Famine Threatens Rayalaseema

(By a Special Correspondent)

The threat of famine in Rayalaseema has attracted country-wide attention though near famine conditions are endemic to this area. If the cry of distress has at last attracted attention it is because a continuous drought for five years has produced its deadly effects on a population whose economic resources and physical stamina have been progressively undermined by it. All the tanks and most of the wells, which are the principal sources of water supply to the people, have completely dried up. Widespread stoppage of all agricultural operations, scarcity of food, high prices of foodgrains, and extensive unemployment among the landless agricultural workers, who constitute the overwhelming bulk of the population—all these physical manifestations of famine conditions are present.

The susceptibility of Rayalaseema to famine is not unknown to the authorities, and it is not as if the present calamity has come suddenly and taken the authorities or the public unawares. On the contrary, that Rayalaseema is the epicentre of the famine belt of the Madras State has long been recognised and there has never been any dispute about it. In a monograph Rural Problems in Madras published by and under the primatur of the Madras Government a few years ago, it was admitted, for instance, that "the most insecure districts (from the point of view of liability to famine) are those known as the Deccan districts, comprising of Kurnool, Bellary, Cuddapah and Anantapur, which have frequently suffered from famine during the last one hundred years". To these must be added the Chittoor district, adjacent to Madras, and forming for all practical purposes an integral part of Rayalaseema.

The four districts mentioned cover a total area of 27,500 sq. miles with a population of about five millions, the vast majority of whom depend solely on agriculture for their livelihood. The average annual rainfall in the region is 25 inches, but it is only once in five years that Rayalaseema has an abundant monsoon instead of its being spread out evenly over the period, while in four years out of five, the rainfall is so precarious that cultivation is extremely difficult. The area is drained by the Krishna and the Pennar rivers and their tributaries, but there are practically no irrigation works in the area worth the name, with the exception of the Cuddapah-Kurnool canal, the Kambam tank in Kurnool, and the Tungabhadra channels in Bellary. The utilisation of the Tungabhadra waters to relieve the irrigational and drinking water problems of the area will be practicable only when the Tungabhadra project is completed and the canals distributing its waters begin to function. There are other irrigation projects under examination to utilise the Pennar and the Krishna waters for the benefit of the area, but none has been taken on hand, let alone being in actual operation. As matters stand, in Rayalaseema at least, agriculture is a gamble in rain.

The local government and its officials must take the blame for their inexusable failure to appreciate the consequences of the drought during the preceding two years and for taking no heed of the warning provided by the failure of monsoon for four years. If at the first warning of the oncoming crisis, a properly planned scheme had been taken on hand for deepening wells, repairing minor irrigation works and constructing catchment basins for the mountain streams, and other measures essential for mitigating the effects of drought, the worst could have been averted. Nor would the crisis be so overwhelming in its incidence, if a systematic programme of road construction and of other emergency public works schemes had been kept ready for implementation and put into operation as soon as the need for them became apparent. Had proper measures been taken in time, food production would not have been so poor, the economic conditions of the smaller ryots and landless labourers would not have become so deplorable as they are now and the word "famine" would not have been writ large on the face of Rayalaseema.

Once the official machinery was lugged into motion by the demands made upon it by the gathering volume of distress, relief measures have gone forward; but even so, it is evident that they are not moving at the pace they should. Red tape takes its toll and relief is distributed in terms of the provisions of the Famine Code which, while "protecting the people from starvation in times of distress" does not impose much further obligations on the State. Outstanding among the essential needs of the affected area is recognised to be provision of drinking water. Next in importance is employment for the agricultural classes, particularly landless labourers, whose resources have been completely exhausted on account of the absence of normal agricultural operations for the last three years. The third is the problem of preventing the outbreak of epidemics and diseases, incidental to prolonged malnutrition, undernourishment and the heat of summer and providing medical relief to the suffering.

Construction and repair of roads and repair of tanks and bunds have been the traditional methods of mitigating unemployment and ensuring necessary purchasing power of the poor labourer. According to the latest figures supplied by Shri C. Rajagopalachari, Chief Minister, about a lakh of persons on the average are being employed in famine works. This does not, of course, exhaust the number of those who are without work but cannot get it and for whom employment has to be found. The number of such forced unemployed is variously estimated at about half a million. The problem of feeding the destitute and extending gratuitous relief to the disabled and the children is a complex and costly procedure. 950 centres have been opened in the famine area at which nearly two lakh persons are being fed on standard gruel. Besides Government gruel centres, there are a few relief centres run by private agencies whose number is unascertamable, where food is distributed without any discrimination to the disabled and the children.

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The Army has been pressed into service for deepening wells and relieving water scarcity. Under the supervision of L.t.-Col Talwar and L.t.-Col Mullenox, Army Engineers, the Army has been engaged in the stupendous
and urgent task of fighting the famine on the water front both by deepening existing wells where they had gone dry and by utilising Army trucks and water curriers to distribute drinking water to the villagers in the interior, where its scarcity is most acute. The extreme scarcity of water in this area renders the services of the Army doubly welcome. The speed at which the well-digging is going on may not be as rapid as one would wish, but the Army is proceeding according to a prescribed programme, beginning with Cuddapah district and extending its operations to Kurnool and then to Anantapur districts, and results cannot be striking when, as has been found by experience, some wells had to be deepened up to 60 feet or more, before water is struck. It is good to know, however, that consideration of cost is not allowed to deter efforts in this direction. Movement of foodgrains into the affected areas is also not as expeditious as it should be or could be; but in any case, unless the problems of high prices and absence of purchasing power in the hands of the vast majority of the working population are resolved by dispatching larger quantities of millets and ragi to the affected areas and the fair price shops are well-stocked with grains while more repair and construction work is undertaken which would provide employment to the able-bodied, the pressure on State resources and public charity will remain undiminished. The long-range social effects of gratuitous relief will also be highly deleterious.

The part played by private and philanthropic organisations in providing relief, however, deserves every commendation. The State is concerning itself mainly with providing grants for well-digging and land improvement and in making subsistence grants to enable the smaller ryots and the middle class families to get through the crisis that confronts them. While the brunt of the burden of providing relief is being borne by the State Government, to whom the cost cannot matter so long as distress persists, the Government of India have made available a sum of Rs 2.48 crores for subsistence loans and financing of gruel centres. Other sources for relief operations are the Prime Minister's Relief Fund, from which a grant of Rs 3.75 lakhs has so far been made, and the Governor's Relief Fund, contributions to which total Rs 2½ lakhs now. The Rayalaseema Relief Committee of the Andhra Pradesh Congress has collected about Rs 2 lakhs, while the "Express" group of papers fund has swelled to about Rs 2 lakhs. Besides, there has been a liberal flow of private charity from the surplus northern Cirears districts and some districts in the South in the shape of grain and clothes and, what is equally important, food for the cattle. The cattle have been as unfortunate and helpless victims of the water and fodder famine in Rayalaseema as men, and feeding and keeping them alive through the current distress period is a vital need for the agricultural economy of the area. Among the organisations rendering notable service by managing gruel centres, distributing cloth and organising other kinds of relief, mention must be made of the Ramakrishna Mission.

The climax reached by the drought in Rayalaseema this year has brought to the fore the long-neglected problem of erecting permanent barricades against the incursions of famine from time to time. Rayalaseema teaches the terrible lesson, which is being learnt at the cost of much avoidable suffering, that in dealing with economically backward areas like it, mere palliatives are useless.
If action to relieve distress is delayed till the crisis actually overwhelms the people, it involves expending much larger sums of money besides, of course, much avoidable misery, than if preventive measures are taken well in time. Even as far back as 1938, the Madras Famine Code Revision Committee prescribed the remedial measures essential in such conditions:

"State intervention has up to the present been largely designed to save life and mitigate suffering. In our opinion a bolder policy is now called for, which we trust will not only be of incalculable benefit to the people by creating much needed wealth and fostering power of resistance but will in the long run save the resources of the state from the recurring drain caused by the recurring needs and continued poverty of those districts."

Among others, the Committee recommended the following multi-directional programme: development of irrigation, namely, provision of irrigation facilities and tank restoration; introduction of improved methods of agriculture, such as bunding and dry farming; exploitation of the mineral resources and development of large scale industries and cottage industries.

These remedies are as appropriate and necessary today as they were in 1938, though not quite adequate in themselves to meet the demands of the situation that has arisen. But, in the intervening years, precious little has been done to give them a purposeful and vigorous push. What Rayalaseema needs more than anything else is protected irrigation, as an insurance against the ravages of drought and as a means of increasing food production and development of industries, big and small, for which her rich natural resources, so far untapped, afford abundant opportunities and scope. The Tungabhadra project, now under construction, is a part of the solution; but it is neither an immediate nor a full solution, because, the project will take another two years to complete and its benefits will be derived largely only by the Bellary and parts of Anantapur districts. Other irrigation schemes are essential, besides the execution of an extensive programme of minor irrigation works and construction of wells, which can be worked by pumps, wherever possible, run on electrical energy. The Rayalaseema Development Board, set up in 1941, solely to carry out schemes which would contribute directly to the prosperity of the area, has no spectacular achievements to its credit. The financial resources at the disposal of the board are meagre, not commensurate with the requirements of the situation and a number of its recommendations has got enmeshed in departmental red tape. If it is converted into a statutory corporation and sufficient funds are placed at its disposal, and if it is enabled to initiate and execute development schemes on its own responsibility, it can prove an effective agency for good.

Shri C. Rajagopalachariar, Chief Minister of Madras, has said that the famine conditions in Rayalaseema might ease by September, by which time the area would have received the benefit of the main monsoon. That is, of course, dependent on nature and providence; but in the meantime there can be no relaxation in the relief operations or in efforts to devise and push through long-range schemes for famine prevention. The farmers can turn to the land and make it yield its fruit only if sufficient water is made available to them. In this direction, it is only purposeful and systematic State action that can prove helpful. It is also essential that some of the irrigation and power schemes, which would directly benefit this backward area, should be taken in hand under the Five Year Plan and the Planning Commission has a special responsibility in this regard.

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Famine conditions, though not as acute as in the five Rayalaseema districts, obtain also in some other parts of the Madras State—in parts of Guntur and Nellore districts, in South Arcot, Ramnad and Chingleput districts. This fact emphasises that about a third of the Madras-State experiences conditions ranging from shortage to scarcity year after year. This year, the rice production in the State is in deficit to the extent of a million tons and production of millets by about four lakh tons. This deficit can be made good mainly by the Centre, which has already declared that it would supply only about half the quantity, of which no more than two lakh tons will be in the shape of rice. Fortunately, the surplus districts had a good crop, and to them the Government must look for fulfilling the procurement targets, which alone can obviate a greater shortage later in the year. The increase in procurement prices for paddy announced by the Government should prove an inducement; but to counterbalance it, there is the increase in food prices consequent on the stoppage of food subsidies by the Government of India. Altogether, what with famine and unforeseen expenditure on relief measures on the one hand, and the potential danger of food shortage, which may grow as the year advances, on the other, both the finances and the general economy of the State as a whole face prospects which are dismal indeed.

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