live on somehow, by some means or the other. If society cannot provide for their existence, they will go outside its pale and still fight on for their existence. Among the disabled, the weak and the crippled, nothing shall matter but the animal instinct of filling one's belly—some would turn into the slaves of the rich, yet others would become anti-social criminals.

Such is the deadly devastation wrought by disease, and yet the urge for ready and unhesitating charity is lacking among Bengal's rich. There are not a few in Bengal who have piled up fortunes out of the war and through black-marketing by hoarding during the famine, but the fountain of patriotism and charity in them has dried up.

At a Press Conference called on June 6, 1944, in connection with the appeal for help for the Bengal Medical Relief Co-ordination Committee, Dr. B. C. Roy remarked:

"I have not got the same amount of help from Bengal as I have got from outside. It is true that the capacity to donate of Bengal's public has gone down to a great extent during the last famine, but many have grown rich in this period. Why are not they coming forward with help? My appeal to the press therefore is that they should through their respective papers carry on a campaign for this. It is my firm belief that with proper campaigning and propaganda, plenty of help would be forthcoming from Bengal." (Janayuddha, 14th June, 1944.)

BLACK-MARKETING IN MEDICINE

When the disease became rampant, medicine like other commodities, also disappeared. Quinine is the only medicine for malaria. Last year when malaria was the most virulent, quinine could nowhere be found in the market. In the countryside, quinine has been sold in the black-market at as high as Rs. 900 per lb., while the control rate is only Rs. 37-8-0 per lb. At that time the market rate in Calcutta was Rs. 400 per lb. Even today, quinine cannot be had for less than Rs. 200 per lb. in the Calcutta market. All the other ingredients of medicines are mostly the monopolies of big European firms, and they are all sold at a far higher price than the Government control rate, and even then cannot always be had. Below is given the comparative control and black-market prices of some of the chemicals:

Name of the chemical	Control rate	Market rate
Soda bicarb	Rs. 15 per cwt.	Rs. 60 per cwt.
Boric acid	Rs. 0-13-0 per lb.	Rs. 5-8-0 per lb.
Carbolic acid	Rs. 1-14-0 per lb.	Rs. 25 per lb.

The market rate went up in the middle of 1944, but has recently come down a little.

When medicines are so expensive, it is next to impossible for the poor to consult a doctor or to get medicines. In this anarchy, death was the only alternative left to them. It is difficult for the poorer doctors to procure medicines, and under such circumstances, adulteration in medicine is widespread. On the one hand is the virulence of disease, and on the other is the scarcity of medicines, and the two together have spread a serious panic in the country.

In August 1944, a Conference of doctors, medical students and druggists was held in the Indian Medical Association Hall under the presidentship of Dr. B. C. Roy. At that Conference the following resolution was adopted:

"This Conference is of the opinion that unless sufficient quantities of medicines are supplied through non-official organisations, the black-mar-

ket in these things cannot be stopped. This Conference appeals to the manufacturers and sellers of drugs that they should resist from black-marketing in medicines needed to save millions of lives.

RULE OF THE BLACKMARKET

Why should there be such an acute scarcity in Bengal's villages? Why should there be such an exorbitant rise in the price of every necessity? The traders say, there is not enough supply in the country, and with no imports, prices go up. That is true. But there is such a thing as honesty, and to corner goods to raise the prices, and to raise them to such a prohibitive level that none but the rich can afford to buy them—this certainly is not honesty. Honest trade implies selling at such a rate that the producer after meeting his expenses should get a natural and reasonable amount of profit. To raise the prices at the time of scarcity simply because it could be done because of the scarcity, no matter if that means death to millions of our countrymen, is the code of the jungle, not of civilised society. During the war, it is this code of the jungle which has become the policy of the producers and the traders.

Prices are controlled so that none may have to pay beyond his capacity and at the same time the producer may get a just price. Whenever a commodity is put under control, immediately the traders remove it from the market; their game being to force the people to buy at a higher rate than the controlled rate. Government has controlled the price of many commodities, but has not arranged for the supply, and so the traders, if they wish, can easily conceal their stocks and refuse to sell at the controlled rate. This way the black-market is born.

The factory owner and the trader have all the time been glued to the idea of making money. That is why they indiscriminately go in for the black-market, and are not in the least repentant for that. They have no other religion but of piling gold. The penury of fellowmen is their opportunity for enriching themselves. The rich man has

got money, and can buy at any price. He is concerned with how to get things for his own self, and does not bother about the community, whether it should live or die. So he abets in the black-market and maintains himself by making friends with the black-marketeer.

This way the black-marketeer has established his kingdom in Bengal, and today there is no market except the black-market in Bengal.

In 1941 when Japan unleashed war in the Pacific, there came about a dislocation of transport and the fall in all foreign imports. The Government fixed the prices of a few commodities on paper only, but made no attempt to enforce the control price. The traders slowly began to sell at prices higher than the control rate, and so became pastmasters in this black art.

The patriots did not raise a finger against the traders. "It is the Government's job to enforce control rate, and not ours"—this became the patriots' axiom. So the traders had nothing to fear. They found that the Government would not come down upon them, since it did not care for the people; most of the patriots would not protest since they feared that any action against the black-marketeer would be co-operation with the Government.

When Jap bombs fell on Chittagong and Calcutta, the crisis deepened—transport was at a standstill, people were in panic and chaos was everywhere. At this time, the big traders demanded fantastic prices for every commodity. Whenever rigid control of prices was tried, they would not delay in removing the commodity wholesale from the market. The patriots did not come out to propagate that such hoarding is unjust and against the interests of the community. The hoarders raised the demand: remove the controls, let there be free trade and the prices would come back to the normal. Many of the patriots chimed in with them—they never spoke for a moment against hoarding.

The hoarders turned to rice. Rice yield was low, import had been stopped, famine was at hand, and therefore trading in rice meant minting of gold. Bigger traders turned to the mofussil to buy up rice stocks for hoarding.

When millions began to die like rats on the streets, and the entire society cracked up, it was not because there was no rice in the country at the time. The well-off middle-class families did not die of hunger, for they could secure rice, a maund for Rs. 50 was then available. The Government made no arrangement to import rice from overseas, the well-off in the country too did not follow the code of dividing up their stocks equally in the interest of all. And so the poor died and their homes cracked up.

Towards the end of 1943, the demand for rationing came. The traders then raised a new cry. They thundered: no rationing, enforce the control rate.

After 1943 it was no longer possible to play havoc with rice. Rationing in Calcutta, a bumper crop and Government purchase made it difficult to hoard rice. There is no acute scarcity of rice so far this year, but there has come cloth famine instead. What the traders in rice did in 1943, the traders in cloth are doing today. When the countrywide cloth scarcity has made it difficult for our womanhood to hide their shame, the traders calmly declare that there is no cloth. And yet in Calcutta 20,000 bales of cloth were unearthed recently after the raid on 3,000 shops. Besides this in many parts of Bengal cloth hoarding on a large scale has been detected.

The *Ananda Bazar Patrika* of 25th January, 1945 reports:

"On receiving information from certain sources the police have recovered 78 bales of cloth from a Burrabazar merchant. Its value is estimated at one and a half lakh rupees."

The *Statesman* of the 11th February, 1945 reports that the Enforcement Department Police have recovered Rs. 50,000 worth of *dhotis* and *saris* from a merchant in Lohia Normal Lane.

The *Hindustan Standard* of 6th March, 1945 publishes the news of the police recovering Rs. 25,000 worth of cloth from a Marwari merchant at Jhalakathi in Barisal district: it transpired that the merchant had concealed the stock in the latrine.

The **Nationalist** of the 7th March, 1945 reports the Enforcement Department Police have recovered 4 bales of cloth worth Rs. 10,000 from the secret godown of a certain merchant in Central Calcutta.

Such news-reports are daily pouring in, and yet these merchants swear everywhere that there is no cloth.

The hoarder belongs to such a brutal and heartless tribe that he can remain absolutely unmoved at the sight of thousands of men and women going without food and clothing, and all that for his unquenchable greed. The virus of his greed has poisoned the entire society.

The code of the war-rich is to get richer, and today the only way to get rich is to hoard and then sell at exorbitant prices.

Cloth, oil, salt, sugar, medicine, every commodity has passed into the deadly grip of the black-marketeer. Where distribution is arranged through Food Committees, the black-marketeer sneaks into the Food Committee itself. Many of the Food Committees in Bengal have passed into the hands of the black-marketeers. Where Government dealers are appointed for distribution, there too the black-marketeer gets himself installed as the dealer. **This way in every village and town, a new tribe of the rich has come to birth, recruited from various sections like the zemindar, the jotedar, the merchant, and the war-contractor. The scum from every class have turned into hoarders. Their vicious influence permeates the entire society.**

The hoarder creates a new conflict inside society. The link between the town and the village has so long been maintained through free trade. Goods from the town used to go to the village and the goods from the village come to the town. And so this free trade would bring agricultural products to the town-dweller and factory products to the villager. The **ganjs** and **bandars** (the traditional centres of commerce) in the mofussil formed the bridge between the village and the town. The kisan would get his due in return for the produce of his soil at the **ganj** and could buy the town products in return there. Through this exchange at these centres the light of learning and culture has so long travelled into the village. With the

awakening of patriotic consciousness the tie of political ideas has also united the town and the village.

But today when the villages are nothing but a grim picture of devastation, the **ganjs** and the **bandars** have degenerated into the stinking dens of hoarders excelling in profiteering, the lock-up of all the necessities of life like rice, sugar, salt and cloth. Town products no longer find their way into the village, nor does the village produce come to the town, for both go to the black-market and from there corruption spreads to the town, the village, and everywhere. The town, the **ganj** and the village—all have lost the age-old links between themselves. On one side the black-marketeer, on the other the entire people—this is the class division of the Bengal of today.

Patriotism has no place today in either production or distribution. The social fabric would not have been torn to pieces when the unnatural demands made by the war and the extraordinary circumstances created by it fell heavily upon the national economy, had there been at the time a Government in which the people had confidence, a Government which would have respected the democratic rights of the people, a Government which would have roused the patriotism of the people, and thereby fulfilled all the tasks of war, production and distribution. But the bureaucracy in this country, opposed as it is to the people's interest, has neither taken up that work nor has any intention of taking it up.

Thus the anti-social interests have raised their heads through its elaborate machinery, the interests of the society have been trampled upon, and those whose sole interest is to make money by hook or by crook, have come to dominate production and distribution. During the famine, the Government has not handed over the work of purchase and sale of food and cloth to the patriotic workers but to the profit-grabbing merchants, for whom money counts far more than patriotism.

So today, it is no longer a question of saving the lives of destitutes—even those who are established in society are heading fast towards destitution and death. The question of rehabilitating the devastated society is overshadowed

by the fact that the devastation still goes on, and the destiny of the nation is in the dirty and cruel hand of the black-marketeer.

BUREAUCRATIC CORRUPTION

Bureaucratic corruption provides the biggest shelter for the black-marketeer. Had the bureaucracy not been so corrupt, the black-marketeer could not have been so powerful. Under the grace of bribed bureaucrats they are safely piling up fortunes out of the tears of the poor.

The *Statesman* of January 31, 1945 reported that investigations were being made in Calcutta in connection with a case involving bribes to the extent of Rupees 50 lakhs. Many officials and contractors are involved in it. In this connection it was revealed that an employee of the Civil Supplies Department had been arrested on a charge of having taken a bribe of Rs. 2,000. Who these persons are is not known to the public, because their names have not been published.

The Special Department of the Central Government has recently investigated 667 cases of bribery in different provinces, out of which prosecution has been launched in the case of 271. In these, 82 Commissioned Gazetted officials are implicated. The number of undetected cases is legion. Black-marketing is just not possible without bribing some Government employee or the other. Bribery has become the order of the day, so much so that the ordinary trader cannot carry on with his trade without offering bribes.

Regarding the amount of the bribe, a specimen may be quoted: a letter appeared in the *Statesman* of January 24, 1945. The writer held that the bribes paid by the people on various counts in the course of a year amount to Rs. 60 crores. Before the war, the Defence of the entire country did not involve such a huge expenditure. The pre-war annual revenue of the Bengal Government came to one-fifth of this amount. It is not known how the gentleman arrived at the figure of Rs. 60 crores, but considering the widespread nature of this vice today, Rs. 60 crores is not a fantastic amount. The Civil Supplies Department,

the cloth shops, the railway station, the Union Board office, the Police Station—all these are the black centres of bribery today. Black-market is bound to flourish with bribery prevalent from top to bottom in the administration. For the black-marketeer as well as the corrupt bureaucrat bribery is part of the daily routine.

The recent Rowland Commission enquiring into the corruption of the Government employees commented:

“Corruption is so widespread and defeatism with regard to fighting it out is so strong that there is no way but to stamp it out with a strong hand. Government officials and the public are being tainted with it. Unless it is stamped out, the poor public will be its victim. The entire burden of bribery falls on the shoulders of the poor, and the corrupt and the dishonest alone prosper.”

Comment is unnecessary on this open admission of corruption in the administration by Government's own appointed commission.

The black-marketeer has not only entrenched himself among the Government officials, but is now becoming the leader of society as well. In the rural areas, it is he who presides over the destiny of the people, and it is his code which is being recognised in the society as a whole. **To force up prices by eluding the control, to sell goods without licence and to hoard with the sure knowledge of the other's wants—few today regard these as corrupt practices. Mutual help in the face of dire distress is hardly in evidence today.**

SOCIAL CORRUPTION

Corruption has begun to corrode the very heart of society.

In Chittagong, women from the families of fishermen, scavengers and others were forced by the distress in the wake of famine to join the Military Labour Corps in large numbers. From there, many have come back infected with venereal diseases. This is true not only of Chittagong; in many of the famine-devastated areas of Bengal, woman-

hood has been dishonoured. A section of the contractors has made a profession out of selling girls to the military. There are places in Chittagong, Comilla and Noakhali where women sell themselves literally in hordes, and young boys act as pimps for the military. After having meekly tolerated theft, bribery and deception we have come to a stage where we fail to stand up even to this barbarism.

Below is given an extract from Kalpana Dutt's article on the conditions down the Arakan Road published in **Janayuddha** of the 3rd May, 1945:

"Majada was another girl of twenty or twenty-one from the same Amirabad. She wanted to live with her head erect. Majada was the wife of a poor peasant. During the terror of the famine her husband deserted the home leaving her behind, and went away to Feni. He came back an invalid with rheumatism, having lost his capacity to earn. When the kitchen, the work-house and all the other means of living were closed down one after the other, Majada was at last forced to take up work in the Labour Corps. But there she realised that her modesty had to be bartered for her earning. She left the job, and not only that, she brought away with her another ten to fifteen out of those polluted, stinking surroundings. They all swore that they would never go back to the Labour Corps so long as they were alive.

"Three months later—only a few days back—I visited Amirabad again. Again I met Majada, this time on her death-bed. The boy had already died. With a broken heart Majada told me that she could not keep her pledge. The pangs of hunger had driven her once again to the Labour Corps.

"Standing on the Arakan Road, I felt I was standing amid the devastated ruins of a great and ancient civilisation. Under this heap of ruins lay buried all its precious legacy—kindness and compassion, mutual respect and comradeship—all brushed and broken to bits."

This picture is true not only of Chittagong but of many other Bengal villages as well. As heinous as the bartering away of women is that of children. Cachin Ghosh gives us a picture of child-slaves in Bogra district in the **Janayuddha** of 15-3-45:

"The children that were sold by starving parents during the famine or left behind to be adopted by relatives, these children have formed into a forsaken bunch in the society. They are by no means adopted children, they have become slaves unto death... In two villages of Baliadighi Union we have traced 18 such children. They are passed from hand to hand for sale and purchase like a commodity."

Bengal's village is being polluted by this hell of theft, bribery and commerce in women and children. This corruption has sapped all moral values. There is no dearth of evidence to show that education, culture and civilisation are really in jeopardy today.

At Rangpur, a Head Pandit was severely assaulted by goonda students for having caught an examinee copying during the last Matriculation examination. The influence of these scoundrels is so great that the District Magistrate has requested the University to close down the examination centre at Rangpur. A year ago the district authorities at Rajshahi had applied to the Calcutta University to relieve them from the responsibility of conducting examinations on similar grounds.

The **Nationalist** (23-4-45) made the following comment on the Rangpur episode: "We would not have commented upon it had it been a stray incident. Unfortunately, there are more of such cases. This shows to what depths of degradation the entire student community has lowered itself."

The **Anand Bazar Patrika** (24-4-45) commenting on the above incident, said: "The whole episode is a matter of shame for the student community. But it has to be admitted with pain that recently incidents of such objectionable conduct seem to have increased. Previously, such reports have come from some of the mofussil districts."

This corruption has permeated not only the student community. It has today entered into every section of our community.

A society in which women are sold like commodities is not called civilised but barbaric. "Each for himself" is the selfish code that is being followed by everybody today, a day of dire distress for the nation. It is this code which has strengthened the black-market, it is this which has made 60 lakhs of Bengalees destitute, it is this again which permits the sale of destitute women in market as commodities. All that is great and good in our country is meeting with its death. The village society stands like an earthquake-devastated building: day by day its bricks are falling out one after another.

WHAT GOVERNMENT HAS DONE

On the one hand the bureaucracy and the greedy profiteers are playing havoc with the people's destiny, and the people stand helpless. On the other side, millions of destitutes are denied social shelter, and the people do not do anything for them. These two spectacles are forcing every Bengalee to deviate from his moral norm.

The Government has its impressive machinery and regulations to fight corruption and black-marketing. But without an abundance of patriotism on the part of the people, none today has the strength to touch these polluters of society. Particularly the big hoarders intoxicated with greed are so intimately linked up with bureaucratic officials that they are hardly caught. Rarely, when they are caught they are let off with light punishment, and besides, their prestige is protected by keeping their names secret from the public.

The Government by keeping itself away from popular co-operation not only fails to catch the people's enemies, but fails also to save the destituted humanity.

Of the grant set apart by Bengal Government for irrigation and cattle supply last year, only 5 per cent could be spent by it. To undertake this task on the basis of proper planning, enquiry and necessary expenses, requires a band of selfless workers who will work with sympathy

and understanding and will see that the money is properly spent. But the Government depends upon its hired bureaucrats, and so nothing is done. The grant made by Government for rehabilitation is being squandered by its innumerable bureaucrats. Out of this grant, boat building has been started to rehabilitate the boatmen and the fishermen. None knows when, if ever, the boatmen and fishermen would get the long-awaited relief, but this much is known that for the present the contractors are having their feast.

This year the Government has sanctioned only Rs. 1 crore 70 lakhs for the opening of work-centres for destitutes. Out of this grant, recently 124 work-centres have been opened, housing 11,724 destitutes. Besides this 4,957 persons come to the centres for work. Government runs 67 children's homes housing 41,121 children. (Refer to Bengal Government's report published in the first half of April 1945.) The Famine came in 1943 and since then in two years, the Government could provide for no more than 20,795 destitutes while there are about 60 lakhs of such destitutes awaiting relief.

The total number of beds in Government hospitals, opened to combat epidemics, comes to 29,620—52 100-bed hospitals, 92 50-bed hospitals, 411 20-bed hospitals. A total of 200 doctors is doing medical relief in the villages. The paucity of these arrangements becomes staggering when we remember that there are 90,000 villages in Bengal and at their peak the epidemics affected 2 crores of the people.

The Government introduced a law for the return of lands sold off during the famine. Holdings sold for Rs. 250 or less, would come under this law. The peasant will have to apply to the District Magistrate for the return of his land, and if decided by the court he may get back his land on condition of paying off the price in 10 yearly instalments. How many kisans could take advantage of this law? In the 15 famine-devastated areas 4,73,441 plots each not exceeding the value of Rs. 250 were sold during 1943. But upto March 1945, only 7,752 applications have been submitted, out of which the court has decided the cases of 290 only!

Every peasant cannot exercise the facility of getting back his land by applying to the Magistrate. For this the best method is arbitration by the kisans themselves. Besides, there being no particular law regarding the procedure of such cases, the Magistrates do not quickly dispose of the instituted cases.

The Government has formed an All-Parties' Advisory Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation. But no plan has as yet been prepared. Big Business is busy drawing up Post-war Reconstruction plans, but in Bengal without a Village Rehabilitation plan, no plan could be implemented. Even in Gandhiji's Constructive Programme there is no clear provision for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Bengal village. Neither the Congress nor the League has as yet come forward with such a plan. The crack-up in Bengal is no less serious than the social and economic break-up in Europe as a result of the war. To rebuild Bengal's social structure should be the prime concern of every patriot today.

WHAT WE CAN DO

The way to save the country has been pointed by the people themselves. Here is an example from Chittagong district: for Chittagong suffered the worst in the province. In this district, at Katthuli village, Double Mooring P.S., the fishermen's settlement was in complete ruins. Making a house-to-house visit in this locality, I have seen orphans, the weak and the old wandering about helplessly. Many women turned destitutes joined the military labour corps. Many women from here were forced to sell themselves to the touts, the nearby town of Pahartali became a centre of vice. The people here have for long watched before their very eyes the decay and downfall of their own society and merely breathed helpless sighs. None could dare to close down the brothel and the toddy shops, fearing the might of their owners. Till the end of 1944, despair and hopelessness prevailed all over.

But with this year, the face of Katthuli has changed. The energetic workers of this village collected all the people and gave the call to rebuild the fishermen's settle-

ment. As a result of the campaign, money came from the local villagers, and with the initiative of the local people, the Government also was made to make grants. In this way, they raised 45 huts for the destitute fishermen of Katthuli. This enterprise has not only enthused the fishermen, but has enthused everybody at Katthuli and Pahartali. So they next proceeded to eradicate vice at Pahartali and formed a Committee for the purpose. At first they were doubtful whether considering the presence of the military it would at all be possible to remove the brothels from the area.

But unhesitatingly they carried on with their campaign, as a result of which the brothels were closed down. Next, in accordance with their demands military police was posted at the local toddy shop. They have also rescued 15 girls belonging to fishermen from Chittagong brothels and reinstated them in normal life in the village. When the movement was first started, threats came from the offenders, and the girls too could not feel confident and did not easily come away. But they went all together ahead with the campaign with great enthusiasm, and so it produced immediate effects. In this way, through common efforts of all, through ungrudging donations given by all and through fearless campaigning, the battered community of Katthuli is being reconstructed. What Katthuli could do, every village can easily achieve.

Here is another instance. This was at Kailati Union, Netrokona Sub-division of Mymensingh district. There are 39 villages in this union, with an adult population of 1,000. The enterprising kisan workers of the village of Bali took the lead in uniting these 39 villages. There are 16 Food Committees in this Union, and the black-marketeer has been kept away from these Committees. Whatever supplies are received are distributed at the direction of the Food Committee. Once the S.D.O. of Netrokona ordered that salt would not be given unless one took sugar. As the sugar supplied was extremely dirty and of bad quality, the villagers did not want to take the sugar. And yet the S.D.O. stuck to his point of no salt without sugar.

Had there been no consciousness of solidarity among

the villagers, the more well-off could have managed to procure salt by some means or the other, while the poor would have suffered without salt. But the people of the entire union held a meeting and expressed their protest against the S.D.O.'s order, and demanded that salt should be given without sugar and better quality sugar should be supplied. According to the decision of the meeting, nobody individually tried to get salt for himself alone. When after many representations and interviews the S.D.O. could not be moved, a procession of 800 one day reached Netrokona. It was here at Netrokona that sometime back a Supply Officer had been arrested on a charge of corruption after insistent public agitation. The S.D.O. did not dare to go against the united drive of Kailati villagers and announced that salt would be given without sugar.

On another occasion, there was an acute shortage of cloth. 100 pairs of dhoties came to Netrokona while there were 10,000 claimants. The men from Kailati union joined hands and reached Netrokona with 150 Ration Cards but they could get only 80 dhoties. These were then distributed through the Food Committee according to the priority of needs. Had there been no unity and solidarity among the villagers, the fortunate few would have grabbed those 80 dhoties while those whose needs were greater would have been left out.

The inhabitants of Kailati union mutually help each other, join hands to meet their own needs and when the bureaucracy has to be fought, they fight shoulder to shoulder. Recently, they have formed a co-operative society with the object of supplying all necessaries of life at control rates. They have raised nearly Rs. 3,000 by selling shares at Rs. 2.

The formation of co-operative would not solve the problem, for, if the local bureaucrat was bent on mischief he may instead of handing over stock to the co-ops, give it to dealers. This has happened at many of the places. It may even happen that that area might be left without sufficient supply of stocks. But the advantage of Kailati union lay in the fact that no dealer could be found here against the co-op, if any one had the temptation of mak-

ing profit by destroying the co-operative then he himself won't be able to stay on in the village in peace. A thousand men in one union, if united, can easily extract supplies (from the District Magistrate). Even if sufficient supplies are lacking, whatever will be received will be justly distributed in accordance with their respective needs. Why not let us then try, wherever we can, to introduce equality and democracy in the village?

Let no patriot sneer at this as a minor task or non-political work. When the entire village life is crumbling to pieces, when the many are about to forget the duty of saving the few, when through the hell of death side by side with destituted millions the profiteer is drugged with greed—then the path of equality and democracy lies through village rehabilitation, for this is the road to national reconstruction.

At many places are being made scattered and disjointed efforts at fighting the crisis. Women workers have at many places opened work-centres for destitute women. **Nari Seva Sangha, Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti and All-India Women's Conference** and such other bodies are running many centres.

In one such centre in Calcutta, 300 poor women come to work every day. This is the best work-centre in Calcutta. The women who work at this centre earn between 8 annas and Re. 1 a day. Their handicrafts are sold in different Calcutta shops. An educated lady supervises this centre. A kindergarten is attached to the centre for the children of those who come to work at the centre. Special educational facilities have been arranged for those who teach needle-work to the women. Arrangements for study, discussion, games and entertainments for all those coming to the centre are at present being made. The supervisor, on the ground of the excellence of the work, has secured a grant of Rs. 20,000 from the Government's Rehabilitation budget.

Hundreds of such institutions are needed. The crack-up can be checked if such centres could be formed and run all over the country and so many women might come back home from the road, in place of begging return to

normal healthy domestic pursuits, and instead of selling themselves can fit themselves back in society.

If the grant that the Bengal Government has sanctioned for Rehabilitation is spent through proper, active relief committees and through social workers of standing, then even that meagre amount could be well spent. Innumerable examples could be quoted from Chittagong alone of the utter waste of resources if they are spent through Government employees, contractors and Union Board Presidents. Unless the true patriots and social workers come forward to take charge of this important task, the corrupt and the vicious will squander the money for rehabilitation and play with the honour of the destitute women.

An example of the extent to which the march of ruin could be halted through united service to the people is provided by the Bengal Medical Relief Co-ordination Committee. This Committee during 1944 sent out 55 medical units to different parts of Bengal and thereby treated 6 lakhs of cases. Besides, different relief committees under its direction have sent out 150 medical units, which have treated a total of 19 lakhs cases. These 19 lakh victims of epidemics have been saved from the jaws of death by the earnest and united effort of their countrymen. By giving ungrudging help and support to the Bengal Medical Relief Co-ordination Committee, our country can be saved from the grip of epidemics.

In every village there must be united effort for self-help. We will save our society from ruin!—let this be the unflinching resolve of everyone of our countrymen. Hospitals for the diseased, work-centres for the destitute, milk canteens for children, Food Committees and Co-operative Societies for the distribution of commodities—if these could be opened in every village, Bengal's social economy would then come back to its own. By none tolerating hoarding, selfishness and corruption in the village, we can make a model one out of it.

But so long as our leaders are engaged in fratricidal warfare, no popular upsurge for united service to the people can be expected. So long as the Congressman is

worried day and night over how to isolate the Communists, how to set up a rival Kisan Samiti against the Kisan Sabha, and how to discredit the League; So long as the Leaguer worries day and night as to how to spread bitter prejudices against the Congress and the Communists—so long will the common man remain confused and in despair.

If the entire energy of the nation's leaders is spent on mutual bickerings and fratricidal battles, is there any doubt then that the bureaucracy will make no effort at village reconstruction? The Congress, the Communists and the League—it is the unity of these three which is the biggest capital for our country and society. If under the shadow of this dire peril for Bengal, the quarrel among these three could not be ended, then death and destruction are sure to triumph. In the land of ruin, none would survive. Let all parties fix one common aim and one common programme for Bengal's rehabilitation, and with that programme let them all take up this gigantic task. There will then be enthusiasm everywhere and confidence will fill every heart. Despair and bickerings have advanced the march of death, unity and confidence shall bring back the tide of life.

For the permanent rehabilitation of Bengal's economy, complete independence and abolition of the Permanent Settlement are needed. In this country a Government with representatives of the people has to be set up so that its entire attention and energy are harnessed to the task of developing industry and agriculture. Development of rivers and canals, irrigation for fallow lands, abundance in the production of necessities of village artisans and arrangement for the supply of raw materials and other articles for them—cattle, manure and seed for agriculture—Government supply, that is control and rationing, to uproot the blackmarkets that thwart normal trade—all these have to be demanded and implemented.

Normal conditions of life won't return with the end of the war, the monopoly that the black-marketeers have established in the meantime would not easily dwindle. After the war, agriculture and industry have to be developed through proper planning. Without control over sale

and profits, no planning is possible. If the big monopolists are allowed freedom of trade, no plan would work.

Regeneration of Bengal's devastated villages is not a day's job, it will take years. But if the market is controlled by the monopolists, they will not allow this reconstruction of Bengal's economy.

The war has seen an unprecedented devastation of Bengal's economy and society. Pre-war Bengal no longer exists and it will never come back. But a new Bengal may be born this time if we—all together—start the rebuilding of a new society in Bengal's villages.

To achieve this objective, no one party is strong enough. No parochial or party interest is greater than this mighty disaster that has overcome Bengal. If the Congress, the League and the Communists unite to reach this goal, then their united strength can and must defeat all obstacles on the way.

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