



The Relief Work during the Time of Bengal Famine of 1943: Role of the Ramakrishna Mission and Some Other Humanitarian Organisations

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ABSTRACT

The Bengal Famine of 1943 was one of the most catastrophic famines that took place during the time of colonial rule. The Famine claimed millions of lives and turned thousands of people into destitute with mere skin and bone. At the time of the Second World War, when governments of several countries fought with each other to protect their interests there on the other hand, people of the Bengal province died asking for a morsel of food. Both the Government of India and the province found themselves incapable to fully address the situation. During this crucial hour of crisis some humanitarian organizations came forward to protect the people from such clutch of famine. This article makes an attempt to explore the role of such humanitarian organizations who took active participation in the relief and rehabilitation programme to save millions of lives in the Bengal province.

Introduction:

Bengal famine of 1943 was remembered as one of the greatest famines of Indian history that took place during the time of the Second World War. Almost 3.5 million people died from acute hunger and millions more suffered with absolute destitution. There were several reasons that triggered the famine condition. Besides out-break of natural calamity in some part of Southern Bengal; the war time policies adopted by the Government also played crucial role in aggravating the famine condition. At this hour of



crisis, several humanitarian organisations came forward to rescue the poor countrymen from absolute misery, destitution, and starvation. This article is mainly focused on the work and activities of three such philanthropic institutions which includes the Ramakrishna Mission, the Indian Red Cross Society, New Zealand Baptist Mission. Without their active participation in relief and rehabilitation programme during the time of Bengal Famine of 1943, it was not possible to rescue the famine victims of the province of Bengal.

Role of Ramakrishna Mission

From the very beginning of its formation based on the principles of Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, the Ramakrishna Mission was known for their humanitarian activities. During the time of the Bengal Famine of 1943, some branches of this institution played significant role to eliminate the adverse effects of the famine. Sarisha Ramakrishna Mission, situated on the Diamond Harbour Road was one of such centre that offered significant contribution in the relief and rehabilitation programme. It set an example for the rest of the country by providing food, cloth, medicines etc. to a large number of famine-stricken villagers. Ramakrishna Mission had an ashram in Sarisha since 1921. By the time of 1943, the Mission turned into a big and well-maintained relief organization.

The relief work in Sarisha was a contrast in nature if compared to the relief programme operated in Calcutta. The relief work organized by the Mission covered an area of 75 sq miles area. They extended their help to almost 60,000 people and tried to full-fill the basic needs of the homeless destitute. 20,000 people were able to get relief measures from the Sarisha centre. Immediate after out-break of the famine Sarisha Mission started their relief operations in June 1943. Through their relief work, they set an example in Bengal on how an educational institution could be harnessed to conduct relief in a time of emergency. At Sarisha, Ramakrishna Mission introduced various types of relief work. They opened several free kitchens, and distributed dry grain doles to the people with absolute starvation. At the same time, the institution sold food grains at controlled rates. Mission also issued milk and cloths. Five relief kitchens were functioned under observation and guidance of the Sarisha Mission. Every day almost 6000 people getting food from these relief kitchens. The Mission also ran 3 milk centers for children and nursing mothers. 500 children received an amount of rice and milk. From another center, rice was distributed free of cost amongst some selected poor families. The issuing amount of rice was 100 maunds. Apart from rice, they also supplied grain to the poor families once in a week. Mission's workers started surveying amongst the villagers and collected data about their actual condition. After that, they issued card to the villagers with urgent need by identified them properly. They issued multiple type of



tickets like free meal tickets, dry grain dole tickets, milk, cheap grain and cloths tickets. They also instructed and advised people about where to go, how to collect tickets and how to get their required stuff. Without the spontaneous effort and services of the Mission's workers, it was not possible for the Ramakrishna Mission to organize a relief work to this extent. From two another centers, an amount of 300 maund of rice per week was sold at controlled prices to some selected destitute. *Atta* (wheat flour), *daal* (pulses) were also issued from these relief centers. Bengal Relief Committee, Marwari Relief Committee, and the provincial government also extended their help to this institution for their marvelous job in the sphere of relief and rehabilitation. The government helped them by providing free and subsidized supplies of food grains and cloth.

The district of 24 Parganas was badly affected by the cyclone of 1942. The district also had to pay a heavy price because of its proximity to Calcutta. Most of its stocks of food grains were drained out to Calcutta during the wartime scarcity. According to a survey conducted by the Calcutta University, most of the destitute who came to Calcutta in search of food were mostly belongs to 24 Parganas, Hoogly and Midnapore. So, it is against this background that the relief work of the Ramakrishna Mission in Sarisha must be studied. Few monks of Ramakrishna Mission also opened a relief kitchen at Majhirschak in Contai where they introduced dry grain dole system.

The Mission also rendered its relief operations in Midnapore district after the outbreak of the cyclone and flood in this region in October 1942. In Contai, rice was supplied by the provincial government to the Mission for the continuation of their philanthropic service. The food grains were mainly coming by river way from Calcutta. Before introducing a grain dole system in November 1942, the monks of the mission surveyed the entire area. They took a census of the neighborhood area and issued tickets only to those destitute who were in dire need of food and medical assistance. Every week they distributed two seers of rice to an adult and one seer for a child. In Contai, they started to work form three centers, namely Majhirschak, Haludbari, and Khejiri. In some areas, they worked together with government and Friends' Ambulance Unit in Contai. Every week they distributed rice doles to 40,000 with the help of government. The Mission also supplied milk to 1200 children behalf of the FAU. The Mission also launched their relief operations in Burdwan. The Mission opened a relief centre at Satgachia, in the Memari police station area and supplied a large quantities of *chira* and *gur* to the victims. The institution also gave a call for funding the relief operation. They Ramakrishna Mission, Belur (Howrah); the Manager, Advaita Ashram, 4 Wellington Lane; and the Manager, Udbodhan Office, 1, Udbodhan Lane, Baghbazar, Calcutta.



In Narayangunj town, Dacca, an excellent work was being done by the Ramakrishna Mission. The Mission had built up a hospital with the monetary help of the Sub-Divisional Officer's relief fund in Narayangunj and supervised it magnificently. In spite of having 100 beds, the hospital provided medical assistance to almost 150 patients by accommodating them perfectly during the time of famine. Two Indian doctors, two American doctors, and five Indian nurses were appointed to maintain the hospital. It had enough medicines, food, and cloth to treat the diseased people. The Ramakrishna Mission had various centers in Dacca from where relief was being provided to the distressed people. Since May 1943 the Mission was served for the poor middle-class families in Dacca by providing them, cash or food grains. Almost 2000 such families were benefitted from relief provided by the Mission. During April and May 1943, the Mission had distributed relief among 48 villages and helped nearly 30,000 poor families in Narayangunj. On Swami Vivekananda's birthday, the mission distributed food amongst 8000 destitute in the town where they made no distinction between Hindu and Muslim. Here, the Mission also introduced a weekly dole of rice and *atta*. The Mission maintained their relief work in Munshigunj Sub-Division of Dacca district through another three relief kitchens at Kalma, Sonargaon and Paikpara but relief operation suffered due to lack of resources. Due to the absence of Abhay Ashram in Comilla, whose workers were arrested because of their active participation in Quit India movement; the Mission took the responsibility of Comilla's relief work. They arranged food and medical services for the destitute. In spite of having a problem of short supply of resources in Comilla, the Mission continued their services here. The Ramakrishna Mission, which had a long-established center in Barisal town, fully participated in the relief programme in 1943. Barisal town proper, Mallikpur, Adhuna, Bamrail were the four places from where the Mission operated its relief work in Barisal District. They distributed dry grain doles amongst the famine victims especially to the middle-class people who were partly deprived of the government's relief operation. The Mission also introduced schemes for distributing clothes and blankets to the destitute during the winter of December 1943. The Mission provided medical relief through its Mallikpur center but the scarcity of drugs limited its activities and it could not provide any large-scale service.

Ramakrishna Mission achieved success in famine relief because of the selfless devotion of their workers and students including boys and girls imbued with the ideal of philanthropy, courage, efficiency, enthusiasm which helped them to face various challenges. Many influential people and common urban and rural people also came forward under the influence of the philanthropic principles of Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. For instance, the Mission received rupees 1001 from employees of a metal and steel factory for the relief work. They participated full heartedly in the Mission's relief work. In the rural



areas, where religion and castes restriction earlier played a crucial role and acted as a barrier, the famine condition brought in a silent revolution in Sarisha where in a long queue, a Bramhin lined up behind a Namasudra and the Namasudra himself followed by a Muslim. Hindu and Muslim mothers shared their foods and feeding their babies under one roof. As stated by T. G. Narayan, a Namasudra peasant told him, “where there is hunger, who cares for caste?” In Narayangunj, out of a total of 76,000 families helped by the Ramakrishna Mission with relief materials between April and December 1943, nearly 66 percent were Muslim families. By the time of August, 1943 the Ramkrishna Mission from their centres situated at Taki, Sarisha, Barisal, Bankura, Dinajpur, Baliati, and Sonargaon they distributed free food and other articles to more than 5575 persons amounted 291 maunds of rice and other foodgrains, 30 pieces of cloth and rupees 844 in cash. They also distributed 2849 maunds of rice at a controlled rate. During the first of August, 1943, the Mission supplied 5800 maunds of rice and 414 pieces of new cloth to 62,843 people of 200 villages of the district of Midnapore and 24-Pargans.

INDIAN RED CROSS SOCIETY

Indian Red Cross Society which was established in 1920 came forward to help the famine victims during the time of Bengal famine of 1943. Most important feature of their relief work was the milk distribution to the ill-fated infants and nursing mothers. According to J. N. Uppal, “The lucky among the starvation infants, young children and nursing mothers benefited from the distribution of milk which had been undertaken by the Indian Red Cross Society”. At the beginning of September 1943, the army had delivered 200 tons of dried milk to the Red Cross Society of India. The society also distributed all the dried milk amongst the poor people of Calcutta and other districts of Bengal. During September 1943, the amount of distributed milk was 48 tons and the amount was increased gradually. In December 1943, the increasing amount of milk distribution of the society was 135 tons which undoubtedly save thousands of lives.

NEW ZEALAND BAPTIST MISSION IN RELIEF WORK

New Zealand Baptist Mission under the supervision of Reverend B. N. Eade also participated in relief work. The organization provided medical assistance to the poor people of Chandpur, a town of Tipperah district. At the very beginning, there were no well organized medical facilities in Chandpur for treating the destitute. During this time of crisis, this Baptist Mission came up with their hospital facilities. They also expanded their hospital according to their highest capacity and tried to give medical assistance to as many people as possible. According to a young doctor of this hospital, most of the patients were suffered from malaria, cholera, diarrhea, dysentery and tuberculosis and day after day, the number of patients



increased. By December, the New Zealand Baptist Mission in their hospital, have treated over 4000 patients. There were two other hospitals which functioned in Chandpur town where they admitted and treated famine victims. One was Elgin hospital and the other was Municipal dispensary. Almost 2,500 sick destitutes were able to get treatment from these two hospitals in Chandpur.

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