

Food Administration and Distribution in Late Colonial India 1943-1947

Dissertation Submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of
the degree of

Master of Philosophy

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2009

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17 June, 2009


Declaration

I hereby declare that the dissertation entitled 'Food Administration and Distribution in Late Colonial India: 1943-1947' submitted by me to Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is my original work and has not been previously submitted in part or full to any other university or institution for any other degree or diploma.

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We recommend this dissertation to be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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In fond memory of

My father

Late Upendra Nath Sarkar

&

Maternal grandmother

Late Bimala Ray

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Acknowledgements

First of all I wish to express my gratitude to my research supervisor Prof. Aditya Mukherjee, not because it is a custom to start the acknowledgement of any dissertation or thesis with acknowledging the supervisor, but because he truly deserves to be in the first place of this acknowledgement. During my M.A. days it was Prof. Mukherjee who generated in me the interest in political-economy and social-economy, which resulted in this dissertation. Working with him has been an intellectually provoking at the same time thoroughly enjoyable experience. He has been extremely understanding in coping with all my shortcomings. Without his support and encouragement I would not have achieved whatever I have achieved today.

Various research papers done by me at the Centre for Historical Studies (CHS), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, under the supervision of Prof. Sucheta Mahajan, Prof. Bhagwan Singh Josh and Dr. Arvind Sinha, have enabled me to develop my research skills and insights into a wide range of historical problems. I have also immensely benefited from the comments made by Dr. Indivar Kamtekar. I have learnt from Prof. Mridula Mukherjee how to advance one's own academic standpoint boldly even when that is not in fashion or the audience is averse to it.

In an indirect manner I am indebted to Prof. Rajat Kanta Ray, Vice-Chancellor, Viswabharati University, Santiniketan, West Bengal, as his teaching during my

undergraduate days in Presidency College, Kolkata, encouraged me to do independent analysis of historical problems.

My family has been a constant source of love and support. Particularly my elder sister Srabani Sarkar and elder brother Palash Sarkar have sacrificed a lot and endured a lot of pains to see me happy and successful. Their contributions in my life are too many to be counted. My mother Smt. Suniti Sarkar always provided me the support I asked for.

My thanks are due to the staff of Departmental Special Assistance (DSA) Library of Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, and the Central Library of JNU; Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teenmurty Bhawan, New Delhi; Central Secretariat Library, New Delhi; University of Delhi Library; National Library, Kolkata; National Archives of India, New Delhi and West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

I am deeply indebted to Iswar Chandra Mohanty, whose knowledge of computer I have shamelessly taken advantage of. Without his technical assistance it would have been very difficult to conduct my research.

My roommate Md. Fahimul Haque Khan made indirect contribution to my research by maintaining a peaceful and at the same time warm and homely ambience in our room. His brother Md. Athar Hussain Khan, who has virtually become another roommate, has been a source of constant help and wit. I must seize this opportunity to express my heartfelt thanks to my previous roommate Sanjaya Kumar Das who supported and helped me in every matter, be it academic or personal. Duryodhan Nahak's academic comments have been extremely valuable and I also remember with particular pleasure the witty interactions we had. Dr. Jajneshwar Sethi's guidance has often shown me the path in the darkness.

Paulami Guha Biswas has helped me in collecting some of the materials. Manas Dutta was kind enough to send me a rare Bengali material. Subir Dey also drew my attention to some materials.

Linesh V.V. and Jagannath Behera guided me in deciding the format of this dissertation and matters related to style of references etc.

It gives me immense pleasure to express my heartfelt gratitude to my senior Dr. Burton Cleetus, presently Lecturer at Calicut University, Kerala, who helped me like an angel when I got fatally ill. He also boosted my academic confidence when I was just a fresher in JNU.

From Anirban Bandyopadhyay I have learnt the extremely important tricks to flourish in academic world. Hia Sen provided some important informations. The long academic discussions with my friend Anupam Das at Kalyani have been thoroughly enjoyable.

All types of interactions did not have obvious and immediate academic significance; but they helped me indirectly to sharpen my thought process and insights and kept me relaxed when the pressure and pains of research were taking their tolls. My classmates Maruthasamy M., Nilendra Bardiar and Joel Gangte, in their own different and inimitable styles have taught me the skills to remain relaxed and jovial even in times that are most difficult. With Vivek Prahladan I have had many academic as well as casual discussions. I am thankful to other classmates Robert, Sagar Tiwari, Priya Singh and Tanu Parashar for the informations they shared with me and for their warm company.

Ambuj Thakur deserves a special mention for both providing articles and being a regular exuberant companion to my long breaks from study. Ranjana Das, in addition to

being a nice and bubbly friend, has often made useful suggestions. Debashish Mondal is another person whose company has been extremely pleasant and relaxing.

I wish to thank Simmy Joseph, Ashique T.K. and Harsh Vardhan Shyam for their encouragement and friendship.

Md. Saidur Rahman has guided me in matters related to hostel life. And often when work became boring I found the necessary distraction in the humorous company of my hostel mates Zakir Hossain and Prafulla Ojha.

Friends of Presidency College, Kolkata – Sarasi Chakrabarty, Mitu Majumdar, Sritama Majumdar, Debayani Bose, Dishari Roy, Dolan Chatterjee, Tanni Moitra and Abhijit Ghosh have showered on me the grace of their company.

The company of many friends at Kalyani – Asim Sarkar, Sourav Bhattacharya, Rivu Dutta, Animesh Halder, Ratikanta Halder, Somnath Maity, Samrat Nag, Soumen Mondal and Mayukh Adhikari has over the years bound me in loving bonds.

Mr. Dharmender of CHS office has accommodated many of my unjust requests and that too with a smiling face always. He has been the trouble-shooter in case of any official problem regarding submission of papers or fellowships.

Due to the limited space here, despite my wish I can not acknowledge many more people from whose teaching or company I have benefited immensely. Though their names don't get mentioned here, but they are deeply imprinted on my heart.

The Junior Research Fellowship awarded by University Grants Commission has enabled me to bear the cost of research in part.

The responsibility for errors, if any, remains mine alone.

Jawaharlal Nehru University,
New Delhi. 17 June, 2009.

Abhijit Sarkar

Introduction

Introduction

The History of India, like the History of so many other areas is a story of food. Any really deep analysis of the past will show that metabolism was, and still is, the mainspring of politics. Had the feeding arrangements of the Bourbon France given satisfaction, the Bastille would probably never have been stormed. Had the steppes of Central Asia been able to feed all their rapidly breeding tribes, neither the Aryan nor the Mogul invasions of India might have occurred . . . The revulsion against surfeit can be as powerful as the politics of hunger. It is a fascinating theme which would repay much further investigation, but we have seen enough to show that there is a definite link between diet and destiny – a link which the leaders of India cannot afford to ignore.¹

Despite element of exaggeration and oversimplification, the afore-quoted part points to the potential and scope of a historical study of food and issues around it. Food has been vital to men's history, but only marginal in history writing, particularly so in the case of Indian history. And whenever food finds place in the historiography of India, it is mainly famines, i.e. short, intense periods of deprivation and their tolls that receive attention. The main driving force behind the study of the food policies of the Colonial Government in India by scholars like Amartya sen, Sugata Bose, Paul R. Greenough² has been the aim to determine the reason of the Great Bengal Famine of

¹ Michael Brown, *India Need Not Starve!*, with a forward by Sir Purshotamdas Thakurdas, Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., Bombay, 1944. p. 3.

² Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1981. Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge University Press, 1986 and Sugata Bose 'Starvation amidst Plenty: The Making of Famine in Bengal, Honan and Tonkin, 1942-45' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Oct., 1990. Paul R. Greenough, *Prosperity and misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-44*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1982 and Paul R. Greenough, 'Indulgence and Abundance as Asian Peasant Values: A Bengali Case in Point', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 4, Aug. 1983.

1943 or to ascertain the amount of government's responsibility in bringing the famine and to enquire socio-economic and gender bias in famine mortality. But the present study is based on the belief that a shift of emphasis is due in studying colonial food policies. Food policies are worth studying by historians even when there is no famine. But as the shadow of the Bengal famine loomed large in the remaining days of the Raj, quite naturally the present study has frequent references to the famine. In the present work the massive Bengal famine of 1943 is the entry point, but it does not stop at famines, i.e. it does not seek to enquire only the causes, course and tolls of the famines, instead it seeks to study how the colonial government in India from 1943 till its end in 1947 tried to handle the issue of food supply to both civil and military folks, and the socio-political dimensions of the measures it adopted and the extent of their success and failure. In the course of the enquiry it would also try to explore the preferences of the colonial state in feeding the people. The study also involves an analysis as to what extent the state's nature was related to its food policies. However, it must be made clear at this point that this is an all-India study and not focussed on Bengal only.

On 19 March 1946 the Governor of Madras wrote to the Viceroy of India, "Food remains our principal problem and overshadows politics for most people."³ Though one possible way of seeing this observation is to see this as part of the larger attempt to belittle the importance and influence of politics for colonized masses and to establish the

³ In the report dated 19.03.46, Department of Food (Rationing Branch), hereafter DOF(R), file RP 1085, Government of India (hereafter GOI), National Archives of India (hereafter NAI), New Delhi, 1946, p. 249.

superiority of day to day problems and scarcities in their lives over politics, I do feel that sometimes in particular cases our concern to obtain basic requirements did overshadow politics, and this is the case even today.

However, the developments which finally ushered in rationing of food in India had actually started before the signs of famine in Bengal became absolutely evident in March 1943. The preceding year 1942 began with a shortage of wheat in the big cities of India. Then attempts were made to control wheat prices by fixing maximum prices without controlling supply and possession. But these attempts proved unsuccessful. The sudden stoppage of rice imports from Burma to India due to its fall in the Second World War in 1942 posed another serious problem. Subsequently there was a rush by the deficit provinces and by Ceylon to buy rice anywhere it was obtainable in India. In such a situation in order to protect their own people from food scarcity, the rice growing provinces tried to impose bans on the movement of rice from their areas. Against this background in May 1942 the Government of India circulated the Food-grains Control Order which introduced measures to control possession and monitor movement of food-grains. But the responsibility to implement this order was put on the shoulders of the provinces. And as there was no over-all plan for the legitimate movement of surpluses to deficit areas, the restrictions on export imposed by the surplus provinces reigned supreme but they caused immense problem for normal trade transactions.

Meanwhile the War situation was getting worse. As mentioned earlier by now Burma had been defeated, vast numbers of refugees started arriving and the Japanese were knocking at the eastern frontier. In addition, the Quit India movement was launched in August 1942 which received tremendous mass support in vast parts of India. Interestingly the development of a detailed food policy in India coincided with such rapidly changing situation and the mass political movement on a national scale. During these days the decisions of the Central or the Provincial Governments to meet the food emergency had to be implemented with whatever administrative machinery was available and often there was hardly any such machinery available. Particularly in the permanently settled provinces there was little direct contact between the government and the villager; and in most of the princely states the administration was in no way geared to modern methods.

Toward the end of 1942, on top of the rice shortage, there came the Midnapore cyclone in Bengal and there were also widespread failure of crops in parts of Southern India. Now the Government could no longer regard the problem of feeding the people as a local matter. The Department of Food was therefore established by the Government of India in December 1942 and the first All-India Food Conference was held in the same month. Though a plan for moving food-grains from surplus to deficit areas was proposed, but due to provincial delays the plan could not be implemented in time to save Bengal a few months later when it entered the period of one of the worst famines in history. Therefore the Government of India scrapped the plan and

embarked again on free trade in food-grains. But the pressure of public opinion and of some of the provincial governments compelled the Government to abandon the free trade policy soon.

Finally the Government decided to appoint the Foodgrains Policy Committee in July 1943. The recommendations of this committee laid down the lines of policy which thereafter guided the Government of India in food administration and distribution. The Committee came to the conclusion that with the end of imports from Burma, India could no longer feed itself on its normal scale unless more food is grown in the country. Consequently the Grow More Food campaign which had already been started in the spring of 1942 was given additional backing by the Government. As a result 1943 witnessed considerable increase in cereals, but interestingly 1943 was also the year of Bengal famine. Thus it became clear that merely increasing production was not enough to secure adequate food supply to people, it had to be accompanied by necessary administrative and distributive measures.

As mentioned earlier, at the central level the Food Department of Government of India was founded in December 1942. But at that time it was not given to any member of the Viceroy's Council solely charged with the Department, instead it was included in the portfolio of the Commerce Member of the Viceroy's Council.⁴ For seven

⁴ "But", in the words of Michael Brown, "the Commerce Department of the Government of India is surely the most crowded administrative pantechnicon the world has ever seen. It embraces everything from

months from December 1942 to July 1943 the Food Department remained part of the Commerce Department. It was finally put in charge of Sir Jwala Prasad Srivastava as a separate portfolio in July 1943.⁵ But the Department “started in the fourth year of the war, had special difficulties in recruiting any reasonably adequate staff, both in numbers and competence. By this stage, the recruitment field both Indian and British had already become substantially drained by the all-embracing character of the War demands.”⁶ Often the staff was really inefficient or insufficient or both.

However, already by the beginning of 1942 when food prices had increased more than double the pre-War level, the Central Government had delegated powers to the provincial governments to enforce statutory maximum prices for food-grains.⁷ Despite opposition by August 1943 there was statutory price control in Sind and Bombay (except four districts), there was statutory price control plus ceiling prices in the Central Provinces, and there was ceiling prices without statutory price control in Madras, United Provinces, Punjab. But there was neither statutory price control nor

Lighthouses to the Sugar Controller, plus the Superintendent of Insurance, the Nautical Advisor, the Textile Commissioner, the Industries and Civil Supplies Department, the Chief Controller of Imports, the Economic Adviser, Scientific and Industrial Research and the Controller of Patents. To expect one man to control this heterogeneous mass of activity plus an urgent subject like food is surely asking too much.” Michael Brown, *op cit*, p. 51.

⁵ Michael Brown, *op. cit.*

⁶ Foodgrains Policy Committee, *Report of the Foodgrains Policy Committee 1943*, by Sir Theodore Gregory, Chairman, Manager Publications, Delhi, 1944, p. 104.

⁷ P.A. Gopalakrishnan, *India's Food Problem*, Eastern Economist Pamphlets, New Delhi, 1953, p. 8.

ceiling prices in Orissa, North West Frontier Province, Assam, Bengal (except for wheat, *atta*, and flour) and Bihar.⁸

To control the indiscriminate movements of food-grains inter-provincial and inter-district barriers had also been created.⁹ But these attempts were somewhat amateurish and localized in nature. Different local authorities took actions in an uncoordinated manner. There was confusion all around regarding the barriers. Contrary to the Government of India's intention, fixation of maximum prices actually aggravated the situation by driving stocks underground and thereby putting the consumer at the mercy of the black market. As mentioned earlier, another important development in 1942 was the sudden end of the import of Burmese rice into India with the fall of Burma into Japanese hands. On the other hand the demand for food-grains was growing then due to the stationing of the Allied troops in different parts of India. And it was not the suffering of the Indian people, but the need to have a smooth running of the War seems to have been the driving force behind the introduction of rationing in India as evident from Government correspondences. For instance in January 1943, referring to the correspondence dated 18.1.43 from Mr. Brunt, Advisor for Petroleum

⁸ See Foodgrains Policy Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 95. In introducing the statutory grain prices, the Foodgrains Policy Committee did consider that the cost of the consumer goods, which the cultivator needed both for the production of his crop and his own and family's subsistence, had risen very high during the War. Therefore the Committee stressed the need to fix Statutory Grain Prices at a rate fair to the cultivator. But the Committee also strongly rejected the view that "the right procedure in the middle of a great war and during a time of acute crisis, is to compensate the cultivator by allowing an unlimited rise of food prices. This measure would have grave anti-social consequences, and, in any case, in so far as rising prices involve a rise in cost of production of consumer goods, the process is self-defeating." See Foodgrains Policy Committee, *op. cit.* p. 91.

⁹ P.A. Gopalakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

Products, R.K. Nehru, the Additional Secretary of the Department of Supply, asked the Food Department that whether any action was being taken to or could be taken to meet the food requirements of essential workers in war industries and feared that unless their requirement was given some form of priority, war production will be affected.¹⁰ Food department's reply was that it was giving high priority to Bombay and Calcutta in its allocation and that it would make it a condition that if the provincial governments wanted to receive its assistance they would have to give priority to the requirements of the essential workers.¹¹ The Foodgrains Policy Committee also pressed the Government to acknowledge the fact that the food problem was a part of the War effort and must be tackled as resolutely and urgently as any other war measure.¹² Thus the main motive behind the concern for fulfilling the food requirements of the essential workers was to have a smooth production in War industries.

In the next three chapters the methods and impacts of procurement of food-grains and their distribution by both Government of India and various Provincial Governments among civil and military population, especially during the period from 1943 to 1947, would be discussed in detail. The discussion is likely to provide an understanding of how the colonial state on one hand and the Indian people on the other perceived the food situation in India in the said period and reacted to it.

¹⁰ See DOF (R), file RP-1011/13, 1943, GOI, NAI, New Delhi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See Foodgrains Policy Committee, *op. cit.*, p. ii.

Chapter 1

Procurement of Food-grains

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The Second World War substantially changed the extent and methods of government procurement of food-grains in India. Before the War government procurement was confined to procurement for the Defence Forces only and the scale of such procurement was very small considering India's total crop output. During those days the government bought whatever grains it needed through a network of agents operating in the surplus provinces and princely states. But the outbreak of the War changed the situation completely. Now on the one hand the demand of the Defence Forces increased rapidly and immensely due to the expansion of the Indian Army as well as the stationing of Allied troops in India; on the other hand now the colonial government had to procure food-grains for vast sections of civil population also as widespread scarcity accompanied the War.

However, procurement for civil consumption was not absolutely unprecedented in India and interestingly it was a princely state that provided the precedence. In the princely state of Kashmir, a compulsory levy of paddy from all growers and a rationed supply to the town population had been in operation quite successfully since

1921. Department of Food's *Outline of Some of the Government Grain Monopoly Schemes Operating in India in 1944* informs about the system:

. . . In 1917-18 when the effects of World War I were felt in rising prices and dislocation of trade, "an outcry arose from the poorer inhabitants of Srinagar" who "looked to the State authorities to provide the usual relief."

The scheme which after considerable trial and experiment was adopted involved the assessment of every individual holding to a levy of about 75 percent of the cultivator's surplus paddy. That quantity the cultivator had to deliver to government officials at the nearest river *ghat* (landing place). The cultivator had been advanced one-third of the price some months earlier for the cost of cultivation, and he received the balance some eight or nine months later after delivery of his quota. The paddy was transported by boat to Srinagar and other towns and there distributed to the consumer under a rationing system or stored until required.

Black markets did not exist when government controlled 75 percent of the surplus grain and bought it at a price fixed by itself. The "trade" on twenty years' experience of working the scheme had been entirely excluded in favor of government agency.¹³

But to a considerable degree the "success" of the Kashmir system was achieved in an autocratic, often tyrannical set up. A report prepared as early as in August 1923 by Raja Sir Hari Singh (later Maharaja of Kashmir), Sir Bertrand Glancy and Major General Janak Singh studied the Kashmir experiment in detail.¹⁴ It recognized that the smooth running of the food administration and distribution for the town population in

¹³ See *Outline of Some of the Government Grain Monopoly Schemes Operating in India in 1944*, p. 18, DOF(Procurement Branch, hereafter P) file P-1095/12, 1944, GOI, NAI, New Delhi.

¹⁴The report has been cited in *ibid.*

Kashmir had a lot to do with the tradition of repressing the cultivators. In the words of the report:

It has been the tradition of an idle city population to demand cheap rice at the expense of the cultivator. It has been the practice of the administration to gratify these demands, and the cultivator has been expected to part with his best produce far below its value and reserve the coarser forms of grain for his own consumption. The adage of King Lalitaditya who ruled Kashmir in the eighth century may be cited as an illustration; his words as quoted in the Rajtarangini are as follows: 'Cultivators must be repressed and their style of living must be lower than that of the city people or the latter will suffer.' During the Sikh Raj of the first half of the 19th century as much as nine tenths of the produce is said to have been exacted from the zemindar.¹⁵

The Report came up with some other very significant observations, e.g. it concluded that attempts to control price without controlling supply was futile and it also stressed the necessity of organization to feed people through rationing. Unfortunately the report was not given its due attention and the Government of India did not study it properly in time. The Kashmir system was only very briefly referred to at the First Food Conference; and at the Second and Third Food Conference no representative of Kashmir was present ! But had the Kashmir experiment been studied carefully, perhaps many of the mistakes which marked Indian Wartime food administration and distribution might have been avoided. However, as pointed out earlier, the 'success' of the Kashmir experience could also be attributed to its autocratic administration which did not tolerate any opposition and therefore could act

¹⁵ See *ibid.*

in a speedy manner. But a system which worked satisfactorily in a remote princely state like Kashmir with overwhelmingly uneducated and docile countryside under an autocratic administration could hardly have been applied in its original form to comparatively educated and independent landowners and peasants of, say Punjab, where the Government was to depend considerably on the votes of the farmers.

However, coming back to the procurement by the Central and Provincial Governments, it is found that immediately after the beginning of the Second World War the attention of the authorities in India was turned to price of food-grains rather than to their supply. Initially the increase in the prices of food-grains and other agricultural produce was welcomed in the belief that the farmers now got a chance to make up the losses they experienced during the low prices of the previous years. But as the War continued the increase in food-grain prices began to affect labour in the War industries. This made the colonial state rethink whether their policy of non-intervention in the price rise was right. And finally in December 1941, with Pearl Harbour and with Japan's entry in the War, the danger that the supply of rice from Burma to India might get interrupted or totally stopped started looming large. The colonial state clearly understood that without Burmese rice India was to have serious food problem.

Considering the situation of the day, in March 1942 the Government of India banned the export of food grains from India. There was considerable public opinion

that this step should have been taken earlier. But later in 1943 the Foodgrains Policy Committee concluded that this step should not have been taken earlier as, quite interestingly in their opinion, it would have inflicted great hardship on countries dependent on supplies from India and Burma, such as Ceylon and Arab countries.¹⁶ But actually the colonial state was less concerned with the hardship of people in other countries and more concerned with its business and demands of the war. According to war strategy Ceylon was an Allied bastion against Japan and the war strategy demanded avoidance of disturbance in areas close to the war supply lines. Moreover in 1942, the available tonnage was rapidly getting reduced due to the submarine campaign. In such a situation food exports from India saved the freight business of the British ships.

But how 1942 was different from the previous years that it compelled the Government to stop food exports from India? One answer is that the food scarcity became much graver in 1942, secondly by now the accounts of India's food-grains export, sometimes exaggerated by a huge scale, was creating a commotion among the masses.¹⁷ Thus protests, sometimes promoted by rumours about India's food export, played a big role in prompting the Government to ban it. The Foodgrains Policy Committee later in July 1943 decided in accordance with the previous step that India must cease to be a net exporter of food and in any case must stop all export of rice.

¹⁶ Foodgrains Policy Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

The Committee proclaimed that “In no other way will it be possible, in our judgement, to dispose once and for all the crop of rumours, which have done and are doing an immense amount of harm to the spirit of the country.”¹⁸

In the new circumstances, the government put its weight behind the idea that all grain beyond the cultivators’ reasonable needs should be made available for sharing among all others. But The Foodgrains Policy Committee ruled out Central Government’s food grain monopoly because a Government of India food grain monopoly under which Central Government’s procurement agency would be responsible for procurement throughout India would have taken a long time and time was a luxury in wartime India. Therefore it was decided that every province and every princely state would have a procurement agency of its own under the supervision of the Food Department, which would buy grains for internal provincial needs, for the Central Government employees and reserve, and for other deficit princely states and provinces. The difference in local conditions did not permit a uniform system throughout India. No central agency could have worked satisfactorily given the enormous difference in conditions of production, in public opinion and in administrative organization, strength and efficiency.

However, finally by the end of 1942 it was accepted by the authorities that the grains for both military and civil needs had to be procured by the governments. After

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

long debates at the first Food Conference in Delhi in December 1942 and second and third Food Conference respectively in February and July 1943, it was decided that the food-grains for both civil and army population must be procured by government or agencies under full control of the government—in case of the provinces under the provincial government and in princely states under the government of the state. Thus the task of procurement was left entirely to the provincial governments instead of any department of the Central Government.¹⁹ Such arrangement was made with a clear intention to make the operation of the Basic Plan easy under which the Government of India was to make agreements with the surplus provinces on the amount of their exportable surpluses and with the deficit provinces on the exact amount of their deficits in food-grains, and was then to allot grains from the surplus to the deficit provinces according to necessity and availability. But to execute the intricate process of buying the targeted quantities of grains, a competent purchase organization was essential. And only the provincial governments had the required local knowledge and the authority over the staff at local level to provide an active procurement machinery. The Third Food Conference made it quite clear that the successful working of the Basic Plan demanded that every province, be it surplus or deficit, must have a procurement agency of its own which would obtain from each cultivator the maximum possible amount of his crop for the government.

¹⁹ See Henry Knight, *Food Administration in India: 1939-47*, Stanford University Press, published in India by Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1954, pp. 65-66 and p. 149.

However, it was a huge challenge for the governments to achieve procurement on such a scale. Considering the intricacy of the transactions intervening between the grower and the consumer and considering the required degree of manpower and infrastructure, most of the provinces and princely states initially hesitated to interfere with or to control or substitute the existing methods of the indigenous grain trade. Particularly this was the case in Permanently Settled areas where there was little direct contact between the government and the villager and almost no local revenue staff was available. In these areas the authorities had to make fresh recruitment and train an entirely new staff throughout every village. But the training also required appropriate manpower which was often not available. And the newly recruited staff lacked the necessary official experience as well as personal influence and local knowledge that the revenue staff at the village level in other provinces had acquired by generations of service. Quite understandably, direct government procurement from the cultivators through such poor and inexperienced staff was not likely to be very effective and any such attempt was to provide unrestrained scope for corruption. And everywhere, even in provinces with already existing village staff, direct government procurement would have thrown additional burden on the government organs and engrossed all of them. The government, already overburdened with a series of additional work arising from the War and wartime conditions, could not have afforded it. Having considered all these, the provincial governments did not attempt at direct

government procurement. Instead, as long as possible, they tried to buy grains through existing trade agencies.

The procurement process was conditioned according to the timings of harvest and the timing of their coming on the market. For instance, rice was generally harvested from October to February and during the months from November to May it was on the market and available for purchase by government. But from July to September it was very difficult to procure rice. The procurement activity was conditioned according to these timings. But often due to inefficient or delayed procurement arrangements, the authorities missed the ideal procurement season, and thus fell far short of their target, as was the case in 1943 with the *aus* rice harvest in Bengal and in early 1947 in Madras with the procurement of rice through co-operative societies.

But the governments needed to procure the maximum possible amount of the farmers' produce, especially in deficit districts to feed the townsmen as well as the landless and non-producer countrymen. This need and urgency forced the Government of India in 1944 to appoint an officer on special duty to report on government monopoly schemes. His report stated that:

. . . in all those areas which have gone forward towards a Government Monopoly there is not one single instance where any doubt is felt that the basic principle is right. In no case is there any thought of withdrawing even to a minor degree. On the contrary, the tendency is quite the reverse and in virtually every case the determined policy is to go forward to make the monopoly more complete and to ensure the whole surplus of every individual cultivator coming within the physical control

of Government. . . . To say that all the schemes have been successful, that there have not been mistakes or that hardships have not been caused would be ridiculous but that the policy is right there are no two opinions amongst those who have tried it out. And the same thing can be said for the views of non-officials. Nowhere did I hear criticism of the policy of Monopoly Procurement. In fact, quite the reverse.²⁰

The forms and extent of monopolies which were in force in 1944 in various areas varied enormously, such as “from complete monopolies where the entire surplus from each individual holding is compulsorily acquired to a semi-monopoly such as in force in Orissa where there is no levy or any attempt made at assessing surpluses and private trade is permitted to continue to the extent of transactions up to quantities of ten maunds each”.²¹ The methods displayed a range of various forms. They ran from arbitrary levy (which was introduced in parts of Punjab for a short period as an emergency measure for procurement of millets) to thorough computation of the crop of each producer and compulsory purchase of everything beyond his total family needs. But under all these schemes the producer was allowed to keep the necessary food for his family and the required seed for his next sowing. And there were other allowances also that allowed the cultivators to retain grain for many other purposes, such as for repayment of loans in kind, to pay rent fixed in kind, to pay the agricultural wage labourers on their land, to make customary payments to village

²⁰ *Outline of Some of the Government Grain Monopoly Schemes Operating in India in 1944*, p. ii, in Department of Food (DOF), Procurement Branch (P) file P-1095/12, 1944, GOI, NAI, New Delhi.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. v.

servants and artisans and for many other purposes. But the government on its part always tried to reduce these miscellaneous exemptions. In this context it must be kept in mind that sometimes the allowances resulted in the growth of black market.

However, regarding procurement it must be reiterated that in India conditions varied so greatly in various regions that it did not allow any uniformity in the procurement system. Now I would discuss in some detail the procurement systems in two of the major provinces of India in order to give a glimpse of the extent of difference between the procurement systems of various provinces. One of the two provinces was Madras, a rice-eating province of South India, where the Congress Ministry had resigned in 1939; and the other province was Punjab, a wheat-eating province of North India, where an elected government headed by the Unionist Party which was based mainly on the rural votes, was in office all through the War. These two provinces varied immensely from each other in politico-economic conditions as well as in administrative structure and capacity. A comparative study of these provinces helps us in understanding some of the procurement policies and methods which were in use in India and also to estimate the degree of diversity and difference among those existing procurement systems.

The mainly rice-eating Madras was one of the earliest provinces to face the task of undertaking procurement. But it was fortunate, unlike many of the provinces and princely states, that it had considerably developed village revenue system and an

existing revenue establishment and therefore it had some of the necessary staffs which in future could be used to carry out the task of procurement. The case of Madras was very interesting and complex as this single presidency comprised of all sorts of areas, i.e. surplus districts, deficit districts and districts living on the margins which sometimes had to depend on imported rice and other grains. When in 1942 the import of rice from Burma came to an end, the surplus districts in Madras witnessed a rush of purchasing agents towards them. Not only the buying agents of other deficit provinces, princely states, and country like Ceylon, but the agents of all the deficit districts within Madras joined the race. Naturally the Government of Madras had to do something to prevent the fierce competition and consequent rapid rise in prices. So the Government introduced permit for the export of rice and prohibited all sorts of export without it. But still due to the fierce competition in buying, particularly among the buying agents of Bombay, Travancore and Ceylon, prices rose rapidly and sharply. So finally in September 1942 all rice buying was put into the hands of a government purchasing agency. Initially the purchasing officers of the Madras Government were asked to buy up to a ceiling price. The ceiling prices were fixed after a conference with landowners, considering the increase in the cost of living and cost of cultivation. There was a little premium over ceiling prices for voluntary sale, and it was claimed that the market for rice in Madras was neither a seller's nor a buyer's market, but it was one fair to both.²² But in reality rice was not coming

²² *Proceedings of the Fourth All-India Food Conference*, 13-16 October, 1943, DOF (P) File, PP-1101/25, 1943, p. 09, GOI, NAI, New Delhi.

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forward at the ceiling price, it was being held off the market in the hope of getting higher prices in the future. Against this background, the Madras authorities requisitioned some five thousands tons of rice held by a group of grain merchants. For the time being the fear of more requisitioning made rice come forward. But soon again in February 1943 rice was not being released and once again requisitioning was resorted to. Thereafter, to a limited extent, requisitioning had to be continued as an integral part of the system so as to act as a bulwark against withholding of stocks from the market. Sometimes there were only threats of requisitioning, not actual requisitioning, and the threats were often enough to yield the intended result.

Actual requisitioning or the threats of it was resorted to with the intention of serving mainly three purposes. First, in severely deficit areas its purpose was to secure adequate supply of grains and regularize it. Second, in such surplus districts which had the tendency of becoming moderately deficit areas at times, the purpose was to keep the local price at about the same level as that of imported rice. Third, in continuously surplus districts actual requisitioning or its threat was used to procure rice to export to deficit areas at the ceiling price.

In Madras, in normal cases rice was bought from the rice mills at the ceiling price. The buying was done by Grain Purchase Officers. These officers were picked by the Deputy Collectors of Madras Civil Service. The Purchase Officers were assisted by clerical and accounting staff, a Marketing Assistant and a Recorder from the

Agricultural Department. The Purchase Officers checked the quality and did sampling of the rice with the help of these people. The Purchase Officers bought all rice for the deficit districts within the province as well as for export to other provinces, for the industries and for the Defence Department. In case of the buying for the deficit districts within the province, approved grain merchants from those districts further bought the grain and then sold it to the local retailers at the approved prices.²³

However, it must be made very clear that the normal rice-purchase scheme in Madras was not a full government monopoly. The Government of Madras made it clear at the Fifth All-India Food Conference in February 1945 that it was against monopoly buying except in severely deficit areas.²⁴ Unlike government monopoly procurement, the procurement system in the surplus districts of Madras did not aim at procuring from the growers all their produce beyond the needs of them and their families, instead the Madras procurement system aimed at making the bulk of the surplus rice available in the market and tried to prevent the accumulation of undue stocks by farmers or grain traders. So under the existing system, the cultivators in the clearly surplus areas had to sell their rice to licensed millers. If the farmers or the grain traders withheld rice from market, they ran the risk of having their stocks requisitioned at the government price. With regard to movements of paddy and rice, permit was compulsory for both inter-district and inter-*taluk* movements. The system

²³ Foodgrains Policy Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

²⁴ *Proceedings of the Fifth All-India Food Conference*, 29 January- 2 February, 1945, DOF(P), PP-1109/07, 1945, GOI, NAI, New Delhi p. 7.

practiced by Madras left local internal trade undisturbed, and consequently the government's task became easier as it had to undertake only the responsibility for distribution of rice in rationed towns and deficit areas.²⁵

The Madras system of procurement worked somewhat satisfactorily as long as the rice-surplus districts of the province continued to be surplus districts. But when in 1945-46 due to a failure of monsoon in the Tanjore Delta and a cyclone in the Godavari Delta, crop failed in major rice growing areas of the province, the system proved inadequate. For the year 1945-46, the total rice crop of Madras was only 4,241,000 tons against an average of 4,862,000 tons for the period from 1939/40 to 1944/45.²⁶ In this situation, the Madras Government was compelled to change the old system and introduce total government monopoly procurement of the farmers' surplus and rationing of food all over the province.

But the procurement system in Malabar District differed considerably from the rest of the Madras province. In Malabar a different set of conditions led to a different system. Malabar was densely populated and severely deficit in the yield of rice. Before 1942 the district had relied heavily on rice imports from Burma. But the end of those imports with the fall of Burma placed Malabar in a very challenging condition. To meet the challenge, the Government of Madras in 1944 introduced a

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁶ *Indian Food Statistics*, Ministry of Agriculture, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, 1949, file A-1068/61, GOI, NAI, New Delhi, p. 9.

comprehensive government monopoly purchase of paddy and rice, ragi and samai throughout the entire Malabar district, except in the Attapadi Ansam in the Walluvanad *taluk*, British Cochin and the Laccadive Islands. Under the Malabar scheme the entire produce of the farmers was at the disposal of the government and they were allowed to retain only the amount required for the domestic requirements of them and their families, for seed for the next year's sowing, and for payment of any rent payable in kind. The regulations which were drawn with great detail, attached great importance to assessment of crops and there was multi-layered system of assessment, at least in paper. According to it, in the first stage of estimation each individual farmer was to submit a formal statement to the village accountant a week before his crop was to be harvested, giving an estimation of what he thought would be the total produce of grain. After the submission of the estimation, the village accountant was to visit the field in person and make a rough estimate of the likely crop. Finally after the harvest the accountant was to make a more accurate assessment of the grain actually yielded and inform the farmer about his assessment. But in practice the village accountant did not make more than one estimate, and often it was not his fault as there was hardly enough time to conduct more than one estimate. However as a measure against errors, a proportion of the estimates was first checked by the Grain Purchase Inspectors, then by the Taluk Grain Purchase Officers and finally by the District Supply Officer. And even after all these if the farmer disagreed

with the estimate, he had the option of appealing to the Taluq Grain Purchase Officer.²⁷

Actual procurement was done by grain traders approved by government as purchasing agents. Each of these agents operated in a separate area, thus competition in buying was avoided. Sometimes instead of individual grain traders, institutions were appointed as government's purchasing agents, for instance in one *taluq*, the Malabar Wholesale Cooperative Stores was appointed as the government agent. On the whole this system worked well. Later in 1946 there was another experiment by which the old systems of trade were replaced throughout the entire district by Producer-Consumers Cooperative Societies. However this system was not very efficient or successful.²⁸

It was the village accountant who had to inform the local purchasing agent of the amount of grains to which each landholder had been assessed. Then it became the responsibility of the agent to buy the assessed amount of grains at the price fixed by the Government. Any movement of grains by the grower in the meantime from storage at the threshing floor or from the village of production compulsorily needed a permit from the Grain Purchase Officer.

²⁷ See *Outline of Some of the Government Grain Monopoly Schemes Operating in India in 1944*, p. 30, in Department of Food (DOF), Procurement Branch (P) file P-1095/12, 1944, GOI, NAI, New Delhi.

²⁸ *Memorandum on the Food Situation in India*, submitted to the Central Legislature, January 1947, DOF (P) file PP-1115/08, 1947, p. 23, NAI, GOI, New Delhi.

As made clear earlier, the intensive procurement system in Malabar was necessitated by the severe scarcity of rice in the district. Quite understandably the entire Malabar district had to be rationed. To all heads of families, family ration cards were issued. The average holding in Malabar could not provide food for the grower and his family throughout the year; hence they were also included in the rationing scheme. But those who had legitimate stocks of grain, had to have their cards suspended for the certain period of a year for which they could feed themselves from the stocks they had.

The government purchasing agents in Malabar district were also the licensed importers of rice from the surplus rice-producing districts. To stop corruption by any purchasing agent, the government could reduce or cancel his monthly rice import quota and transfer that quota to some other importer.

The organization of the staff of the food administration in Malabar district was improved and simplified in 1946 by replacing old officers who had been separately in charge of either grain purchase or rationing with new officers who simultaneously dealt with both grain purchase and rationing. For example the District and Taluq Grain Purchase and Rationing Officers were replaced by Deputy District Supply Officers, Taluq Supply Officers and Deputy Supply Officers. This reduced complications between the two branches of purchase and rationing.

Now we would return to procurement in Madras Presidency in general. Till now I have discussed only procurement of rice, as rice was the staple food in the province and among all the food-grains it was in the greatest demand for export to other parts of India. The original Madras procurement schemes were also concerned with rice only. But there were districts in Madras that produced and consumed variety of millets such as jowar, bajra, korra and ragi. In 1944 when Madras introduced statutory price control of millets, it was then found that millet stocks were precarious.²⁹ Hence in April 1944 a makeshift levy of millet was introduced in all districts of the province except the districts of Madras, Malabar and the Nilgiris. The levy was of one maund per acre from each holding of over 10 acres cultivated with millets. But soon the levy scheme was modified in many districts and then by October of the same year replaced by a graded levy. On irrigated land the new levy ranged from 1 maund to 6 maunds per acre, and on dry crop land from nothing to 2 maunds per acre according to the area of the holding sown with millets.³⁰

In order to secure necessary information to increase procurement and ease its process, orders were issued to maintain a comprehensive stock registrar in every village throughout the presidency except in the districts of Malabar and Madras. The register could be used either for a graded levy or for the acquisition of the entire

²⁹ *Proceedings of the Fifth All-India Food Conference*, 29 January- 2 February, 1945, DOF (P) file PP-1109/07, 1945, p. 29, GOI, NAI, New Delhi.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 34.

surplus of the cultivator. The register was kept for paddy as well as for millets. The registers provided and preserved invaluable local records in great detail.

However the above mentioned procurement system of millets was scrapped in early 1945. In the deficit districts a new system whereby each cultivator's surplus millet crop was procured, replaced the old system. And in districts which were slightly surplus and sometimes slightly deficit, buying of millets was done by purchasing agents who were drawn from grain traders. Whenever millet prices leaned towards the minimum price fixed by the Government of India, the buying agents entered the market and purchased millets up to the target figure laid down by the local government.

Now I would discuss procurement in Punjab. The case of Punjab is important as it demonstrates on one hand the difficulty of the Government of India in dealing with a province run by a popularly elected government; and on the other hand the constraints faced by such an elected provincial government in considering the food needs of other provinces of India. As is widely known, while in 1939 the Congress Ministries resigned from office in all Congress ruled provinces, the Punjab Government headed by the Unionist Party continued to remain in office and it rendered full support to the British in their War efforts. The extent of the Unionist support was such that the British once acknowledged that they owed the success of the War effort in Punjab to Sikander Hyat Khan who was the Prime Minister of Punjab from 1937 to his death in

1942.³¹ Punjab enjoyed political stability in the province; it was the only Muslim majority province which had escaped internecine conflicts and frequent changes of ministries since the outbreak of the War. But the Unionist Party was mainly dependent on rural electorate. Quite naturally it was its political compulsion to support the interests of the countryside. It had to support every layers of the rural agrarian mass — the landlords, smallholders, tenants and sharecroppers. These people had a very lean time during the agricultural depression of the 1930s. Consequently during the War they felt as if they were entitled to benefit from the soaring prices of food-grains. The popular feeling in Punjab was that the other parts of India, particularly the industrial areas, had unjustly profited during the Depression by living on cheap Punjab grain, and even during the War the prices of industrial products were being allowed to rise and hence the Punjabi agriculturists and grain traders must be allowed to take advantage of the War and to make whatever profit they could and thus they must be given an opportunity to make up at least some portions of the losses they suffered during the lean period of the thirties. The Punjab Government due to its dependence on rural agrarian vote bank was not in a mood to estrange this vote bank by coercing them to sell their crops at a fixed price. Instead, the Government felt bound to take a stand in favour of the high price of grains. In addition to the rural producers, the Government had to consider the tremendous influence of grain traders on urban vote. A great section of the grain traders was from urban Sikh and Hindu

³¹ Viceroy Linlithgow to Secretary of State Amery, 28 December 1942, *Transfer of Power* (hereafter *TP*), Vol. 3, p. 431.

community and obviously they were against any kind of price control and compulsory requisitioning of food-grains.

And the Government of India Act of 1935 did not allow the Government of India to intervene in Punjab as food was a 'transferred', i.e., provincial subject. But it would be wrong to think that the Government of India would have intervened had the Act not deterred it from intervening. On the contrary, the Centre was not willing to intervene. Actually rural Punjab was the main recruiting field for the Indian Army during the War, and the military authorities made it clear to the Government of India that it must not take any action that might cause serious discontent among the Punjab farmers and thus hinder recruitment, or cause anxiety to those Punjabi soldiers who were already in service. And the Provincial Government also did not forget to warn the Centre against any kind of intervention. For instance at the Fourth All-India Food Conference in October 1943 the representative of Punjab pointed out that almost half of the soldier ranks of the Indian Army at that time were drawn from the cultivating classes of Punjab and he added that "grave administrative and political repercussions" would follow if statutory price control, requisitioning of food-grains and rationing were introduced in Punjab. In a not so veiled manner he even threatened the Centre by refusing to take any responsibility for things that might happen in case the

Government of India disregarded the “advice” of the Punjab Government.³² In the words of the representative:

We are prepared to go to the extent of even tightening our belts, within reasonable limits of course, in order to be able to help all deficit areas, but what we do not propose to stand is any arbitrary exercise of authority on the part of the centre or anybody else.³³

But due to the stand of the Punjab Government vis-à-vis food-grains, the deficit provinces regarded Punjab as a selfish province which was feeding itself luxuriously and then selling the remains to the rest of India at extortionate prices. The deficit provinces claimed that as Punjab was a part of India it could not evade its responsibility to come to their help in feeding fellow Indians. But the appeal to the unity of India and the idea of the interdependence of its various parts did not move Punjab much and it refused to accept that it had any responsibility to the rest of the country. The attitude of Punjab definitely added to the difficulties faced by the Centre in its attempt to procure grains and organize distribution of foodstuffs.

But by the end of 1942 the Punjab Government had somehow been persuaded to secure supplies for other provinces and to agree to the proposal of a central buying agency for wheat, provided that the Provincial Government would conduct the operations, decide the quantities for export, fix the prices and it would not be required

³² Proceedings of the Fourth All-India Food Conference, October 13-16, 1943, DOF (P) File, PP-1101/25, 1943, p. 21, GOI, NAI, New Delhi.

³³ Ibid. p. 23.

to requisition grains for the Central Government. But in February 1943 the Punjab Government clarified that the price should be such as to induce the cultivators to bring their produces to market, instead of forcing them to hide the produces. And it maintained that the target for purchases should not be “marketable surplus” but the “exportable surplus”, and by “exportable surplus” it meant the surplus that remained after feeding Punjab towns and deficit areas within Punjab. According to the Punjab representative at the Second All-India Food Conference, in Punjab about 40-45 percent of the growers’ crop used to come on the market but this “marketable surplus” could not be exported as they were needed to feed the towns of the province itself and the deficit areas within the province. It was apprehended that if anything more than what was called “exportable surplus” was exported it would result in unrest and force the grains to go underground. But the calculation of the needs of the Punjab towns and deficit areas within the province was left vague, and one might suspect that this was done intentionally. The calculation had ample chance to enable Punjab to retain far in excess of its real needs, as much of the rural grain consumption was grain which never came on the market but was obtained directly from the field and thus leaving to trace for calculation. However, a target procurement figure was to be fixed, at least formally, and it was to be left to the Provincial Government to see whether that target figure could be exceeded. But despite this target figure, to other deficit provinces of India the Punjab scheme seemed like a case of Punjab first and the rest of India nowhere !

It looked like a mockery of those dying in the Bengal famine, when at the Third All-India Food Conference the representative of Punjab put forward the frivolous proposal that there should be “qualified Free Trade, a voluntary or compulsory setting aside of one seer per maund of produce for the countryside, and . . . a charity fund to which well-to-do people should be asked to contribute voluntarily in the first instance.”³⁴ He then added “Enforce it by law and compel them to make this contribution if they fail to do so voluntarily”.³⁵ Such small contributions were definitely not going to serve the purpose. And it must be remembered that this frivolous proposal was put forward when the Bengal famine was in full force and the disastrous effects of the “free trade” experiment in the Eastern Region had become clear. The proposal shows how some people of the greatest surplus province of India failed to understand the seriousness of the food problem of India and how they trivialized the issue.

However, the suggestion was not adopted and Punjab continued with its existing procurement system through old trade organizations. Already under the system six firms of the grain dealers had been chosen as purchasing agents in the province. Five of the six firms were in charge of buying for the civil needs of other provinces and princely states according to the allotment of Government of India Supply Orders

³⁴ Proceedings of the Third All-India Food Conference, DOF, Procurement Branch File, file P-1011/20, 1943, p. 19.

³⁵ Ibid.

made by the Director of Food Supplies. The remaining one farm had to do all the buying for the Defence Department. Now the operations of other ordinary traders were confined to only supplying the domestic needs of the province. There was another buying agency, i.e., the Registrar of Cooperative Societies who bought for the provincial grain reserve through commission agents.

All these buying agencies conducted their operations throughout the whole of Punjab. The existence of more than one buying agency and their common operation area resulted in acute competition among them to get grains to buy. Inevitably this competition to buy often profited the Punjab growers and grain traders at the expense of the deficit areas of India. However, despite all these, a considerable amount of wheat was procured in Punjab for export to other provinces. But one of the reasons for the success of procurement in Punjab was the bumper crop in the province in the year 1942-43. During the year Punjab's wheat production was 4,175,000 tons against a usual crop of about 3.25 to 3.50 million tons.³⁶ But though Punjab provided supplies to the rest of India from its bumper crop in the critical time of Bengal famine, yet it seems that even at this stage Punjab did not fully appreciate the extent of the danger threatening India's food sufficiency, as the popular opinion in the province was still thinking that rationing was unnecessary in a surplus province like Punjab, and the opinion was still against price control of food-grains, unless at the same time prices of all commodities necessary for agriculture was controlled. The Government of India

³⁶ *The Food Statistics of India*, DOF, Procurement Branch Files, NAI, 1946, P-1027/06, 1946, P. 38.

was criticized by the Punjab farmers on the ground that it was only eager to procure food-grains at a low price but it was not making any attempt to make available to the farmers the consumer goods such as iron and steel for farming tools and cart wheels, fertilizers, oil for irrigation pumps etc. And this criticism was not entirely unfounded; because it is true that during the War, Government's industrial policy was preoccupied with the needs of the War and consequently the needs and problems of the farmers did not receive adequate attention.

In 1944 there was a significant re-examination by the Punjab Government of its procurement policy. Consequently by 1945, according to the new system, all purchases for the Defence Forces were being made by a single commercial firm, and all those for civil needs by the Director of Food Purchases, an officer of the Provincial Government. The Director was buying through tenders which had to be accepted and guaranteed by certain firms dealing in grains who had been appointed as clearing agents.³⁷ This system eliminated competitive buying which was prevalent earlier. To a great extent this system was a result of the view of the Punjab Government that with the existing administrative strength and efficiency, direct government procurement would not be able to handle purchase of huge quantities of grains involving millions of tons. However, regarding the procurable surplus the Famine Inquiry Commission pointed out that as long as prices were good, grains came freely into the hands of the sole purchaser for export, which was the Provincial Government. But whenever the

³⁷ Famine Inquiry Commission, *Final Report*, 1945, Government of India, Madras, p. 30.

prices were low, the growers withheld their grain from the market in the hope of getting higher prices later. In such situations the grain traders also increased their stocks instead of selling. In such cases the government could have waited for the prices to come down, but the lack of stocks in 1945 did not allow the Provincial Government to wait. In view of this problem the Famine Inquiry Commission recommended that “if it is established that the producer is holding back his grain from the market, with the object of pushing up prices, requisitioning should be resorted to without hesitation”.³⁸ Meanwhile another problematic development for Punjab Government had taken place. In 1944 the report on Government Grain Monopoly Schemes had concluded that “monopoly procurement had justified itself and should continue to be the goal towards which the development of all procurement systems should proceed”. The Punjab Government apprehended that monopoly procurement would definitely involve requisitioning of grains from the grower, which it was not at all willing to undertake.

But a substantial decline in wheat production at the all India level in the year 1945-46 convinced Punjab to modify its stand vis-à-vis government procurement. In the previous season, i.e. in 1944-45 the wheat production for all-India, except areas from where figures were not available, was 10,551,000 ton; whereas in the next season it came down to 9,038,000 tons.³⁹ In this changed situation Punjab finally introduced a system of

³⁸ Ibid, p. 35.

³⁹ *The Food Statistics of India*, DOF, Procurement Branch Files, NAI, 1946, P-1027/06, 1946, P. 29.

monopoly procurement for wheat.⁴⁰ Under the system the purchase of wheat in all markets of the province was completely put under government control. All movement of wheat by road or rail was banned; the only exceptions were movement from field or village to market and movement under special permit of the government. The purchasing price of wheat was now fixed by the government in each market. The government was now operating through associations of bigger local grain dealers, who were made the sole buyers of wheat in the market. And all wheat purchased by these associations could be used only under the orders of the government and according to them. Direct selling of wheat by the grower was now forbidden, except for the requirement of his own village or in particular cases to the neighbouring village up to 20 seers. As for rice, a similar scheme was introduced in the rice-growing areas of the province, under which the price of all rice produced at any rice mill was controlled and it could only be obtained under government orders. Any incoming or outgoing movement of paddy and rice to or from the controlled rice areas needed government permit.

In the context of movement of food-grains, it is interesting to note that even when there was no formal government monopoly, in some cases, to ensure the virtual monopoly of government agents in buying food-grains, the Central and Provincial Governments resorted to indirect measures such as control of transport which was a crucial weapon in the process of procurement. For instance in its desperate attempt to

⁴⁰ See *Government Grain Monopoly in Punjab*, DOF, Procurement Branch Files, NAI, 1946, P-1031/15, 1946, pp. 9-11.

secure control of the upcoming *aush* rice crop in 1943, the Government of Bengal was advised by the Foodgrains Committee that it should deny transport to all grain bought in competition with government agents.⁴¹ But the Committee's advice went in vain as the Bengal Government failed to take adequate action and could not obtain the crop.

However, by August 1943 the railways in India had a very heavy additional strain thrown over it by the huge movements of grain. The normal volume of traffic was greatly increased by military and supply services movements, much traffic formerly sent by sea now had to be sent by rail. As the War was in its fourth continuous year, shortage of locomotives and wagons began to set in.⁴² Traffic to Calcutta, which was extremely important as Calcutta was the capital of a province hit by the famine of highest severity and as from military and business point of view an operational centre of great importance, was hampered by floods. However, the War Resources Committee of the Viceroy's Council ordered that highest priority be given to foodstuffs than to ordinary military supplies.⁴³ But there was often lack of coordination and delays in food movements from surplus to deficit areas. Due to lack of storage facilities and wagons, purchase operations were sometimes delayed and sometimes huge quantities of grain lay on station platforms awaiting wagons, on the other hand sometimes grain was not ready to fill available wagons.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Foodgrains Policy Committee, *op.cit.*, p. 47.

⁴² Department of Food (DOF), Procurement Branch (P) file P-1037/12, 1943, National Archives of India, Government of India, New Delhi.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ See correspondence from War Transport Department to Procurement Branch of Department of Food in DOF, Procurement Branch (P) file P-1039/14, 1943, GOI, NAI, New Delhi.

Chapter 2

Civil Rationing

Chapter 2

Civil Rationing

Rationing was introduced in July 1943. As we have already seen, by then the supply of Burma rice had been stopped and India was threatened with a Japanese invasion. On the other hand at that point of time Bengal was in desperate need of rice, but some of the surplus provinces were protesting the movement of grains from them saying that they could not provide so much grain for others, and that they could not introduce necessary administrative measures to do so. The common people in these provinces were growing suspicious that undue export of food grains was taking place and excessive purchases were being made for the Army in India.⁴⁵ In these circumstances the Foodgrains Policy Committee held its first meeting in Delhi on July 8, 1943.⁴⁶ The report of this Committee laid down the lines on which India's food policy from 1943 onwards was founded. The recommendations contained the need to secure more equitable distribution of what was available and obtainable. It hinted at the introduction of rationing in many parts of the country. However, the success of rationing system was dependent on the other recommendations of the Committee such

⁴⁵ Sir Henry Knight, *op.cit.*, p. 106.

⁴⁶ Foodgrains Policy Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

as an increase in available supplies, improved procurement machinery, general extension of the principle of statutory price control and an overhaul of the machinery of administration and relations between the Central Government and Provincial Governments and among the Provincial Governments themselves.⁴⁷ Quite correctly the Committee emphasized that all these were inseparably connected, therefore none could be effective unless the others were also implemented.

On 27 July, 1943, the Foodgrains Policy Committee formally informed the Government of India that rationing of foodstuffs should be introduced immediately in the larger cities of India, not only in deficit areas but in surplus areas also, and ought to be progressively extended to lesser towns.⁴⁸ This was accepted by the Government of India. But it was not that rationing was introduced without any difficulty and opposition. Some of the problems in introducing rationing were that the dietary habits of various classes and castes of Indians made any uniform list of rationed products impossible. And though the urban population which was to be rationed initially was not absolutely very great, but scattered over an immense territory. As mentioned earlier in the case of procurement, recruiting the necessary staff to work rationing was another difficult task. The Committee's arguments against these obstacles were that rationing was the only way to "kill the queue", hold "food morale" and, more interestingly, it was argued that in order to get food from overseas, India must show

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 23-27.

⁴⁸ Foodgrains Policy Committee, *op. cit.* p. xiv.

that any food so sent would be equitably and economically distributed.⁴⁹ Thus rationing was also expected by the state to perform image-building to draw food donations from abroad.

Some change in public opinion in favour of rationing was caused by the Bengal Famine in 1943. The fate of a province popularly considered a surplus province in rice horrified other provinces. When crop failed in Bengal, rice imports were not available immediately. Seeing the Bengal experience no province or state could any longer consider itself safe.

But despite the Foodgrains Policy Committee's defence and the experience of Bengal, rationing was still regarded by some as unnecessary, by some impracticable, and by others as undesirable. And not only in 1943, surprisingly even by February 1945 when rationing was somehow got established as a reasonable and viable form of state intervention in the supply of food, there were still people doubting the necessity and urgency of rationing. For instance on 1st February 1945 the representative of the United Provinces declared at the Fifth All-India Food Conference that " We feel that we are dealing with a temporary emergency which we hope will be gone, say, three years hence. If that is so we are going to get through it by improvisations. . . . If it is a matter of improvisation, I do not think it is necessary to go to total rationing for the

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 9.

sake of the theory of total rationing, if you see that under all other circumstances you had better hold off for a few months more or a year more.”⁵⁰

The representative of Punjab declared that the Punjab Government thought it unnecessary for a surplus province like Punjab to introduce rationing. He informed that despite differences, Punjab ultimately introduced rationing because it was told that rationing was necessary in the interest of all-India policy and to satisfy Public opinion outside the state.⁵¹ However, later the extensive shortages of 1946 convinced most of the opponent of rationing about its necessity.

But the opposition to the idea of rationing was so strong in 1943-44, that the Government did not insist on uniformity all over India. And really conditions varied so enormously in various areas of the country that it actually made uniformity impossible. However, the recommendations of the Foodgrains Policy Committee took at least one uniform policy regarding the food-grains to be distributed. According to it wherever rationing was introduced, all the major food-grains of that area had to be included in the rationing. Thus the Committee recommended uniformity to accommodate diversity in the food habits of different parts of the country. According to this policy in 1944 rice, wheat and millets were rationed in Bombay, Sind, Central Provinces and Hyderabad, whereas in Punjab only wheat and *atta* (flour) were given

⁵⁰ As quoted in Sir Henry Knight, *op. cit.*, pp. 189-190.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 190.

in ration. Outside the city of Madras in other areas of the province only rice was given in ration while in Mysore even ragi, in addition to rice and wheat was among the rationed items.⁵² As among the food-grains particularly rice was in scarcity, in rice eating areas, such as Bombay and Cochin, the authorities made efforts to encourage people to buy and to learn how to prepare alternative food-grains.

With regard to the quantity of ration, the Foodgrains Policy Committee had suggested a standard of one pound of food-grains per adult person per day and half of the normal adult ration for children between the age of two and twelve years. But in the surplus provinces there was often a tendency to give more amount of grain in ration. And these provinces came up with different arguments to justify the extra amount of rationed grains. For instance the *Report on the Progress of the Recommendations of the Foodgrains Policy Committee* mentions that “the Northern and North West Provinces claim that their people are physically so constructed as to require a relatively greater proportion of food-grains than people in the Southern parts”.⁵³ However the arguments in favour of greater amount of grains in ration in some parts of the country were rejected by the Central Food Advisory Council. Its meeting in July 1944 declared that:

The Council is of the view that the present burden of an overall deficiency of food-grains should be shared evenly by all parts of the country and deprecates the existing disparity of ration scales.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 191.

⁵³ *Report on the Progress of the Recommendations of the Foodgrains Policy Committee*, submitted to the Central Legislature, November 1944, DOF (Rationing Branch) file RP-1011/24, 1944, p. 26, NAI, GOI, New Delhi.

It, therefore, recommends that full rationing should be introduced in every province in all urban areas and that the basic ration per head should be uniformly 1 lb. per adult per day. It presses the Government of India to bring about uniformity in both these matters throughout India without delay.⁵⁴

The recommendations were referred to the Provincial Governments by the Government of India with the comment that “so long as there is any part of the country where the ration is lower than three and a half seers⁵⁵ a week, there appears to be little justification for having a bigger ration anywhere else.”⁵⁶ However the Government of India itself made an exception to the normal ration of adult persons. It created a specified category of heavy manual workers who were to get an additional 50 percent over the normal 1 lb per day.⁵⁷

Though it was intended that the cereal ration for an adult should not fall below a pound a day, but the Government of India was forced by the shortages in 1946 to prescribe 12 ounces a day as the maximum ration throughout India. And actually sometimes it was far short of this in parts of South India. However, the scale of rations remained a matter of dispute all through the period.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ i.e. 7 pounds.

⁵⁶ *Report on the Progress of the Recommendations of the Food-grains Policy Committee*, submitted to the Central Legislature, November 1944, DOF (Rationing Branch) file R-1011/24, 1944, p. 29, NAI, GOI, New Delhi.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 30.

With regard to the retail price of foodstuffs given in ration, normally it had to be kept as low as possible. Usually they were sold at the procurement cost. But in some cases the poor men's ration were sold below the procurement cost and the loss incurred thus was made up by raising the price of the better qualities of grains consumed generally by the middle and upper classes. However in some areas government subsidies were indispensable.

By August 1943 full rationing was introduced in thirteen cities and areas whereas partial rationing in four, distributed among two provinces of British India and nine Indian States. By that time the fully rationed areas were –

Bombay city and suburbs, Poona and Kirkee, Cochin State, Travancore, Bangalore city, Civil and Military Station Bangalore, Indore city, Dewas Senior, Morar and Lashkar in Gwalior State, Quetta Pishin, Jafarabad and Vithalgadh in Kathiawar Agency. The partially rationed areas were – Bhopal city, Junagadh, Thanadeoli and Manavadar in Kathiawar Agency.⁵⁸ However, although Bombay was the first big rationed area, some smaller areas had been operating rudimentary rationing from an earlier period. One such area was Amreli in Kathiawar where food control had been in operation since 1941.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Henry Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

⁵⁹ For a detailed description of Amreli experiment in rationing see Michael Brown, *op. cit.* pp. 99- 104.

In British India and in the Princely States by February 1944, 103 cities and towns were rationed. By November 1944, 40 municipal areas and towns were, or were about to be, fully rationed, covering approximately 42 million people.⁶⁰ The number increased to 516 towns and municipal areas covering 50 million people by February 1945.⁶¹

The Foodgrains Policy Committee's recommendations attached due emphasis to publicity regarding rationing in order to educate the masses about the benefits of rationing and to secure public opinion in its favour.⁶² And also to prevent panic and rumour, it was important that the public be kept informed of the facts of the food situation.

The required number of ration dealers was so large that government turned many existing grain traders into ration dealers.⁶³ In addition to ration shops a certain number of government retail grain shops were to be opened. It was decided that employers' shops and co-operative societies would have to be licensed and treated as traders, and their customers would have to come under the same ration rules as applicable to the rest of the population.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ *Report on the Progress of the Recommendations of the Food-grains Policy Committee*, submitted to the Central Legislature, November 1944, DOF (Rationing Branch) file R-1011/24, 1944, p. 24, NAI, GOI, New Delhi.

⁶¹ *Memorandum on the Food Situation in India*, submitted to the Central Legislature, November 1944, DOF (Rationing Branch) file RP-1014/10, 1945, p. 13, NAI, GOI, New Delhi.

⁶² Foodgrains Policy Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

But most interestingly, the Foodgrains Policy Committee thought it unnecessary and impracticable to introduce general rationing in rural areas.⁶⁵ This is particularly striking because the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 was mainly a rural one. This requires a detailed discussion. Actually the famine period in Bengal was also the period that witnessed War boom in Bengal. Bengal was close to the frontier of the war with Japan and it was a place where a massive expansion of military expenditures and war-related civilian expenditures occurred at that time. The increased purchasing power of those benefited by the war boom, primarily located in Calcutta and some other urban areas, made it easier for them to take a bigger share of the available food supply, leaving the rural masses without the ability to compete in the food battle. And this economic divisiveness was not moderated by state intervention. Instead it was exacerbated by government's provision of subsidised rice for residents of Calcutta. Thus those who had been benefited by the war boom in earning higher incomes were further helped by the opportunity to buy food at lower prices. The political incentive of the government for giving priority to feeding Calcutta was that urban unrest could have been very disruptive for the War efforts, whereas rural unrest was thought to be less articulate and less problematic. As a consequence of this calculation, deaths in Bengal famine were confined almost entirely to the rural population; those who died in the city of Calcutta had actually moved there from villages in search of food. As

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-52

the rural masses were not crucial for war efforts, their suffering did not receive government's attention. Thus the economic division was strengthened and magnified by the political incentives operating on the Government. These political incentives are sometimes overlooked in trying to analyse famines in terms of purely economic parameters. But we should not lose sight of this more complex and less obvious interconnection between war and famine amidst direct and clearly identifiable links between wars and famines. One of the most pernicious effects of wars and warlike situations is the weakening of the opportunity of adversarial politics and social criticism. The excuse for suppressing independent newspapers has often been based on the so-called demands of war efforts, e.g. during the Bengal famine of 1943 also, the war situation was cited as justification for the censorship of the local media, and criticisms voiced in that media had little impact anyway on decisions taken in London or by the Viceroy in Delhi. The Government of India was ultimately moved in mid-October, many months after the famine had started, only when Ian Stephens, the editor of the British-owned Calcutta daily *The Statesman*, published severe attacks on Government policy, which immediately led to questioning in Parliament in London.⁶⁶

However, the rationing system brought with it some unpredicted problems. In the ration shops quite naturally the grains were at first sold at rates below market price. This resulted in an influx of buyers from neighbouring non-rationed areas where

⁶⁶ "Seen from a distance", editorial, *The Statesman*, 14 October, 1943. See also "The death-roll", editorial, *The Statesman* 16 October, 1943.

prices of food grains were much higher.⁶⁷ As the government failed to foresee any such unintended consequence, this pressure resulted in rapid gobbling up of supplies. To resist the flood of unwelcome purchasers, the price of grains was raised to the “economic” level.⁶⁸ But now to enable the intended customers of the rationed area to draw rations at the “economic” price, public employment had to be provided to all able-bodied men on extensive soil conservation works and they had to be paid at a rate to correspond with the grain prices at the ration shops. The aged and infirm received free relief.⁶⁹

The strength of the issue of food in the social and political arena got recognition in the final chapter of the Report of the Foodgrains Policy Committee. The fact that food can affect even the existence of the state was evident from its observation that “Hungry men do not discriminate and social unrest does not stop at Provincial frontiers. The Centre, all the Provinces and all the States have a common interest in seeing that the situation does not get out of hand.”⁷⁰ But some of the provinces refused to accept or appreciate this observation. For instance, in Punjab the Provincial Government appeared to put the interest of its own cultivators and grain-traders before the people of deficit areas.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Henry Knight, *op. cit.*, 115.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Foodgrains Policy Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁷¹ See the comment of Additional Secretary of Department of Food in DOF(P) file P- 1121/07, 1944, NAI, GOI.

However, by the beginning of 1944, 24 million people were receiving food rations.⁷² It was not that rationing represented a uniform structure in all areas it touched. There were two major types of food rationing— statutory and non-statutory. Under the former, statutory orders were issued to deal with the enumeration of the population and with the acquisition, possession and movement of the rationed items. Any breach of these orders was punishable by law. Statutory rationing meant that every ration card holder was entitled to receive his or her full ration of food-grains from the ration shops at a fixed price. In the statutorily rationed areas no free market was permitted and there were restrictions on the import and export of even small quantities of food-grains. No one could obtain food items included in ration without a ration card, except at authorized hotels and restaurants. By December 1947, 148 million people were covered by rationing out of which 54 million were under statutory rationing.⁷³ Though this number looks impressive at first look, but it represented roughly a mere 15% of the total population of India.⁷⁴

Under the non-statutory rationing system, which was in force mainly in some rural areas, the scale of ration was not guaranteed and it was also not uniformly available throughout the year. It was given only during lean seasons or when the provincial governments had stocks to spare; and the people could fulfil only part of their requirement from this type of ration. Quite naturally in these areas the ration

⁷² P.A. Gopalakrishnan, *op cit*, p. 10.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 11.

card holders were allowed the freedom to supplement their rations with whatever they could buy in the open market. In the areas under non-statutory rationing, ration cards were issued to agricultural producers also whose production was judged to be below their needs. The cards entitled their possessors to buy rations from a licensed retail dealer on a fixed scale. But the authorities in these areas were not bound by legal obligation to supply this ration and there was clear provision that the government might fluctuate and even stop the supply. Thus virtually the people in these areas were dependent on the free market for their food requirements.⁷⁵

In some rural areas there was a third method of food distribution called controlled distribution. Instead of individual ration cards, under this system family ration cards were issued to needy consumers for priority supply to them by private traders. But under this system the quantity of food-grains was to vary according to the availability of supplies.⁷⁶ However, by 1947 practically the entire area of Bombay, Madras, Cochin, Travancore and Mysore came under some form of rationing.

Now I would discuss Government's food policies vis-à-vis the port labour, colliery labour and police. The logic in choosing these sections of civil population is that the concern for food supplies to these sections demonstrates the colonial state's eagerness to maintain a smooth running of war. And in fact this eagerness is quite evident from the files of the department of food, there are far more files concerned with these

⁷⁵ For a brief account of non-statutory rationing see *ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

⁷⁶ See Sir Henry Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

particular sections of civil population than files concerned with the food provisioning of common civilians.

I would start with port labour. The urge to have a smooth War effort, as discussed earlier, led the colonial state to attempt to arrange for regular food supplies to the port areas; e.g. in July 1943 the War Transport Department referring the fortnightly report dated 5.7.43 from Sir Thomas Elderton, communicated to the Food Department that supplies of wheat, *dal* and mustard oil to the port of Calcutta by the Bengal Government were not regular and also informed that the purchase of mustard oil in the market was becoming increasingly difficult. The War Transport Department requested the Food Department to intervene and ask the Bengal Government to arrange for regular supplies to the Port Commissioners.⁷⁷ The correspondence also mentioned that the Food Department had already been requested separately to arrange for the supply of eight hundred tons of rice per quarter by the state government to the Cochin port authority. It was apprehended in the correspondence that “The inadequacy of the rice ration given by the state and the consequent under-nourishment is already reported to be having a detrimental effect on the output of port labour. This will have to be prevented at all costs, as otherwise important Port and Defence works will suffer.”⁷⁸ It was also reminded that though the Dewan of Cochin who just some time ago agreed in Delhi to increase the food ration to 1 lb. per day per man, making

⁷⁷ See correspondence of War Transport Department to Food Department dated 20.7.43., Department of Food (Rationing Branch) file, RP-1011/13, 1943, NAI, GOI, New Delhi.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

up the balance with dry grains and tapioca, the rice rations given by the state would still remain inadequate. It was requested that the Food Department should make some special arrangements to send rice and wheat to the Cochin port by sea from Karachi in the meantime till the rice rations by the state could be rectified.⁷⁹ But N.N. Wanchoo, on behalf of the Food Department replied the next day that he fails to understand why was there any difficulty in obtaining *dal* and mustard oil in Bengal as there was free trade in the province and neighbouring Bihar. However, he suggested that if really *dal* and mustard oil were not obtainable in Bengal in sufficient quantities, then they could be brought from Bihar.⁸⁰ Regarding Cochin port, he replied that the amount of rice available to them was not so huge that they could “lightly contemplate direct despatch to essential services” and made it clear that no special supplies for the Cochin port could be made and thus the port labour would have to be content with 1 lb. a day for the time being.⁸¹ As evident from these correspondences the colonial Government could not always satisfy the needs of the port labour, but it always paid special and immediate attention to their demands.

The colonial Government was equally concerned with rationing to colliery labour. In 1944, on the request of the Labour Department, the Food Department drew a draft scheme for the rationing of consumer goods to colliery labour. It was based on the assumption that the procurement of the rationed articles would be either by

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Food Department's letter to the War Transport Department on 21.7.43, *ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Government or by the Mining Federation or Association and not by the colliery owners themselves. The scheme suggested that if the procurement was done by the Federation or Association then the distribution to individual collieries should also be done by them and if procurement was done by either of the Provincial Government or the Centre, the distribution should be done by the Provincial Government.⁸² Collieries were to be responsible for the bulk storage and they were to distribute the supplies through ration shops set up by them. For the distribution of food-grains and consumer goods the draft expressed preference for completely distinct shops to two-in-one shops.⁸³ The draft suggested detailed procedures for smooth and honest distribution, such as maintenance of ration book register, the daily sales register, stock register, indent forms etc., their validity and instructions regarding how to fill, use and maintain them.⁸⁴ However, considering the dominance of illiteracy among the vast masses of the customers, these formalities must have fallen prey to sheer ignorance and flouting.

The items which were to be distributed on a ration basis were – *Dal*, Mustard oil, gram, *gur*, tea, kerosene oil, matches, soap, candles, tobacco, *beedies*, hurricane lanterns, standard cloth, blankets, chimneys, wicks, building materials.⁸⁵ Thus in addition to food items, there were many more items in the rations. Not all these items

⁸² See 'Draft Scheme for the Rationing of Consumer Goods to Colliery Labour' in Department of Food (Rationing Branch) file, R-1011/13, 1943, GOI, NAI, New Delhi, p. 1 of the 6 pages of the draft.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1 and pp. 3-4 of the 6 pages of the draft.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1 of the 6 pages of the draft.

were to be distributed weekly, many of them as and when required according to the quotas to be fixed for a year or six months. Some of them, such as *dal*, gram, *gur*, mustard oil, tea, soap, tobacco, *beedies*, standard cloth, blankets (and/or mats), were to be rationed on an individual basis and the rest on a family basis.⁸⁶ With regard to the articles to be given in ration the following grouping was suggested –

Group I. *Dal*, Gram, Mustard oil, *gur*, tea.

Group II. Kerosene oil, candles, matches, soap, tobacco, *beedies*.

Group III. Standard Cloth, Blankets (and/or mats), hurricane lanterns, chimneys, wicks.

Group IV. Building materials, such as Timber, bamboos, bricks, lime, cement, tiles, thatches for roofing, coir, nails etc.

In case of the Group IV, the draft itself felt that these articles could be better distributed on the basis of each application treated upon its merit rather than upon a rationing basis in the strict sense of the term.⁸⁷ It was suggested that of the articles to be rationed on an individual basis, except tobacco, *beedies*, cloth and blankets, children between the ages of 2 and 12 years should get half the amount laid down for adults. But in regard to cloth and blankets, a specific ration, which was not necessarily to be half, should be fixed for all children including even those below the age of two.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 2 of the 6 pages of the draft.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 2 of the 6 pages of the draft.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 3 of the 6 pages of the draft.

To check false enumeration for the issue of ration books, it was suggested that Government might make a minimum period of attendance the condition to entitle the colliery workers to the consumer goods ration. If a worker was found to have been absent for a given period, his ration book would be cancelled automatically or held in abeyance.⁸⁹ One important proposal in the Food Department's draft was that the colliery owners, if they so desired, could allow credit facilities to the workers; but at their own risk.⁹⁰ The draft banned persons with an infectious disease from being employed in ration shops.⁹¹

However, the food distribution by the Government for Colliery workers did not work too well. The Assistant Secretary of the Indian Mining Association sent to the Secretary of Commerce department on 18th March 1943 a copy of his telegram already despatched to the Labour Department on the previous day, reminding him the serious food situation in coal-fields in both Bengal and Bihar and warned that "Coal Industry cannot give any guarantee that production will continue under present provincial control of food-stuffs which has failed."⁹² However, here one thing may be mentioned that the preferential treatment of the essential civil workers such as the colliery workers attracted the unskilled labourers from other sectors to those directly connected with the execution of the War.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 4 -5 of the 6 pages of the draft.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 4 of the 6 pages of the draft.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 5 of the 6 pages of the draft.

⁹² See the correspondence of the Assistant Secretary of the Indian Mining Association to the Secretary to the Government of India, Commerce department dated 18th March 1943 bearing No. 457- R in Department of Food (Rationing Branch) file, RP-1011/13, 1943, GOI, NAI, New Delhi..

Compared to common civilians, special case was made for the Police. They were to draw supplies at a higher quantity, while the dependents of police personnel were to receive supplies, up to a maximum of two adult or four minors for each policeman, at the same rate as other Government employees.⁹³ Towards the end of 1947, the police started demanding increase in the scale of cereal ration permissible to them to the army scale of ration. For instance, the Deputy Inspector General of Police, Delhi, asked for such an increase for the local police Force from 7 *chattacks* (including 2 *ch. Supplementary ration*) to 10.5 *chattacks* per head per day, i.e. the army scale of ration.⁹⁴ K. Ram, Secretary (Rationing and Civil Supplies, Delhi) also argued: "...the present ration of cereal rations for the Delhi Police force is barely sufficient to sustain a person, who, in addition to his normal daily work as a police officer, has to perform drill and do other physical exercises three times a day...the cereal ration allowed to the members of the Defence Services is 10 ½ *Chattaks* per man per day and the duties of the police are just as arduous as those of the army. As the scale of 7 *Chattaks* per head per day appears to be inadequate I am to request that the police force may be treated on the same level as the army in the matter of ration".⁹⁵ In the context of these demands and suggestions it is also to be remembered that as the police had already

⁹³ See the letter from R.N.Lines, Esq., I.C.S., Deputy Controller of Supplies, Bihar to all District Magistrates and Heads of Departments including Register, High Court, dated Patna, the 3rd July 1943. See paragraph 3 in the copy of the letter No. COW-28/42 dated 31st May'43 from the Postmaster-General, B & O Circle, Patna to the Director-General, P & T, New Delhi in DOF(R) file RP-1011/24, 1943, NAI, GOI, New Delhi.

⁹⁴ See the letter Sd. K.K. Subramanian bearing subject "Increase in the ration of Delhi Police Force" dated 23.12.47 in DOF(R) file RP-1011/24, 1943, NAI, GOI, New Delhi.

⁹⁵ K. Ram to the Chief Commissioner Delhi, 11 December 1947, DOF(R), File. RP-1013/21, 1944, GOI, NAI, p.160

been included in the Heavy Manual Workers' list of Delhi, they had been getting extra ration of two *chattaks*. However, Government of India did not approve the proposal to raise the ration scale for the police to the level of ration permissible to the Army men.

There were many cases of discontent, particularly among the lower ranks of the police, around the issue of food and rationing. For instance, in March 1946, in Bihar an agitation developed among Policemen because of the reduction in their rations. They finally resorted to strike and it spread to some other districts also, but it was over in most of them by early April.⁹⁶ In another case more than two thousands policemen in Delhi refused to take their food on 21 March 1946 as a protest against poor quality of food provided to them from the Police Lines Kitchen. One of the strikers informed: "the food supplied to us from the Police Lines Kitchen is not fit for human consumption. Even cattle would not eat the *chappatis* and *dal* which we have to eat."⁹⁷

Discontent and tension were common among the employees of the Central as well as Provincial Governments. Interestingly there was a kind of competition between the Central Government and the Provincial Governments to feed their respective staff. For all of them the first priority was to feed their own employees first. This led to

⁹⁶ Fortnightly Report for Bihar for the second half of March 1946, in Sumit Sarkar (ed), *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India, 1946*, Part I, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2007, p.434.

⁹⁷ *Hindustan Times*, 22 March 1946, in Sumit Sarkar (ed), *ibid.*, p.433.

tension between the governments. There were some measures to help the Central Government employees to obtain their required foodstuffs, for example, the Central Government had the system of selling the grains at cheap subsidized rates to its servants drawing salary of less than three hundred rupees per month. Accordingly the Railway Department was selling foodstuffs to their employees through their own distributing stores. The Government of India thus provided a preferential treatment to this section of population as against the general public, because these people were extremely necessary for the War effort.

It was lamented by the Food Department that the Provincial Governments always wanted to feed their own population first and for them Central Government employees always came next. Quite clearly this was a concern not about the common masses, but about the government employees, so that the administration and sway of the colonial state could be retained. But there was competition and envy among the various departments of the Central Government itself. There was considerable amount of debate on this issue. Mr. W.H. Shoobert, D.G. of Posts and Air Department, complained in the Departmental Conference of the Food Department that their staff nearly starved in Calcutta and was on the verge of a strike. He demanded that all departments should be treated alike, and complained that it seemed to him that Railways were the favourite of the Government of India as it attracted Government's

attraction first in times of food scarcity.⁹⁸ Sir Gurunath Bewoor, C.I.E., of the Posts and Air Department, called for some assurance that a Central Officer would sit with the Provincial Director of supplies so that he could ensure that Central Government employees got an adequate share of what the Province obtained.⁹⁹ Against the background of these demands, Regional Food Commissioners started to being appointed. It was suggested that the Regional Commissioner should, if necessity arose, make it a condition that Provincial Governments would be supplied with foodstuffs only if they undertake to feed Central employees in their respective provinces.¹⁰⁰ Mr. Shoobert asked that if Bengal Government did not behave accordingly, could Centre send the required foodstuffs for the Central employees directly to them. Somerset Butler of the Food Department pointed out the dangers of such action, i.e. such a step would give the Provincial government the impression that it was no longer responsible to feed Central Government employees from foodstuffs grown within the province and thus Central Government departments might find themselves dependent solely on food sent by the Centre and the situation for them would actually become worse than the present day.¹⁰¹ However, it was feared that the labourers employed on air field construction work, who had been completely let down

⁹⁸ See p. 3 of the Proceedings of the Departmental Conference of the Food Department, where officials of the Posts and Air Department, Labour Department, E.H. & L. Department, Railway Board, C.P.W.D. and War Transport Department were also present, held at 6 p.m. on the 24th March 1943 in Committee Room No. 53. Council House, New Delhi in DOF(R) file, R-1011/13, 1943, Government of India (GOI), National Archives of India (NAI), New Delhi.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ See the comment of Mr. N.V.H. Symons, C.I.E., M.C., I.C.S. of the Civil Defence Department in p. 3, *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ See Somerset Butler's comment in p. 3, *ibid.*

by the Bengal Government, might start riots and strikes.¹⁰² It was suggested that if given permit to import, the C.P.W.D. itself could import 70,000 maunds¹⁰³ into Bengal. But the suggestion of giving individual departments the permit to buy foodstuffs and feed their staff was rejected on the ground that it would result in competition in buying among the buying agents of each employer and that in turn would shoot up the prices, as happened in the past, where some of the big employers' buying agents tried to buy for a six months reserve resulting in the disappearance of surplus into these hoards in surplus provinces.¹⁰⁴

However, with regard to Bengal, the Central Government departments were asked to inform their Calcutta offices to get into touch with the Regional Food Commissioner Mr. Justice Braund in Calcutta so that Central employees could get a fair share from the Bengal Government of the consignments imported by the Central Food Department into Bengal.¹⁰⁵ It was feared that as the food department admittedly could not fetch enough foodstuff into Bengal for three weeks from then, the 60,000 aerodrome coolies employed by the C.P.W.D. would starve and start rioting.¹⁰⁶ As a makeshift solution for those three weeks C.P.W.D. was advised to ask its contractors to buy whatever they want in the districts in which the coolies were working, though

¹⁰² See the words of Mr. J.J. Bryan, who was representing Chief Engineer of C.P.W.D., in p. 3, *ibid*.

¹⁰³ But whether 70,000 maunds of rice or wheat or any other foodstuff, that has not been mentioned in the proceedings. See words of Mr. J.J. Bryan, pp. 3-4, *ibid*.

¹⁰⁴ See Mr. Butler's words in p. 4, *ibid*.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁶ See Mr. Bryan's apprehension, p. 4, *ibid*.

it was admitted that they would have to pay very high prices for the requirements.¹⁰⁷ It was admitted by the Food department that in addition to Bengal, Bombay was also short of rice and Cochin and Travancore too were badly in need of rice.¹⁰⁸

It seems that the imports by the Food Department into Bengal were something on which everyone in Bengal jumped. Even the Indian Mining Association enquired whether the mining sector was to receive share in the rice that the central government was making available to the Bengal government.¹⁰⁹ Three mining associations, including the Indian Mining Association, kept close touch with the Regional Food Controller in the hope of getting rice supply. Finally they were assured that the mining interests would receive rice supplies from the amounts that the central government was making available to the Bengal Government.¹¹⁰ Following the Bengal example, the mining interests of Bihar, represented by Indian Mining Association, Indian Mining Federation, and Indian Colliery Owners' Association, also started pressurizing the government of Bihar to obtain a promise for future supplies to the collieries under their control.¹¹¹ However, in case of Bihar there was no longer any question of being supplied from outside the province, because of the huge export of

¹⁰⁷ See Mr. Butler's words, p. 4, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ See the letter dated the 12th April 1943 bearing subject "Rice for Colliery Labour" from the assistant secretary, Indian mining association, Calcutta to the secretary, government of India, labour department in Department of Food (Rationing Branch) file, R-1011/13, 1943, GOI, NAI, New Delhi.

¹¹⁰ See the correspondence from D.S. Joshi, Esquire, I.C.S., under secretary to the government of India to the secretary, Indian mining association, Calcutta bearing subject "Rice for colliery labour" dated the 20th April, 1943 in Department of Food (Rationing Branch) file, R-1011/13, 1943, GOI, NAI, New Delhi.

¹¹¹ Letter from the regional commissioner (food) to R.A.E. Williams, Esq., ICS., Secretary to the Government of Behar, Supply department dated 6th May, 1943 bearing subject "Supplies to the Behar Mining Interests" in Department of Food (Rationing Branch) file, R-1011/13, 1943, GOI, NAI, New Delhi.

surplus to which the province had been assessed under the Basic Plan of the Food Department.¹¹²

The competition between Provincial Governments and the Central Government for obtaining rice became acute and tense as the case of the Postal Department in Bihar in 1943 proves. On 28th May 1943 M.D.Murtrie, the Postmaster General of Bihar & Orissa Circle, asked Mr. Ansorge, the Food Advisor to the Governor of Bihar, that whether the provincial government would help them in securing food grains for their departmental grain shops at controlled rates or at some “reasonable” rates. But he was disappointed by the Advisor who told that as the central government had lifted the ban on inter-provincial movement of food grains,¹¹³ the provincial government no longer had any power to control the market prices. And regarding “reasonable” rates he said that the provincial government itself was in the market buying rice etc. at the market price. Therefore he advised the postal department to do the same. The advisor also informed that the Bihar government was buying rice worth about two crores, as there was likely to be scarcity of rice in the next five months, i.e. until the next crop. The situation was such because rice was being “drained” out of Bihar by buyers from Bengal.¹¹⁴ He also disclosed that the intention of the Bihar Government was to sell rice to their own lower paid employees at three seers for a

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ The ban on the export of food-grains from one province to another in the eastern zone, which comprised the provinces of Bengal, Assam, Bihar, and Orissa was lifted by the central government with effect from the 18th may 1943. See paragraph 4 in the copy of the letter No. COW-28/42 dated 31st May’43 from the Postmaster-General, Bihar & Orissa Circle, Patna to the Director-General, Post & Telegrams, New Delhi in DOF(R) file RP-1011/24, 1943, NAI, GOI, New Delhi.

¹¹⁴ See paragraph 1, *ibid.*

rupee and if any surplus remains after meeting their own requirements, only that remaining rice could be made available to the postal department, but the novelty of the proposal, which must have shocked the Postmaster General, was that the postal department would have to pay price for it, but not the price at which the Bihar Government bought, but market price! Thus by reselling the rice to the postal department, the Bihar Government would recoup some portion of the loss sustained by them in selling rice to their employees at a rate cheaper than the market rate.¹¹⁵ The advisor failed to see any reason why Bihar Government should suffer any loss by supplying the staff of the Post and Telegram Department at any concessional rate !

However, the Postal Department was advised by both the advisor to the governor of Bihar and the District Magistrate of Patna to buy everything it could for its staff as soon as possible. An alarmed Postmaster General wrote to the Director General, Post & Telegram, in New Delhi asking whether sufficient money¹¹⁶ would be placed at his disposal to enable him to buy food requirements for the next five months and whether they could sell rice and wheat from the departmental grain shops at three seers to a rupee and bear the loss thereby. He warned:

If not, it would very soon be impossible to carry on the Post and Telegram services in the Circle with any degree of

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Which according to his modest estimation was at least Rs. 12,00,000/- (twelve lakhs) for rice alone in the next five months at the rate of Rs. 20/- per maund. But his estimation also included the probability that he was quite likely to require a much larger amount when purchases would actually begin. See paragraph 3 in the copy of the letter No. COW-28/42 dated 31st May'43 from the Postmaster-General, B & O Circle, Patna to the Director-General, P & T, New Delhi in DOF(R) file RP-1011/24, 1943, NAI, GOI, New Delhi.

efficiency and construction work of the Engineering Branch for which we employ outside labour and which has already been seriously affected by coolies deserting, will come to a standstill.¹¹⁷

The extent of panic felt by the Postal Department can be understood from the concluding paragraph of the Postmaster-General's letter—

. . . I wish to stress again that conditions are deteriorating so rapidly that I am afraid there is no time for any more correspondence. . . If however you still think that there are some obscure points which require elucidation, I would strongly suggest that this may be promptly achieved by personal contact between the Direction and myself. I repeat that the matter will brook no delay.¹¹⁸

Having discussed the food situation vis-à-vis some particular sections of population, now I would draw attention to an interesting finding about food rationing in India. It has been found that usually the actual consumption of cereals was below the quantity of ration allowed. Often it has been interpreted as indicating that a vast part of the population was so poor that they could not buy the grains even when they were provided at the rationing price. Another possible interpretation is, which Henry Knight favours, that where food items other than those available in the ration shops were procurable outside free or at cheaper rates than even the rationed items, the consumption of government ration was naturally less. And Knight says that this was inevitably the case in areas populated by farming communities.¹¹⁹ But Knight's

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ See paragraph 5, *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Sir Henry Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

argument does not seem convincing as it was the very unavailability or high prices of grains that led to the introduction of rationing even in some areas dominated by agrarian population. Now if the idea of availability of alternative food items outside the ration shops is ruled out, then only the poverty of the potential consumers can explain the low consumption of ration. However, Knight is correct in saying that lack of efficient ration machinery and the failure to monitor and stop the ration card holders from leaving the area were among the factors behind large quantity of un-drawn rations.¹²⁰ Another factor was ignorance about rationing among the target ration-drawers and lack of adequate publicity by the government. However, the consumption of some particular items such as sugar was always comparatively high because these could be resold for profit in the open market.

Now I would discuss a very interesting aspect of the food measures for the civil population. Quite remarkably they included restrictions on consumption during various social and religious occasions. In order to stop or at least reduce 'wasteful consumption' on these occasions numerous 'austerity measures' were brought into practice. According to these controlling measures there was the provision of allowing supplementary food-grains and other foodstuffs such as sugar on these events, but the upper limits of such supplementary foodstuffs was fixed. And all the occasions were not entitled to the same amount of supplementary foodstuffs, for example marriage

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

ceremonies were in most cases entitled to more supplements than death occasion. Among the religious institutions the mosques were to get more supply than temples and gurdwaras during the *Ramzan* month varying on the basis of the size and number of mosques in the area. Apart from religious institutions and individuals, certain professionals, such as caterers and *halwais* (sweet makers) were entitled to extra supply. But as food was a provincial subject, the quantity of these food supplements varied from province to province. For instance, for a marriage ceremony any family in Bihar was allowed to draw extra sugar up to only 3½ lbs whereas for the same occasion a family in Punjab could get supplementary sugar up to 34 lbs and the allowed amounts of supplementary sugar on death occasion in these two provinces were respectively 3 ½ lbs and 17 lbs. There was difference not only in the quantity of supplements, but also in the grains given in supplements. For instance on marriage occasion in Madras the families were to get 32 lbs supplementary rice, but in Punjab the supplement for the same ceremony was in the form of wheat, i.e. 100 lbs of wheat.¹²¹

But sometimes the limited quantities of supplements had serious consequences. For example, because of the controlled supply of sugar, in most of the cases *halwais* and confectioners could not make sweets for festival days which had earned them great profit in the past. Thus the sweets industry was hard hit by the sugar control. Some of

¹²¹ 'Policy regarding issue of Supplementary Quantities of Rations for Religious Festivals', DOF (R), file. RP-1000 (24) Vol. I, GOI, NAI, 1945, pp.43-46.

the confectioneries even had to shut their business.¹²² Thus the state controls were estranging these sections of the population from the state wherever they were implemented. A more serious problem faced the government when controls related to religious ceremonies were introduced. These were resented by all religious communities. On the whole it had been the policy of the Central as well as the Provincial Governments not to interfere with religious practices. But the grave food situation in India compelled various governments to reduce or eliminate consumption of extra quantities of food on religious occasions. And the serious and complicated consequences of such government interventions can be understood from an incident vis-à-vis the Sikh community in the city of Bombay. By an order dated 6 June 1945 the Government of Bombay had prohibited offering and distribution of raw food-grains, eatables, milk and any beverage in which milk was used except tea or coffee, to fifty or more persons at any function in the city of Bombay and the districts in its suburbs.¹²³ But in violation of the order some leaders of Guru Singh Sabha were distributing food in Bombay on 20 July 1945 on the occasion of Baisakhi according to their religious custom. When they were arrested, it became a huge issue with the Sikh community all over the country. The Sikh leaders of Bombay received support from the Sri Guru Singh Sabha of Delhi which passed a resolution condemning the ban by the rationing authorities on free distribution of food on the occasion of the Martyrdom

¹²² For example the Confectioners Association of Kasauli in Punjab decided to close their business, because despite attempts, it could not restore the 'drastically reduced' quota of sugar to its previous scale. See *The Tribune*, 1 October, 1945, p. 9.

¹²³ DOF(R), File.R.P. 1085, NAI, GOI, 1946, p. 30

Day of the 5th Guru and Baisakhi and arrest of the leaders of Guru Singh Sabha of Bombay. They asked the Bombay authorities to withdraw the case against the Sikh leaders so as to appease the injured feelings of the Sikhs and warned them to refrain from any such interference in religious matters in future.¹²⁴

But the Government continued with its policy of controlling exorbitant consumption of food on religious occasions; and it did not think it right to differentiate between different religions in this matter. Consequently in Bombay the appeal of Fazal Ibrahim Rahimtoola for permission for the distribution of food on the occasion of Moharram was rejected on the ground that the authorities “do not see how we can admit them as valid in favour of the Muslim community when they have been rejected in respect of other communities like Sikhs”.¹²⁵ It is important to note the rationing authorities ruled out the argument that ‘austerity measures’ with regard to social and religious functions were merely war-time ad-hoc measures and as the War had ended they should be scrapped now. Instead they argued strongly that “. . . the end of the War has not brought any change for the better in the supply position; and we feel that measures which were devised with a view to avoiding wasteful consumption of food should continue to be enforced with the same rigidity as before.”¹²⁶ In accordance with this view, a further order which came into effect from

¹²⁴ ‘Austerity Meals’, Department of Food (Rationing Branch), File. 1000/1 Vol.1 , GOI, NAI, p. 1

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.18-19

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

17 March 1946, the people in Bombay and suburban districts were prohibited from entertaining more than twenty five people at any function.

The Government of India was eager to show that in restraining 'wasteful consumption' it was being fair to all classes, that it had no class bias. Therefore it had to impose restrictions on the clubs also, concentrated mainly in urban areas and visited by the well-to-do only. Provinces were asked to impose restrictions on the use of flour, milk, cream and sugar in confectioneries and cafes making 'luxury items' like pastries, cakes, chocolates and ice-cream etc.¹²⁷ These were never part of the regular food habits of common Indians; they were consumed only by the better offs. Regarding these luxury food items, it was argued that considerable amount of wheat and other ingredients could be saved by prohibiting them.¹²⁸ Many states such as Bombay and Punjab followed the Centre's directive in this matter, for instance, an order published in an Extraordinary Punjab Government Gazette declared that with effect from March 12, 1946, no person should manufacture for selling purpose cakes and pastries in which the flour of any cereal was an ingredient.¹²⁹

Along with food-grains and flour, consumption of sugar and milk also were under strict surveillance and control. For example, in 1945 the Madras Milk Control Order

¹²⁷ B.R.Sen, Secretary to Government of India, Department of Food, to all Provinces and Administrations, 23 February 1946, 'Economy in the use of Food stuffs', DOF(R) File. R.P. 1085, NAI, GOI, 1946, p. 13.

¹²⁸ See the letter of Mrs. K. M. Routh, a lady from Bombay, to the Viceroy Lord Wavell, 15 February 1946, in 'Policy Regarding Supply of Rations of flour (maida) to Bakeries and Catering Establishments, DOF(R), File.RP-1000/57, GOI, NAI, 1946, p. 18.

¹²⁹ *The Tribune*, 9 March, 1946, p. 8.

was issued which declared that "...use of milk in the manufacture for sale of products such as ice-cream, badam kheer, milk syrup, cream cakes, kova or other sweetmeats either wholly or in part out of milk is prohibited. The question of effecting cuts in the sugar quotas to bulk consumers like hotels, confectioners etc. is under consideration...In Madras city the Commissioner of Civil Supply has already prohibited the manufacture of more than 6 varieties of sweet preparations in hotels and sweet meat stalls per day."¹³⁰ Similarly in Bombay and its suburbs an order was passed which banned the use of fresh milk of any kind in the preparation of tea-coffee etc. by catering establishments, teashops and hawkers of tea-coffee. In place of fresh milk, only milk reconstituted from imported dried milk was allowed to be used.¹³¹

In February 1946 the Centre issued directives to all the Provinces that a strict three-courses meal must be enforced in all eating places open to public such as canteens, restaurants etc. to stop wastage. Accordingly different Provinces passed necessary legislations, restricting any 'wasteful consumption', e.g. the Punjab Government passed an order completely banning consumption of bread at the commercial eating places, and by bread the order meant loaf bread, *chapati*, *poori*, *parantha*, *phulka* and *nan*.¹³² Through further notifications the public was informed that those found guilty of evading this order would be punished severely.¹³³

¹³⁰ Such measures were in practice in almost every province of British India, though there were regional variations. For details see DOF(R), File.RP.1085, GOI, NAI, 1946, p. 51

¹³¹ DOF(R), file. RP 1085, GOI, NAI, 1946, p. 79

¹³² *The Tribune*, 9 March, 1946, p. 5.

¹³³ *The Tribune*, 23 March, 1946.

As a result of this order, at any eating place outside home, the people of Punjab had to give up their age old habit of eating these breads with curries and were forced to eat curries alone. Quite naturally this measure proved extremely unpopular. The Order also minutely chalked out in every detail the restrictions such as how many dishes should constitute a meal, what should be the main and subsidiary dishes, how they should be served etc. According to the Order no biscuits, rusks, rolls or pastries could be served with tea or coffee. They could be served only with lunch or dinner as main ingredients of a subsidiary or a savoury or sweet dish.¹³⁴ However, it was not that only Punjab issued such comprehensive orders, they were issued by other provinces as well according to the provincial situation and needs.

But the observance of these rules and regulations posed serious problems for the people. There were rules, as in Punjab, restricting the number of guests for any gathering that involved consumption of food. People in general were against these rules as Indian hosts and guests, unlike Europeans, generally had large families and numerous relatives whereas the allowed number of guests was too small, twenty five in most of the provinces. Often the hosts came up with ingenious tricks to evade the laws, for instance often big parties were organized under the guise of 'joint hosts'.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ *The Tribune*, 9 March, 1946. p. 5.

¹³⁵ R.N. Smith, Secretary to Government of UP, to W.H. Kirby, Rationing Advisor to the Government of India, Department of Food, 21 March 1946, DOF(R), File.RP.1085, GOI, NAI, 1946, p. 42.

The rules and regulations caused many other problems too, e.g., in cosmopolitan cities like Lucknow the absence of any alternatives to the rigid three course meal immensely hampered the business of the catering establishments, because the population of Lucknow comprised considerable number of Punjabis and Bengalis as well as UP men and their food habits were different from each other and naturally they all wanted different set of meals. But under the new situation the caterers were not allowed to serve according to their different demands.¹³⁶ Many catering establishments had to shut their business due to rigid government controls with regard to consumption of food. And the closure of the catering establishments left a lot of people unemployed. The UP Government was averse to implementing the austerity measures stringently as the Government thought that it would incur huge losses on the proprietors of the catering establishments and it would also push a large number of people out of employment.¹³⁷ Many of the *Gowlis* or the milkmen of Bombay resented the restriction on the use of fresh milk as it was damaging their business and once they resorted to a novel form of protest whereby one morning they brought their milk to the Secretariat in Bombay which was the principal government office in the city and poured the milk out on its doorstep.¹³⁸

However, it was not that all sections of Indian population resented the 'austerity measures', quite contrary vast sections of the society thought that the 'austerity

¹³⁶ Smith to Kirby, 21 March 1946, DOF(R), File RP1085, GOI, NAI, 1946, p. 42

¹³⁷ DOF(R), File. R.P.1085, GOI, NAI, 1946, p. 42.

¹³⁸ Sir Henry Knight, *op. cit.*, p.208

measures' were in the interests of the country as a whole, and often the guests desired to comply with the laws as they understood their necessity. In the context of the Order passed in Bombay on 30 January 1943 prohibiting the distribution of food of any kind at any religious or social gathering to fifty or more people without the permission of the Supply Commissioner, Henry Knight points out that "Though some few people resented the limitation of their well-meant hospitality, or of the exhibition of their social importance among the less well to do, the order was welcomed by the majority; they could now plead "government orders" and avoid the ruinous entertainment of the large numbers of relations, friends, acquaintances, and strangers which custom imposed on various occasions, and a useful social reform among both Indians and Europeans was thus a by-product of food control – at least during the war."¹³⁹ Knight then adds that "The order had also the effect of preventing the ostentatious display of the rich feasting in sight of the poor and helped the people to realize that all were in the same food boat."¹⁴⁰ One example of the people's cooperation in the efforts to control wasteful consumption of food was that in Civil and Military Station of Bangalore, a League for the Conservation of Food was founded. The members of the League were required to take a pledge to consume food judiciously. They also wore badges to make people aware of the purposes of the League. The League brought out

¹³⁹ Henry Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 207

¹⁴⁰ Henry Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 207

a bulletin periodically giving full information in all matters related to the preservation of foods, how to grow more food and on simple ways of economising food.¹⁴¹

Quite interestingly most of the clubs in India decided to comply with the 'austerity' rules of the government regarding consumption of food. The clubs were normally concentrated in big cities and other urban areas and their membership included the elites and upper layers of the society. Definitely these people were not in the same food boat with the common men of the country. Yet, in addition to the government orders restricting consumption of food in the clubs, sometimes the clubs voluntarily came out with their own initiatives to control food consumption and stop wastage. But to what extent their cooperation in the effort to stop wastage of food was the result of their genuine concern for less privileged and to what extent it was their attempt to be in the good book of the authorities remains a matter of doubt. As the clubs' membership reflected the who's who of the society, they were also the people in close touch with the government and their interest demanded them to be in the good book of the government. This might have been one of the motives behind the clubs' exceptional cooperation in the effort to stop wastage of food.

However, most of the clubs decided to stop serving eatables during entertainments and to restrict the number of guests. Many clubs stopped the practice of taking out food from their premises. Many of them stopped serving rice, sandwiches and

¹⁴¹ DOF(R), File.RP. 1085, GOI, NAI, 1946, p. 180.

toasts.¹⁴² Some of the leading clubs of Bombay decided not to allow their members to invite guests who were not members of the clubs to dinner; attempt was also made to curtail the number of dinners and monthly dance-nights. The Secretary of Willingdon Sports Club of Bombay wrote to the Regional Food Commission: “You will observe, that as a result of cuts we have made the club draws no ration of rice and only utilises 70 % of bread permissible, and although Government permits parties to a limit of 24 we don’t allow in excess of 20 persons per party.”¹⁴³ The Cricket Club of India, Bombay, informed the Regional Food Commissioner that they have ceased serving rice completely. “The Club had decided that it will serve only one roll or one slice of bread during principal meals— breakfast, lunch and dinners. Apart from other measures, it also decided to cut out cakes, toasts and sandwiches”.¹⁴⁴

Now I would discuss in brief the role of publicity and propaganda in the functioning of food controls and rationing. The need to give rationing adequate publicity was deeply felt by various governments in India. For instance in Bombay prior to the introduction of rationing the provincial Government took the help of publicity measure in the press, by public meetings and lectures, by radio broadcasts and even by cinema to explain the rationing system to the public.¹⁴⁵ Shortly before rationing was actually introduced in Bombay city, a film showing the procedure for

¹⁴² The Director of Civil Supplies, Bombay to Secretary, GOI, DOF, DOF(R), File.RP 1085, GOI, NAI, 1946, p. 77.

¹⁴³ See the letter dated 15 March 1946, DOF(R), File.R.P.1085, GOI, NAI, 1946, p. 234.

¹⁴⁴ DOF(R), File.RP.1085, GOI, NAI, 1946, p. 230

¹⁴⁵ Sir Henry Knight, *op. cit.*, p.203.

obtaining a ration card and for drawing one's ration was shown in the cinema halls in Bombay with the cooperation of the local cinema managements. This proved very effective in explaining matters to the public as, according to Henry Knight, "The Bombay artisan or labourer, even if he could not read, was often a keen cinema "fan", especially after the wartime rise in wages had put sparse cash in his pockets."¹⁴⁶

The need to publicize government measures with regard to food continued throughout the period. The end of the War did not bring any change in the situation; instead at the end of the War, food situation became graver. Consequently state publicity became even more necessary during this period. B.R. Sen, Secretary, Department of Food, declared that "the Government of India will shortly undertake, a sustained Publicity campaign covering all aspects of the food shortage and remedies to lessen the impact of the shortage on the general population. All Administrations were urged to organise their own food publicity campaign, using all the means available, namely the Press Advertisements, Radio, Films, Lectures, Exhibitions, Loud Speaker Vans etc."¹⁴⁷ During this period numerous leaflets and pamphlets were issued; one of them asked its readers, "Can you, personally, do anything to help still further? Yes. Don't buy any more bread than you can eat. In canteens and restaurants

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ B.R. Sen, Secretary to GOI, DOF, to all Provinces and Administrations, 23 February 1946, 'Economy in the use of Food stuffs', DOF(R) File. RP. 1085, NAI, GOI, 1946, p.15.

don't ask for bread unless you intend to eat it. Bread means lives, don't waste a crumb."¹⁴⁸

The handling of food scarcity demanded change in the food habits of Indians. For instance with the stoppage of rice supply from Burma, it became necessary that the rice-eating people should use substitutes in place of rice. But to bring in such change in the food habit of the people incessant propaganda was needed in addition to cooking demonstrations and distribution of free or subsidized dishes prepared from unfamiliar grains. Consequently the authorities embarked on publicity to prove the better nutritive value of other grains. In March 1944, a note prepared by Dr. Aykroyd on the use of wheat and Cambu in South Indian dishes and containing a number of recipes was circulated to all Provinces and Princely States for practical demonstrations and publicity. The note observed that "...the people must be taught to turn to alternative grains by demonstrations...before undertaking an educational campaign, the cooking habits of the people and facilities for adopting unfamiliar method of cooking (utensils etc) must be investigated. Thus in Bengal, one of the difficulties with regard to the popularisation of wheat is that *chakkis* are not generally available, so that most wheat has to be distributed as *atta* which readily goes bad."¹⁴⁹

In accordance with this observation later Nutrition Exhibitions were organized in

¹⁴⁸ DOF(R), File.RP-1000/57, GOI, NAI, 1946, p.22

¹⁴⁹ W.R. Aykroyd, *Note on Food and Nutrition Policy in India*, Department of Food, Government of India, Delhi, 1945, p.4.

many big cities, e.g. such an Exhibition was held in Delhi from 27 to 31 March, 1947.¹⁵⁰

To popularize wheat in place of rice, a Wheat Propaganda Officer was appointed in Madras, and wheat was being sold at a very cheaper rate than rice. In September 1944 the Government of Madras issued a pamphlet stressing the point that wheat was more nutritious than rice, it also emphasized the necessity of mixed diet in place of a main dish consisted of rice only. The pamphlet also included many recipes of wheat.¹⁵¹ Thus the state brought the issue of food habits and nutrition into public discourse and took up active campaigning about these issues.

However, publicity and propaganda regarding food was not a one-way thing in colonial India. The Government of India and various Provincial Governments also on their part had to face the brunt of counter-publicity and propaganda directed against the state. For example in Punjab it was a common allegation of non-producing consumers against the government that as the Punjab Ministry mainly represented land owning interests, it was actively conniving at the increase in wheat prices.¹⁵² The question of food scarcity sometimes took anti-British shape. This was an alarming situation for the colonial state. For instance, in Bombay, pamphlets inciting workers

¹⁵⁰ For the functioning of the Exhibition see, 'Instructions Prohibiting the serving to Rations of Bread in Catering Establishments', DOF, (R), File. RP-1000/57, VOL. I, GOI, NAI, 1946.

¹⁵¹ DOF (Basic Plan), File.BP-1008(89), VOL. I, GOI, NAI.

¹⁵² Fortnightly Report on the situation in Punjab for the second half of May 1943, Home Political, File.18/5/43,(Poll. I), GOI, NAI, 1943, p.169.

to agitate for food and not to starve for the sake of “British Imperialist Military” were clandestinely distributed at the meetings.¹⁵³ In the newspapers the pictures of those suffering from starvation in Bengal were prominently published. Some newspapers published official communiqués describing exports of food stuffs. These excited the public and the main target of their anger was the colonial state.¹⁵⁴ During the month of September 1943¹⁵⁵ the Axis Radio propaganda was almost exclusively focussed on India’s food problem, which was attributed solely to British rule.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ According to the Fortnightly Report these pamphlets were issued by the Bolshevik Mazdoor Party which was the Bombay Branch of the Fourth International, see Fortnightly Report for the first half of January 1943, Home Political, File. 18/1/1943, Poll(I), GOI, NAI, 1943, p. 19

¹⁵⁴ Fortnightly Report on the situation in Punjab for the second half of August 1943, Home Political, File.18/8/43, Poll.(I), GOI, NAI, 1943, p.151.

¹⁵⁵ The concerned Fortnightly Report writes 1933 instead of 1943, however it seems to have been a mistake.

¹⁵⁶ Fortnightly Report on the situation in Punjab for the first half of September 1943, Home Political, File.18/9/43, Poll.(I), GOI, NAI, 1943, p. 43.

Chapter 3

Military Rationing

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Military Rationing

There was a substantial increase in the number of army men in India during the World War II. In addition to regular Indian Army, there were British and American troops stationed in India. And Indivar Kamtekar shows that towards the end of the War, only a minority of the Indian Army were owners of land and a huge number of them were from the labourer and artisan classes. Naturally these soldiers did not have the option of depending on their own agricultural land for food in times of scarcity or complete disappearance of food grains in the market.¹⁵⁷ Moreover their grain ration in the army was generally more than their normal consumption at home. Thus it was a huge task to feed the vastly expanded Indian Army. In addition, there were measures to provide ration not only to the serving army men but to their family also. By October 1944 families of all soldiers, except those who were themselves hoarders of rice and paddy, were included in the rationing scheme irrespective of the income.¹⁵⁸ In September 1946, in the Madras presidency, a novel experiment in the form of a

¹⁵⁷ Indivar Kamtekar, 'A Different War Dance: State and Class in India, 1939-45', *Past and Present*, No. 176, August 2002, p. 192.

¹⁵⁸ P.K. Basu, Regional Food Commissioner, Calcutta to GOI, 10 July 1944, DOF(R), R-1013/2. NAI, p. 62.

mobile military welfare ration depot was opened at Mailpatti in the North Arcot district under the auspices of the local Soldiers Board. The object of this depot was to cater to the needs of the military families residing in hoods and corners of the district by making foodstuffs and other necessities available to them at the various weekly shanties.¹⁵⁹

But there was also considerable debate on the point that army personnel were getting very high amount of rations compared to civil population.¹⁶⁰ There were frequent rumours among the civilian masses that the army was buying far in excess of its real needs; that it had vast reserves of food-grains which should be released for civilian consumption and to bring down market prices. The Army's refusal to disclose purchases and stock citing 'security' reasons provided impetus to the rumours. But apart from the rumours, even some official sources brought same allegations against

¹⁵⁹ DOF (R), R-1013/2.GOI, NAI, p. 61.

¹⁶⁰ For instance the ration of sugar per month allowed to the civilians at Shimla was only 1 Sr. 2 Chh. per month whereas the ration allowed to the army personnel was much higher than that allowed to the civilians. For a detailed description of the sugar ration allowed to army personnel stationed at Shimla and their families on the basis of an enquiry from the Officer Commanding, Detail Issue Depot, Shimla, see the document of the Office of the Sugar Controller for India, Shimla dated 3.3.1945 in DOF(R) file RP-1011/24, 1943, NAI, GOI, New Delhi. However the Sugar and Salt branch of the food department was not happy with the high amount of ration of sugar to the Army. In view of the averse mood of the Food department, the War Department issued orders to limit sugar ration to defence services personnel and their dependents in civil rationed areas to the same scales as were applicable to the civil population of that area. See the document of the Office of the Sugar Controller for India, Shimla dated 3.3.1945 in DOF(R) file RP-1011/24, 1943, NAI, GOI, New Delhi. The Food department noted with gratitude the total reduction in the sugar requirement of the Defence personnel. Letter from S.A. Maini, Food Department, to Mr. S.A. Baily of the War Department dated 11.1.45, in DOF(R) file RP-1011/24, 1943, NAI, GOI, New Delhi. However the reduction was the result of a review of the total stock position, as there was enough stock and though the gross demand for sugar was reduced, but no reduction was made in the scale of ration to individual military man and his family. See the memorandum of the War department (Army Branch), government of India dated 22nd February 1945 on the subject "Sugar for Defence Services during 1944-45" signed by A.C. Beynon, joint secretary to the government of India to the department of food in DOF(R) file RP-1011/24, 1943, NAI, GOI, New Delhi.

the army. For instance, Regional Food Commissioner of Madras, C.P. Karunakara Menon observed that “while it is necessary to meet all reasonable requirements of the military personnel it is criminal to allow rations which admit of wastage when the civil population is suffering. Such large disparity in rations is bound to cause discontent among the civil population”.¹⁶¹ Under pressure, in December 1943 the General Army Headquarters took the decision and communicated to all concerned that “In areas where ‘civil rationing’ has been or may be introduced, purchases of ‘rationed’ commodities from Army sources will be restricted . . . to the limits laid down for the civil population of that area.”¹⁶²

In addition to grain, the Indian army needed many other subsidiary foods also. And the procurement of these foods led to socio-economic consequences of great importance. The Allied troops stationed in India, the American and British soldiers, were accustomed to eating meat, eggs, fish and vegetables on a scale unknown to the Indians. In peacetime, even in the early years of the War, these items were usually bought through a system of local contracts made with local suppliers. As the demand was small, the producers and traders did not find it difficult to supply them. But as the demand kept on growing on a progressive scale as the War continued, the local contractors found it difficult to fulfil their contracts. In such a situation quite naturally prices rose high. This rising price tempted the villagers to sell their young stock and

¹⁶¹ DOF(R), R-1013/2, GOI, NAI, p. 10.

¹⁶² DOF(R), R-1013/2, GOI, NAI, p.23.

even working cattle to the butchers. The selling of cattle was also prompted by the high price of cattle food and fodder.

The increased purchases by the army authorities had enormous effect on local economy and caused difficulties to local people. The increased butchering of working cattle for meat led to the eventual depletion of India's cattle, so badly needed for growing food crops. Gradually discontent arose among the civil population on the issue of the Army's all-absorbing demand for food. And finally in early 1944 the Army Department and the Food Department of the Government of India realized the danger and asked various Provincial Governments to set up "Purchase Coordination Committees for each Army Command to eliminate uncontrolled or uncoordinated buying of such items as fresh meat, fish, vegetables, fowls, eggs, etc., for civilian as well as military consumption."¹⁶³ These Committees were supposed to regulate consumption so as "to protect animal breeding stocks, cows in milk and working bullocks used for agricultural and transport purposes", to avoid depletion of seeds required for cultivation.¹⁶⁴

The conditions of the day required some restraint with regard to slaughtering of animals for meat. Consequently the military authorities decided in 1944 not to slaughter (I) cattle under three years of age, (II) male cattle between three and ten

¹⁶³ *Memorandum on the Food Situation in India*, submitted to the Central Legislature, February 1945, p. 8, in DOF(P) file, P-1011/2, 1945, NAI, New Delhi.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

years of age which were being used or likely to be used as working cattle, (III) cows between the same age bracket which were capable of giving milk (however cows which were unsuitable for bearing offspring were exempted from this protection), (IV) cows which were pregnant or in milk.¹⁶⁵ Not only the military slaughterhouses; even civilian slaughterhouses came under Government of India's scrutiny. Provincial governments were asked by the Centre to issue similar instructions in respect of civilian slaughterhouses. They were also asked to introduce some meatless days.¹⁶⁶ However these measures came too late, as evident from the Government sources. The *Grow More Food Campaign* admitted that by 1945 there was "an acute shortage of bullocks for agricultural purposes practically all over the country".¹⁶⁷

The Government of India, already disturbed by a prolonged War, had no intention to face popular discontent around the issue of drain on civil supplies of food; as such a discontent could have been fatal for the Government in the conditions of the day. Therefore the Government of India took steps to encourage the military authorities to start their own vegetable farms so that the drain on civil supplies caused by military demands could be stopped. Army dairies were expanded and increased; pig and poultry farms were organized. For instance, in the Eastern Command (which included Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and parts of Assam) to meet the requirements of the Indian, British, American, Chinese and other Allied Forces stationed in the area, in February

¹⁶⁵Sir Henry Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

¹⁶⁶ Sir Henry Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

¹⁶⁷ *Grow More Food Campaign Progress, 1944/45*, Government of India, p. 9, in Department of Education, Health and Lands file EH-904/10, 1945,GOI, NAI, New Delhi.

1944 vegetable gardens were started. Some of these gardens were run solely by military men and others jointly by the provincial government and army agency. Military piggeries in Calcutta had pigs of imported breeds; the army also had four hundred goat breeding herds under its supervision. In May 1944 the first duck farm in Bengal was established. Helps from experts abroad were sometimes sought, for example a Chinese expert in mass incubation of duck eggs was to arrive shortly to help the duck farm.¹⁶⁸

The presence of vast number of foreign soldiers in India also increased the demand for processed foods. But these foods were not part of the diets of the Indians; naturally these were not produced in India in a quantity that could meet the wartime demand. Hence the Purchase Coordination Committees had to make arrangements for the import of various processed foods like tinned fish, frozen meat, dehydrated meat and potatoes to supplement or replace local supply. But apart from this import short-cut, the Food Department also tried to increase production of processed foods within India. By February 1945, six meat dehydration factories were functioning at Nowshera, Poona, Patna, Madras, Delhi and Agra and three other such factories were under construction. Not only meat, by February 1945, nineteen factories were selected for the dehydration of potatoes and onions for the army.¹⁶⁹ As the dehydration technique of food was a new process in India, it required detailed research and

¹⁶⁸ Sir Henry Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

¹⁶⁹ The Food Statistics of India, see in DOF(R) file RP-1011/24, 1943, GOI, NAI, New Delhi.

guidance from countries which were advanced in this matter. Realizing this, the Food Department established a headquarter laboratory; and a Chief Technical Advisor and a Technical Advisor were appointed to supervise the laboratory. But even the advisors had to be sent to United Kingdom and United States of America to learn modern techniques of dehydration of foodstuffs.¹⁷⁰

The processed foodstuffs produced by factories in India included army biscuits, dehydrated potatoes, onions and goat meat, dried fruits, syrups, ground coffee, condiment powder, chutney, lemon and lime juice cordial and canned fruits. In 1945 there were reportedly 134 factories producing processed foodstuffs.¹⁷¹ The production of processed foods increased the need for adequate containers to package. A fruit canning factory at Nasarpur was started.

While the stationing of non- Indian soldiers necessitated the need to have processed foods at an unprecedented scale, at the same time the specific nature of the food habits of the Indian soldiers had to be taken care of. *Ghee* or clarified butter was an indispensable part of traditional Indian diet. Naturally *Ghee* found its place in the rationed items for the army. But due to the increase in population and the insufficiency of dairy products, adulterated *ghee* had long flooded the market. Therefore to secure unadulterated supply, in various dairying areas of India the Government opened *ghee*-heating centres to prepare *ghee* for the Defence Forces'

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

consumption. But as enough pure *ghee* could not be produced, the food department had to make arrangements for the production of *vanaspati* or ‘vegetable *ghee*’, a hydrogenated oil compound produced from groundnuts. In 1945 there were seventeen vegetable *ghee* factories in India with the annual output of 117, 245 tons and half of this was prepared in Bombay.¹⁷² The government of India sanctioned the founding of twenty seven more factories. These factories received Government help to bring plant and machineries from abroad.

But with the end of the Second World War and consequent demobilization, the army demand for processed foods got reduced. Of the twenty four factories which had been worked by the government to produce processed foods for the army, by January 1947 only two remained in operation — the *ghee* heating centres at Agra and Bangalore. Private food processing factories were asked by the government to turn to production for the civil market. But the civil demand of processed food was not enough to sustain the industry, quite naturally most of the private factories stopped production. When the military provisioning of raw materials and packing-materials stopped with the end of the War, these factories were also troubled by the shortage of supplies of raw materials and packing-materials, such as tin plates.

¹⁷² *Ibid.* p. 180.

When the War was over, the old demand for reduction in the level of military consumption got new vigour and further pressure was built on the Government in this matter. In May 1946, the Regional Food Commissioner of Madras, C.P.K. Menon argued again “...When the civil population (non-producers) are now on a 12 oz ration and may have to go down to a still smaller ration in the coming months, it would appear difficult to justify a ration of 21 oz to the army men who are now in peace conditions, or any rate higher than what is now allowed to the heavy manual labourers viz 1 lb...If their ration of food grains is reduced to 1 lb a day the saving would be nearly 50, 000 tons a year which would feed at 12 oz four lakhs of civilians a year.”¹⁷³ In this connection it must be noted that much of the Army’s stocks were wasted by inadequate care in transport and storage; due to lack of covered storage often food-grains got damaged.¹⁷⁴

But the Government did not think it right to further reduce the quantity of rations to the Army in the conditions of the day. R.H. Hutchings informed Menon on behalf of the Food Department that “it is no use...pursuing the matter further with the War Department. No further reduction in the Army scale of rations can be obtained...you will of course, realise that the present is not a good time to risk discontent in the Army by a reduction in rations”.¹⁷⁵ The Army also made clear that the medical authorities of the Army were not ready to accept any reduction even for personnel

¹⁷³ From a letter dated 30 May 1946, DOF(R), File. RP-1013/21, 1944, GOI, NAI, pp.36-37

¹⁷⁴ Sir Henry Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

¹⁷⁵ Hutchings to Menon, 4 June 1946, DOF(R), File. RP-1013/21, 1944, GOI, NAI, p.37

engaged in sedentary occupation.¹⁷⁶ Thus the amount of rations for the Army continued to remain much higher than civil rations.

The issue of supplies for the Army not only led to differences within the Indian Government but it also coloured the relationship of Britain with India in Wartime. In November 1942 it was Amery, Secretary of State for India who first took up the issue with the Government. Fearing that the high prices, poor harvests and the Midnapore cyclone might disturb India's supplies to the troops, Amery asked the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow to adopt "more central intervention than would normally be contemplated" to obtain necessary amount of food. He went to the extent of asking the Government of India to return to the system of collecting land revenue in kind to secure military supplies!¹⁷⁷ Just a month later the urgency came from the other side as meanwhile some important developments took place – the newly founded Food Department in Delhi forecast a shortfall of a million tons of grain, the supplies to the Army and to foreign countries had incensed the Indian politicians, and there were already signs of an impending crisis in Bengal. Against this background the Viceroy thought it difficult to maintain supplies to Ceylon and Middle East and the Food Department begged London for an import of 600, 000 tons of wheat.¹⁷⁸ Yet London's reply was only that there were no ships but Ceylon must not be abandoned. At this

¹⁷⁶ The memorandum of the War department (Army Branch), government of India, dated 22nd February 1945 on the subject "Sugar for Defence Services during 1944-45" signed by A.C. Beynon, joint secretary to the government of India, to the department of food in DOF(R) file RP-1011/24, 1943, NAI, GOI, New Delhi.

¹⁷⁷ Amery to Linlithgow, 14 November 1942, *TP*, III, p. 259.

¹⁷⁸ Food Department to Secretary of State, 18 December 1942, *TP*, III, pp. 455-6.

Linlithgow responded by saying that to supply the Middle East and Ceylon was no longer possible and he also threatened to stop shipments and to reduce the level of military rations.¹⁷⁹ This threat finally bore some fruit; London offered a quarter of the grain that Linlithgow had asked for. Linlithgow clutched at the straws and thanked London profusely and concluded in March 1943 that “the food situation may therefore be treated with guarded optimism.”¹⁸⁰

The next six months witnessed in Bengal one of the worst famines in the history of the world. By July 1943 Delhi was again bombarding London with requests for half a million tons of grains. Some Iraqi barley was all that the Cabinet offered and the Viceroy’s reply was:

I am bound in terms to warn the Cabinet that the Government of India cannot be responsible for the continuing stability of India now, or for her capacity to serve as a base against Japan next year unless we have appropriate help in prospect.¹⁸¹

Finally the Cabinet was persuaded in September by the intervention of the Commander-in-Chief Auchinleck and the Chiefs of Staff to arrange for shipment of another 50,000 tons. But the Cabinet also made it clear that the idea of importing a million tons of grain a year into India was totally unacceptable to it.¹⁸² But in the same month the Gregory Committee on food-grains reported that an import of one

¹⁷⁹ Linlithgow to Amery, 19 February 1943, *TP*, III, p. 333.

¹⁸⁰ Linlithgow to Amery, 18 March 1943, *TP*, III, p. 826.

¹⁸¹ Linlithgow to Amery, 13 August 1943, *TP*, IV, p. 169.

¹⁸² Memo by Chiefs of Staff, 17 September 1943, and War Cabinet 24 September 1943, *TP*, IV, pp. 270-273, 319.

and a half million tons was necessary to get the procurement machinery and rationing started. But London offered merely 100,000 tons. The new Viceroy Wavell cleverly tried to project the civil requirement as the military requirement in the hope that military requirements would receive sympathetic and prompt treatment from London. Accordingly he demanded a million and a half tons to cover India's supply to the military. He argued that India could no longer supply the troops in the eastern theatre.¹⁸³ But the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill did not submit to Wavell's demand, instead he derided his statistics and completely refused to accept that there was any shortage at all.¹⁸⁴ An angered Wavell wrote:

The fact is the Prime Minister has calculated his war plans without any consideration at all of India's needs; I am afraid that he may be courting a first class disaster to the Empire, unless we are lucky.¹⁸⁵

In early 1944 India was offered again a mere 200,000 tons and this time Wavell reacted by saying that he could no longer supply the troops.¹⁸⁶ However, despite problems in the mean time, finally by early 1945, India was getting grain at the rate of over a million tons a year.¹⁸⁷

The main point here is that the colonial government's interest in the issue of food supply was mainly in order to ensure supplies for the Army. The apparent concern to

¹⁸³ Wavell to Amery, 22 December 1943, *TP*, IV, pp.558-560.

¹⁸⁴ War Cabinet, February 1944, *TP*, IV, pp. 700-8.

¹⁸⁵ Wavell to Amery, 25 February 1944, *TP*, IV, p. 758.

¹⁸⁶ Wavell to Amery, 23 March 1944 and 29 March 1944, *TP*, IV, pp. 828-30.

¹⁸⁷ Amery to Wavell, 12 February 1945 and 11 July 1945, *TP*, V, p. 602 and p. 1229.

solve the food problem for the civilians was actually guided by the need to secure supplies to the army as is evident from the following words of Wavell –

. . . on the one hand it is impossible to ignore the needs of starving people and on the other an acute shortage of food at once reduces the efficiency of the factories and the civilian services of all kinds, *on which a Military Commander must rely*.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Wavell to Amery, 29 March 1944, *TP*, IV, P. 844. Emphasis mine.

Conclusion

Conclusion

Before 1939 the Government of India did not feel any need to prepare any plan for providing adequate food supply to the civilian population. The development of food policy and administration in the proper sense was remarkably sudden and rapid in India. For instance, in Madras presidency in the year 1942, the entire food administration amounted to only half of one official ! But four years later there were fifteen thousand food officials. In 1942 the food administration cost virtually nothing; four years later it swallowed almost a quarter of the provincial budget. The suddenness and rapidity owed a lot to the peculiar conditions of the Second World War and to Britain's expectation of India's role in the War. In the early months of the War, the Government of India was extremely confident about food supplies. In addition to supplying the Indian Army and Allied troops stationed in India, the Government of India also undertook to contribute to supplies to Ceylon, Aden, Persia, the Middle East and the Arabian Principalities. The generous supply of foodstuffs was a crucial contribution of India to the British War effort. The demands of the War went a long way in shaping the food policy and administration in late colonial India. Government policies with regard to food administration and distribution was prompted not by the aim to ensure adequate food supply to the common masses, but

to have a smooth running of war. As we have seen in this dissertation, the colonial state had its own preferences and logic to it in feeding people.

The Government of India was undoubtedly slow to realize its responsibilities for feeding the common people of India. It was also slow to control the supply and the price of the things which the farmer needed to produce India's food – the steel for his farm tools, the cattle for his plough etc. The farmers blamed the Government for high prices of these and consequently condemned grain controls by the Government without addressing these issues. The lack of coordination which sometimes amounted to conflict between the Central and Provincial Governments and between various departments of the Government made the task of the Food Department more difficult in India. The rapid politico-economic changes through which the country was going in the last years of the Raj often prevented the authorities and political agencies from giving the issue of civilian food supply its due attention. However, it is difficult to deny that that the introduction of rationing of foodstuffs to some extent averted trouble and disaster in many of the towns and villages in India. Though the main thrust behind the introduction and expansion of rationing was the colonial government's need to have a smooth War effort, yet it appears that a considerable number of people benefited from it. Without it scarcities and rocketing prices would have left a large number of people to die of hunger. Without it many of the industries would have witnessed workers' discontent. And finally rationing enabled the government to have its main aim fulfilled, i.e. it kept the War effort going.

But, Secretary of State Amery's words are perhaps the best summary of the activities and aims of the colonial government on the food frontier –

. . . there is a natural and widespread feeling that somehow or other the ultimate responsibility (to ensure adequate food supply) rests with us and that this country could and should have done more.¹⁸⁹

Nevertheless blaming only the colonial state for the distress of the Indian people does not give the full picture. There were problems on part of the people that made the solution of food problem more difficult. There were also considerable differences in public opinion on food questions. The interests or self-interests of the farmers and the workers, of the villagers and the townsmen, of the shopkeepers and the customers, of the agricultural and industrial areas, of the surplus and deficit areas were often found irreconcilable. Quite naturally this added to the problem of food administration in India. Even during emergencies the administration was slow to act or hesitated to execute its policies due to the fear of clash of interests. In deficit provinces the rationing system was welcomed, but in surplus provinces it was for a long time seen with suspicion and thought unnecessary. And due to constitutional brakes, the Government of India was not allowed to intervene in the provinces as food was a provincial subject. The problems of Government of India got reflected in 1946 in the report of the American Famine Mission to India:

¹⁸⁹ Amery, Secretary of State for India to Viceroy Lord Wavell, 21 October 1943, *TP*, IV, p. 401.

It was generally held that the Government of India had a major responsibility for feeding the people of India and yet it did not have administrative authority to do this. Clearly the deficit Provinces and States looked to the Central Government for aid. They wanted the necessary foodstuffs. On the other hand the surplus Provinces and States viewed any Central program as “undesirable interference.” . . . The deficit areas were willing, in fact anxious to cooperate. The surplus areas were slow to join and gave less than full support. As in all surplus areas, neither producers nor consumers are disposed to accept readily low rations of food and direct procurement measures. In fact the procurement provisions of India’s Basic Food Plan were put into effect quickly and effectively in most of the deficit areas, but slowly and less effectively in surplus regions. In the latter areas the Government of India found it necessary to rely upon requests, upon appeals of patriotism and the national unity of India, and various indirect pressures.¹⁹⁰

Actually for a long time on part of the Government there was almost no effort in the surplus provinces, e.g. in Punjab, to inform and educate public opinion about the reality of the danger to India’s food supply, about the possible consequences of shortages in the deficit areas, and about the need for all provinces and princely states to act in a coordinated manner and to share the hardship. Governments of surplus provinces like Punjab took the help of publicity measures much later. The inevitability of price control, government procurement and rationing of food-grains was genuinely acknowledged by the surplus provinces only when they were faced with the pinch of scarcity, as in the case of Punjab in the year 1946. Procurement had to deal with a whole range of problems, from the objections to any compulsory levy of grain from the cultivator to the difficulty of requisitioning without provoking

¹⁹⁰ Famine Emergency Commission, *India’s Hunger: Report of the American Famine Mission to India*, GOI, 1946, pp. 12-13.

violent protest. It was only when the task of procurement seemed to be beyond the powers of private enterprises and their sole motive of profit-making was rendering the very purpose of procurement useless, then the pressure of necessity goaded the government to take up procurement in its own hand.

The food policies in India went through slow stages, for instance procurement process of food-grains went through many stages and progressed with great difficulties. It started with the deficit areas having to buy or control food-grains to feed their own people, as in Cochin and Travancore, then came the stage where the stoppage of the rice supplies from Burma and the failure of crops in 1942-43 made it clear that the food of India would have to be monitored and if necessary controlled, otherwise many would go short. The Bengal famine of 1943 showed what could happen if effective measures were not introduced in time. But still it was only after the experience of shortages in 1946 when even the surplus provinces felt the pinch of scarcity themselves, that their attitude towards procurement and rationing changed in true sense and improvements in food procurement and distribution could be achieved.

With regard to rationing it is found that it did not perform equally in every part of India as conditions varied greatly. Unfortunately some provinces had more inefficient food administration than others. For example there was no local village staff in most of the permanently settled areas. The availability of manpower appropriate for appointment as officials was less in some provinces than others. In areas like Punjab more men joined the

Defence Forces and their ancillary departments. In Punjab, as in the United Provinces, the proximity of the headquarters of the Civil and Defence Forces Administration was a drain on available supply of clerical staffs for the food administration. But in a few places like Bombay the scarcity of appropriate men was made up by the availability of large number of educated women competent to staff the food administration. Naturally these differences resulted in the differences in the performance of the food administration in different parts of India.

The social consequences of government procurement and rationing are also noteworthy. In a certain sense rationing can be held responsible for widening the tension between the agriculturists and the trading class. The period of the War in India was generally one of rising prices. Traders in consumer commodities were making fortunes taking advantage of the situation. But the traders in food-grains were stopped by the state from exploiting the opportunity which the War offered. Naturally they grew envious of those who traded in other commodities and developed a bitter sense of discrimination against the colonial state. The Second World War also witnessed soaring wages of urban labour whereas gradually the food-grain producers were prohibited from free trade despite favourable supply-and-demand ratio. At an instant societal level, these differences posed the cultivators and food-grain merchants against other traders and urban labour and in turn this envy started to see a bias in the activities of the state and finally held the colonial state responsible for all these. For Government procurement, as long as a rising market was expected by the cultivators

and grain-traders, grain was bound to be held off the market; and it was only on a falling market that grain came freely forward. As discussed in chapter one, provincial governments, such as the one in Punjab, were often reluctant to deprive the grower of his profit.

Finally, rationing affected the Indian food habits also. Though the Foodgrains Policy Committee had promised to study the tastes and habits of the various communities and castes, it had given no assurance to any section of the population that its habitual food-grains would be made available. In accordance with this, in January 1946, when Madras was faced with a failure of crops, the Madras Government made efforts to popularise alternative food stuffs especially groundnut and sweet potatoes. It was thought that “it may be ultimately necessary to issue these as part of the ration scale.”¹⁹¹ And keeping in mind Indian food habit, there were attempts to replace sugar with *gur*, a traditional sweetener of India, for quasi-military labourers to solve the problem caused by scarcity of sugar.¹⁹²

The ‘austerity measures’ were often insensitive to the food habits of the locals. Very often the rationing authorities rejected indigenous foods by simply branding them as un-nutritious. The people were expected to change their food habits overnight, for instance in Punjab the sudden ban on all forms of bread forced the people to eat curries

¹⁹¹ Fortnightly Report of the Madras Province for the first half of the January 1946, in Sumit Sarkar (ed), *op. cit.*, p. 853.

¹⁹² See Letter from S.A. Maini, Food Department, to Mr. S.A. Baily of the War Department dated 11.1.45, and the memorandum of the War department (army branch), government of India dated 22nd February 1945 on the subject “Sugar for Defence Services during 1944-45” signed by A.C. Beynon, joint secretary to the government of India to the department of food in DOF(R) file RP-1011/24, 1943, NAI, GOI, New Delhi.

alone. The fact was completely overlooked that unlike western countries the Indians were not accustomed to eat curries alone, they needed to team it up with either rice or *roti*. Thus on part of the colonial state there was an attempt to impose the masters' food habits on the colonized masses.

And propaganda was an important weapon in the attempt to change the food habits of the Indian public. For instance, when the stoppage of rice supply from Burma demanded a cut down on India's rice consumption, people were asked, sometimes forced, to use substitute grains in place of rice. But interestingly people were not encouraged to court the substitutes of rice on the ground that rice was in short supply but on the ground that other grains were more nutritious than rice. Thus often there was a politics and calculation behind the state's slogan of nutrition. And the stringent restrictions on food in hotels and restaurants and the consequent closure of many of them put a lot of people in distress who had either no cooking arrangements or anyone to cook at home and therefore completely dependent on hotels and restaurants for cooked food. In big cities, particularly the migratory labourers, footpath dwellers, vagabonds who were dependent on cheap restaurants or paisa hotels, had to suffer a lot due to the 'austerity measures'.

However, to counter the objections to 'austerity measures' the state came out with the slogan of equitable distribution of food to all. The state resorted to egalitarianism; it was argued that due to food crisis all should suffer equally. However, all did not suffer equally; the wealthy often managed somehow to get hold of undue supplies whereas

sometimes the very people in whose interest the 'austerity measures' were supposedly introduced, i.e. the poor, faced practical problems as noted above due to the measures.

On the whole, the idea of rationing ultimately emerged successful and permanent despite adverse forecasts that in India it would never work. Its necessity was finally appreciated even by those who opposed it most. However, rationing was always surrounded by complaints. Many of these complaints were genuine, for example, often the grain offered by the ration shops were inferior compared to the grain bought at the grocer's shop before the War. Often people had to wait for hours standing in the queue outside the ration shop. But despite all these, in many areas it was rationing only that provided grains at a price which enabled people to have at least some food. On the whole the wide acceptance of the rationing system proved the willingness and ability of the Indian people to accept and adopt novel and complex measures when they became really necessary.

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