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BENGAL LAMENTING

FREDA BEDI

Published by
THE LION PRESS • LAHORE

"In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted because they were not."

Rupees Three

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY S. A. LATIF AT THE LION PRESS
HOSPITAL ROAD, LAHORE

FOREWORD

With the closing of 1943 the rice crop had been harvested the Aman crop, which was the richest almost in memory. Here was the golden treasure of the grain, the dream, El Dorado of thousands upon thousands of the emaciated sons and daughters of Bengal. It was expected to bring relief of itself, but instead it brought disillusionment, for the mass of the people had to suffer yet again the frustration of seeing the crop filter through the official procurement channels into the store of the hoarder and the bottomless pit of the Black Market.

This small book is a record of the month of January, 1944 which I spent touring the most afflicted districts of famine-stricken Bengal.

The first stage of the famine was then over. To swell the tide of human misery, this first famine brought in its wake epidemic and disease, for famine and disease are not sisters, as many think, they are two sides of the same horrible face of destruction and cannot be separated one from the other. In that

second slaughter of the innocents more died than in the first, but to juggle with figures is a thankless task. For the body which death by disease comes to take as his own is more often than not already three-quarters slain by lack of food, and the task of the germs is completed almost before it begins. When a victim dies of "dysentery following starvation," it is more the lack of food than the germs which are to blame.

So the second stage of the famine proved to be more than the battle-ground of the germs. Starvation was still there and showed few signs of defeat. The rice was in the shops but there were hundreds of thousands who were destitute and could not buy it. And, above all, in men's minds was growing the conviction that there had been no fundamental improvement either in procurement or distribution plans. It was obvious to anyone who did not want to gloss over the facts that a Second Famine was on the way.

In the intervening months there has been a partial blackout of Bengal news. In the columns of the world press it has lost its freshness. But we in India cannot forget because Bengal is part of our First Front against suffering, and it matters to us whether thousands

die, if it gets into the headlines or not. News has come from Chittagong that the Second Famine has already passed the stage of a foreboding and has become fact.

It is useless to repeat the old story that everyone knows, and that is now being re-enacted in Chittagong. How the thin stream of destitutes begins to flow into the towns, and daily swells. How people in the villages, up to half of them, look at the rice in the shops and have not got the rupee that now buys a mere seer of it. How the "death by epidemics" curve is on the upward trend. Cholera is rampant in Cox's Bazar. In the group of villages called Mariamnagar Union, 50 out of every hundred of the children are down with pox.

The drifting tide of the helpless on Bengal's Frontier is not going to the Relief Kitchens this year: it is finding its way into the ranks of the Labour Corps run by contractors, which does the hundred and one odd jobs necessary in the hinterland of the army, building and maintaining roads and clearing the jungle. Over thirty thousand women have taken their place among the men, there is no security of service, and in between bouts of work there is starvation for them and worse. Few of the

women stick to the work for long, weakness and disease drags them back again to the village and death.

This book is more than a cry of pain, a call to pity, a picture of another tidal wave of tears that has wrenched itself up from the ocean of human misery. It is a demand for reconsideration on a national scale of a problem that cannot be localised, a plea for unity in the face of chaos, one more thrust of the pen for the right of every Bengali and every Indian to see his destiny guided by patriots in a National Government of the People.

F. B.

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Back from Bengal

My tour of Bengal lasted nearly a month. During that time I have been to the extreme corners of the province, to West Bengal, Midnapore, Kharagpur, Contai and the coastal areas affected by the cyclone, to the hinterland of Calcutta, the 24 Parganas and the Capital City itself. I went by steamboat into the romantic country of the river Padma, East Bengal, with her rich banana trees and her thread-like waterways, to Dacca, fabled for its textiles, to Narayanganj, and to Munshiganj, the mothersoil of Sarojini Naidu, of C. R. Das, and Jagadish Chandra Bose. Finally, I went to the Santiniketan of Tagore.

In addition I penetrated into the famine areas of Orissa which are contiguous, across the placid beauty of the Subarnarekha and on foot and by palanquin into the heart of the Santal country in the Fatiabad area near Jaleswar. I saw the working of the Friends' Unit near storm-dévastated sea-coast, with its rare trees and ruined houses, the area that was once prosperous with its many cocoanut palms, its bananas and its fish and which now is one

of the centres of the great misery that has engulfed Bengal. I spent a day with one of the Army Medical Units that is bringing vital medical help to thousands of those whom disease has attacked in the wake of one of the worst famines in recorded Indian history.

My footsteps have gone not merely to the towns and their environs, into the houses of officials and Government offices, into the grand offices in the heart of commercial Calcutta which is the home of the most wealthy, private relief organisations. As usual, I followed the principle of finding things out for myself, and my footsteps have taken me deep into the villages, and from door to door in the poorest homes.

The village is always the barometer of Indian life. There, in one of the hundreds and thousands of huddles of mud huts away from the main road, barely reachable by a muddy path, lies India's destiny, her life, her death, her intolerable longings, her inertia, the remnants of her joy of living, and her last and most bleeding despair. Statistics were there for all to see. Amery says that Bengal's Death Roll "might be higher" than 1000 per week. The *Statesman* diffidently put it at 11,000 and insisted too that it "might be

higher." Competent non-official observers put the weekly death figures to one lakh minimum, and it is more than likely that the death figures for the whole famine period until to-day range between three and four million—thirty to forty lakhs.

But while figures mean a lot to the economist, to the man who digests his morning paper along with his breakfast they are often mere juggling, and one or two or three million deaths are separated in his mind by no very definite measuring rod. The famine is not real to him, if his own stomach is full. My job, as I saw it, was to make the famine a reality nor a bundle of figures.

The *Tribune*, our most widely read Punjabi daily, was of the same opinion. They sent me to Bengal on their ticket, and published most of the articles in this book. Thanks to them the black-out of Bengal news that let nobody know what was really happening was at least lifted in this part of the world.

Words, I know, are very poor tools with which to express what I have seen. On my return, after a harrowing month, nothing was more amazing to me than the general smug feeling that persisted around me that Bengal had "turned the corner," and that

famine was a thing of the past. To put it in military terms, that only "mopping up" operations were necessary and that the main campaign had been won. The Bengal famine; and its projection in Orissa, was by no means over. It was glaringly there. It was in fact still so serious that, even though the villages were surrounded by the stubble of the richest rice cropped in years, the shadows of a second famine, even worse than the first, hung over the Bengal countryside.

Government has stated that rice is available. It is for the most part available, but in spite of it, stark hunger is everywhere, because men and women have no money with which to buy it . . . and its price was, even in January 1944, going up to Rs. 20 per maund (of eighty pounds) and above. By April, it touched Rs. 27 per maund in deficit districts. One filthy torn rag is the only garment literally millions of villagers possess. They have no money or hope of getting another; the raging need of food swallows the few annas they get. Medical relief, despite the army and civil effort, is still hopelessly inadequate.

Misconceptions about the real situation do not grow by themselves. They are deliberately fostered by press propaganda, by oily official

statements, and by man's innate desire to push an undesirable idea into the back limbo of his mind. As one friend put it "the people are tired of Bengal news," and as another said "after all, all the money that is being collected may not be going into honest hands." There may be an element of truth in both these remarks. But neither India nor any member of the Allied Nations can afford to forget Bengal, any more than the Londoner could afford to forget air raids. The Bengal Famine is a menace, not only to our own future, but to the future of the world. For the few ghouls who have made and are making money out of her distress, there are hundreds and thousands of honest workers who see that every pice goes to the place where it is most needed.

Not one of us who is eating enough can forget what is happening just because it is uncomfortable to remember it, and because the crisis has lasted too long. To become famine weary will not end the famine.

The problem of Bengal to-day is not just the problem of rice and the availability of rice. It is the problem of society in fragments. The economic life of the village is in chaos. Men have died ; men have emigrated to Assam and the big towns.

They are lying ill with malaria, dropsy, and the hundred-and-one diseases that have come in the wake of famine. And women have died, and women are ill, but more tragic are those who have neither the release of death, nor the qualification of serious illness for getting put in 'a hospital. There are women in Bengal in their hundreds of thousands who have been left widows, who have been deserted by their husbands, or who have been merely left in the village with their children while the man goes to "get food," and who receive neither news or money from the "big city", where their husband may be dead or ailing or merely earning enough to keep his own handful of bones together. Such women and children are destitute.

Destitute. It is a meagre word. It means they have no money beyond the few coins they can pick up in casual tasks during the harvest time—the paddy husking, household work. It means they are dying of slow starvation. It means that for the bowl of rice to fill their child's stomach, or their own, they will sell themselves for a few annas. It means venereal disease and painful death.

In the midst of moral platitudes, it is a sobering thought that when men and women

get to that last bitter "fight for existence" in the barren no-man's-land between life and death, woman's honour, religion, and tradition, self-respect and the family do not weigh heavier than a bowl of rice.

It is worse in some areas than others. It is particularly bad where the army is, for demand and supply interact. One worker of Munshiganj whom I asked about it said, "The women in this area are very devoted to the ideals of Hinduism and Islam, and very little of this kind is happening." But I know what is happening in Chittagong and Calcutta how women are being sold in the Chandpur area of East Bengal. I know too that the women there were not less devoted to their religious ideals and their family. The difference between Munshiganj proper and Chittagong is not the difference of people: it is the difference of their surroundings.

Women who are left unprotected have a double problem to face—human and economic. Whole sections of the Bengal population have to be trained again for life, to be taught trades, to be re-absorbed into the economic framework. They are the most hopeless of "have-nots" and they have no more roots now than the gypsies have. Their stability, if anything, is less,

because the gypsies at least have their own code and traditions. In Bengal a cross-section of the people is uprooted. They have no money to buy rice, however cheap it becomes. Their need is not only the immediate one of food but of complete rehabilitation.

About children the position is still more grim. No one knows or can estimate how many babies and children have died. No orphanage that I saw had babies under three. They are nowhere. In the teeming villages of Bengal, babies are rare things these days. I could get at no estimate of the number of orphans with different organisations but I imagine they are not far short of a million. In village Khilgoon, in Dacca district, it is reported that only three young children remained out of four hundred, and out of a population of 1,300 only 800 remains. Arthur Moore, of the *Statesman* and the Friends' Ambulance Unit came to their rescue but there must be hundreds of similar villages where nobody has come.

Looking at children suffering is to suffer more than them. Many times confronted with some child of six mothering a younger one, or some infant nursing an older sister or brother, I realised the unbearable and inhuman unfairness of it all. There is something in the

eyes of a man or woman dying of slow starvation that is akin to the eyes of a man dying of slow torture. But a man dying of deliberate torture would mix rebellion with suffering. And the famished mix their sorrow with despair and resignation and I don't know which is the more horrible combination.

Countless times in the face of it I asked myself the meaning of it all. We can delve into the reasons. We can diagnose the malady. We can prescribe the cure. We can work for the changing of it all. But we cannot answer the ultimate "why" of it. Why should the children suffer? Why should Bengalis have this personal agony? Why them and not others? Why you and not me?

A close friend of Rabindranath Tagore said that he once in the face of calamity asked the poet the same question. He admitted it had troubled him a lot. "The only thing I can think of," he said, "is that perhaps by their suffering we are goaded into thinking deeper, into asking the reasons for it all." He added, "the answer does not satisfy me, but it is all I can think of."

The poet's answer does not satisfy me any more than it satisfied him. But I too agree that, faced with such an inferno of horror, any

human being would be jolted into fighting against it, into trying to prevent its recurrence. The rice crop was white gold in the fields of Bengal. There was no hand of nature in all this misery ; she gave her rains and her sun, the seed time, the ripening and the harvest all came and went at their appointed times. The macabre sights of Bengal are not the result of blind Nature. They are the fruit of man's neglect, his greed, and his incompetence. It is the unique famine in the midst of the rice crop. The famine began in an uninvaded country. The cyclone only attacked a limited area. Floods only accounted for another small piece of land. Famine has been everywhere, and through it all the gay life of Calcutta has gone on, her restaurants have blazed light and her rich and privileged have feasted.

In the face of it even the *Statesman* had something to say. On September 23rd, 1943 the Editor wrote :

“This sickening catastrophe is man-made. So far as we are aware, all of India's previous famines originated primarily from calamities of Nature. But this one is accounted for by no climatic failure: rainfall has been generally plentiful. What the Pro-

vince's state would now be had drought been added to Governmental bungling is an appalling thought."

There are many things to be said about the causes of the famine. What should be done. The value of the existing relief organisations. But, before I say it, will come what I saw, because that itself is the basis of my argument.

The Painted Face

I had reached Bengal, and the train grunted into Burdwan station. The countryside was quiet and fulfilled after the harvest, and the long pale stalks of the crop had been shorn to stubble. Beside a reed hut a peasant woman was standing, the border of her meagre cloth scarlet against the thatch. A few palm trees leaned against a pool, with its green skin of weeds. Ragged banana trees huddled together, away from the flat rice lands.

After the harvest. A time for rest. A time for happiness in the villages. But as the train slowed down, a scrabble of ragged urchins rushed up to the carriages, asking for money and food. The officials on duty shooed them off, but, at the end of the platform, they jumbled together again, insistent. Very thin, they were. Very dirty. I wondered how many were orphans. One child was already swollen with dropsy, and his face covered with sores.

In Calcutta, the foreboding grew. "Yes, it is true that it is easier now that the harvest

has come," people said, "and the destitutes have been sent away from Calcutta, skin and bones as they were, so that the *aman* crop would not rot in the fields for lack of labourers to cut it. But we are full of dread. This is the time when the new rice is coming into the market, and this year we have got a huge, almost an unprecedented, crop. And yet, what do we find? We cannot get rice at the control rate in most places. In the *mofussil* it has already gone to Rs. 20 per maund and more. The Government has promised that the price will go down to Rs. 12 per maund at the end of the month. But we haven't got faith in their word. When they have fixed prices, things have immediately become unobtainable, and the *black market* has flourished." They should control the supplies as well as the price. The fear of a second famine is stalking Calcutta, when even the first has not left it. It is like a man panting and taking a minute's respite in a hard race knowing that he has got to go on again, and with depleted reserves.

Go through the streets of Calcutta, and you will find that they have outwardly almost returned to normal. Sometimes in a waste spot, you come across a few families cooking a handful of the precious rice together. The

streets are full of busy life, the shops choking with goods. The rikshaws go clanking by with girls in them. Military lorries race through the streets. There are soldiers everywhere, and the restaurants are bursting with food and music and merry-makers.

But look into the faces of the middle-class and the poor. Some of them have got a haunted look. They are thinner. "There are some free kitchens still running," a friend told me, "but most have been closed down, and they have been sent back to the villages, all those wretched destitutes who walked about like a *memento mori* in the city streets."

"Tell me," I said, "is the famine over—at least, the worst of it?" "Good God, no," was the reply. "They have only made Calcutta more comfortable for the rich to live in: they have pushed the inconvenient sights back into the villages. They have to some extent solved the problem of providing rice in Calcutta and of course about fifty per cent of the workers even here were provided for right through the famine, because they ran essential services, were Government employees or worked in war concerns. But tales from the villages are terrible still. And we are still faced with the back-wash of the tide. Come

and see what I mean."

I went along to a Ballygunj Milk centre run by Mrs. S. C. Roy. A crowd of mothers and children, many very tiny babies, were swarming round a table in a green courtyard. "What do you give them?" I said. "Just over a *pau* of milk per child, and a few drops of sharks' liver oil to make up the vitamins they lack," was the reply. The women were all given metal discs, with their numbers, and each child was registered in a book. Anyone bringing the disc can get milk for the child concerned. The babies looked cheerful. "You should see the difference," Mrs. Roy said. "When we started in October, most of them were skeletons. Come here, Marali." She pulled a small and very thin baby towards us. *Marali* means "she who was about to die." Her mother had lost five children and this poor little waif with double hernia got this name to protect her from the Evil Eye. "She was a skeleton when she came here," she said, "but the doctor who comes twice a week gave her a truss. The oil and milk have done the rest." "What do her father and mother do for food?" I asked. "The woman works in some house cleaning pots and pans, and gets a little food and a rupee or two. The man has

been ill for months and can do nothing."

"And who provides the milk?" "Well, we have some difficulty about funds," was the reply, "and so we have had to cut it down from the hundred and fifty we used to feed. From this month we have only given it to the three-year olds and below. Some of the older children come and beg for it sometimes, but what can we do? The Confectioners' Union have been giving us milk. The Hygiene Institute gives us the Sharks' oil. They are inoculated against smallpox by the Calcutta Corporation doctor. The Bengal Women's Food Committee used to give us *sooji* when we fed the older children. We would like to make this into a permanent clinic for the *bustees*, as some guarantee against the worst malnutrition—but then money has got to come from somewhere." She sighed.

Next to the Tollygunj canteen, run by the housewives of the locality for the children of the lower middle classes and workers. The women were cheerful, and had worked morning to evening for months. A Mahila Atma Raksha girl, a voluntary worker from one of the women's organisations, was with them, and they were all members. Besides running the kitchen, they teach the women to make paper bags, coir mats, leather purses and dolls, "so that they

will have something left to earn money with, when the kitchen closes down," they said pathetically. They love these women they are helping: they know their husbands have either died or are ill, and that very few have got even meagre work. They fear for the little ones they have fed since August, and who are round now, and happy, with decent clothes they themselves have given them. They are running a school for the children in the afternoons.

I tasted the food, rice, lentils and a vegetable, coming hot in big iron containers from the central Government Kitchens. It was good, and hot, and prepared under scientific supervision so that none of the vitamins were lost. "We buy it from them," they said. "It would be difficult to cook here, and it is good tasty food." It was a good big helping of rice which was given to each child, and they give one anna for it. "They are happier to do that—they feel it is not charity. It actually costs us three annas and we pay the rest." "But suppose the child cannot give an anna even?" I asked. "Then we ourselves subscribe and it is given free."

The child took away a plateful, but he did not eat it there. "Why don't you make

him eat it here?" I enquired. "You see, they cannot eat and see their parents starve, so they just run away with it, and we know that at least four share it. But, after all, they cannot live unless their parents also live, so we let them do it."

It heartened me to see Tollygunj and women who had never done "social work" before spontaneously getting together and working like heroes when they saw what they could do. I saw Mrs. Radha Kumud Mookerji too. She had run a grand kitchen of round two hundred women, and even kept seventy in a big house for months until the crop came. A Boy's Club helped her. She worked morning to night, and collected clothes and money. The women were like a big family, doing all the cooking and work themselves. "No woman thought of her own child first," she said, "all the children in the house were her children. And sometimes when money ran short they offered to go without food for a day. "It is just before the crop, and we understand your difficulties," they said. "Don't worry, we can go without."

I went out again. The peasants had gone and God knows what I should find "back there" in the countryside where I was to travel.

The few kitchens working were taking the edge off the worst malnutrition. The women in the streets were well-fed and dressed. But behind them I could see the ghosts of the women swallowed in their thousands into the brothels during these awful months.

Calcutta is a lady with a painted face. She is hiding her ugliness and her sores under a coating of powder and the red on her lips is the red of the people's blood.

Roof Without Tiles

We were going through village Sahala in the 24 Parganas district about thirty miles out of Calcutta. There was a huddle of mud houses, with thatched roofs, most in a shocking state of disrepair. Suddenly we came across the house of a better-class peasant. He had tiles on the thatch, as a protection against the rain. With a shock I saw that half the tiles were gone, and the whole room was exposed to sun and storm. "He has sold them one by one for food," Jyotish told me. He called to a woman standing on the verandah. "Where is the old man to-day?" he questioned. She pointed to a dirty quilt lying on the floor at her feet. We could barely see a hump in the centre. She pulled the quilt away. The shadow of an old man was lying with closed eyes, groaning faintly. His feet and face were swollen with dropsy. No hope for him. The treatment for dropsy is Vitamin B. and decent food. No doctors in the neighbourhood have got Vitamin B. tablets. Nobody can get continuous good food.

"Is there no free kitchen here, Jyotish?"

ked. Jyotish works ceaselessly in these villages. He turned to one of the local relief workers. "It was closed down by the local Doctor—or rather on his advice. He said that cholera is so bad we should not encourage people to come together in the kitchen." It seemed senseless. Starve the villagers and they will be an even more enticing prey for the cholera germs. Dr. Basu of the China Medical Unit was with us. "I don't agree with this closing down," he said. "There can be some precaution, and the ones from the cholera infected houses can be segregated. The rice is in the village shops—paddy Rs. 10 per maund, and rice Rs. 15 per maund—but people just haven't got the money to buy it. They are living on roots." "The workers are starting to organise the kitchen again. We too realised that this was wrong. But I don't know how long we'll be able to carry on. The Friends' Ambulance Unit is giving us funds at present. The Krishak Samiti (the Bengal version of the Peasant's Union) are doing all the work, along with the Communist workers. We work together, and give relief irrespective of religion."

Sahala was horrible. But so, for that matter, was every village. We visited ten or

eleven. As we were standing before the roof without tiles a boy jumped up. A beautiful boy of fourteen, but not as thin as most. "Eight people have died in his family," they told me. Cholera. Father and mother and six children. He is left, and one small three-year old brother. I looked at the boy again; he looked at me. He asked for sympathy with his eyes, but he was sturdy, and cheerful when he talked. A lump came into my throat. At times the lump was so continuous I could not speak. He was a little tree, and he was sturdy because the three-year old was dependent on him, and found comfort in his shade.

Of all the unbearable things, this was the most unbearable thing of all. To see children orphaned and dependent on one another. Little brothers clinging to older brothers. A child of eight nursing a sister of twelve, ill, perhaps dying of dropsy. A baby of two, a round little boy, clinging to a brother aged six. Tears stung my eyes whenever I saw it, and useless and senseless as tears are they still sting my eyes when I write about it. Skeleton babies a year old, looking no bigger than a normal baby of three or four months clinging to their mothers like baby monkeys, with patient pitiful eyes. Little things that anything can

hurt, who have only one thing left to cling to and that also helpless.

They are lucky they have a mother. More than once, looking at mothers and old men, I had the feeling that they were not alive, somehow their bodies went on subsisting, hanging on to the fringe of life, because of the terror of leaving the one or two remaining children defenceless.

Panchuparamanik, for example, in village Kathalfully. He was suffering from acute malaria. His beard was grey and unkempt in a skull-like yellow face. His eyes were deep down somewhere. Sticks for legs. A boy of eight sat by him. Son and daughter-in-law dead. Other children all dead. The boy was left, and he was getting malaria. In Panchu's bony hand was a dog-eared ticket for the gruel kitchen. A village or two away. But he couldn't walk there. For a fortnight he had starved, and the fever had shaken him, and he was hanging on to the thread of life because of the boy. Only because of the boy. The old man's eyes were half-crazed.

One village after another, and we walked to them across the stubble of the rich rice crop. New rice. Where is it going? Some into the village shops. But few can buy it at any

price. The Government of Bengal is not buying on a large scale, waiting for the price of rice to go down. Large scale movements of rice have been prohibited. But where is the rice going? Into the hands of the hoarders again probably. A few villages are trying to save the rice and hand it over to peasant co-operatives, but that depends on the state of peasant organisation. There is a campaign, "Save the crop for the people." The only solution is control—but control demands machinery and the rooting out of corruption and without the help of the All-Party people's committees distribution cannot be just. The Government themselves realise it; and have issued orders that local officials must take non-official help. But red tape is hard to circumvent, and many local officers are reported to be ignoring the order. The struggle for control—read control for the people, by the people—must go on, in spite of opposition.

How can there be even a ray of hope otherwise? Village after village. House after houses. Everybody, except a few shopkeepers and petty land-owners, starving slowly to death. Dying like flies of cholera and dropsy and malaria. In sixteen villages round Shivani-pur (average population 500), out of 8,000

landless labourers cum fishermen, Hindu and Muslim, it is estimated that almost 4,000 have already died. Cholera is in every village but one. Malaria is virulent. The two or three medical centres are struggling with cholera inoculation and an utterly inadequate quinine supply.

The food canteens of the Friends' Ambulance and the Krishak Samiti feed only children. There is no money for more. The shops of the shopkeeper money lenders are full of rows and rows of brass glasses and bowls, mortgaged for food. Fishing nets. Axes. All the implements of toil. One peasant cried. "There aren't even enough men to harvest the crop and sow the seed. It hurts me to see the land lying idle."

The full moon swung huge, like a golden coin over the winding stream, and we sat in the long boat. There were cries in my ears—the echo of a woman's voice wailing and crying on the path from Devipur. Agonising cries, not the silence of the dead that creeps into the villages. Her husband had just died. Her five children were dead. Only a girl left. "She has no money to cremate him with." She clung to our feet. We gave her the few rupees necessary. One cry, stilled, for a few minutes.

How much longer would this agony last? The roof is without tiles. Nothing now to keep out the wind and rain, and the man is gone.

Five pots with green cocoanuts on them, over there, something for the God on the full moon day. Pitiful act of faith. We even found a starving woman and her child fasting. The child whimpered, but all our arguments would not move her. Who were we to give guarantees that God would not be angry with her for letting the child eat the canteen food on the full moon day? We were just eyes that came and saw it all.

Back there, like a disk of gold, the moon rose, and the sunset before us was a bloody curtain behind the palm trees. The rice stubble gleamed pale in the half light, and we heard the *Azan* prayer from a mud cottage. The voice was coarse and not very loud but it penetrated our consciousness as insistently as the despair around us. Man's undying faith, in the face of death. Even in the face of lingering death. And it is not only a faith in God, it is a blind faith that one day things will get better, one day the people will not starve.

Jyotish's face was thin, and his face was tired. I have seen dozens of such tired faces. But his legs walked so quickly we could not

keep close enough to him when we crossed the fields. One day things will improve, and it is the people who will make them better. He too has faith.

Ballet of Death

Bengali villages are like Bengali women. Their soft tree-bordered pools are eyes fringed with lashes. Their curved palms against the skyline are long as hair, and the creepers lace the bushes together like slender fingers. The red lotus budding on the water is the red marriage mark on the forehead of the bride.

But the water is treacherous; on it breed mosquitoes in their hundreds and thousands. They dance on the dark motionless surface. They are the second scene in Bengal's gruesome Ballet of Death.

The first movement of the Ballet was slow. Lingering as death. The landless peasant starved in the village. The price of rice went higher and higher. He had nothing more to buy it with. He sold his bits of property, his wife's bangles, the kitchen pots and pans. He sold even the coming crop, green on the fields, for a bag of rice. If he had a patch of land, that too went for another bag. Cattle were sold. Ploughs. Children.

Then the trek to the towns began. Slower and slower moved the feet as they crossed the

rice fields. Children's bellies were bloated like balloons. They dropped by the wayside. And the endless procession of skeletons trooped into Calcutta. Some died, not even strong enough to reach the Relief Kitchens. Others lay ravaged with disease, dysentery and cholera, filthy with excrement, along the side-streets.

Relief kitchens sprang up. The Government cleared the men off the streets and put them in the Destitute camps. Then the crop came, and they were sent back, half alive again after the canteen food, into the villages.

So ended the first scene.

The second movement of the Ballet of Death has started. The Dance of the Germs. The invisible dance of the millions and millions of bacteria, attacking emaciated bodies, making limbs swell with dropsy, skin burst into eruptions and sores, bodies freeze with shivering and boil with fever.

We visited the cholera-infected villages of 24 Parganas. Village Malikpur was typical. In the first house, a young mother sat brooding over a two-year old boy. It was not a very poor cottage, that is, it wasn't so poor in the old days. There were two little frocks, grey, because there was no soap, but, still, washed with care and lying on the floor. The

child was covered with the ragged remains of what must have been a decent little quilt.

His little eyes were hopeless, and the woman's hunched shoulders spoke of a sorrow too great to bear. Her husband had died of starvation. So had her second child. This little one was the only one she had left.

"Treatment?" asked Dr. Basu, of the Chinese Medical Unit. "None possible. There are two local doctors within calling distance—a few villages away—but they want twelve rupees for the saline treatment for cholera! She can't afford it. Only the middle-class can give that: not even the poorer middle-class." In this tiny village up to now there have been nine attacks, and six deaths. Three or four more fall ill every few days. How many are going to die?

In each village in the Shivanipur area we calculated there were ten or eleven deaths from cholera. Malaria is beyond counting. Five per cent. of the cases are virulent and mean certain death. The rest waste away. By the end of the winter, what will be left?

Quinine supply is so inadequate that it almost means nothing. The Headmaster of Shivanipur was given 600 tablets for distribution in the *Thana*. Eighty-five thousand

people inhabit it. The Army dispensary was helping, but it closed down for no given reason ten days ago. In 210 villages, there are two qualified doctors. The People's Relief Committee centres in the Thana, four have distributed 7,500 tablets of quinine and five hundred anti-cholera inoculations.

Village Devipur, where an excellent children's canteen was running, had twenty-five cases of cholera and fifteen deaths. The milk kitchen there was run by the Bengal Women's Food Committee and the food given by the Friends' Ambulance Unit. The workers came from the Kisan Sabha men. The children are being kept alive—as long as funds and food last. But the men and women?

In Mahirampur, one bright spark of hope, a little medical unit was operating under Dr. Aswini Dev Sarkar. This were distributing quinine, tonics for acute anaemia and wasting, saving a life here and there. Here at least we found doctors who were working among the people, and not caring for money.

Doctors who profiteer on patients, and traders who profiteer on foodstuffs and medicines, deserve no mercy at the hands of the people. Peaceful as I am by temperament, by the time I had been round a few villages and

heard same stories I felt even transportation for life would be too mild a sentence for them.

In Calcutta, I heard the same complaint. The editor of one of the most considerable dailies complained bitterly against profiteering in medicines. "How can the general public fight against the Black Market?" he asked. "When a person is ill, medicine has to be got at any cost, and there is no time to report in the Police Station, or get witnesses and run to Court." The editorial of one paper said, "The entire Governmental machinery is set in motion to bring political offenders under arrest. Cannot the authorities do the very same thing in respect of profiteers and dealers in the Black Market...? Can they not ask a number of responsible plain clothes police officers to visit druggist shops in the city and watch things for themselves?" They ask for "drastic and exemplary punishment for a number of profiteers". Since the drug crisis began, there has been no major prosecution or punishment and all the papers, *all*, and the vast body of the public behind them, have asked for it.

At the end of a day's hard walking, we were stumbling to our last village, over the rice stubble again. Dr. Basu almost as if by

habit began singing an odd little Chinese tune, one of the songs of the Eighth Route Army. He and Dr. Bera have started their own Medical Unit. They have already got a tiny "hospital", a room, where they are trying to rehabilitate a few of the broken-down village workers who have been giving their blood for relief work. They are held up for lack of funds and medicine, but they are in spite of it striking out into the districts. Their motto is "Doctors from Bengal, money from outside, quinine from the Government." "But I would like a number of doctors too from the rest of India," said Dr. Basu. "Medical units from each Province, a sort of Goodwill Mission into the interior of Bengal."

And our own little Eighth Route Army is steadily growing. All those who see the distress and work for it, and fight for money, and supervise, and do the hundred and one difficult jobs that are necessary to get medicines and keep relief going. Knocking at a door here. Arguing and persuading there. Behind it all here are big people who love Bengal and her suffering peasantry. Dr. B. C. Roy, the famous physician, has taken ten thousand pounds of quinine from the Government and mixed it with a local antimalarial drug *chhatim*, so that the

combined pills will decrease the amount of quinine needed to save a case.

And the little people—the cooks and the organisers, the children who sing and collect, and the young people who make and distribute clothes—they too are heroes.

Two Children

I can't forget two children. Whenever I turn my thoughts to Bengal—and it is so persistently in them—I see two faces.

The first is Gangadhar's. I met him on the day I went to Midnapore. It had been a tiring enough journey from Calcutta, crowded as usual. In the trains there are no lights, and where the bulbs had been you are lucky if you find an oil wick-lamp, locked in a wire cage. Midnapore looked inexpressibly dead and dreary.

"Come along, I'll take you to the orphans' home," Comrade Saroj told me. We walked along the winding path, past the dilapidated and nondescript houses. Up a gully, we found the house where they were lodged. "There are only two left," we were told. "You have come a day too late. They have been transferred to the Central Orphanage some miles away at Jalagram, where the Hindu Mission has got two homes. One for girls, with one hundred there, one for boys, where there are three hundred."

I looked at the two who were left. There

was a tall boy, of about thirteen. Muscular and very black in colour. His clothes were dirty and he stood very seriously with his arms crossed. The second was slenderer and fairer, about eleven years old.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Gangadhar," replied the older one.

"Sripoti Kumar," said the younger one.

I asked their stories. Sripoti Kumar said his mother and father and baby sister were still living, and he was on the point of dying of starvation when they gave him to the orphanage. His father was a carpenter. "Perhaps I'll go back when it's all over" he said shyly.

Gangadhar had a stranger story. "My father had a hundred *bighas* of land," he said, "in the cyclone area of Contai. One hundred *bighas*. Fifty he sold for a little rice. Fifty nobody will buy because they were soaked with salt water at the time of the tidal wave and will not be fertile for years to come. My mother died, my two brothers died. My father thought I would die and he sent me here. He writes to me. Perhaps, if this awful hunger ever stops, I'll go back."

He looked gloomy. The house was cheerless enough: they did not appear to have

anything to play with or to do. "The boys were bad boys," Gangadhar said. "But it was not their fault. They had no teachers, no books. I was in the sixth class." He spoke proudly.

Before leaving, I asked Saroj to ask them what they would like. "Just a little thing. I haven't come to distribute money, but they look so depressed." I thought they would ask for kites. But no. "Give me a book," said Gangadhar ferociously, as though his hunger was too great to be borne. "Me too," said Sripoti.

As I went away, Gangadhar ran after me. "For God's sake arrange for my education," he said, gripping my arm as I left.

His problem, I found, is no unique one. Of the seventy-five boys sent by the Hindu Mission in that batch to Jalagram, seventy-three were schoolboys. Schooling is in a chaotic condition. This area was well served by primary schools, and middle schools. Now, following cyclone, famine and disease, 1,175 schools out of 2,722 are closed. Nearly fifty per cent. In those that are left, disease and lack of food has so decimated the attendance that the average attendance is barely 150 out of 500. It is reckoned that at least fifty per

cent. have had to stop studying, because their empty stomach made the attempt at learning a mere farce.

Midnapore reminded me of, a wounded soldier. It has suffered much. The Denial Policy of the Government, the Indian version of scorched earth following the Japanese threat, crippled its waterways by taking away its boats. Its grain was removed "to a safer place." On its coastal side the cyclone ravaged. The August happenings following the little revolution that took place there in 1942, were put down with very great loss of life. It has been computed at five hundred. True, now the harvest has come corpses are no longer rotting in the streets, the poor have gone back to the villages and the free kitchens are closed. But Midnapore is still stunned.

My guide Saroj was tired but he would not admit it. His health is bad, but he continues running round the villages, doing what he can. Building up a co-operative grain reserve here. Distributing quinine there, or a few clothes. He knew where help was needed and he gave it when he could and starved himself. Only another soldier in the "Red Army" and I wonder how long he'll be able to do it.

We decided to cycle to Kharagpur. My

cycle was a perilous affair with inactive brakes. It was in addition a man's cycle and I couldn't get off easily. So I quietly fell off whenever the crowd got too great. By the river that divided the two towns, there was crowd enough. It was a fair in fact, and I shuddered a little when I thought of the epidemics. Just the worst possible place to hand on small-pox and cholera. The beggars on the banks were more demanding and more horrible than usual, huddled over a dirty piece of rag and begging grain.

The cycle was put on the ferry boat and we came across and raced down the straight road to Kharagpur. On the way I met the second child. A girl in the State Poor House outside Kharagpur. It was a clean well-ordered place, and I found the Superintendent enthusiastic and conscientious about his work.

She was sitting on a bed in the children's ward. Smiling. That was why I noticed her. Smiles in rural Bengal are rarer than *colas* of gold. I asked them to ask her what was the matter with her. "Nothing," said Puti and smiled again. I turned to the doctor. "She is an orphan," he said. "Picked up on the streets. She's suffering from chronic malaria."

But Puti, the innocent, went on smiling.

Near her was Kayim, of the lovely eyes. Like Puti he was about seven years old. A shepherd boy, they said, of a Muslim family. He did not smile but his eyes were the eyes of a poet and I wondered when again he would see the squat goats of West Bengal. "Where do you send them when they are better?" I said. "Back home, if they have got one," was the reply. "And if not, to the orphanage."

A few beds away were two Telegu-speaking children, waifs, picked up by the roadside, of one of the Madrassi families that came to work in the railway centre of Kharagpur. They sat and begged on the bed "Give us rice," they cried, holding their inflated stomachs. "They go on begging when they first come here," the doctor said. "They think they cannot get food unless they do. They will learn not to in a few days. And the tragedy is we can't give rice to these two, they have dysentery and malaria, and they can only be given juices and so on. They think we won't give them rice."

And so to Kharagpur. In the Railway quarters, I met the Mahila Atma Rakshsha women (the Women's Self-Defence League), who have been feeding many of the destitutes by their own spontaneous co-operative efforts. I met there also two Sardars, Gurdyal Singh and

Rattan Singh, who arranged a meeting for me in the Gurdwara. It was pleasant, if surprising, to find so many fellow-Punjabis and their wives in the midst of the famine country. They gave me a real Punjabi welcome. And they, too, are trying to lend a helping hand in the midst of the misery they see about them.

Kingdom of Beggars

“You must go to Contai,” a friend of mine told me in Calcutta. “It is probably the worst afflicted area in Bengal, having suffered the devastation, first of cyclone and flood, and then of famine and disease. It is literally a kingdom of beggars.”

And a kingdom of beggars it proved to be. Travelling along the thirty odd miles from Contai Road station towards Contai in West Bengal we saw all around us the remains of the cyclone havoc. Uprooted trees, bleached and scarred, lay in hundreds near the road-side. A good many of the palms still standing had been in some way bent or mutilated by the winds and torrential rains. Numberless houses still had no roof, or ragged thatch, although the Government has poured quite a considerable amount of money into the Contai area to enable the peasants to rebuild their huts. This money is repayable in four instalments. The terrible tidal wave that swept up the tidal canal at Contai, and rushed upon the land from the coast, not only devastated whole villages and resulted in thousands of deaths

and the slaughter of cattle, but it also soaked whole stretches of land in salt water, and for years to come any sort of cultivation will be impossible.

This catastrophe of October 1942 followed on the heels of shocking repression of the nationalist rising in the Midnapore area in September. The whole population was completely stunned, homeless and without the most basic possessions. The Friends' Ambulance Unit took up the Relief work they saw to be immediately necessary, and spontaneous relief work started, the Local Committee work being supplemented by various organisations from outside, among the most efficient being the Ramakrishna Mission.

In 1943, as if this wrath of the Unknown on the heads of the peasants was not enough, disease began to attack the district on a large scale, mainly malaria and cholera, but running the gamut of horror into dropsy and scabies as malnutrition increased.

By the time I arrived, there was at least a visual improvement on conditions three months before, when corpses lay uncared for in the streets and a procession of macabre skeletons trooped in, ceaselessly drawn by the magnet of the name "Contai," the biggest townlet within

miles. By now most of those emaciated bodies with tortured eyes have found rest in death and comfort in oblivion, and the flotsam and jetsam of that tide of misery is dragging itself back to life in the various emergency hospitals of Contai and its surroundings.

The rice crop has come, rice is in the shops, and, for those who are able-bodied, there is work in the fields. The agricultural labourers are getting inadequate wages, a little higher than before (going up to twelve annas a day), but, where the crops are short, work is not enough for all and whole families are eking out a living on the work of a few. A great many of the smaller peasants have sold out their holdings altogether, sometimes for a mere bag of rice. A typical peasant family I talked to in village Mohishagut had six *bighas* of land from which they had harvested thirty-six maunds of paddy (that would mean about twenty-four maunds* of rice), and there were eleven members in the family to be fed. Although four members of this family were capable of work, only two were working. "And after a few weeks," said Harnarain pathetically, "there will be no more work until the next crop, and then what shall we do?"

* 1 maund=80 lbs.

I felt that relief was on a larger scale in Contai than in other affected areas, and that, for the time being, it was doing better with regard to clothes and food than most, but that horrible undercurrent of doubt was there. . . . "and then what shall we do?" The emergency hospitals are functioning, but will close, perhaps in three months, perhaps in six. . . . "and then what shall we do?" I spoke to Dr. Shanti Soni, a Punjabi girl who is doing yeoman work in one of them, and she says the stream of the diseased shows no signs of slackening. There were fifty patients with her, twenty-one of the cases being dysentery, in fantastic weakness, huddled in semi-circles their skull-like faces looking like the very shadow of death. Many were in a dropsical condition, sores breaking out on their swollen limbs. "And all of them," she said "whatever the disease they are suffering from, have got round worms in their stomach and in their bowels. The surgeon has never performed a post-mortem yet in which they are not present. They vomit them regularly, and this will go on because they come from the impure water, and no other supply is possible. They have all got scabies too."

I looked at their itching spotty skin, with

scabs and sores. Like pariah dogs in the bazars, they were catching the dreadful mange one from another . . . and it is most difficult to cure. Sterilisation of clothes and beddings on a large scale is just not attempted either here or in the army hospitals, and nursing and ceaseless work is required to cure such a condition. There are not enough doctors and nurses. Along the streets people sit scratching their dried skin. "The whole of the Contai sub-division is ravaged with scabies," I was told. "It is a peculiarity of the place, and no one knows quite why it is."

In village Kolaipada we found an ancient mariner. He came up to us to show his legs covered in scabies, and to complain of fever. We told him to go to the hospital. "It is too far from here," he said, "how can I walk?" The Friend's Ambulance Unit arranged to send their car. "But are there more in the village?" they asked. Then began his long long tale. The upshot of it was that, in the village of Kolaipada, of three hundred and ninety souls, one hundred and fifty perished in the cyclone, another hundred and fifty succumbed to cholera and malaria and famine, and a bare ninety are left. "Most are ill," he said. "In two days we have had seven cholera

cases, and more will come." He went on scratching his legs reflectively. "More will come".

I came up against the ineffectiveness of even present relief when I saw Junput Military hospital. Here was a good well-organised hospital running, a part of the new scheme that followed Wavell's visit to Bengal. The man in charge was sympathetic and obviously devoted to his job, but he had only been in charge three days. "How many beds here?" "One hundred," I was told. "But thirty are empty." "The villages are full of the ill and the dying, and why are they empty?" "They don't come." "The point is," we said "not that they won't come, but that they can't come. Do you fetch them from the inner villages?" It seems not. The Ambulance goes along the motor road, but there is not a single stretcher party to fetch men from the villages. And anybody who has experience of village localities anywhere in India knows the vast majority of villages are approached only from the footpaths, and not the roads. "We are trying to arrange stretcher parties," he said; "but there is no budget for it yet, and it may take time."

It probably will. But by the time they are formed hundreds more will have died and

the beds will lie empty in the meantime. Another tragedy of red tape.

I was more than ever convinced of the necessity of private relief after seeing Contai. Government has the money and can do work on a much large scale than other organisations can, but without the patient individual work of private organisations, on however small a scale, the whole atmosphere gets so enmeshed in red tape that somehow or other the maximum help does not reach those who need it.

The Friends' Ambulance Unit—consisting of English Pacifists, and Mr. Sudhir Ghosh—is an excellent example of what can be done by a more co-operative outlook. They are distributing milk from the Red Cross and the Government in the whole sub-division, keeping alive thousands of children and saving them from the worst malnutrition, but their organisation is a private one, works with humanity, and understanding, and not a seer of milk is wasted. Their Children's Home too was a delight. The children were happy under their Bratachari leader, Shoto Babu.

The little Babies' Clinic under Barbara Hartland an English nurse who was with Tagore during his last days, and who is a great friend of India, was a heartwarming tiny

centre. It kept alive a handful of babies found on the streets and in the destitute homes but it was working with regularity and there was a homely atmosphere about the place. "Look at this little fellow," said Barbara, "he's as black as a teapot, but such a darling. His mother tried to bury him alive to save him from the agonies of starvation, and we just managed to save him. She ran away, fearing punishment, but we are trying to find her." I looked at him. He snuggled up to her quite happily. "You should have seen him when he came," she continued. "He was so terrified of everybody, he could not be touched without tears."

Yes. That is what is needed. Not only food for emaciated bodies, but healing and love for torn and emaciated minds and feelings. And this will come only from the people who work for relief not because it means money to them, but because they love India, and suffer and work with her sons and daughters.

The Milk Tree of Orissa

It was my good luck that when I arrived in Jaleshwar, Orissa, to see what was happening on the Bengal-Orissa borderland, I should find Sjt. S. N. Sahu, President of the Servants of India Society for Orissa and Pandit H. N. Kunzru, their all-India President, who had arrived there for the same purpose.

I joined in with their programme, and we struck out into villages ten miles away, over the sandy reaches of the lovely Subarnarekha river. In spite of my vigorous protests that I could, and did, walk much longer distances, I was forced by kindness into a palanquin, the only form of transport possible. It wasn't too uncomfortable; and it was certainly some protection against an unexpectedly hot midday sun, but I could not stand it for more than a mile or two and preferred my own feet.

It was pretty countryside. Village huts of mud and thatch, shaded by banana trees, and a plain of rice stubble. But here too the path of the cyclone was still clearly defined. Big trees torn up by the roots lay white and bleached, and we were unable to get the favourite *dabs*, green

cocoanuts, which are the purest drinking water in an area riddled with contaminated water supplies. "Most of the coconut palms were uprooted," we were told. I remembered a similar statement about Contai. "Before the cyclone it used to be a land abounding in cocoanuts, and fish was better and cheaper here than in any other district of Bengal. Now we hardly see a coconut, and so many of the fishermen are dead that fish even is difficult to buy."

A fellow-journalist had suggested the Orissa visit to me. "Orissa famine conditions are a direct result of the same factors as prevail in Bengal," he said. "Geographically, the two districts of Contai and Jaleswar cannot be separated—the cyclone havoc was present there, and there too the criminal mismanagement of the rice supply contributed to scarcity, and resulted in at least a thousand deaths. In the Fatiabad area," he continued, "there is a field of hundreds of sun-scorched skeletons and through it runs the railway line along which waggon loads of rice were poured into Bengal. I saw it myself, and took photographs."

At Fatiabad, a crowd of over a thousand Santals rushed up to us. Their dark vital

bodies glowed in the sunlight. Very thin they were, for the most part, but the smoothness of their skin had not been polluted by scabies, as was the case in Contai. True, here and there I did see children with malnutrition, sores and dropsical hands and feet, but the proportion was less. I remarked on it.

"The reason for this is our work here," said Vyasji, active member of the Servants of India Society and the Gandhi Seva Sangh. "We persuaded G. P. Birla of the Orient Paper Mills to come to our help, following the rise in rice prices that made thousands destitute, and since December we have been feeding over seven thousand people on this Fatiabad side, either in the free kitchens or by means of rice doles."

I corroborated this later in Cuttack, where I met one of the secretaries of the Famine Relief Committee, Sjt. S. S. Misra, who has been working specially in the hard-hit Gangam coastal district. "The one reason why the Orissa peasant has not reached, in the majority of cases, the startling degree of emaciation of the Bengal peasant is because, from the beginning of 1943, and within a month of the cyclone, the Orissa Relief Committee started work. We are all working

—officials and non-officials. Huts were rebuilt, fishing nets given. Probably because the famine area here is more restricted we were able to mitigate the worst effects of high prices and starvation—but the situation definitely got out of control from the autumn, and people died in their hundreds. We are keeping on our free kitchens in the Santal land most particularly because, although the rice crop has come, they are landless, have wages insufficient for existence, and are in the real sense destitute. One ragged garment on their back, no kitchen utensils, homes deserted.”

I was able to gather from others that the strict censorship in the province prevented news of actual suffering from being published, and it was not until Pandit Kunzru came personally and began issuing statements that the outside world knew anything about it. Then more money help began to flow into Orissa, and relief on a wider scale was possible.

The next agricultural labour for the landless Santals will not be given until June, the crop time. The thousand odd men and women and children who were feeding in rows on rice and a mixture of lentils and *brinjal* (it was very deficient in fat), sitting in front of me, had no future. Another “kingdom of beggars.”

Normally they would fill their stomachs in these months selling coal and firewood. "But firewood is free here. So many trees have been uprooted in the cyclone that everyone has all he wants for the mere cost of picking it up. A bit of odd day—labour here and there will not feed whole families, without homes and cooking utensils. Wages too are six to eight annas for the men, and three to four annas for the women. Rice prices are controlled but, even in the best places, it is reported that price of rice is Rs. 12-8 per maund.

It is obvious that mere relief kitchens, essential though they are if the population is not to degenerate into the gangling bags of bones you see in Bengal, are not the final answer to the problem. Side by side with relief must go a big rehabilitation plan for the Santals and the landless Oriya peasants and destitutes. They need purchasing power, and only work can give that. They need enough money to buy rice, and even current wages cannot procure it.

Armed with these questions I went later to the Chief Secretary. The Santals in the small place I visited numbered 14,000. What was Government's plan? The problem could not be solved with relief only and the *aman* crop was not

an Aladin's lamp which would yield magic results. I was assured that Public Works programmes on a large scale were in preparation—"say, from the beginning of March." They were also planning to subsidise rice, so that $4\frac{3}{4}$ seers to the rupee would be available. It sounded hopeful. "And we are starting limited road construction work in the Jaleshwar area straight away." But I wondered, as usual, what the reality would be. How adequate to deal with the immensity of the problem.

I looked at a Santal girl-mother feeding her baby. She was holding him on her hip with nonchalant grace, unconcerned by my watching eyes. He buried his flat little nose into her breast and sucked loudly and greedily. I remembered the Santal songs. The mother is called "the milk tree." So many little ones were living on the milk of their beloved "milk trees." May it not dry up in another wave of starvation. May the Santal babies not suck blood as the Bengali babies have done.

It is up to us to see they don't. The weight of public opinion has done a lot to move the Orissa Government. Money from outside—some from New York, some, even, from Trade Unions in England—has gone towards

ting over hard days in neglected Orissa, almost unknown and unheard of among the grand provinces of Hindustan. But more money is needed if the work is to go on. The day of giving is not yet over.

A hundred Santal orphans were lined up near the Free Dispensary of the Marwari Relief Society. Groups of orphans here and there. I've been running into them ever since I entered Bengal. A beautiful boy of twelve stood defiantly with a baby brother on his hip.

Who cares for the Santals? They have no schools, only a handful of Missionary teachers. They have no future. They are frequently subjected to the degradation of foodlessness. They have no protection against famine.

The enormity of such neglect struck me again. How many unmined jewels are among them? How many potential artists, dancers, leaders of men?

Tears in the Rice

I had no very clear idea about East Bengal. Standing on the deck of the grandiose steamer that churns its way up the Padma river from Gaolundo to Narayanganj, I was amazed at its magnificence. Before me was Padma, on whose banks Tagore has meditated, whose turgid waters in the monsoons have for centuries annihilated the mean traces that kings and autocrats and peasants leave on her mighty shores, Padma the supreme, the unmeasurable, the uncontrolled. Before her even the Railway pays its homage—the actual station on her banks is no permanent thing, but must uproot itself whenever the Great One shows signs of changing her channel, as she does most years. She is calm sometimes, but she is treacherous, and when the rains come huge waves boil up and sometimes even engulf the steamers.

Padma rules East Bengal. She has an immense disdain for the trappings of civilisation, the trains and the ships and the buildings that dare to approach her.

But she has never ruled alone. Man has always swarmed over her banks. The plantain

trees have for ageless ages grown there. Padma respects man, and man respects Padma. There will be no halt to the movement of Padma; there will be no halt to the continuous birth-pangs of the women of Bengal. For the movement of the people, their growth, is immortal; she can engulf only the mean and static residue of their efforts at possession. Padma is all-powerful only because she seems so in the eyes of her dazzled subjects, the fishermen and the tillers of the soil. But the ruled are themselves the rulers, for without them hers would be a barren kingdom.

There were heartening things to see in Narayanganj and Dacca. Narayanganj was shown to me by Nibedita Ghosh, the lively little bride of a few months, who has no time to act the part of the petted new-comer, and who takes on her young shoulders the not inconsiderable burden of running a Milk Canteen, with the help of her Mahila Samiti workers. I asked who gave the money. The Marwari Relief Society, I was told.

I went to the hospital. The District Board doctor was in charge. The general supervision of it was carried out by the Swami of the local Ramakrishna Mission. There were two American Catholic sisters of the order of the

Holy Cross, and five Bengali sisters doing the nursing. It was a very very clean and pleasant place, and the hundred and fifty odd patients looked well-cared for and contented.

That decided me. Narayanganj might be a small centre, of no special concern in the vast spider-web of the Bengal Famine. But it had a special appeal. Here at least I found people co-operating and helping one another with a good spirit and solidarity that broke down all prejudice. And the results were astonishingly good.

Shocking news reached me from village areas in the neighbourhood. In village Khilgaon, I was told, out of four hundred babies and young children, only four had survived. Only eight hundred were living in the village, where before had been one thousand three hundred souls. Arthur Moore, who is doing patient and troublesome work all over the area (some change from his work as the editor of the "Statesman", but, I felt, a fitting sequel to his epic swansong, his plea for understanding for India) had given three hundred rupees a month to open a free canteen there, from the funds of the Friend's Ambulance Unit for whom he is working.

In the town of Narayanganj, things at

least were a little better. About the villages I was not so sure. The citizens whom I met—and they were not few—were worried beyond measure about the future, and the rising price of the rice. “This time last year, after the harvest,” they said, “rice was six or seven rupees a maund cheaper than it is now. It is still 4 to 5 hundred per cent more expensive than in pre-war days. To-day, yes, we are barely managing, but tomorrow . . . ?”

Dacca had the same tale to tell. When the Ramakrishna Mission, for whose network of relief organisations all over Bengal I heard nothing but praise, celebrated the birthday of Vivekananda with feeding the destitutes over eight thousand turned up—Hindu and Muslim, they make no distinction.

“Normally,” said Swami Maithilyananda, “we have to beat drums and then only get a thousand or so. This time, the news of our ‘mela’ went mainly by word of mouth. We cooked for six thousand, and now we have had to start again and cook for two thousand more.” I looked at them. The last two thousand were sitting in rows with plantain leaves in front of them, waiting. Their condition was not too good. Thin children with rickety legs and inflated bellies.

Unhappy looking women, and men with a leaden look on their faces. A smile was a thing to be welcomed.

I went deep into the afflicted areas of Dacca district when I went on foot to villages near Munshiganj. It confirmed my forebodings. Even if the worst scarcity of food has been eliminated from the towns by persistent local effort, by rice doles and relief kitchens, the condition of the villages is still heart-rending. The towns are mostly stopping their kitchens at the end of this month. The funds of the All-India Women's Conference have dried up. So have those of the Ramakrishna Mission, manfully though it has struggled. I have not much hope even for the towns if the price of rice continues to rise.

But the villages are the key-point. Our approach was unheralded and unrehearsed. In the first group of huts in a Muslim village of landless labourers, I found a woman cooking rice in an earthen pot on an open-air 'chula'. Her shoulders were heaving as she stirred it. She covered her face, for strangers had come. I went up to her and looked into her eyes: they were full of tears. Tears were falling into the rice. It was a bare half seer, floating in water. "For seven people,"

her husband said in a low voice. In how many villages, I wondered, are the poor eating their bare handful of rice slop salted with a woman's tears?

• I went farther into the same village. At every door I stopped to hear the same pitiful theme, with its hundred variations. "Here the men have gone away to work in Assam: the women have nothing. They make a bare occasional living working at marriages and festivals. In between they starve" . . . "Here they have all run away: the men to the town, the women to beggary and destitution and the gruel kitchens." I shuddered. There was a lot behind that inadequate word, destitution. Humiliation, demoralisation, casual prostitution, disease. And behind it the face of abandoned children.

We came across a hut without its corrugated roof. It had been casually torn off, and the room gaped dully to the sky. In reply to my half-formed question they pointed out a dried up husk of a woman cowering in the next hut. "Her husband died a few days ago", they said. "Her children died before that. She sold the roof, her last possession, to buy him a coffin."

Amina she was called. To her left were

two children, Jalusha and Javida "orphans too. They are being cared for by the man in the hut in the middle. There too, the widow finds shelter. Three houses have become one. Panchushek has a big enough family burden. He has five children and a wife of his own, but he opened his doors to them all."

Panchushek was not understanding what we were saying. Arun, who had been distributing quinine to them on behalf of the People's Relief Committee, was a known factor. I was the unknown. They wondered if I had come to help. I asked myself, as I have done a hundred times, how much my little boat could pull. Individually, I could do nothing. But in the long run we have all got to do our utmost and do something now, and urgently, and we have all to think, whether we be in Punjab or in Bengal or in the rest of India, what the answer to this earthquake of suffering is. How we can help to end this tragic dislocation of life? How we rehabilitate the uprooted and the bereaved?

Give we must, wherever we give it, because the labour of keeping people alive has got to go on, vast and uncontrollable a task though it is. More, we have got to face those

urgent problems of the destitution of women and the future of Bengal's orphaned children. In Calcutta, they have started already. The women are battering on the doors of Government to move in the matter, but they themselves are not idle. They are formulating a joint scheme for all relief organisations. They are tirelessly bringing the question up before the conscience of the public.

The capstone of my suffering and my resolve was Nuroo. I found her near a bridge as I walked back to the bazars of Munshiganj. It was far out in the countryside. A few men were working at a potato crop nearby and shovelling water with kerosene tins out of the dirty stream below. She was shivering in the first cold of the dusk, sitting huddled like a monkey. "She was left here yesterday," they said. "Last night we fed her and let her sleep with us. But we can't keep her." Their hands were expressive of today, tomorrow, the whole story of despair.

The eight year-old child said nothing. Her frail claw-like hands rested on her knees. She did not even turn her eyes towards us. I picked her up and she lay with a great and unutterable tiredness on my shoulder, motionless.

But her shivering was more than cold.

It was fever. In the morning we carried her to the Emergency hospital and I left her there, scarcely more alive, clutching the crude doll we gave her. And for her, what comes next ?

A day with the Army

Everywhere I went in Bengal I either saw Army hospitals or heard of them working. But nobody seemed to know much about them and how far they were effective. In spite of the obvious anti-Army feeling in many areas (especially where the Government's Denial Policy had been in force since the threat of invasion) there were many who said, "Without the Army, I don't know what we should have done . . . you see they have such an organisation at their disposal, and it's so quick."

It was then, I made up my mind to see what they were really doing not on paper, but in actual 'day-to-day' work. From the Army Famine Relief Office I got some idea of the magnitude of what was being done. At a time when transport was the most difficult of famine problems, when quickness meant thousands of lives, Wavell's visit put the whole of Army transport and petrol at the disposal not only of the Government, but also of private relief organisations. "The Ramakrishna Mission is one of our biggest

'customers'", the kindly Colonel in charge told me. So rice and grains were dumped all over Bengal, with the minimum delay. Where the water supply was defective pure water was delivered.

In a six-week period, forty-eight thousand maunds of clothes and blankets were distributed to various centres. Two and a half million pieces of clothing. No other organisation could have done it with like rapidity. Milk distribution has been another task done efficiently and well.

That was the carting side of it. The next was Medical Relief. There are one hundred and fifty units working in Bengal, an average of eight, per district. In the one-week period ending the fourth of January over thirty-seven thousand cholera inoculations have been given and nine thousand small-pox vaccinations. Patients treated were over fifty-seven thousand, and ten, per cent. of them were treated in the hospitals. Quinine has gone through the Army in large quantities and over six million Atebrin tablets have been given to Civil Surgeons all over Bengal.

The Sindhi Major and the English Colonel who are working together in the Medical

Relief office were very helpful and I arranged to spend a day with an Army Medical Unit working in the 24 Parganas area in the hinterland of Calcutta. Figures mean less than the stories behind them.

So it happened that I landed up at Baruipur. In 24 Parganas there are fourteen mobile treatment centres. Baruipur centre has the only hospital. There are 100 beds but another fifty were being fitted up as there was such a great need for it. I went first to the Out-Patients Department, and found a patient queue squatting on the ground. Everyday about three hundred came, I was told. Before treatment, an anti-cholera injection is given. Diagnosis, in the nature of things, is rough and ready. More than a few minutes cannot be spent on each patient. Most of the cases are malaria, over eighty per cent. Many are anaemic. Vitamin pills are given, and most are given a pint of milk. Patients have to come every third day for medicine. More than that cannot be given "to prevent black marketing." Probably the worst cases never saw the hospital as they could not walk there.

In charge there was a Punjabi doctor from 'Pindi. A woman doctor, recently out

from England, had made the Children's Wards very jolly places open to sun and air. There were no cholera cases in the hospital, because "it's not possible to disinfect everything, and it's too dangerous for the rest of the patients." But they had taken a few bad T. B. cases: "we just hadn't the heart to refuse them."

When I went out to see the mobile units working, I saw the whole scheme in relation to the Bengal country-side. At the Hospital, there had been four English doctors working. On the ambulance, I found another, and a mixed group of sepoys from all parts of India. Only one could speak Bengali—he was a Muslim from the Eastern districts. At the first stopping place, a mixed and laughing crowd of children, men and women were taking milk. About a hundred. They refused the cholera inoculation, and there was nobody to persuade them to take it. Various cases were treated on the spot. I went up the narrow and dirty village path with the *sepoy* interpreter. "Things are better in these villages since the harvest," they said, "but at least ten per cent. will be faced with rank starvation when the harvest is over."

My coming, in Punjabi dress, created a

stir. An English-speaking member of the village came up. He worked in Calcutta. "Tell them to mend the well," he said, "it's been in disuse because we can't afford repairs for the last year and a half. They tell us to boil drinking water, but this would be a much better protection against typhoid and cholera." Before this, nobody had plucked up courage to tell the unit about it. I asked if it could be done. "Well, we can write to the Civil, and there is no reason why they should not do it," was the reply.

"It would be much better than the present position," said the Captain thoughtfully. "Even if they boil their drinking water they insist on washing their household utensils in the contaminated water of the village pond and that's just as bad."

Going on with them all to the next stopping place, we found a large crowd, nearly three hundred, waiting. All get milk—thick rich full-cream Nestle's milk powder shaken up in water. Much better than anything to be bought in the *bazar*, and probably of more value in fighting epidemics than the tablets of halibut-liver oil and vitamins that went down with it. Everyone who comes gets a full pint, and it popularises the work of the Ambulance.

The sepoys had a hard job getting the crowd into lines—"we waste hours doing it" they complained. But nearby was a local doctor who had been organising the local relief kitchen and grain doles, a genuine selfless public worker, and he had never been on speaking terms with them.

It again struck me how much more work they could have done with a little intelligent local co-operation. Volunteers could have made queues, carried in patients, acted as a liason. Here at least there was no such thing, and fear of the Army is so much, combined with a shyness for all "official" things, that the army will in most cases have to take the initiative. In Bashirhat, one of the 24 Parganas centres, the students have taken the units to the worst places and helped to reach the real doorsteps of the people. In Chittagong area too.

The Army complain of "indifference". It looks more to me like plain shyness and awkwardness. The doctor at Andhermani came up to me readily enough and expressed willingness to help. I hope they are taking his co-operation.

The work is systematic, and the Unit comes back to the same village twice a week, because without it any long-term treatment of, say,

malaria or malnutritional deficiencies is useless. They admitted they had very little connection with the inner villages, beyond the motor road. "It would take them long to get there," they explained, "and stretcher parties aren't an economic proposition." There are so few healthy and able bodied men capable of doing carrying work that I wonder how far any such scheme would be successful. But at the back of my mind I could see the hopeless condition of those hundreds of inner villages like the Devipur ones in my first visit to the district.

Great though all this work is, I had a very strong feeling that it could be much greater. Through it, the people are more kindly disposed towards the army than they have been for years. It is an invaluable opportunity to bring the army near the people, to forge bonds they will never forget. The language difficulty is tremendous but in spite of it there was kindness and understanding. Nobody had any political axes to grind.

But, and it is a very big but, it stops there. If there were Bengali patriots working along with them, the Indian Army could come much closer to the people. I'm sure many of the people who came for treatment would like to know more of those who come to help them. But

they are tied by the bonds of different languages.

One of the Captains complained his cap had been stolen in the village. It was a jaunty R. A. M. C. cap, attractive with its crimson cloth and gold braid. "It costs eighty rupees," he said ruefully, "and it's so ungrateful". "Probably some child liked it," I pointed out. "It's sheer mischief, and nobody would dream that a cap the same shape as the Gandhi cap would cost so much." I doubt if anyone could sell it and get money for it in such a village. But the misunderstanding was there. He was devoted to his work, and was upset that they would not take the cholera inoculations. "Perhaps if you came round with us more they would take it," he said. It only needed a talk by a local school-master, and hundreds would have gained confidence.

Going back at dusk to Calcutta, I thought it all out again. The Army work against epidemics has done a lot to save Bengal from a far worse fate, but, as one Colonel put it "the army's first work is the army and how long we go on doing our bit here depends first and foremost on the war situation. We want to go on as long as we can, but we mustn't be taken as permanent . . . others must jump in to take

the place of our units before they are withdrawn."

At that time, no joint Medical Relief Committee of private organisations had been formed. Since I returned it has, and things look brighter, because side by side with the Civil Surgeon, Bengal and his permanent and emergency organisation, side by side with local Health officers, has grown up a committee to guide and direct medical relief which will go not only to towns and centres on the road, but into the heart of Bengal's villages. Dr. B. C. Roy is the president of this Bengal Medical Relief Co-ordination Committee, and all the bigger organisations are co-operating, including the Bengal Relief Committee. The People's Relief Committee, tireless and persistent as ever, is at the back of it.

Relief and Rehabilitation

The need of Bengal is for relief and rehabilitation. One cannot go without the other. It is equally impossible to feed millions of people over long periods of time, by means of doles and free kitchens, and to let them starve while long-term schemes of rehabilitation are put into practice.

The work of rehabilitation on a large scale is of necessity a Government responsibility. It is vital work, that requires capital investment, and will show no immediate money return. It may even ultimately be repaid only by the incalculables: the well-being of the Province and its return to normal life. But without a New Deal, touching the castaways of the famine, the hundreds and thousands of deserted women and widows, the orphans, the destitute who have somehow drifted along the roads to death or the destitute's camps, there can be no solution of the problem of hunger. Unless these people again get the power of earning and the power of buying they cannot return to normal social life. The Contai Cyclone area is a "kingdom of beggars". All stricken areas of Bengal are the same.

It is almost too much to hope that for some time inflation will be checked to any large extent. Its results can only be nullified by increasing the buying power of the masses of the people, in particular of the landless, to make up the lag there inevitably is between the increase of their own wages and the upward price curve. Famine of the Bengal variety is itself a war phenomenon, and it would be instructive for the government of Bengal to study what, for instance, war-torn China has done to meet great human tide of the hungry and homeless that washed inland from the theatres of war.

Industrial co-operatives, the Indusco experiment, carried through by Rewi Alley and his group organisers, have played an important part in keeping Chinese war economy going. Decentralised cottage industries, mechanised with simple machines in individual house-holds, with co-operative marketing facilities, have recast thousands of human lives. The whole scheme is backed up by training schools and inspectors, and by it many of China's war time needs have been satisfied. Some such scheme could bring new hope to the utterly hopeless. In Dacca, for instance, thousands of weavers have died of starvation, although Dacca textiles

are treasured and sought after all over India. In the homes of the so-called "depressed classes", Gandhiji's "children of God" like the village of Rishipara near Munshiganj, skilled basket-makers were starving because they had no money to buy cane, which used to come from Malaya.

Various private relief organisations are groping to understanding of the problem. The Gandhi Sevasangh, all over Bengal, is in its own limited way setting up spinning centres. I saw one working in Contai. The work was going on in seventy-four villages, two hundred and sixty-four children were being looked after in childrens' homes, and eleven medical relief centres had been opened.

In the Report of the Contai Sevasangh was the following paragraph :

"The Khadi Vidyala that the Sangha conducted for the last six or seven months has been turned into a spinning home where poor spinners from the neighbouring villages assemble daily to spin and get some rice (8 ozs. 4 chattaks) in addition to their usual wages. A contribution of fifty maunds of rice was received from the Gujarati Sewa Samity to give food grains to the poor spinners and other artisans as extra wages. It is contemplated to extend the work as far as

possible so that poor villagers may become self-supporting through this handicraft."

In the offices of the Bengal Relief Committee of the Hindu Mahasabha I came across the same realisation, and the major part of the money left for distribution was earmarked for "work schemes" which included the building of village tanks and roads. The need to take people from beggary to self-supporting work is a real one. In the case of women, it is the only road open to them if they are not to become mere cattle in the markets of human flesh.

That this is a bare fact and not sensationalism is proved by the reports of volunteers who worked in the food queues in Calcutta and saw the numbers of young women dwindling day by day until they ceased to come altogether. Or Press statements like the following:

"At Netrakona, in Mymensingh," says a United Press meassage of the 1st November, 1943, "rumours of the malpractice of regularly selling destitute girls aged between 2 and 13 in the local prosititutes' quarters were current for some time when all the local parties combined together under the leadership of the Netrakona Relief Committee, and at the instance of the Sub-Divisional Officer rescued a dozen girls from

the clutches of the prostitutes. This happened on the 28th night . . . These unfortunate girls had been sold at the rate of Rs. 10 to Re. 1-8-0 each."

Mrs. Ela Reid, Provincial Secretary of the Mahila Atma Raksha Samity, in a statement to the Press on the 22nd of December says that "trafficking in minor girls who are brought for sale by boat—among other places—to Chandpur from various parts of East Bengal has increased," and that "two such boatloads of human cargo have quite recently been sold at Chandpur, but the third one was intercepted and handed over to the authorities."

On the 26th of October, Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit issued a statement to the Press in which she said: "Cases have been brought to my notice of these poor creatures being raped at night while lying on the roads. There also appear to be certain people at work who attempt to decoy women who are destitute and without protection."

In the second week of January, the women's organisations in Calcutta, headed by the Mahila Atma Raksha Samity (the women's Self-Defence League), arranged a joint meeting, chaired by Dr. Shyamaprasad Mookerji. It was addressed among others by tireless

women's workers like Renu Chakravarty and Mrs. Ela Reid. To quote the "Statesman" report on the meeting:

"Speeches were made regarding the immensity of the task and the complicated nature of the problem which, it was stated, it was not possible for any one organisation to solve. It required the combined and co-ordinated effort of individuals and organisations.

"Dr. Mookerji said that they were now faced with one of the gravest problems—that of rehabilitating Bengal. As a result of famine and pestilence that had followed in its wake, the entire social and economic structure of village life had broken down. They had to build it again. It called for an extreme national effort and the problem was one which was not possible of solution by non-official efforts alone or by establishing one single home for homeless women and destitute children. They must all pool their resources in the work of reconstruction."

This understanding that only cohesive effort can do anything, is a later, though welcome, development of Bengal life. The famine itself was chaotic, and the relief that was offered was for the most part spontaneous and chaotic. In the very nature of things,

where people saw the need they gave, and men and organisations were too busy healing the terrible suffering all around them to think on a Province-wide scale. But in no sense can one say that there was any substantial co-ordination reached among non-official bodies.

Types of relief and their scope varied with different organisations. The Bengal Relief Committee, of which Sir Badridas Goenka is the President and Dr. Shyama Prasad the Vice-President, was the first in the field and the biggest, having collected over sixteen lakhs of rupees by the end of October. It led the way with a network of free kitchens and dole centres all over the Province. By the same date, the Marwari Relief Society had collected nearly ten lakhs. It would be mere repetition to list other organisations, but over sixteen joined the Relief Co-ordination Committee.

The Relief Committees of the Muslim League, the Moslem Majlis, the Ahrars, the Khaksars, the Muslim Chamber of Commerce and other Muslim Relief Organisations, went on side by side. It is a sad commentary on the sectional character of relief that none of the Muslim organisations joined the Relief Co-ordination Committee.

It remained for the women, traditionally

most backward, to lead the way. The All-India Women's Conference and the Bengal Women's Food Committee, whose members are drawn from all religions, became active members of the Relief Co ordination Committee, and helped to guide its decisions and distribute its funds.

The Friends' Ambulance Unit went its own efficient way ; with their help, the Red Cross took up the distribution of milk, and by November was feeding 120,000 infants daily. In the meantime the People's Relief Committee pursued its devoted work, backing up local United Relief organisations.

The quality of work done by different organisations varied, and some of the richest were, by common consent, not invariably the best. The charge of using funds for party purposes, not directly, but in such a way, and through such people as would strengthen party interests, has been levelled against some. Against others, like the Ramakrishna Mission, there was nothing, and in fact on all sides credit was given for selfless and competent work, particularly among the impoverished lower middle classes who were too proud to eat in the free kitchens and for the most part preferred to die at home.

It is interesting to note in passing that in Narayanganj out of a total of over 76,000 families helped by the Ramakrishna Mission with rice doles between April and December, 1943, nearly 66% were Muslim families. It is this spirit of impartiality, and of giving where the need is greatest, that has been a striking feature of their relief.

Of the Friends' Ambulance Unit, much has been written. The F. A. U. is a group of young English "Friends" or pacifists who chose to work for famine relief instead of offering military service in World War II. They have financed their work mainly from England, and have in addition had various grants from funds such as the Viceroy's Famine Relief Fund. They have also distributed Red Cross milk. The scope of their work has varied from medical relief and free kitchens, to children's homes and milk centres. From its Head, J. R. Symonds, comes one of the best expressions of the functions of private relief in time of famine :

"I am often asked to justify the existence of private organisations in a world in which State control becomes increasingly universal. Even Government sometimes queries the value of organisations working outside its own

extensive machinery. The justification, as I have already suggested, is twofold. Firstly, the good voluntary organisation is invariably ahead of the Government both in theory and execution. It has no precedents to consult, no files to lose, no public holidays to observe, and no Finance Department with which it conducts a dignified cotroversy. Its arguments are drawn from suffering it has seen at first hand on the field, and its immediate policy shaped by the amount of money it can immediately lay hands on. Secondly, the voluntary organisation works on a restricted scale, and can therefore afford to be humane, giving the vital extra attention to the individual which is not feasible or economical in a large scheme."

The truth of these remarks, in a country where the Government is not "the people", was brought home to me many times during my travels. I saw the unvarying and unappetising food in the average Government kitchen (in spite of the fact that it was wholesome it was rarely appreciated) for instance, and compared it with the carefully worked-out diets in the Friends' Ambulance Kitchen of Devipur, run by the Krishak Samity volunteers. Instead of the deadly uniformity of the other

public kitchens, here I found a scientific and balanced diet which was changed regularly. Its standard can be gathered from the two following alternative quantity lists for 100 children:

Food, five or six chattaks per child (ten to twelve ounces) consisting of

either Rice 5 seers	}	Rice 10 lbs.
Dal 5 seers		Lentils 10 lbs.
Vegetable $7\frac{1}{2}$ seers		Vegetable 15 lbs.
Oil 1-2 paus		Oil $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ lb.
Spices—lemon		Spices—lemon
or Rice $6\frac{1}{2}$ seers	}	Rice 13 lbs.
Dal $3\frac{1}{2}$ seers		Lentils 7 lbs.
Meat or fish 5 seers		Meat or fish 10 lbs.
Vegetable $1\frac{1}{2}$ seers		Vegetable 3 lbs.
Oil 1-2 paus		Oil $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ lb.
Lemon.		Lemon

This should be compared with an average Government kitchen—Munshiganj, where four maunds of rice, two maunds of dal, and two maunds of vegetable (one maund is equal to 40 lbs.) were cooked daily, with a small addition of cooking oil, for 1,500 people.

I had the same feeling when I saw children's homes working. The boy Gangadhar and the little girl Puti I saw in the Midnapore area expressed for me the problem, not only of

themselves, but of all Bengal's orphaned children.

Treatment varied, from just the food and bare-bed type, to the Friends' Home in Contai, where some intelligent attempt was being made by its Bratachari manager to give physical culture, songs and games their proper place. Here again non-official organisations have got to show the way, by the standards they themselves set up and by what they will demand—and ultimately get—from the Government. The All-India Women's Conference have already started homes in Calcutta and Diamond Harbour and have got plans for most of the outside districts. They will no doubt discharge their duties well, and they have a double responsibility. For on their standards and attitude will to a large extent depend the attitude of the Government when it takes the problem in hand in its entirety.

There is as yet no joint effort on behalf of the children. Numbers are difficult to get at, but a conservative estimate must be one lakh (100,000) orphans scattered in different corners of the province. Most of the children will require at least ten years' care and education. They will have to be given technical

training, fitted for life.

It is a problem like that of the women, too vast for solution by individuals. To save the little ones from early death, many organisations have picked them up from the streets and the villages, and are giving them what care they can. The Government has got its own batches. So have all the major Relief Organisations. The Bengal Relief Committee admit that "they have a budget for the children for two years." "And after that?" I enquired. "Then," said the Secretary, "some will go back to relations if they have any, and others will go to the Hindu and Muslim orphanages."

There may not be room in the Hindu and Muslim orphanages he is thinking of. There is certainly no room at this moment. The problem of these homeless ones has got to be thought out whole, not sectionally. Even the present system is inadequate. One of the Colonels in charge of Army Relief told me of the difficulty of finding homes for the destitute children released from the army hospitals. "What is needed here is some kind of Dr. Barnardo's Homes," he said. "All the money coming from abroad should be pooled and used for the purpose, instead of in

the kitchens. It's the Government's job to feed people ; that money from outside should be concentrated for a really big work of this kind."

. There is a lot of truth in what he said. Public pressure is needed to get the Government and all private organisations to think in terms not of mutual distrust, but of co-operation. It would be much better for the future of Bengal's children, for the Gangadhars and the Putis, the Kayims and the Nuroos, if some great organisation, as international and non-political as the Red Cross, could take their precious lives in trust, and give them one and all education and health and a stake in the future.

It is when talking of the people and public pressure that I remember the People's Relief Committee. At the time when the bigger Relief Committees were intent on opening branches of their organisations, often communal ones, and local all-party relief committees, which had sprung up of the people's need, were being shut down for lack of funds, the People's Relief Committee came in with its call for unity in Relief. It supported all really representative local non-party relief work. It gave a stirring deal to the Province in its day-to-day work

and issued a Province-wide appeal for unity. It fought factionalism. Rooted as it was in the real needs of the people, it got its sustenance from the people. All over India Trade Unions and peasants' Unions, students and village mothers, the little man and woman-in-the-home, gave their bit to help, and if there is any truth in the widespread Indian belief that it is not money but where it comes from that matters, its bare lakh and a half of rupees must have a potency not granted to other large collections. Its influence has been at once unifying and inspiring, and I recognised it wherever I went. The Food and Relief Committees supported by the People's Relief Committee have led the way, not only in service; but in, for instance, locating local hoarders, demanding proper control, and organising rationing.

They, and those they help, are the real "people of Bengal" who will by their actions forge the unity that has been so missing at the top. In the face of a disaster that has no party affiliations every true lover of the country can unite : it is only the opportunists and the ambitious who put name before the need of the suffering. It is organisations like the People's Relief Committee who point

the way to the future, who show how the people themselves can by their inviolable and unchanging strength wrest the initiative from the inefficient and the slothful, and pave the way for a popular, representative, all-Party Government which can rehabilitate Bengal.

And Tomorrow

The natural question for anybody who reads these pages is "who is to blame?" Somebody obviously is.

It is easy enough to find a devil who happens to suit your political argument, and, in ignorance of figures, it has been a popular witch-hunt. One of the most persistent tales was that "the British Government wanted to starve Bengal because it was Bose's province, and they thought the Bengalis might help the Japs when they came." I found it current not only in North India but in Bengal itself, and should not be surprised if it has not flourished elsewhere. And, incidentally, I also found its match in the mouth of an officer of the British Army "somewhere in Bengal." We were discussing causes of the famine. He said, rather diffidently, "Sometimes, it may seem odd to you, I wonder if this whole famine hasn't been planned out by some interested Indians in order to discredit the British Government." I told him of what other people were saying, and we laughed over it together. But it stuck in my mind

that the same tendency was there in both cases.

The first thing to be decided is "was there an actual shortage of rice?" If there was any large-scale shortage or export then even the best administration in the world could not prevent what happened. If not, then it is not the lack of rice that is to blame but the men who distributed it.

War-time figures are not available because the Government has withheld them for military reasons. But we can get enough to serve our purpose. Statistics show that the normal rice deficit in Bengal was not more than 15% or about four crore maunds. Part of this was normally supplied by Burma. It is important to remember that the Bengali peasant, except in years of bumper crop, has been traditionally underfed. 4% has been an average net import figure. When Burma was taken by the Japs, at the most India lost this four per cent, and it was not enough to cause a famine.

Other factors that went towards creating scarcity conditions were army purchases for the upkeep of the Army in Bengal, rice bought for export to the Middle East, and the Denial Policy of the Government in the coastal areas directly menaced by Japanese invasion.

Cyclone and flood affected a limited area.

None of these could have, either individually or collectively, created such a horrible catastrophe. Major Wood has asserted that only 7000 tons of rice was purchased in Bengal for the Army in the pre-famine year. Taking into account the maximum army concentration in Bengal, and the undeniable fact that most of the Army are non-rice eating, Punjabis, Gurkhas and allied troops, this is not an impossible figure. And 7000 tons is an unimportant amount. Exports plus Army in Bengal rations are not calculated to come to more than 2% of the total crop. This is also an insignificant figure.

The Denial Policy of the Government, a household word in Bengal, but not so well-known outside, was to take all rice from the threatened coastal lands so that it should not be used by the enemy in the event of invasion. That created an acute local scarcity in the Contai-Midnapore areas, already in distress following the cyclone, which reached a peak when the area was flooded during the monsoon. Transport difficulties were aggravated by the Government's confiscation of boats—also part of the Denial policy.

The Government figures for confiscation

were 30,000 tons, of which 27,400 were resold to the civil population. Stories were current in Bengal of rice so taken being buried to prevent its capture when transport was impossible. Other stories were there of rice rotting in unsuitable store-houses. Even taking these two last factors into consideration, it is doubtful if they actually mean much in terms of the total rice percentage.

But what the fall of Burma meant was not so much tons of rice; the loss of it virtually meant the sealing up of Bengal from the world rice market. No outside factor helped to pull down the rice price, and it was left a monopoly in the hands of Bengal's trading interests and hoarders. How important that factor is, is evident from the way the import of even a limited amount of Australian wheat brought down the inflated wheat price in Bengal.

Actually what happened was that artificial scarcity in Denial and cyclone areas, and to a lesser extent in the flood area of Burdwan, combined with dislocated transport, overburdened with war responsibilities, created local panics that translated themselves into, on the one hand, exaggerated private-hoarding by the middle classes and, in particular

by the big rice-growing landlords who are the kings of Bengal's rice, and on the other, profiteering and hoarding by local trades people, backed up by the big commercial rice firms. Add to this inflation, and you have chaos complete. Money flowed into the Stock Exchange; rice became a commodity of scarcity value; and the sharks of Big Business made their daily thousands by trading in the people's life-blood—their staple food.

The part played by inflation is no mean one. At the beginning of the war, in 1939, the circulation of notes in India was 670 crores of rupees. In October, 774 crores of rupees were in circulation . . . an increase of 104 crores. The rupee is now worth six annas and eight pies. And the wages of agricultural labourers have not increased by so much. Where before wages were eight to ten annas a day, they have not on the whole risen to more than one rupee or one rupee four annas. The lot of the landless labourer—ten millions (one crore) out of Bengal's sixty millions (six crores)—is to be measured in terms of inflation as well as scarcity. Moreover, the labourer gets a bare money wage for his work in the harvest, and is rarely paid in grain as is his counterpart in the Punjab.

So we get down to hoarding rice, speculation and inflation as the roots of the trouble. But in any province, which boasts of reasonable administration, it is the job of the Government to control the hoarder. The Government is ultimately responsible for what happens in the province. There are ugly rumours in Bengal about the corruption of the Government machinery itself. I heard it referred to as "Bengal rot." It is everywhere. Whatever relief measures, food or medical, were done, that "rot" accounted for a good deal of wastage—if it cannot be called by a more unpleasant name.

"Aha" the sun-dried bureaucrat will say, "you see the Indians are to blame" It is not a question of Indians or English. Anybody who has studied life in India today knows to what an extent the Government services have degenerated the material that goes into them. To serve the British Government in India is for millions the badge of venality, and is avoided for the most part by men who feel patriotic.

Moreover, the final responsibility is, as the *Statesman* has not shirked pointing out in a series of editorials, not that of the Bengal Government but of the Central Government...

as long as the British Government professes itself responsible for India, it cannot shirk taking the medicine with the jam. It may be bitter, but it must be faced, that the Central Government ignored the major problem of food distribution in India until it was too late, and in face of the threat of invasion, feeding the army, and the sealing of India from the world market, though fit to leave India's food to blind chance and *laissez faire* at a time when such inaction was not only careless but criminal.

India has many gallant sons who have lost their lives fighting against fascism on every major Allied Front. But the casualties in the Bengal famine have vastly exceeded the casualties of Indian troops, and those who died of disease and starvation had no joy in the fact that they died because the simple elemental necessity of their living—rice—could not be controlled, and distributed, by the men who were given the task of governing them.

Rationing should have been introduced into India at the beginning of the war. Even in 1944 it had only just begun, and Bengal, incidentally, was not one of the "star" provinces. Such a state of affairs can only exist in a country where the Central Govern-

ment is so completely out of touch with the people that it cannot see a major catastrophe coming even when it is under its very nose.

other explanation can be given for its failure to set up a Central control of Food earlier in the war.

On the Bengal side Government was so weak that, although millions have died, there has been no major prosecution of the hoarders and the traders who have been instruments of the slaughter. The 'Huq-Shyama Prasad ministry, and the Muslim League Ministry have got their supporters and their defenders—but neither can answer the very startling allegation that they failed, as Governments, to root out the culprits. History will not be content with excuses, it will ask for *motives*. Why were Calcutta and Howrah left out of the anti-hoarding campaign that half-heartedly swept the outside areas?

In the face of this danger to Bengal and to India, because Bengal cannot be separated from the life of the country as a whole, we are driven to the conclusion that only a united Government can solve the problem. Unless and until every single element in Bengal is fused into a real government of the people that will stop at nothing, either shooting or long-

term imprisonment, to rid the province of leeches and cleanse it of corruption, no plan for the future can succeed. Congress and Muslim League, Shyama Prasad and other opposition parties, all the patriots of Bengal irrespective of politics and religion, can alone save the Province, because they alone can get the support of the masses. Without a constant check from the people themselves, organised into Food Committees to help with the rationing *and to see* it is not abused, to help in the procurement, storage and proper distribution of food grains, combined with intelligent rehabilitation of those who have no buying power, Bengal is doomed.

Wendell Wilkie in his book "One World" has got some penetrating things to say about the problem of politics and the war. One of his remarks fits in well with Bengal. He had spent the evening with "experienced and able administrators of the British Empire." He concludes:

"That evening started in my mind a conviction which was to grow strong in the days that followed in the Middle East: that brilliant victories in the field will not win for us this war now going on in the far reaches of the world, that only

new men and new ideas in the machinery of our relations with the peoples of the East can win the victory without which any peace will only be another armistice."

Wavell has come nearer to the soil of Benga than Linlithgow did. But the problem does not lie with Viceroys only, with Governors and Ministers. It lies with every Bengali and every Indian. There is no argument left for the *status quo* when it has failed so miserably, and there is no doubt about it that any patriotic team of Indians could have averted such a terrible loss of life. The Indian demand for a National Government at the Centre has become not only insistent, but a matter of life and death.

"Freedom is more than a word." To India it is life-blood. It runs through the minds of the millions of her people inside and outside prison walls. Freedom alone is the cement that can bind together every section of the Indian people in their hour of crisis.

"Freedom is more than a word, more than the base coinage

Of statesmen, the tyrant's dishonoured cheque, or the dreamer's mad

Inflated currency. She is mortal, we know, and made

In the image of simple men who have
no taste for carnage
But sooner kill and are killed than see
that image betrayed."

