FREEDOM FROM FAMINE

The role of political freedom in famine prevention

A thesis for the Cand. Polit. degree
at the Department of Political Science,
University of Oslo

May 1997

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the course of writing this thesis I have benefited in various ways from a number of individuals. I would firstly like to thank my thesis-supervisor, Professor Bernt Hagtvet, for introducing me to this fascinating subject, for lengthy and stimulating discussions followed by invaluable comments on numerous drafts, and for his patience and encouragement at all times. A special thanks to Dr. Desmond McNeill for my attachment to the Centre for Development and the Environment (SUM), for many interesting discussions, and for constructive comments on innumerable drafts.

I am grateful for the constant encouragement I have received from Prof. Francesco Kjellberg (UiO) with whom I have worked on a separate project and from whom I have learnt much about India. Thanks are also due to Prof. Emeritus Arne Næss for insightful discussions on a wide range of subjects. I also wish to thank the following individuals for having had the privilege of benefiting from their constructive comments, in conversation and in writing, on various aspects of this thesis: Prof. Raino Malnes (UiO), Prof. Edward Friedman (University of Wisconsin), Prof. Hans Blomkvist (University of Uppsala), Prof. Andrew Brennan (University of Western Australia), Dr. Asbjørn Eide (UiO), Prof. Knut Heidar (UiO), Dr. Arup Maharatna (University of Burdman) and Dr. Arild Ruud (SUM). Various members of the H-Asia discussion group have also been of enormous help in clarifying ideas and concepts and I would like to thank one of the editors, Prof. Frank Conlon (University of Washington), for his assistance. An intellectual debt is due to Prof. Amartya Sen, who has inspired me so much with his writings.

The Centre for Development and the Environment (SUM) has not only provided me with office facilities but also an academic and a social milieu for which I am truly grateful. I will fondly remember the assistance and encouragement I received at all times from Liv Norderud and her staff, especially from Mr. Manhar Patel. Mr. Lóránd Lukács jr. has been most kind to assist with the layout of this thesis and has taught me much about computer programmes.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to Mr. Fridtjov Beck Wiig and the Social Sciences Library at the University of Oslo, who worked so patiently and efficiently to procure all the reading material I requested. Both books and articles, whether from Norway or elsewhere, were made readily available to me in a matter of days. Karen C. Johansen and the staff at the Office for International Students has kindly extended help and assistance at all times during the course of my stay in Norway.

I must acknowledge the wonderful privilege I have had of studying in Norge - a country that has become very dear to me - and the immense pleasure I have derived from learning "norsk" which, incidentally, is a delight to speak! My heartfelt gratitude to Reidunn Ljones for five wonderful years and for providing me with so much love, support and encouragement throughout. In addition, she has also helped to procure additional reading material from the Norwegian School of Management's main library. I am eternally indebted to Anne-Lise and Tiril Guttorm for having given me so much joy and happiness over the past year. They have always cheered me up when I needed cheering, and have given me much to look forward to.

During my stay in Norway I have also been blessed with many friendships. In particular I am grateful to Terrence Baine, Ingrid Sætre, Morten Gulbrandsen, Kit Fai Næss, Ronny Lie, Ann Kristin Brunborg, Vegard Fløtre, Kristin Haraldstad, Tormod Burkey, and Janne Duesund for their love, support, and encouragement. Finally, Ava and Devdas Banik have been a constant source of encouragement, and their love has sustained me through this entire effort.

"As different rivers have different sources,

But all mingle their waters in the sea;

So, Oh Lord, the different paths

Which men take through different tendencies,

All lead to thee."

- Swami Vivekenanda

Dan Banik
Oslo, Norway
May, 1997

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1. Introduction

Famine, today, is an insult. That people still die on account of famine and famine-related diseases is something that really is quite hard to believe, at first. Yet, time and time again we have witnessed recurrent famines in a number of regions of the world, where entire populations have been violated of the most basic of all human rights, the right to life. Famines, by virtue of their extent of devastation and magnitude, have pushed communities to the verge of extinction, while forcing others into migration or radical economic, political and social change. Harrison (1988: xiii) writes that war, pestilence, and famine have formed integral components of history, especially since the beginning of substantial human population growth in the Neolithic. While war is yet to be eradicated completely (although one can claim that no two democratic countries go to war with each other), many diseases have in fact been eradicated or controlled with the development of technology. Yet, famine still rears its ugly head, even today, despite the Green Revolution and the surge in agricultural technology. It is widely believed that famine in this century is an insult and need never happen in a world abundant with food. Indeed, scarcity in world food production can no longer be single-handedly attributed to the cause of famine, and thereby one needs to look at a number of interlocking factors in order to explain this phenomenon. Even though most famine deaths are due to disease, deaths have also been linked to loss of body weight, malnutrition, alternative 'famine-foods' and increased crime. During the course of a famine, a community undergoes the traumas associated with "migration, mental disorientation, ‘wandering’, uprooting and separation, and transfer of assets (ensuring more people starve the next time). The absence of formal social security and of adequate institutional arrangements only accentuate the mortality syndrome" (Alamgir & Arora 1991: 9). At least on a theoretical plane, famines can be prevented if its exact cause in a given society can be defined and the factors leading to such a situation identified. It is my primary contention in this thesis that the role of the government in putting into effect both long-term preventive and immediate relief measures is crucial if the threat of famine is to be eradicated or controlled. Famines have conventionally

been seen as "an act of God". This approach tends to isolate famines from social, political and economic issues and locates famines within the category of ‘natural disaster’ like earthquakes, floods, drought, volcanic eruptions, etc. The alternative view is that famine is an "act of Man", arguing that famines are primarily a result of human activity and can be prevented by appropriate economic and political interventions. I have chosen to focus on this alternative view keeping in mind the urgent need to focus attention on the poorer and more ‘vulnerable’ sections of the population, who, most often, fall prey to famine. The difference between the concepts of "famine" and "hunger" has also often been confused. At the outset, it is perhaps in order to note that one can prevent and eradicate famine even while malnutrition and hunger caused by poverty continues, and that is why success in combating famines often need to be qualified. However, famine is *intrinsically* linked to the hunger of poverty and this has consequences for the understanding of vulnerability to famine and the "famine preparedness" capability of a country.

It is my intention to maintain a deliberate optimistic tenor throughout this thesis: Famine is *preventable*. Famine, in contrast to other disasters, is preventable as there always is a warning period during which planning can take place. Even if such plans fail, timely and adequate relief can avert a major loss of lives. However, it is rather apparent that famine-prevention efforts need to go well beyond ensuring rapid and adequate provision of food and relief to affected areas. The greater goal ought to be a long-term one, that of reducing famine ‘vulnerability’. This is the line of thought that prevails throughout this thesis. Famines should never be allowed to happen. Famines should be a thing of the past.

1.1 The Argument

The point of departure of this thesis is Amartya Sen's observation that democratic institutions and a free press enable a country to withstand the threat of famines. Basing his analysis on an initial comparison between India and China, Sen argued, in his now famous Coromandel Lecture (1982), that independent India has successfully prevented famines due to its democratic political structure. In spite of not being able to guarantee

freedom from chronic hunger, famines have been successfully averted as the bureaucracy and civil institutions are able to provide early warnings of impending food crises, and as the political leadership is pressured into taking timely action to prevent such crises from developing into major disasters. In contrast to India, during the period 1958-61, China went through a severe famine where millions perished. Unlike India, the dictatorial political system in China was not pressured into prompt and adequate action. There were no opposition parties or independent and vigorously active newspapers to campaign on behalf of the famine affected masses. Chairman Mao did not even officially declare a famine, and it was only a decade or so ago that the world became aware of this grim tragedy. In collaboration with Jean Drèze, Sen has later extended this observation to compare the success that several African countries, mainly Botswana and Zimbabwe, have had in combating famines with the contrasting experiences of countries like Sudan and Ethiopia. Writing on the attractions of Sen's liberal rights hypothesis, de Waal (1996) notes the following:

> *... it [Sen's hypothesis] gives a human rights* raison d'être *for international media and aid organisations, as well as a feeling of wider relevance to social and economic issues for human rights organisations. Increasingly, these organisations see themselves as part of an international civil society, promoting and defending freedoms world-wide, investigating abuses of human rights, exposing famines and prompting Western governments and the UN to act. There have been enough cases of journalists exposing famines since Biafra in 1968 and Ethiopia in 1973 for this to be quite an attractive idea. (de Waal 1996: 195)*

Sen's analysis focuses on the nature of public action and the roles of the state and non-state actors in preventing famines. Public action, as conceived by Sen, includes actions of a "collaborative" nature through civic organisation, and/ or actions of an "adversarial" nature as expressed through social criticism and political opposition. "In this sense, public action includes not only the directly beneficial contributions of (state and non-state) social institutions, but also the actions of pressure groups and political activists" (Kracht & Huq 1996: 75). By working together and influencing government policy via political activism, criticism and opposition, all actors in Indian society contribute towards eliminating famine.

1.2 The Purpose

The main purpose of this thesis is to first undertake a thorough theoretical discussion on the theories linking government policy and famine. In addition to Sen's theory of "early warning" and anticipation of famines, various alternative approaches will be discussed in order to assess the "early warning" capacity of opposition parties and an independent press. Second, the thesis also aims to examine whether Sen's contention actually holds ground today. This, with especial reference to India. Nevertheless, I will also attempt to generalise the lessons from India to apply to certain other famine-prone countries. The two basic categories of questions that this study proposes to investigate are as follows:

1) Does political freedom facilitate greater success in famine-prevention in developing countries? To what extent does political freedom, viz., opposition political parties, a free news media, and a strong and active public opinion, make the government act responsibly in times of crisis so immediate and threatening as the onset of famines or famine-like conditions? How crucial is the "early warning" of an impending crisis as provided by political parties and a press? And once provided, do governments heed to such warnings?

2) Acknowledging that India has successfully combated famines since independence in 1947, can one characterise this as an achievement based on long-term planning or a "crisis-induced" response? This, especially considering the number of people suffering from poverty and hunger during normal times. Does political freedom in India work well only during a large-scale disaster? How important has been the "early warning" role of political parties and the press in India?

The study has two interrelated goals. First, to contribute to the understanding of famine prevention in the present development context of India, and second, to enlarge the comprehension of the ways in which famine prevention is associated with the existence of political freedom in developing countries. In this quest, some recent successes and failures in combating famines in a number of famine-prone countries will be discussed.

1.3 The "Puzzle of Indian Democracy"

India became independent at the stroke of midnight on 14 August, 1947. British colonial presence came to an end with the transfer of powers to a government formed by the Indian National Congress - a party founded in 1885 and which led the nationalist movement. In January 1950, a federal Constitution (with 395 articles and 8 schedules, and among the lengthiest in the world) was adopted providing for elections every five years, based on universal adult franchise. It also provided for a Council of Ministers headed by a prime minister collectively responsible to the lower house of parliament, the *Lok Sabha*. The members of this lower house are directly elected from territorially delimited constituencies. The Constitution, with over sixty amendments, has been in effect consistently since adoption, and advocates that India is a sovereign, socialist, secular, and democratic republic.

Three puzzles of Indian democracy, which have been of great interest for students of comparative politics, have been identified by various authors. The first is India's success in maintaining democratic rule (except for a brief authoritarian interlude during the Emergency of 1975-77), "in the world's largest and most heterogeneous democracy which runs counter to J. S. Mill's ... proposition that democracy is 'next to impossible' in multiethnic societies and completely impossible in linguistically divided countries" (Lijphart 1996: 258). The second puzzle, and one that Dahl (1989: 253) points out, is the survival of democracy in India despite widespread poverty and illiteracy. Finally, Weiner (1989) has coined a phrase, "Indian paradox", to depict a third puzzle. This entails "the far more puzzling contradiction between India's high level of political violence and its success at sustaining a democratic political system" (ibid.: 9). Despite these puzzles, Lijphart's main conclusion is that democracy has survived in India mainly on account of a power-sharing system displaying the elements of *grand coalition*, *cultural autonomy*, *proportionality*, and a *minority veto* (Lijphart 1996). Indeed, democratic institutions and a fair degree of political liberty have managed to survive in India despite the enormous differences in resources and opportunities among its citizens, and despite predictions to the contrary.

1.4 Famines in India

Arthasastra, a classic treatise on government, written in India over 2000 years ago by Kautilya, contains a mention of famines. Kautilya writes that when a situation of famine is imminent a good king should "institute the building of forts or water-works with the grant of food, or share [his] provisions [with the people], or entrust the country [to another king]".[1] Among the chief measures of famine-relief adopted by Indian rulers over the years has included, among other things, the following: the opening of public grain stores to the people and free distribution of raw grains; the opening of free kitchens; the remission of taxes and other forms of revenue and the provision of monetary advances; the construction of public employment programmes like canals, roads and embankments; encouragement to the people to migrate; and finally, an increase in the salaries of soldiers (Srivastava 1968: 28; Walker 1989: 101). Even though the Mughal rulers had formulated a famine policy in 18th century India, there seems to be no systematic record of any comprehensive famine-relief policy until the arrival of the British. The British administration took over from the East India Company in 1858 and there was a marked departure in the administration's attitude towards famine protection and relief.[2] From 1860 to 1877 a number of major famines took place in India, most notable the Orissa famine of 1865 and the 1873 famine in Bihar and Bengal. A considerable number of lives were saved, especially in the Bihar[3] and Bengal famines as the government undertook a very expensive but effective policy, though for the major part *ad hoc* in character, of procurement and distribution

[1] As quoted in Drèze (1990a: 19).

[2] In the period prior to the arrival of the British East India Company in 1765, famine in India was a relatively localised and infrequent affair. During the tenure of the East India Company, between 1765 and 1858, famines became more widespread and severe - sometimes as severe as the calamitous Bengal famine of 1770. Despite this, famine relief was given little attention, and as a later Famine Commission of 1880 pointed out that this was mainly because the Company was more interested with fiscal policies aimed to please its shareholders (Walker 1989; Drèze 1990a).

of grain (Brennan 1984: 94-95).[4] Nonetheless, it was acknowledged that existing famine relief policies were inadequate and a Famine Commission was set up in 1880, in order to construct a workable relief policy for India. This Commission formulated the *Famine Codes* of 1883 (which were thereafter revised repeatedly) based on the principle that the government had to ensure that there would be no loss of lives during scarcities. Further, guidelines were forwarded to the local administration with regard to the anticipation, recognition and relief of famines (Hubbard 1988: 122; Walker 1989: 102).[5] The Famine Codes included detailed local contingency plans, backed by law, such that they were practicable enough for an Indian Civil Service (ICS) officer to administer in districts with populations sometimes exceeding one million. There were also institutionalised career incentives for such district officers to resolve and manage these crises in a successful manner (Harriss 1988: 161). In the period 1860 to 1880, India witnessed many calamitous famines, whereas the period from 1880 to 1896 represented, by contrast, a great success in preventing crop failures from developing into famines. However, in 1896-7 and in 1899-1900, disaster struck once again and with renewed force. In the twentieth century there were few small famines but one major disaster of monumental proportions, the Bengal Famine of 1943 (Drèze 1990a: 33). How could this happen in spite of the presence of the Famine Codes?

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[3] This famine has been termed as the "Panic Famine", since the government, concerned with the grim tragedies of the 1860s, was determined to save, at all cost, people dying from starvation (Aykroyd 1974: 55).

[4] Drèze (1990a: 20) cites a number of reasons for this. There was both, a genuine desire to preserve political stability and the revenue base, and an administration that was concerned with its image in the eyes of the British public.

[5] Detailed guidelines for various scenarios were provided relating to, among other things: the creation of a continuous flow of information, from every local area to the Provincial Government facing a state of scarcity or famine; the type and nature of relief works and the scale of wages to be paid; the organisation of gratuitous relief and the establishment of the system of village inspections so that the people knew of relief measures; suspension of land revenue and the grant of seed loans; relaxation of forest

1.4.1. The Bengal Famine, 1943-45.

Nature was not to blame as there was no drought, flood, or crop failure that led to widespread starvation. In contrast, many in Bengal believed and still believe that maladministration was responsible for this unnecessary hunger, suffering and death, even though the actual causes of this famine were rather complex. In addition to inadequate governmental relief measures, a gradual collapse of the grain-marketing system, rebellion, cyclone, and an ensuing refugee problem, have been identified as some of the causes (Greenough 1982: 85-100). The fear of an imminent invasion by the Japanese and an ensuing war in Asia, prompted colonial authorities in Bengal, during 1942-43, to confiscate and haul in grain stocks from the countryside (especially from the delta region) and to destroy boats. The authorities were determined to feed Calcutta and to keep the important industries running, but the confiscation of grain fuelled inflation and spread alarm in rural areas (Arnold 1988: 97). This put strains on an economy that was already fragile, suffering from the effects of a poor harvest and paralysed the normal movement of foodstuff into grain-deficient areas. Calcutta experienced famine mainly in the form of hundreds of destitutes arriving from the districts daily. In the beginning, relief was confined to personal charity, mainly in the form of free kitchens organised by charitable organisations. When the government officially adopted a famine relief policy, it was marked with cautious parsimony - e.g., meals were to be served at the same time in all kitchens so that destitutes would not be able to get more than one meal. And by the end of October 1943, the colonial government decided to remove the destitutes from Calcutta.[6] Although the number of deaths began to decrease, due to the availability of some relief in the districts, many continued to perish on account of famine-induced epidemics (Sen 1976: 8-9). Even

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laws for the duration of the famine; and protection of cattle (Hubbard 1988: 122; Brennan 1984: 104-105).

[6] On 28 October 1943, the Bengal Destitute Persons (Repatriation and Relief) Ordinance was passed. This piece of legislation, controversially enough, alleged that repatriation was better achieved than relief in the many destitute homes and camps outside Calcutta (Sen 1976: 8-9).

though the official Famine Inquiry Commission report of 1945 concluded that there were about 1,5 million deaths, Aykroyd (1974: 77), who was a member of this Inquiry Commission, feels that this figure was too small.[7] Sen (1976: 4) has argued that the internal consistency of the Commission's method of calculation suggests a figure around 3 million. The failure of official policy in the handling of the Bengal famine has been much criticised.[8] Drèze (1990a), Sen (1983), and Greenough (1982), argue that no famine was ever officially "declared" in Bengal. The reasons for this were primarily political in nature, and this fault alone may well have contributed to the extraordinarily large number of deaths associated with the famine. An official declaration of the famine would have obliged the government to organise work programmes and relief operations as specified by the Famine Codes. In a document to the Viceroy of India, Sir T. Rutherford, the Governor of Bengal, explained that, "[t]he Famine Code has not been applied as we simply have not the food to give the prescribed ration"[9]. The imperial government could have permitted more food imports into India by reallocating shipping as an emergency measure. In spite of regular reports by local officials warning a situation of distress and the request for relief supplies, the government did not begin relief efforts until the middle of August 1943. And when relief efforts were finally set into motion, they were of an excessively punitive character. This, especially with regard to the extraordinarily low wages paid on relief

[7] The number of deaths has been a disputed issue. According to C. Subramaniam, Minister of Food and Agriculture during the Bihar Famine, the Report of the Famine Inquiry Commission (stating that around 1,5 million people had died) was designed to cover up the true scale of the tragedy. The general view nowadays seems to be that the number of excess deaths in Bengal was probably much higher than officially reported (Berg 1971: 114n).

[8] The Famine Inquiry Commission of 1945 provided a detailed analysis of the policy failures and the administrative bunglings of the Bengal government as well as the imperial government in Delhi. In addition, the famine brought about immense criticism of British imperial policy from the Indian nationalist movement (Sen 1981: 78)

[9] quoted in Sen (1981:79).

works, which did not contribute towards checking the vulnerability of the affected groups, as famine-related epidemics began to take their toll (Drèze 1990a: 34).

1.4.2. Famine prevention in independent India

The Famine Codes of the 1880s, which still form a cornerstone of the government's relief policies, were updated in the 1970s and renamed as "Scarcity Manuals". The central and state governments in India appear to have been active in enacting and implementing legislative policy measures meant to improve the food situation in the country. In spite of facing many crises during the past five decades (mainly on account of drought), India, unlike Africa or Bangladesh, has not experienced a major famine. There has been close co-ordination between famine anticipation measures on the one hand and famine relief measures on the other. Although India has succeeded in providing immediate *relief* to affected groups, long-term measures aimed at reducing *vulnerability* to famine have not been adequate. *Land reforms* in India have only been implemented in a few states and, if implemented nation wide, could definitely have a much larger effect on food security in rural areas. The same can be said about developments in *infrastructure*. Large irrigation projects have been implemented in certain areas and not others, while the condition of roads remain poor. Electricity is produced in short supply and many villages do not have the funds to pay their electric bills in times of drought, when electric pump-sets become all the more necessary. Yet, in spite of all these constraints, India has succeeded in avoiding a major famine disaster. As Harriss (1988: 161) points out, *famine relief* in independent India has been comprehensive, involving: the provision of wages on relief works together with drinking water; feeding kitchens; gratuitous relief for economic dependants; the creation of more discriminatingly productive assets via relief works; the provision of water and fodder for famine-affected animals; and credit to compete with moneylenders and pawnbrokers so that assets would not be depleted and also to minimise the disruption of agriculture. The most important change, however, since the pre-independence days has been the *interventionist* attitude of successive Indian governments. Such interventionist measures have, on many occasions, averted disaster

by protecting the entitlements of vulnerable groups. Many have, over the years, attributed this absence of major famine as a result of political, economic and demographic changes. Large-scale disasters have been avoided even when food crises assumed unusual proportions, as in 1966-7 (Bihar), 1972-3 (Maharashtra), 1979-80, and 1985-87.[10] In spite of not been able to eradicate large-scale poverty and endemic hunger, famines have disappeared from India. As Drèze (1990a: 1) aptly remarks, "if India's recent 'success' in preventing famines is hardly a definitive achievement, it still remains a creditable one against the background of continuing failures elsewhere".

1.5 Methodology

The methods used in this thesis are qualitative and comparative in character, based on a critical analysis of existing (secondary) literature. Such secondary sources have included various works on famines, freedom, and politics, drawn from literature within the fields of economics, philosophy, and political science, respectively. In addition, material from newspapers and other forms of mass media together with evaluation reports by various governmental and non-governmental agencies have also been used. The internationally acknowledged reference book, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, has been consulted, in particular, the *Britannica Book of the Year* and the *Britannica Nations of the World*. Certain issues of the World Bank's *World Development Report* has also been consulted.

One aim of this thesis is to examine the famine prevention capability of India in recent times. It is virtually "impossible to initiate a qualitative study without some sense of why the subject is worth studying and what concepts might be used to guide the investigation" (Ragin 1994: 87). In the previous sections, I have highlighted the political causes of famines and how government policies can contribute in averting and/or combating famines. The discussion on the concepts of "famine" and "political

[10] As some part of India inevitably experiences drought or floods each year, it is difficult to categorise what should qualify as a major disaster. Nevertheless, there seems to be agreement that the years mentioned include some of the worst crises that India has had to weather since independence.

freedom" reflect current theoretical ideas, and the works of Amartya Sen help to get the research started. However, I recognise that the initial connection between inappropriate government policy and/ or a response failure in causing famines, may be altered considerably, or even discarded during the course of this research. Another purpose is not so much as to test Sen's theory but to use the case of India and other categories of famine-prone countries to further develop the inter-relations between famine and government policy. For this a comparative method is ideal and helps to examine patterns of similarities and differences across a moderate number of cases (Lijphart 1971; Stinchcombe 1978). In comparative research on diversity, the category of the phenomena to be investigated is usually specified at the outset and the goal is to explain the diversity within a particular set of cases (Lijphart 1984). Thus this study attempts to contrast the different *forms* of protest/ response that occurred in response to drought and famine in certain selected countries. In some countries, there were labour strikes led by unions; in others, opposition political parties organised protests; in others a vigorous and active press launched campaigns against government policies; in others, there were mass demonstrations involving different groups; and so on. The focus is on how certain countries were able to avert famines or successfully combat famines once they occurred and whether success achieved was primarily on account of political freedom. To explain this diversity, I will first group countries according to their records of guaranteeing civil and political rights, and second, the extent of press freedom present within these countries. Then, I will look for patterns of similarities and differences between countries which have averted famine and those which have not. Perhaps, the countries that have not been able to avert famine have repressive governments, without the existence of a formidable political opposition or an independent and active media?

1.5.1. Selecting cases

I have, in this thesis, chosen a qualitative-comparative approach. The qualitative approach seeks in-depth knowledge of a relatively small number of cases. "When the focus is on commonalties, it [the qualitative approach] often narrows its scope to

smaller sets of cases as it seeks to clarify their similarities. The comparative approach usually addresses more cases because of its emphasis on diversity, and it is applied to sets of cases that are clearly bounded in time and space" (Ragin 1994: 130). First, a qualitative approach is used to focus on various instances in India when food crisis and famines have been successfully combated - mainly a contrast between the averted famines in Bihar (1966-67) and Maharashtra (1970-73). Second, there is also an attempt to focus on the famine prevention records of a select (small) group of countries, mainly in Africa. These countries have been selected on a basis of well-known records of past droughts and famines. In addition, certain other "famine/ drought-prone" countries are also used in this study for purposes of comparison. This necessitates a comparative research approach.

1.5.2. State performance

The French Revolution gave the world the famous slogan, "liberté, égalité, fraternité", and this may be interpreted as a way of defining the principal-agent problem in politics as governments should pursue these principles in order to be legitimate to their populations. The key method here is State evaluation, which "is a method for monitoring the activities of the state elite, holding it accountable to the population" (Lane & Ersson 1994: 82). For the purpose of measuring the variation by country in the institutionalisation of the rights and duties that substantiate the concept of *freedom/ liberty*, a number of indices have been constructed - most of which accord a central place to certain human rights that are *sine qua non* for any democracy: freedom of thought, speech and association and the freedom of the press. In addition, there is also a focus on the incidence of civil and political rights, in general, around the world (ibid.: 83-84). I have chosen to use one such measure of state performance in terms of state respect for civil and political rights; the annual *Comparative Survey of Freedom* as undertaken by Freedom House since the 1970s. The *Survey* rates all countries and territories in the world, according to a single standard in order to point out the

importance of democracy and freedom.[11] The usefulness of such a survey is that it does not view democracy as a static concept and recognises that a democratic country does not necessarily belong to the category of "free" states - this, since a democracy can lose freedom and become merely "partly free". Another survey, pertaining to the extent of *Press Freedom* in the world as undertaken by Freedom House, is also used. The survey has a clear-cut methodology: it is divided into four categories in which each country is rated on a scale on 1 - 10 (10 for most strict control of media, 0-1 signifying no/ very little control or influence). These four categories are applied first to broadcasting and then to print and then the total for each country is summed up and each country is placed into the categories of "free", "partly free" and "not free".[12]

1.5.3. Reliability and validity

As mentioned previously, this thesis is primarily based on secondary literature. In some instances, however, I have undertaken *secondary analysis*, i.e. used the results of analyses conducted by others, to compile and tabulate data based on my selection criteria, and specifically for the purpose of studying famine prevention. This form of analysis is often used to compile the results of a phenomenon as examined in a wide variety of studies (Hellevik 1993: 103). An advantage of using secondary sources is that I have been able to choose among a relatively large number of studies with relevance to freedom and famines. A disadvantage of such sources is that I have not

[11] The *Survey* employs a checklist of civil and political liberties to help determine the degree of freedom present in each country and related territory, and to help assign each entity to the comparative categories of "free", "partly free" and "not free" countries. The *Survey* rates political rights and civil liberties separately on a seven-category scale, 1 representing the most free and 7 the least free. Those countries whose category numbers average 1-2.5 are considered "free", 3-5.5 "partly free", and 5.5-7 "not free".

[12] The first category looks at the degree to which laws and regulations influence media control. The second category is concerned with political pressures on media content. The third category looks at the economic influences over media content, while the fourth category considers repressive actions (killing of journalists, physical violence against journalists, etc.).

always been aware of the methods used in various studies to collect data, especially famine-related data. Questions regarding the *reliability* of the data used pertains to how the data was measured, and the precision with which such measurements were carried out (ibid.: 159). My primary source of data consists of the two annual surveys undertaken by Freedom House. Even though one can question the placing of countries into the neat categories of "free", "partly free", and "not free", Freedom House is careful to mention that such labels are highly simplified terms and that these labels do not imply that all countries in a category are the same. An interesting outcome of this study is that famine-prone countries do indeed fall quite neatly into the above categories, although some might, say, object to India being placed as a "partly free" country. Thus, the surveys used do not pose much problems with regard to reliability of this study.

Validity of a study depends on *what* is measured and whether the measured phenomenon is relevant to what is being studied (ibid.). With regard to famine studies, I have not encountered problems of validity as famines are relatively easy to define and measure. However, with regard to the effects of government policies in averting or prolonging a famine, problems of validity may arise. This, since the effects of long-term government policies become usually apparent after a considerable amount of time and evaluation. Nevertheless, by strictly abiding to the operational definitions of "famine" (chapter 2), "success/ failure of government policy (chapter 3) and "political freedom" (chapter 4), problems of validity have been minimised.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

Chapters 2, 3, & 4 consist of a thorough analysis of definitions and theories, with the aim of coming up with an operational definition of the concepts to be studied. *Chapter 2* looks into the definitions and theories of famines, and an attempt is made to arrive at a precise definition of famine relevant for this thesis. After having identified the various theories of famine, I discuss specifically government policy and famine in *chapter 3*, where a detailed theoretical analysis of government policy failure is taken up. In *chapter 4*, the concept of political freedom is discussed using political

philosophy and criteria of democratic performance, in order to adapt the concept for the study of famines. The point of departure is Berlin's distinction between "negative" and "positive" liberty. After a critical examination of theoretical definitions, an operational definition of political freedom is arrived at by taking into consideration the existence of political parties in opposition and a free press.

In chapters 5 and 6, the operational definition of political freedom is applied to India (especially the cases of Bihar and Maharashtra) and also with regard to certain other famine-prone or famine-vulnerable countries. A detailed examination of the "early warning" and "accountability" roles of political freedom in famine prevention is undertaken. *Chapter 5* looks into the role of opposition political parties in averting famines in India and in a select group of countries. And in *chapter 6*, I examine the usefulness of an independent press in warning the government of impending disasters, with specific examples. Finally, *chapter 7* summarises the findings together with concluding remarks and suggestions for further research.

2. Definitions and Theories of Famine

> *Famine is ... hard to define but glaring enough when recognised. (A. E. Taylor quoted in Currey 1978: 87).*

2.1 Introduction

Even though famine is not a new phenomenon, being as old as man himself, arriving at a single definition of famine has proved to be a fruitless endeavour. Further complicating the situation is the reluctance of governments and politicians in using the term unless forced to. The term, "famine", itself came into English through Norman French from the Latin *fames*, meaning hunger (Aykroyd 1974: 1). The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1996) defines famine as an "extreme and protracted shortage of food, causing widespread and persistent hunger, emaciation of the affected population, and a substantial increase in the death rate". Most dictionary definitions of famine range from extreme/ severe/ broad/ acute scarcity or shortage of food leading to violent hunger to acute shortage of anything. These definitions have the shortcomings of describing merely a few symptoms of famine where broader definitions are required.

At the outset it is perhaps appropriate to clarify certain key concepts in order to avoid ambiguity. To put it simply, "Famines imply starvation, but not vice-versa. And starvation implies poverty, but not vice versa" (Sen 1981: 39). In *Poverty and Famines*, Sen clarifies many ambiguities when he writes the following:

> *Starvation is the characteristic of some people not* having *enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there* being *not enough to eat. While the latter can be a cause of the former, it is but one of many* possible *causes. (Sen 1981: 1)*

Upon scanning the literature, one comes across a number of different approaches, reflecting the fact that famine is a complex socio-economic and political phenomenon of a specific society. Arup Maharatna's (1996: 1) categorisation of famine definitions provides a most useful starting point for the discussion in the following section.

2.2 Definitions and Dimensions

Some define famine as a condition when a large proportion of the population, of a sizeable area, are affected by a state of extreme hunger, starvation, and malnutrition (Keys et al. 1950: 784; Masefield 1963: 2; Bhatia 1967: 1; Cox 1981: 5). Keys (1950) writes that "famine denotes the semi-starvation of many people - a substantial proportion of the population of some sizeable area".[1] According to Masefield (1963: 2), "the minimum acceptable definition would then imply a wide and prolonged shortage of food resulting in an increased human death rate". The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (1976) states in a document that "... the word ‘famine’ is used to refer to a societal crisis induced by the breakdown of the accustomed availability of and access to basic foods, on a scale sufficient to threaten the lives of a significant number of people". A similar emphasis on the food situation is also to be found in the definition of famine provided by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations, although it concentrates on the importance of international assistance.

Another approach defines famine as a community crisis, "a syndrome with webs of causation through which communities lose their ability to support marginal members who consequently either migrate in families because of lack of access to food, or die to starvation or starvation related disease" (Currey & Hugo 1984: 1; Currey 1978). Still others prefer to see famine in terms of excess mortality. This is done by drawing a distinction between famine on the one hand, and hunger, starvation, and malnutrition on the other (Blix, et al. 1971: 190; Aykroyd 1974: 1; Sen 1981: 40; Cox 1981: 5).

Many definitions of famine also contain explicit references to its demographic impact. Chen and Chowdhury (1977: 409) see famine as "a complex syndrome of multiple interacting causes, diverse manifestations, and involving all three demographic variables - mortality, fertility, and migration".[2]

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[1] quoted in Maharatna (1996).

[2] quoted in Maharatna (1996: 2).

2.3 A Taxonomy of Famine Theories and Causes

The evolution of famine theories spans almost three centuries, a period during which the world has witnessed many profound changes. Early theories of famine faced a situation where there existed limited trade in food such that failure in food production locally would be a sufficient cause for famine deaths. Among such early theories was one forwarded by Thomas Malthus. In his "Principle of Population", Malthus offered an explanation of famine based on population growth. He wrote,

> *in an arithmetical ratio... This implies a strong and constantly operating check on population from t...the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man. Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only he difficulty of subsistence. (quoted in Dando 1980: 59)*

However, with improvements within the agricultural and transportation sectors, the production and distribution of food during the 19th and the 20th centuries became much easier, providing grounds for new theories of famine. Devereux (1993: 30) points out that most "taxonomies" of famine have difficulty in effectively placing the diversity of theories into neat categories. This difficulty results from the various ideological, disciplinary and conceptual lines along which famine theories divide and overlap with each other. Leftwich and Harvie (1986: 29-35) have, for instance, forwarded a taxonomy of famine theories that mainly follow disciplinary lines.

Table 2.1: A Taxonomy of Famine Theories (1)

1.	Food Availability Decline (FAD)	
	1.1	Population increases (Malthus)
	1.2	War
	1.3	Climatic factors
2.	Ecological Mismanagement	
3.	Socio-economic and Political Dislocation in the Course of 'Change' or Development	
4.	Economic theories	
	4.1	Market Failure (Alamgir)
	4.2	Exchange Entitlements (Sen)
5.	Government Mismanagement / Political or Institutional Failure	
6.	Anthropological or Sociological Explanations	
7.	Multi-causal or Eclectic Approaches	

Source: compiled from Leftwich and Harvie (1986) by Devereux (1993: 31).

This classification has the advantage of providing us with some clear-cut categories, even though it, somewhat inappropriately, locates war within the FAD[3] approach. In my opinion, war should be located primarily within the category of government mismanagement and/ or socio-economic categories. A further drawback is that this taxonomy does not distinguish between the immediate events or 'famine triggers' and longer-term processes such as "socio-economic and political dislocation in the course of change or development" (Devereux 1993: 31). Curtis, et al. (1988: 5) forward a classification showing the causal linkages of the famine process. First, there are the *long-term* causes of household income loss or income instability, like environmental degradation and social change, which increase the vulnerability of the poor. Second, the *precipitating* factors, i.e., the events that dislodge the final food security of the poor like floods, drought, war and epidemics, set off the spiralling of food prices, a reduction in food supply, collapsing prices of rural assets (especially livestock), calling in of debts, migration to towns, etc. And third, there is *relief failure*, whereby famine is precipitated by inadequate and/ or incompetent governmental response during a food crisis.

In an attempt to provide an overview of the causes of famine, Meghnad Desai's (1988) model is one I find rather appropriate and comprehensive. Desai's model provides a clear-cut conception of the causes of famine and allows one to isolate certain variables and analyse them separately.

Table 2.2: A Taxonomy of Famine Theories (2)

The Nature System	**The Economic System**	**The Socio-political System**
1.1 Stock variables: ecology, land quantity and quality, other available natural resources 1.2 Flow variables: Climatic factors like rainfall (leading to floods and drought) & soil conditions	food grain stocks, capital equipment, cattle, distribution of financial assets.	3.1 State hostility based on religious, ethnic, racial or class grounds, Civil War 3.2 Administrative/ political response to famine 3.3 Social structure: kinship, behavioural norms, inter-group conflicts, religious taboos, etc.

Source: compiled from Desai (1988: 128-133)

[3] Explanations of famine based on food supply shortages have been labelled by Amartya Sen and others as "Food Availability Decline" (FAD) theories.

The above classification makes it possible to locate the causes of famine much more precisely even though nature, the economic system and the socio-political system, can all contribute jointly in creating a famine situation. In the following section I will now discuss the theories of famine, with a special emphasis on the socio-political aspect, by drawing from the two taxonomies as illustrated in tables *2.1* and *2.2.*

2.4 Theories of Famine

Alamgir (1981: 21) has pointed out that an adequate theory of famine is expected to provide the complete chain of causation which leads to famine under different circumstances. Further, such a theory should also provide an account of the possible outcomes or scenarios that reflect the process of adjustment of the individuals and the society in a post-famine situation.

> *In essence, one needs a combined theory of the economy and the society in order to understand how these operate under normal circumstances, what kinds of shocks induce a chain of reactions leading to famine, what happens during a famine, and finally, whether the economy and the society adjust back to the original position or the new position. (Alamgir 1981: 21)*

However, Alamgir also realises that a large number of scenarios can be constructed to describe the sequence of events leading to famine, and "in this sense, there probably does not exist a single theory of famine" (ibid.: 39). Such an attempt to arrive at a general theory of famine would prove to be gross oversimplification. Indeed, the difficulties involved in forwarding an all-inclusive theory of famine are enormous. As Watts (1987: 205) has so rightly put it, "Famines are enormously complex social and biological phenomena and it is quite hopeless to expect a generic theory of their origins or consequences". Nevertheless, it is important to examine briefly what various past and contemporary theories of famine have to say, and in the following sections I will discuss them under the categories of Food Availability Decline theories, economic theories, and socio-political theories.

2.4.1. The Food Availability Decline (FAD) theories

Sen has labelled the explanations of famine based on food supply shortages as 'FAD' theories. Within the FAD approach, three theories have received considerable attention.

a) Climate: Famine could result as the end result of a chain of events triggered by too much rainfall (floods), too little rainfall (drought), cyclones, earthquakes, etc. Whether a famine takes place will depend on the conditioning of the ecology and the structure of the other economic and political systems. Further, the availability of a forecast on the likelihood of high or low rainfall combined with the ability of the socio-political system to respond can avert a trigger such as drought from developing into a famine (Desai 1988: 128; Cox 1981: 6). A number of climatic factors, particularly rainfall, physical elements like social conditions, and biotic factors like pests and animal diseases, can affect agriculture and the quality of harvest. Famine can occur as a result of the combination of any number of these factors (Harrison 1988: xv).

b) Mismanagement of natural resources: There are three major types of arguments relating to the degradation of natural resources in increasing famine vulnerability: famines are caused by inexorable "natural processes" (e.g. encroachment of deserts on previously arable land); the "ignorance" or "irrationality" of the local population who become victims due to their own inefficient agricultural methods or due to conflicts arising out of the private and social ownership of resources; and, a final argument sees ecological degradation as a natural result of colonial or post-colonial exploitation between classes, and between people and nature. Consequently, when indigenous social and economic practices are disrupted by capitalist penetration, famine is seen to be inevitable (Devereux 1993: 103-113).

c) Population: The main Malthusian argument is that land is limited but population has a tendency to increase indefinitely. The demand for food will eventually outstrip any potential food production and consequently, starvation will act as a natural check on population growth. Famine will, in fact, restore the balance

between food demand and food supply. In spite of comprehensive refutations of such a view, several contemporary 'neo-Malthusian' variants insist that famine can still be explained as 'too many people, too little food'. According to one such line of argument, high population growth rates perpetuate poverty at the household level and famine vulnerability at the regional level, as excessive partition of land among heirs takes place. There is also the argument that modern medicine keeps more people alive, thereby accentuating the pressures on land. Thus, the single prescription, according to neo-Malthusians is birth-control (ibid.: 183-184).

2.4.2. Economic theories

Variables such as foodgrain stocks, capital equipment, cattle, distribution of financial assets and other endowments are results of past decisions. Famine vulnerability of a community will, to a considerable extent, depend on the size and distribution of its reserve stocks of foodgrains as well as assets which can be cashed to buy food (Desai 1988: 128-132). Two main economic theories of famine are the following:

a)Entitlements: Amartya Sen (1976; 1981) demonstrates that famines can and do occur even in the presence of an abundance of food in the country or region. He thus rejects the FAD approach. Briefly, Sen's approach focuses on the need for the 'acquirement' of food by individuals and households. The overall production or availability of food may be an inaccurate indicator of what the vulnerable groups in a community actually require. Instead, this approach concentrates on the forces that determine the bundles of commodities over which a family or an individual can establish command. This, since a person can starve if some economic change, in the form of a fall in endowment (e.g. alienation of land, or loss of labour power due to ill health), or when an unfavourable shift in the conditions of exchange (e.g. loss of employment, rise in food prices, reduction of social security provisions, etc.) make it no longer possible for him or her to acquire any commodity bundle with enough food.[4]

[4] This approach sees famine-prevention as basically a question of "entitlement protection", i.e. of re-creating the lost entitlements of vulnerable groups, involving the

b) Market failure: When markets are unreliable, a dependence on the market for food is very risky. For instance, the hoarding of food for precautionary or speculative reasons can increase food shortages and lead to a further increase in prices. "If the price of food relative to income rises then the net purchasers, the deficit cultivators and the land-less, may no longer be able to satisfy their food requirements .... A sudden sharp change in relative prices may therefore bring about famine" (Oughton 1982: 172). The causal sequence of events whereby the poor get "priced out of the market" during a food crisis may be depicted as follows: Drought, flood, etc., bring about crop failure, which sets into motion a chain of events - increased market demand for food, declining marketed food supplies, hoarding and speculation, rising food prices, falling asset prices, and ultimately famine for the poor (Devereux 1993: 89). The failure of the market was one of the factors in the Bangladesh famine of 1974, when hoarding of rice following pessimistic forecasts led to a major shortfall in marketed supplies.

2.4.3. Socio-political theories

Both, the FAD and the economic theories, are considerably dependent on the socio-political system, which, at the macro-level, involves looking at the nature of the state and of the society in a famine vulnerable area. Civil wars, an incompetent administration, the structure and incidence of taxation[5], etc., may affect the availability and distribution of food. Most importantly, the socio-political system is also vital for the administrative/ political response to the threat of famine as it includes kinship patterns, behavioural norms, inter-group conflicts, religious taboos, etc. (Desai 1988: 129). The question of whether a famine is an *act of God* or *an act of Man* has

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promotion of participative economic growth, the protection of the environment, the abolition of armed conflicts, and the development of social security systems (Sen 1990a: 3-4).

[5] The taxation, and the method of taxation (direct requisition, income tax, or indirect tax) imposed on agricultural output is often a central source of revenue for most developing countries (Desai 1988: 129).

dominated the famine debate over the centuries. Devereux (1993: 21-22) writes that the conventional view for a long time was that famines, being unique and unusual events, resulted out of a malign fate or from some freak of nature. Under such an approach famine is isolated from the social, economic and political spheres and accordingly, "natural disasters" (like earthquakes, floods, drought, hurricanes or volcanic eruptions) are identified as the primary cause of famine. Consequently, vulnerability to famine is understood to be that of living in drought or flood prone areas rather than being a consequence of poverty, government policies or undeveloped markets. The only solution, therefore, is that people should migrate elsewhere and that once famine relief is provided, the situation will return to a pre-famine normality. The alternative view is that famines are the tragic consequence of *human* activity, even when "triggered by a discrete natural event" (ibid.). This approach sees famine primarily as a result of hunger, poverty and social deprivation. Such a situation may be corrected by modified behaviour through economic and political interventions. This is the view that I have chosen to look more closely at. The nature of the socio-political system provides, what has often been referred to as, "man-made triggers". Within this category, two sub-categories are important: *war* and *government policies*.

a)War: Even though many famines occur in peaceful situations, wars often function as triggers or catalysts. As Walker (1989: 20) puts it, "[F]or an increasing proportion of the developing world's population, war and the associated military spending tip the balance between survival and famine". Walker goes on to identify four major facets of war as a triggering mechanism for famine. First, war diverts financial, human and manufacturing resources to military spending. Second, war disrupts the local economy (e.g. a squad of troops living off a village and then taking a months supply of food when it leaves). Third, during war, there is often the deliberate use of food as a weapon especially in the form of food blockades and sieges. And fourth, war invariably helps to create a refugee population, especially from rural areas when small-scale farmers and landless labourers are forced to migrate, having little in the

way of assets to take with them (ibid.: 20-21). History is replete with examples of famines being triggered in politically unstable areas, torn by war and civil strife such as in: Russia in the aftermath of the revolution and civil strife that followed after World War I; Northern Ethiopia in 1972-74; the Ogaden; parts of Mozambique; and Kampuchea in the 1970s. Political instability, in the form of both locally generated and externally financed wars, can trigger famine by hampering food production, coping mechanisms and relief aid. Borton and Clay (1986) conclude that there exists virtual unanimity on the roles of the civil wars in Ethiopia, Chad, Mozambique and Sudan in propelling initial food crises (resulting from drought, environmental and economic problems) into full-blown famines. There exists, I feel, almost unanimity, on the view that wars have a tremendous potential for causing famines. However, my interest here is not to focus on war, but rather emphasise the other man-made trigger that can set off a famine, namely, failure in government policies.

b)Government policies: Through their economic and political policies, governments can "cause" famines. Institutional failure arising out of government inaction or action, in spite of the presence or absence of early warning mechanisms, can trigger off a famine and/or deliberately accentuate the situation. The availability and distribution of food can be seriously impaired if a government, on racial, ethnic, religious or class grounds, is hostile to sections of its population. Incompetent and inadequate governmental administration with regard to famine-relief can lead to famines. Speedy intervention by the government amid a scarcity of resources calls for a calculated reliance on existing distributional mechanisms, like for example, the operation of private trade stimulated by cash support to famine victims. Employment programmes through publicly organised "food-for-work" and "cash-for-work" schemes, including free cash and food relief to vulnerable groups unable to work, can form an essential component of every famine-relief programme. Ideally, it has been pointed out, there should exist contingency plans for effective and speedy response by the administrative apparatus, whereby vulnerable groups are identified early on the co-ordination of relief programmes (Drèze & Sen 1989: 7).

Co-ordination of governmental and non-governmental relief efforts is also of the essence such that NGOs, the UN and other donors work through and supplement the government's efforts.

Famines resulting from government policy failure can be looked at in terms of a distinction between failure on account of *resource and logistical constraints* on the one hand, and failure due to *inappropriate policies* and/ or the *failure to intervene* during a food crisis, on the other. Government policies that are found wanting due to resource and/or logistical constraints need a wide range of remedies as the government in power may have its hands tied due to a number of factors like the natural resource-base of the country, the amount of foreign aid available, the condition of roads, etc. The correction of these aspects should form a separate line of inquiry, which this dissertation does not wish to focus upon. Consequently, the main discussion throughout this thesis, and especially in chapter 3, will concentrate on two aspects of failure in government policy: *inappropriate policies* (discussing briefly, theories of urban bias and agricultural regulation), and *the failure to intervene* (discussing how political freedom can help in providing early warning of impending disasters and hold the government accountable for the measures undertaken).

2.5 Definition of Famine as used in this Study

In terms of describing famine or in terms of forwarding a causal theory, many of the famine definitions presented under section **2.2,** forward fragmented views. Even though definitions that equate famine with 'severe malnutrition', 'acute food shortages', or 'extreme hunger', identify certain salient aspects, they fail to communicate the sense of crisis and despair that accompanies famine.[6] Alamgir (1981:

[6] Arnold (1988: 6-7) recognises this when he proposes that famine is an 'event' in that there is usually agreement that a famine occupies a finite span of historical time and that it is an exceptional episode, standing apart from normal everyday life. Famine, according to Arnold, is also a 'structure' as it "acts as a revealing commentary upon a society's deeper and more enduring difficulties" (ibid.).

20) proposes that an adequate definition of famine should fulfil two objectives[7]. First, a definition should clearly distinguish between a famine situation and a non-famine situation by focusing on *excess deaths*. Therefore, hunger and starvation should not be confused with famine, unless they result in excess deaths. Second, an early warning feature, including the *symptoms* associated with famine, should be included in the definition. He, then, goes on to propose a demographic definition of famine.

> *Famine is "a general state of prolonged foodgrain intake decline per capita giving rise to a number of sub-states (symptoms) involving individuals and the community as a whole which ultimately lead, directly or indirectly, to excess deaths in the country or region" (ibid.).*

While acknowledging the plus points of Alamgir's definition, I feel that an account of the triggering mechanisms of a famine that leads up to an economic crisis - *natural disasters* like floods and drought, and *man-made calamities* like civil wars, invasion, and above all governmental incompetence - should also be included in a definition of famine. Indeed, as Mayer (1981: vii) points out, "...the truth of the situation is that the natural catastrophe is the last straw which plunges a society that was not working very well into a disastrous situation". It is also necessary to specify that famine affects, first and foremost, the most vulnerable groups and communities in a country, reducing them to destitution. Therefore, who falls under "vulnerable groups" needs to be identified and recognised. The most visible area of vulnerability, in many developing societies, is physical and material poverty reflected in poor health, small and unproductive land-holdings, inadequate infrastructure, low level of technology, and vulnerable groups like women, children and the elderly. Thus, vulnerability, as distinct from poverty, is strongly linked to assets and can be defined as "defenceless, insecurity and exposure to risk, shocks and stress" (Chambers 1989: 1)[8]. A distinction between the concepts of "hunger" and "famine" is also crucial. When foodgrain intake drops suddenly, a situation of hunger may arise, while if there has been a *prolonged* decline

[7] Although he proposes three objectives, I feel that his first and third objectives overlap.

[8] quoted in Davies, et al. (1991: 3).

in the intake of foodgrains which together with disease, etc., ultimately causes death, then one faces a famine situation.[9] The fact that early warning mechanisms, based on a study of long-term symptoms, can be identified by governmental and other relief agencies, should also form an essential ingredient in a famine definition. An Early Warning System (EWS) can be defined as "a system of data collection to monitor people's access to food, in order to provide timely notice when a food crisis threatens and thus to elicit appropriate response" (Davies, et al. 1991: 6). In addition to warning of an impending crisis, an early warning system should also be able to continuously monitor the socio-economic conditions of specific groups.

> *[F]amine early warning should not be about predicting mass starvation. It must be geared to warning of the erosion of the subsistence base of the victim's society. (Walker 1989: 52)*

Finally, by specifying the above features, a definition of famine will be able to draw causal links between the *prior variables* (the precipitating factors, either natural or man-made), the *intervening variables* like food-grain shortage (resulting in hunger and starvation), and the ultimate *effect variable*, namely, excess deaths as a result of famine. Thus, for our purposes here, famine will be defined as follows:

> *Famine is a result of natural disasters (floods, drought, etc.) and/ or man-made calamities. It develops into a socio-economic process resulting in the accelerated destitution of the most vulnerable groups in the community to a point where they can no longer, as a group, maintain a sustainable livelihood.[10] Famine is a general state characterised by a decline in the foodgrain intake per capita over a prolonged period, thereby allowing the possibility of a system of early warning based on a review of the symptoms involving individuals and communities as a whole. The end result of a*

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[9] "Hunger", as Aykroyd (1974: 2-3) writes, "is an emotional word associated with fundamental bodily sensations which impel living things to seek for food in a multitude of curious ways.....Famine victims are indeed hungry, especially in the early stages of famine, but the obsession with food which accompanies established famine is something deeper than mere hunger".

[10] This sentence is drawn, almost entirely, from Peter Walker's (1989) definition.

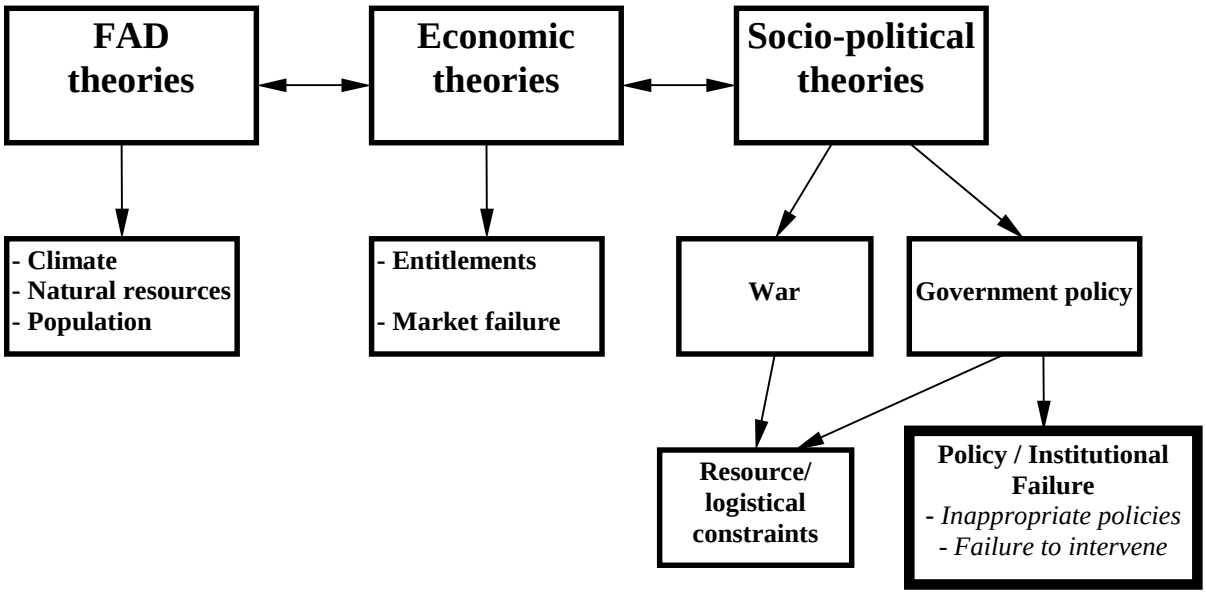
famine is excess deaths caused, directly or indirectly,[11] by the inability of vulnerable groups in the country or region, to acquire sufficient food to sustain life.

2.6 Summary of Theories of Famines

Schematically, the theories of famine discussed so far can be presented according to the figure 2.1, which also highlights the area of focus that is emphasised in this thesis. The figure recognises the inter-relationships between the various theories, although the "FAD" and "Economic" theory categories can be said to be more dependent on the Socio-political theory category than vice-versa. Within the category of socio-political theories, I have chosen to place war on a separate category, since war on its own cannot be said to be primarily as a result of government policy failure alone. A number of other factors like the international crisis scenario, together with age-old disputes can lead to a final declaration of war. Inappropriate planning and response on the part of a government may be due to resource and/ or logistical constraints that are inherent within certain countries, and consequently this has been also put in a separate category. The category that is of most importance in this thesis is that of "policy/ institutional failure", where government responsibility in causing famines is looked at by focusing specifically on inappropriate policies and most importantly, on the failure of the government to respond (set into motion adequate and timely relief measures) during a famine situation.

[11] Excess deaths can be caused directly as a result of starvation and/or indirectly, as a result of famine-related diseases.

Figure 2.1: Theories of famine



Source: compiled from Desai (1988), Devereux (1993) and Walker (1989).

3. Famine and Government Policy

3.1 Introduction

In his preface to a book on famines, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan[1] rightly points out the importance in recognising two popular misconceptions relating to the cause of famines - famine is not a repetitive natural event nor is it simply a crisis of food availability. Natural phenomena, like drought, flood and crop failure, are often only the mechanisms that trigger and set into motion the tragedy of mass starvation. And, in most cases, famine is *selective*, in that its victims are invariably the most vulnerable groups of society: poor farmers, landless peasants, nomads, widows, old people and children. The government of a country that experiences famine can be said to have failed in two respects - firstly by not developing a system which normally ensures that all are fed, and secondly, by not mobilising a sufficient response to the crisis (Hareide 1991: 22). In this sense, the government will have violated a basic freedom of its citizens - the right to freedom from hunger.[2] Walker (1989) notes that the state seldom reacts to stress as early as the victims since there are always alternative explanations for the stress and the victims' reaction (ibid.: 53-54). Often viewing famine as a temporary aberration, states tend to react only to mass starvation, the final phase of famine. Viewing famine as anything other than temporary and abnormal would mean that the state would have to admit some degree of responsibility (ibid.). Declaring a famine has always been characterised by reluctance as this would amount to admitting a failure on the part of the government concerned. While some states have been willing to admit this responsibility, many others have not. Thus, an important point here is that food emergencies that deteriorate into famines are invariably on account of policy failures at both the domestic and the international levels. Famines do not just occur

[1] Sadruddin Aga Khan's preface can be found in Peter Walker's (1989) book.

[2] Famine is an obvious violation of the freedom from hunger as formulated in article 11 (2) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This was pointed out to me by Dr. Asbjørn Eide (personal communication).

suddenly; they are most often due to the lack of preparedness and the absence of political commitment on the part of the authorities. It is therefore necessary to look closely at how politics can cause "man-made" famines.

3.2 The Political Causes of Famine

With time and progress in disaster response policies, explanations that merely advocate, for instance, drought and/ or overpopulation leads to famine, have proved to be highly inappropriate. Devereux (1993) describes the situation as follows:

> *The causes of modern famines always include elements which are either directly political - a deliberate act of political will - or indirectly political - a failure to intervene to prevent famine, or famine as an unintended by-product of government policy. (ibid.: 129)*

Based on evidence found in contemporary literature and in the media, governments have been held responsible for famines for the following reasons: *inappropriate policies*, the *failure to intervene*, *war*, and *"malign intent"* (ibid.: 129-130). The impact that war has in causing famines is widely recognised and has been discussed in the previous chapter.[3] However, war is not the cause of famine that is the focus of this study. In the following sections I will further elaborate on two categories, inappropriate policies and the failure to intervene, having chosen to discuss the category of "malign intent" under the category of "failure to intervene". The concept of "vulnerability" is central to the explanation pertaining to inappropriate policies. Many developing country governments have pursued inadequate policies to eliminate or lessen vulnerability. Even when intentions have, by and large, been noble, the implementation of these have not always been successful. It is also often the case that

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[3] A civil war, for instance, allows famine-precipitating factors to originate and grow in the spheres of food production and trade, in the creation of refugees, and in preventing both domestic and international aid from reaching the affected population. The situation in Mozambique and Chad during the 1980s, and the case of Somalia in the early 1990s, are some of the examples that come to mind under this category.

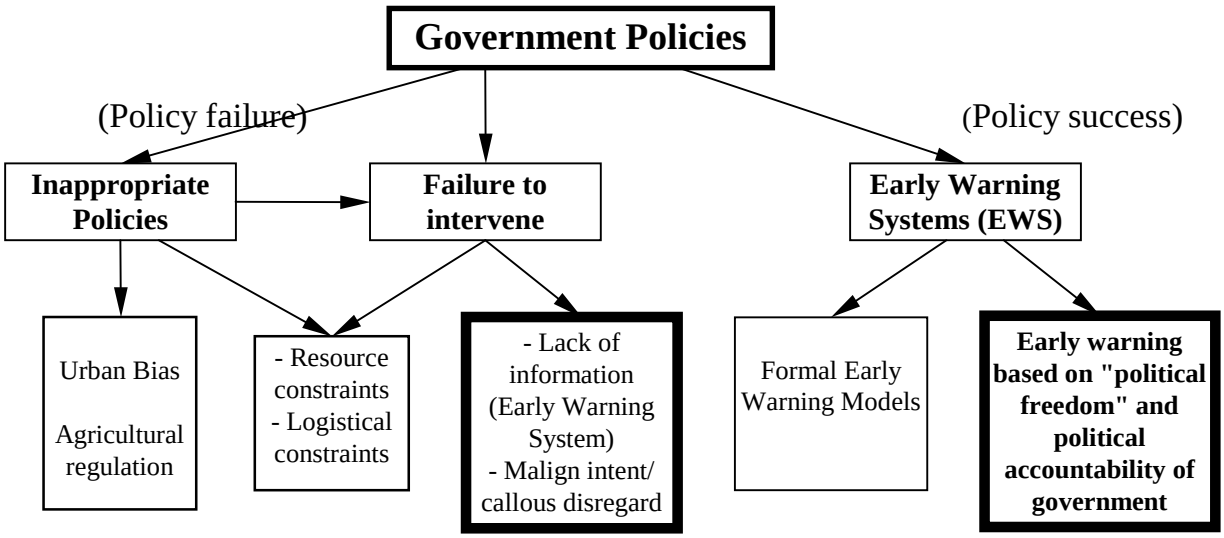
governments pursue a policy which actually marginalises and impoverishes particular groups of people, which in turn, increases their long-term vulnerability to drought or flood. Many famines fall into this category, but the most important examples are perhaps, the famines in the Sahel region[4] (1969-73) and the Chinese famine of 1958-61. Urban bias theories and inappropriate agricultural regulation are two popular causes of famine that will be discussed under this category. A famine that could have been prevented is accentuated by either the inability of the government to respond to a food crisis, or merely a refusal to do so. The reasons for this inability and/ or refusal, whatever they might have been, served to allow a famine to occur in China (1958-61), Bangladesh (1974), and in Ethiopia (1974 and 1984-85). A reason for the failure to intervene may be due to resource / logistical constraints. However, as pointed out earlier[5], I will discount this factor under this category and will instead focus on two main components: *lack of information* and what Devereux has termed as *"malign intent"*. By lack of information I will refer to the absence or inadequate functioning of formal economic models of early warning and the type of early warning that political parties, the press and other interest groups provide to the government. By "malign intent", I will refer to cases when a government has purposely created and allowed famine conditions to precipitate while in the process of using "starvation as a

[4] The term "Sahel" has been used in the international news media to incorporate the following six countries in West Africa: Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta), Niger, and Chad.

[5] In chapter 2 I have already mentioned my intention not to focus upon the resource/ logistical constraints factor in causing institutional failure. A couple of decades ago poor transport and communications and scarce resources would have seemed to provide a reasonable explanation for crop failure resulting in famine. However, in the present day scenario these factors cannot any longer provide a legitimate excuse for inappropriate government response. Poor countries with resource and logistical constraints need to pursue policies that result in appropriate remedies. However, the investigation into these policies and their remedies do not form a part of this thesis.

mechanism of repression and subjugation" (Devereux 1993: 130).[6] Schematically, the proposed discussion is illustrated by figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Government Policy and Famine



Thus, as I see it, there are two main political causes of famine, inappropriate policies and the failure to intervene. However, even among these two categories I have chosen to focus specifically on the institutional failure aspect resulting from the failure on the part of the government to intervene. Therefore, even though I will discuss the category of "inappropriate policy", my main emphasis will be on the ability of the government concerned to intervene during a famine. Success in famine policy will be discussed in terms of the concept of "early warning systems" (EWS), mainly the form of early warning guaranteed by political freedom in the form of opposition parties and a free press.

[6] Examples that could possibly fall under this heading would include the Soviet famine (1933-34) and the Dutch famine of 1944.

3.2.1. "Success" and "failure" of government famine policy

The term "policy" is seen, in most discussions of relief and development by both aid organisations and governments, to denote the enunciation and pursuit of benevolent and laudable goals (Keen 1994: 8). Therefore, this view sees policy as primarily problem-oriented: policy is seen to correct the ills of disease, underdevelopment, poverty and famine. In the event that such benevolent policies prove to be inadequate or "fail", as when interventions for providing aid do not improve the conditions of the intended beneficiaries, then this approach is most likely to see this policy failure as being caused by a variety of "obstacles to implementation" (Schaffer 1984: 181-84).[7] An alternative perspective of the term "policy" questions and rejects the assumption that policy goals and aims are benevolent. It, accordingly, questions the whole notion of policy failure, arguing that policies do not always necessarily or completely fail. The main focus should be to concentrate on explaining what public policy does, and then to analyse whether this explanation can then be used as an instrument for improvement and change (ibid.: 188-89). In this study, government famine policies are understood to have failed when there is inadequate planning for meeting the needs of the affected populations before and after the outbreak of a crisis. This study, however, concentrates more on the ability of a government to provide adequate and timely relief. If a government, in spite of resource and/ or logistical constraints, shows a determination to provide relief to the starving populations (either by diverting resources from other sectors or appealing to the international community), and if these measures prevent excess famine-related deaths, then the government is considered to have pursued a successful policy. Thus, responsiveness to the demands of the affected masses together with the launch of an appropriate response is the key aspect that qualifies for a policy being termed as a success. To what extent a government pursues policies aimed at reducing vulnerability to famine in the long-run is, of course, more difficult to place into the neat categories of "success" and "failure". But here again, it is abundantly clear that long-term measures to reduce the threat or likelihood of famine is

[7] quoted in Keen (1994).

definitely an essential ingredient for a successful response upon the outbreak of a crisis. In the section below, I will now discuss ways in which government policies can fail and which can create a famine situation or worsen a crisis instead of containing it.

3.3 Policy Failure Due to Inappropriate Policies

Under this heading I will mainly discuss two aspects of inappropriate government policy; urban bias theories and agricultural regulation. Briefly put, urban bias theories argue that famines can occur when government policies are biased in favour of urban areas or urban elites. This, since the agricultural sectors interests will most often not be taken into account. Agricultural regulation in preventing famines relates primarily to the government's food policy regulating domestic food markets.

3.3.1. Urban Bias theories

Michael Lipton (1977) has argued that vulnerability to famine is often mainly due to biased government policies which favour the urban elites and consequently discriminate against the interests of the agricultural sector.

> *So long as the elite's interests, background and sympathies remain predominantly urban, the countryside may get the 'priority' but the city will get the resources. The farm sector will continue to be squeezed, both by transfers of resources from it and by prices that are turning against it ... Nobody conspires; all the powerful are satisfied; the labour-intensive small farmers stay efficient, poor and powerless. (Lipton 1977: 18-19)*

Similarly, Spitz (1978: 868) remarks, "the fact that in times of famine town-dwellers can still get something to eat while country people starve to death is a sign of the power relation between the urban population and the rural population". Whenever a food crisis looms in the horizon, there is usually a sharp increase in food prices. But, it is argued that in such situations the various social groups in urban areas, the seats of political power, succeed to pressure the government to give their (urban) interests more weight than the rural interests. The government will then take 'appropriate' measures

to check the rise in food prices, which in the long run, favours the urban populace (ibid.; Timmer 1989: 23). An example to prove this point is provided by Gill (1986), namely, the 1974 overthrow of Haile Selassie's regime in Ethiopia.

> *Haile Selassie's imperial regime might have survived prolonged starvation in the countryside; when food shortages and price rises spread to Addis Ababa and the demonstrations began, his days were numbered. (ibid.: 48)*

3.3.2. Agricultural Regulation

Many governments intervene and control a large proportion of the marketed food supply for two main reasons; to safeguard farmers against low and unpredictable price for produce, and to protect poor consumers from exploitation by traders in the form of high food prices. Whether these objectives are achieved is another matter altogether and often, inappropriate and damaging intervention together with discriminatory pricing policies and inefficient and corrupt marketing agencies, have been blamed for declines in food production, especially over much of Africa. Usually *price regulation* (especially through the provision of subsidies on certain essential products) leads to low consumer prices, and are meant to protect the poor. But if such subsidies are not well targeted, the wealthy will also enjoy the same benefits as the poor. Another problem of government regulated food prices is that they remove the early warning signals of food shortage to which merchants in free markets can respond to (Devereux 1993: 133-134). When severe food shortages crop up in local areas, they may develop and remain undetected for a long time, resulting in famine conditions. This type of a situation has been said to occur in the Chinese famine of 1958-61. Governments could, alternatively, also control food supplies by controlling *food distribution*. This is accomplished mainly by restricting the movement of food between regions or across borders. When such measures in the form of trade barriers are in effect, a region or a country may be partially or totally insulated resulting in a closed economy. In addition, there is the increasing likelihood of the rise of the "black market" for those who are willing to gamble for higher profits. The prohibition of private inter-regional trade between 1979 and 1988 in Ethiopia was a fundamental catalyst for the famines that

resulted, while the prohibition of export of cereals and rice from each province in India was largely responsible for the Bengal famine of 1943 (Sen 1981: 77; Devereux 1993: 134).

In addition to the two above mentioned ways, that of urban bias and agricultural regulation, there could be a number of factors which could contribute towards policy failure. Inappropriate policies can result, for instance, due to lack of resources, logistical constraints, lack of foreign exchange, high defence expenditure, inadequate importance attached to the agricultural sector, lack of foreign and national investments in infrastructure, etc. In addition, one must be aware that governments face competing priorities while making policy decisions, and that there are wide differences between and within governments. Policies are ultimately dependent on governments, priorities and thinking. Policies will thus change when governments, priorities, and thinking changes.

3.4 Institutional Failure: the failure of government intervention

Once a famine is underway, relief policies need to be set into motion mainly by governmental agencies. This does not mean that non-governmental agencies do not play a crucial role. The efforts of the Red Cross, CARE and Oxfam, to name a few, have been universally recognised. However, since we are concentrating on the role of the state, we need to understand how the state would view a situation of famine. There would seem to be no doubt that most famines today can be contained by an appropriate and early response by government authorities. Many recent famines in Africa have been attributed to government negligence. In the event of an imminent famine crisis, many governments have failed to re-allocate public resources for relief, and have also often failed to make an early request for relief from international donors. Looking at how governments generally view and react to famines, Walker (1989: 54-55) differentiates between famine as an abnormal catastrophe and famine as a temporary phenomenon. When the government understands (or prefers to view) famine as an *abnormal* phenomenon, then famine-relief measures do not necessarily form a top priority as regards competition for scarce national resources and attention. Many other

issues, domestic and international, may top the government's agenda. Civil war, a huge international debt, separation movements, etc., may qualify for more urgent attention than the onset of famine-like conditions in some remote area of the country. A consequence of this may be a reluctance to declare a situation of famine in the country or region. When the government regards famine as a *temporary* event, it is usually accompanied by a weak institutional response framework. While most Ministries may have well-established power-bases within the governmental apparatus, bodies dealing with famine are often temporary in nature, being formed by "seconding people from other ministries" (ibid.). Therefore such *ad hoc* famine bodies will not have the advantages of a more established organisation and will be prone to weakness in the formulation, co-ordination and the implementation of relief policy. It could also be the case that other competing government agencies have a vested interest in seeing that such famine bodies remain temporary and weak.[8] As a result, such bodies meant to combat famine may not possess enough resources or political leverage.

Institutional response failure can be caused by a number of factors, and Devereux (1993: 137, 188) classifies four such factors; (1) lack of and/or inadequate information (famine early warning system absent or non-functional); (2) lack of resources (for example, no foreign exchange to import food supplies, poor transport for distribution of food, etc.); (3) logistical constraints (e.g., poor roads, inaccessible areas); and (4) "callous disregard" (e.g. when governments feel no sense of responsibility to the victims or plainly, do not care. This may be on account of trying to avoid international embarrassment) or due to "malign intent" (e.g. when a government exhibits political hostility toward certain famine-affected communities). "In short, a famine occurs because of the government's ignorance, incapacity or callousness. It follows from this

[8] There are a number of areas, for instance under Ministries of Health (immunisation programme) and Agriculture (seeds and tools), where it may not be clear whether a temporary Famine Agency can interfere. The lines of responsibility between government departments and Ministries, during a famine, may be unclear. In addition, when famine receives international attention, there may be a sudden rush of hard

that that two preconditions are needed for effective state intervention, namely, that the government has both the *ability* and the *will* to prevent famine" (ibid.: 137). The remainder of this chapter will focus on these major aspects of the cause of institutional or response failure, namely, the lack of information and callous disregard on the part of the government. I will then go on to discuss how a successful relief policy involving active and timely governmental response may occur. A most appropriate way of pursuing this endeavour would be to first look at the different approaches of studying an Early Warning System (EWS).

3.5 Early Warning Systems (EWS) and Early Response

General agreement prevails with regard to the need to act urgently in order to diffuse threatening famines and 'early warning systems' make it possible for a government and other bodies to act without delay by providing information to policy makers on the threat of an imminent food crisis. In order to propel a nation to act, there is the need for convincing information and an imminent disaster to react to. But the longer the nation waits to intervene, the more costly will the resulting intervention prove to be. The notion of an early warning system and its usefulness is an old idea starting from the time when the British formulated the Indian Famine Codes[9] in the 1880s (Drèze

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currency and new equipment into the Famine Ministry, causing further inter-departmental rivalry (Walker 1989: 54).

[9] The Famine Commission formulated the Famine Codes of 1883, which were thereafter revised repeatedly. These codes were based on the principle that the government had to ensure that there would be no loss of lives during scarcities. Further, guidelines were forwarded to the local administration with regard to the anticipation, recognition and relief of famines (Hubbard 1988: 122; Walker 1989: 102). Detailed guidelines for various scenarios were provided relating to, among other things: the creation of a continuous flow of information, from every local area to the Provincial Government facing a state of scarcity or famine; the type and nature of relief works and the scale of wages to be paid; the organisation of gratuitous relief and the establishment of the system of village inspections so that the people knew of relief measures; suspension of land revenue and the grant of seed loans; relaxation of forest

1990a). Recent famines in Africa, however, has led to a renewed interest in attempting to formulate and arrive at various different EWS conceptions and models.

3.5.1. Definitions and dimensions

An EWS can be defined as "a system of data collection to monitor people's access to food, in order to provide timely notice when a food crisis threatens and thus to elicit appropriate response" (Davies, et al. 1991: 6).

> *A famine-oriented EWS warns the authorities "of the last stages of destitution of a population before hunger and starvation set in. Consequently, a famine-oriented EWS is often also relief-orientated, providing the information necessary to trigger emergency assistance, invariably food aid" (ibid.: 9).*

In a similar vein, Walker (1989: 52) remarks that "famine early warning should not be about predicting mass starvation. It must be geared to warning of the erosion of the subsistence base of the victim's society". While classifying various types of EWS, Walker (ibid.: 69-70), adopts a two-way classification between "trigger related" and "deprivation-related" warning systems. The "trigger-related" EWS points to "indicators of events which immediately precede the mass starvation phase of famine" and whose purpose is "to provide the information needed to mount an effective disaster relief effort". The "deprivation-related" EWS is concerned with "identifying and highlighting increased vulnerabilities which may result in mass starvation" (ibid.: 70). The first EWS is concerned with the mass starvation and relief syndrome, while the second EWS concentrates on the deprivation and development aspects (ibid.: 71). EWS are present at a *hierarchy* of levels, stretching from a global to a localised level. Table 3.1 provides an example of various levels of EWS schematically.

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laws for the duration of the famine; and protection of cattle (Brennan 1984: 104-105). The Famine Codes included detailed local contingency plans, backed by law, such that they were practicable enough for an Indian Civil Service (ICS) officer to administer in districts with populations sometimes exceeding one million. There were also

Table 3.1: Hierarchy of Early Warning Systems

Level	Examples
1. Global	Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS)
2. Regional	Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC)
3. National	most EWS
4. Sub-national	Agricultural Planning Unit (APU), Darfur, Sudan
5. Local	Suivi Alimentaire Delta Seno (SADS), Mopti, Mali

Source: Davies, et al. (1991: 7).

The objectives of EWS at these various levels range from global allocation of food aid to the targeting of various interventions at the individual, household or village levels. However, Davies, et al. (1991: 7) point out that the boundaries within this hierarchy are often blurred in that many national systems cover only drought-prone areas or exclude other areas that are difficult to monitor, like for instance, areas of conflict and semi-arid pastoral zones.

3.5.2. Formal EWS models versus alternative sources of warning

The variety of causes that a famine can develop from makes the task of a formal early warning system a difficult one. Drèze & Sen (1990b: 7) differentiate between *two* main alternative approaches of studying EWS. The first approach involves studying formal EWS models, while the other approach entails abandoning "the search for an adequate 'early warning model', and to concentrate on getting the necessary warnings in other ways" (ibid.). The aspect of anticipating famines can be dealt with under appropriate economic analyses focusing on the entitlement failures of specific occupation groups, instead of the reliance on a theory of famine that concentrates on food output and availability only (Sen 1987b: 14-15).[10] Formal EWS models use a variety of indicators

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institutionalised career incentives for such district officers to resolve and manage these crises in a successful manner (Harriss 1988: 161).

[10] "Sometimes famines have not been anticipated precisely because the ratio of food to population has remained high, despite the failure on the part of substantial sections of the population (usually belonging to vulnerable occupation groups) to retain the

based on the potential causes of food crisis and famine. Over the years, meteorological, natural resource, agricultural, nutritional and health, and socio-economic indicators have been taken into account. In the 1970s, there was a concentration on crop production and rainfall data, while in the 1980s much more emphasis was placed on nutritional and health data. In the 1990s, the shift has been towards socio-economic data concentrating on the following indicators: market indicators; migration; gathering, bartering and consumption data; and coping strategies (Davies, et al. 1991: 13, 26-35). Drèze & Sen (1990b: 7) remark that there exists "some agreement that the existing formal systems of early warning are seriously defective", the major reason being the multiple causes which can trigger off a famine: natural phenomenon (e.g. drought); economic phenomenon (e.g. widespread loss of income and employment); and the socio-political phenomenon (e.g. a civil war). Therefore, it is suggested that one way of tackling the situation would involve improving the formal early warning models (however inadequate they may) that have been devised so far (ibid.). This has been attempted, among others, by Desai (1988; 1990), who looks at the interplay between environmental, economic and socio-political factors and goes on to specify a model, taking into account the food production system, the non-food production (rural and urban) system, and the food delivery system. The alternative approach, one that Sen (1982; 1983; 1990a) has brought to the forefront, entails abandoning the search for a model altogether, and instead concentrate on getting necessary warnings in other forms.

> *One of the major influences on the actual prevention of famine is the speed and force with which early hunger is reported and taken up in political debates. The nature and freedom of the news media, and the power and standing of opposition parties, are of considerable importance in effective prevention of famines. (Sen 1990a: 42)*

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means of commanding enough food" (Sen 1987a: 14). Sen goes on to cite examples of such failures in anticipation in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Early warnings can, thus be provided by political parties in opposition and, "through an active news media reporting early cases of hardship and worsening hunger (Drèze & Sen 1990b: 7). Sen recognises the importance of detailed economic analyses but feels that an active and vigorous newspaper system "can often do more to prevent famines than complex early warning systems" (Sen 1991: 333). I will now, specifically discuss this form of early warning, as forwarded by Sen.

3.6 Anticipation and Action: Sen's Theory

The history of anti-famine policy in the world shows that there exists a great variety of successes as well as failures in anticipation, relief, and in the prevention of famines. Sen (1987b) identifies some of the reasons behind this. In addition to economic analyses of formal early warning models, other sources of information must be used in order to provide a system of early warning and prediction. At the outset, three features of this early warning and accountability process are envisaged by Sen:

a)"Widespread starvation does not hit an economy simultaneously in all sectors and in all regions". A sensitive system for early warning and prediction of famines can be made possible "by making discriminating use of available information". In this context, *active journalism* can usefully supplement the work of economic analysis, "by reporting early signs of distress with predictive significance" (ibid.: 14).

b)But another problem arises in this context; the *question of agency*. "Precisely who is to anticipate famines?" It seems quite obvious to Sen that the answer to this must be "those who provide relief and also take other steps for curing famine threats". And "[t]his role, naturally enough, falls primarily on the government of the country in question" (ibid.).

c)A third important factor is the following statement: "[H]ow soon, how urgently and how effectively the government will act will largely be determined by the *nature of politics of the country, and the forces that operate on the government to act without delay*" (ibid.).[11] It has been seen that governments have, very often, been

[11] My own emphasis in italics.

extremely slow to react and "insensitive to information coming in about threatening famines" (ibid.: 15). Hence, it follows that the extent of freedom enjoyed in society with regard to public knowledge of and involvement in social issues is absolutely vital.

> *Effective famine anticipation and counteracting policies are not merely matters of economic analysis, they are also significantly dependent on the nature of political agitprop and active journalism, which operate on the government, influencing its concerns and forcing its hand. (Sen 1987b: 15)*

What all this, in essence, amounts to is Sen's justifications for the promotion of a society with ample political freedom as a solution to famine.[12] Depending on the nature of the political structure, it is often possible for an inactive or uncaring government to escape accountability while not initiating a proper response during a famine. At the core, Sen's theory proposes that democratic traditions enable a government to be responsive and accountable; consequently, inappropriate policies, actions, and measures can be subject to criticism by the opposition and the media, and have an adverse effect on public opinion.

> *There are scarcely any cases in which famine has occurred in a country that is independent and democratic with an uncensored press. This absence of famines applies not only to rich economies, but also to poor but relatively democratic countries, such as post-independence India, Botswana or Zimbabwe. (Sen 1991: 333)*

3.6.1. The role of a free media

The freedom of free access to information and expression combined with the role played by a free press are essential if the government is to be given the “big push” forward in implementing necessary measures to prevent famines and thereby protect the basic right of life of its citizens. Therefore, it follows that an active, responsible and independent media, on the look-out for instances where a food crisis is on the

[12] Sen himself seldom uses the term "political freedom" and instead most often uses "democracy" or "democratic politics".

verge of taking place, can make the government and other relief agencies aware of situations that threaten to break out into major human disasters. An independent and critical media can first provide information of a deteriorating situation and then hold a government accountable if active and timely relief is not provided to the affected groups in the population. However, it must also be recognised that very often the press, and the media in general, limit their coverage of such crises to involve news items that are sensational. The "news-worthiness" of media coverage is a negative aspect of the media's role, which ignores the silent persistence of endemic hunger under "normal" (non-famine) situations. Further, for reasons of journalistic motivation, "the media tend to over-concentrate on stories of failure and disaster" (Drèze 1990b: 127). In spite of this, the media, undoubtedly, plays two crucial roles; the *informational* role (as discussed above); and the role of *accountability*, whereby the government is put under constant pressure to be responsive and sympathetic to the plight of the affected populations.

> *So long as famines pose no threat to a government's survival or credibility, effective action to prevent famine lacks the urgency to make an inescapable imperative for the government. The persistence of severe famines in many of the sub-Saharan countries - with both 'left wing' and 'right wing' governments - relates closely to the lack of democratic political systems. (Sen 1991: 333)*

3.6.2. The question of relief agency

Sen simply remarks that it is the government of the country concerned that bears the primary responsibility to carry out relief measures during a famine crisis. However, he does not distinguish between the diversity of incentives and capabilities for relief provision among the regional /local governments on the one hand, and the central government on the other. I feel a further emphasis needs to be made on this division of responsibility and the question of effective co-ordination of relief measures by the local and central governmental apparatus.

a)Local governments: Regional or local governments are likely to be better at assessing the relief needs of the population than central governments. Being closer to the affected populations, it is easier for them to suggest policies and programmes

for action, if and when needed. However, due to inadequate technical, administrative, and financial resources, they are often hindered from effectively designing and implementing relief activities (von Braun, et al. 1992: 27). Further, effective relief measures may often be hindered depending on the relations between the centre and the region. In a federal country like India, the regional states have their own respective state governments. When the government at the state level is formed by the same political party as at the centre or by a political ally, then co-operation and co-ordination become that much more easier. However, as is increasingly the case scenario in India, competing political parties may hold power at the centre and the state levels, which can lead to a tug-of-war for resources and for postponing tough decision-making for purposes of gaining political mileage.

b)The central government: It is, of course, reasonable to assume that central governments are better equipped with greater financial, technical, and administrative resources than local governments. This provides them with greater ability to design an overall relief strategy as well as the responsibility for making detailed plans for its implementation. However, there is an urgent need in most countries with food security problems to establish explicit co-operation at central government levels in policy and programme formulation. Further, there is the need for joint generation of information and analyses by agricultural, food-distribution, and health-related bodies at all levels. Problems of co-ordination are, thus, of the essence if an overall crisis relief strategy is to be successful. In many instances, implementation problems pose the greatest barrier as projects are implemented with little or no input from local communities, or are not modified to fit contrasting needs. In many developing countries, the structure of implementation is based on a heavy top-down model, where most policy decisions are taken at the central level. A more decentralised decision-making system would lead to a greater involvement of local governments (ibid.).

c)Voluntary and international agencies: Even though Sen abstains from discussing the division of responsibility and capability of relief measures within the various levels of government, he recognises the importance of international and national

voluntary and non-governmental organisations. Although the government of a country has the primary responsibility for implementing anti-famine actions and programmes, there are other organisations, institutions and groups which can play a decisive role in providing relief to famine victims. And one could mention here the crucial roles played over the years by OXFAM, War on Want, and Save the Children. Sen recognises the role of such organisations and feels that public scepticism concerning the efforts of such organisations is unjustified. Providing famine relief, according to him, is not a matter of 'all or nothing'.

> *Any help that is provided in reducing starvation and suffering and in recreating the economic means of subsistence has obvious benefits even though the proportion of the victim population covered by such activities may not be very large. (Sen 1987b: 15)*

International donor agencies usually benefit from a number of advantages in comparison to local governments in that they have considerable resources and technical expertise at their disposal. Further, they are not perceived as potential rivals for political power and so may have more freedom to implement particular policies and operate in particular regions. They may also have certain disadvantages, such as lack of knowledge of local conditions and customs, and less ability to respond quickly and flexibly to changing circumstances because of local bureaucratic constraints. Nevertheless, considerable famine relief has been provided over the years by intergovernmental, non-governmental, and international agencies. UNICEF, Oxfam, CARE, War on Want, the Red Cross, and various *ad hoc* institutions have played important roles in averting large scale food crises in India and in many parts of Africa.

3.6.3. Nature of politics in the country: India and China

Sen (1982; 1983) puts forward an interesting hypothesis, namely, that India's success in eliminating famines since independence is not primarily the result of raising food output per head, as it has often thought to be. In spite of lower food production than in many countries in the Sahel region in Africa, and a lower rate of economic growth than China, India has prevented famine. Indeed, in spite of near famine-like conditions in 1965-66, 1970-73 and during the more recent droughts in the 1980s and the 1990s, the

last major famine in India occurred in 1943, preceding independence in 1947. In contrast, and as a direct consequence of the disastrous policies of the "Great Leap Forward", China experienced a famine that lasted for three years (1958-61) and resulted in the deaths of 25-30 million people (Drèze & Sen 1989: 210-215; Ashton, et al. 1984; Bernstein 1984; Peng 1987; Riskin 1990).[13] The world was not even aware of the existence of such a famine until political reforms in China during the 1980s made available official statistics and closer study of that horrendous phenomenon by Chinese and foreign academics. The primary reason, according to Sen, for India's success at preventing famine is India's democratic political set-up, in contrast to China's dictatorship.[14]

Drèze & Sen (1989) have gone on to propose that the prevention of famines in India has been a direct result of the extensive "entitlement" protection efforts, that on numerous occasions have managed to sustain the rural Indian population through a crisis. The entitlement protection scheme in India relies on the operation of two complementary forces, viz., (1) "an *administrative system* that is intelligently aimed at recreating lost entitlements" (caused by floods, droughts, economic slumps, etc.), and (2) "a *political system* that acts as the prime mover in getting the administrative system to work as and when required" (ibid.: 122).[15] In essence, Sen & Drèze argue that "the administrative structure can be non-operational and ineffective in the absence of a

[13] A major point of controversy concerns the exact estimate of excess deaths during this famine. Figures forwarded by various researchers tend to range between 10 to 30 million casualties.

[14] When people began to starve in large numbers, a further two years would pass before the Communist Party was able to come to grips with this disaster. With no democratic safeguards that could provide "early warning" signs of distress, Mao was able to continue on the wrong track without really being questioned. The famine could have been arrested much earlier if senior party leaders had dared to stand up to Mao. But already early on in the 'Great Leap Forward', Mao had warned that dissent would not be tolerated. Political, as well as other dissenters were systematically imprisoned and tortured. In addition to the millions who perished, millions were arrested and sent to death camps or fled their homes (Becker 1996).

political triggering mechanism" (ibid.: 123). A similar political triggering mechanism did not (and still does not) exist in China which was the main reason why the Chinese authorities, once they had initiated relief measures to combat the tragic Chinese famine, were not held accountable for their failure and for the inappropriate and inadequate nature of the relief projects.[16]

3.7 A Critique of Sen's theory

Arguments can be forwarded that emphasise various aspects, other than or in addition to political freedom, that an contribute towards explaining the continued threat of famine persisting in many countries. Some see *colonialism* to have increased the famine 'vulnerability' of poor rural households. Certain elements of colonial policy persist even upon independence in certain countries, like for instance: an emphasis on the extraction of raw materials and minerals for export; agriculture divided into a male-dominated cash-crop sector based for export and a female-dominated subsistence sector; dependence on a few commodities for foreign exchange; and most importantly, an "artificial system of nation states with many potential ethnic conflicts within and between those states" (Hareide 1991: 91-92). The role of colonialism in creating or helping the re-emergence of new conflicts, especially those based on ethnic and/ or religious grounds is an important aspect that must be kept in mind. Many newly independent countries have struggled in their initial years of independence with trying to

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[15] My emphasis in italics.

[16] One by one, the inappropriateness of the new measures unfolded: the popularisation of new breeds and seeds failed; new methods of deep ploughing and high-density planting with wheat, cotton, sorghum, millet and every other important crop resulted in dead seedlings; major setbacks were suffered when China tried to mass-produce and use machinery based on impractical designs; pest control programmes in order to exterminate birds, rats, insects and flies were launched in 1958, but without the birds to prey on them; insects multiplied thus damaging crops; a series of gigantic irrigation schemes were conceived which, almost without exception, seldom worked nor endured; population control schemes were not advocated as Mao, in fact, feared labour shortage (Drèze & Sen 1989: 211-215; Becker 1996: 59-82).

cope with civil unrest within their borders. This has not helped the cause of famine prevention policies. Thus, it is argued that traditional famine coping strategies involving crisis responses from civil society and the local markets was, over time, gradually destroyed through colonialism and imperialism (ibid.: 126).

Some advocates of *economic growth* have point out that the increase in food production and food availability are underestimated in an analysis emphasising political freedom in famine prevention. The role played by economic development must not be underestimated (Bhalla 1994). It is argued that economic growth can create inequality, and the drive towards economic growth can leave some people behind not just from mainstream social and economic progress but can also marginalise or deprive them of their meagre resources. When this process of marginalisation continues over a period of time, certain groups in the population will become impoverished and consequently, vulnerable to famine (Sahli 1981: 493).[17] In addition, the present state of external economic exploitation can also be seen as a major cause of vulnerability and famine. There has been a worsening in the terms of trade, especially for the poorest of the developing countries, caused to a large extent by excessive investments in the cash-crop sector at the expense of peasant agriculture.[18] Sen's argument in this context is that guaranteeing economic stability must go hand in hand with the provision of social security. He admits that while famines and endemic hunger can be eliminated with economic expansion, like in the case of South Korea, there is persistence of hunger in Brazil despite spectacular economic growth. Further, there are also examples where governments in much poorer countries, like Sri Lanka and China, have been able to

[17] Some have argued that post-colonial capitalist development entails a disintegration of the so-called 'moral economy'. "The growth of commodity production and market relations has strengthened food security in some aspects, but has also undermined the re-distributive guarantees of the pre-colonial economy, replacing them with an uncertain market mechanism" (Swift 1989: 12).

[18] Hareide (1991: 95) emphasises the heavy debt burden scenario in low income African countries during the 1970s and the 1980s, whose debts were almost seven times higher than low income countries in Asia.

deal effectively with endemic hunger without having to wait for substantial economic growth. The primary reason for this success has been the public provisioning of food and other necessities by the government (Sen 1987b: 20-21). Nevertheless, one does recognise that certain countries and regions are unfortunate enough to be endowed with certain economic short-comings mainly in the form of resource constraints that even a society with political freedom finds difficulty in correcting.

3.7.1. Politics and benefits of famine

Alamgir (1978) has depicted the situation in post-independence Bangladesh - for the group including poor peasants, agricultural labourers, petty professionals and low paid fixed income groups - as that of a trap between the "poverty line" and the "famine line". Some members of this group continue to fall below the famine line and perish either directly due to lack of basic food or indirectly as a result of famine related diseases. However, the gap between the poverty and the famine levels are far lesser than in colonial times as the government has been successful in keeping such events at a relatively low level except in 1974, when death due to famine reached an alarming level.

> *[t]he exploitative elements in the society, in collaboration with international capital keep the situation under control by averting excessive death by starvation but at the same time ensure that the broad masses remain sufficiently weak not to be able to challenge the authority of the existing state power and its allies. (Alamgir 1978: 87)*

Politically the government cannot afford a widespread famine situation. But what it can afford is a situation whereby vulnerable groups are pushed below the poverty and minimum needs line towards death; this, as long as it takes place individually and slowly. Thus, it is possible to have large sections of the population below the poverty line under normal times; whereas when vulnerable groups fall below the famine line, there is suddenly an increase in concern due to the fear of political embarrassment as the reputation of the regime abroad is at stake. Alamgir terms the situation in Bangladesh as one of "a case of below poverty level equilibrium trap" (ibid.). In a similar tone, Rangasami (1985) has suggested that famine is a "process" which actually

benefits one section of the community while the other section loses out.[19] She comments that famine is a process whereby the victim community is steadily deprived of its assets and its ability to labour as economic, military, political, social and psychological pressure is exerted (ibid.: 1749). With regard to India, Rangasami writes that "the state intervenes only to halt the starvation process but will not consider intervention in the economic process", and this leads to widespread poverty and recurrent famine among one section of the community while the other reaps benefits (ibid.: 1797). Sen has been aware of this aspect and has himself pointed out the shortcomings of his emphasis on democratic rights in preventing famines. He writes the following:

> *There is no relief for the third of the Indian rural population who go to bed hungry every night and who lead a life ravaged by regular deprivation. The quiet presence of non-acute, endemic hunger leads to no newspaper turmoil, no political agitation, no riots in the Indian parliament. The system takes it in its stride. (Sen 1983: 757)*

He also writes that while "the elections, the newspapers, and the political liberties work powerfully against dramatic deprivations and new sufferings", they easily allow "the quiet continuation of an astonishing set of persistent injustices" (Sen 1986: 41). Sen admits that a situation whereby endemic malnutrition and hunger takes place quietly, is a feature that needs to qualify India's otherwise exceptional record at famine prevention. The interesting aspect of the Indian political system, for instance, is that it cannot afford a famine "both because it would be too acute and because it cannot take place quietly" (ibid.).

3.7.2. The withholding of relief : some possible explanations

If one subscribes to the view that famines can actually be *beneficial* to certain groups in society, then it follows that these groups would also have an interest in preventing

[19] Whether famine is a distinct "event" or a continuous "process" has been a long-standing debate. While Drèze & Sen (1989) emphasise famine as a disastrous event, Rangasami (1985) and Walker (1989), among others, feel it is more of a "process".

effective relief. By withholding crisis relief the price of grain increases, and in addition, costs of labour for the government are lowered. Lobbying by merchants had a great impact on the British decision to not import food during the Irish famine. Similarly grain merchants in Malawi lobbied against relief in 1949 (Keen 1994: 7). Blockades against food supplies and other forms of relief has often functioned as weapons of war in both domestic and international conflicts. Wiseberg (1974), and Okpoko (1986) have documented this aspect that took place during the Nigerian civil war of 1967-70, when the blockade of Biafra caused hunger within rebel camps. Starvation-induced submission thus, comprised a major aspect of government policy. By withholding relief, famine can be contained at certain locations, thus hindering and discouraging migration, something that almost inevitably follows when people start "wandering aimlessly"[20] in search of food. The reason for this may be to minimise the side-effects of famine like, for instance, "the perceived threat to the health and security of local people posed by famine migrants" (Keen 1994: 7). But de Waal (1989) shows how there existed hostility towards migrants during famine in Darfur, Sudan. The withholding of relief from certain areas actually led to unusually large concentrations of people in the presence of inadequate health and sanitation services, and was instrumental in causing excess mortality as a result of health crises. Drèze & Sen (1989) essentially believe that the primary reason for withholding relief is "negligence or smugness or callousness on the part of the non-responding authorities" (ibid.: 262). Keen (1994) feels that such a view overlooks the fact that states and politically powerful groups may *actively promote* famine by actively obstructing relief for rational purposes of their own. Accordingly, "the Drèze and Sen conception of the state is essentially a liberal one, in which the failure to act in the public interest is perceived as a failure of public policy. A certain amount of interest among 'the public' is assumed" (ibid.: 5). Indeed, Drèze and Sen are of the view that although disputes may arise about the division of the benefits, "public action for social security is in some sense beneficial for all groups" (Drèze & Sen 1989: 17). I do not see anything

[20] an important symptom of famine.

wrong with a liberal conception of what success and failure entail in terms of famine policy. In this sense, the only reason why Keen objects to such a conception is due to the benefits that actually accrue to certain sections of the population. But, for all practical reasons, this cannot justify calling a ordinarily failed famine policy (that does not meet the needs of the affected masses) a success merely because some people benefit from them. Keen's criticism of Drèze and Sen in this connection is unfounded.

3.8 Summary

The chapter started by identifying the political causes of famine and I decided to concentrate on two aspects of government policy failure that can result in famines: the lack of information and consequently, an absent or inoperational early warning system (EWS), and a "malign intent" or "callous disregard" on the part of the authorities in power. These policy failures were discussed under the headings of "inappropriate policies" and "failure of government intervention". However, the response failure aspect has been accorded primary focus and I have discussed the crucial role played by a well-functioning EWS, both formal and informal. Sen's theory emphasises the informal aspect of EWS, which political parties in opposition and an independent media represent. Thus, the main argument thus far has been as follows:

> *With a relatively free press, with periodic elections, and with active opposition parties, no government can escape severe penalty if it delays preventive measures and allows a real famine to occur ... the diverse political freedoms that are available in a democratic state, including regular elections, free newspapers, and freedom of speech ... must be seen as the real force behind the elimination of famines. (Sen 1990b: 50)*

In taking a brief historical look at some past famines - like for instance, "The Great Hunger" of 1841 in Ireland[21], the Ukrainian Famine of 1933-34, and the Ethiopian

[21] The natural cause of the Irish famine (1845-51) was the almost total destruction of a staple crop, the potato, by a parasite and an estimated 1.5 million people starved to death or were killed by famine diseases (Aykroyd 1974: 30). Many, like Woodham-Smith (1962), Ambiranjan (1978), and Bernstein (1995), have argued that what initially started as a natural cause, was accentuated by the short-sighted relief policies

famines of 1972-1975 and 1984-1985 - one can see important arguments in support for the importance of political freedom in famine-prevention. While non-interference by the government was dictated by Adam Smith's *laissez faire* doctrines in Ireland, *urban bias* and the cruelty of Stalin's collectivisation efforts were responsible for almost seven million deaths in the Ukraine alone, as Stalin diverted resources and food from the villages in order to feed the cities and finance the purchase of Western industrial equipment.[22] More recently, when the northern regions of Ethiopia (especially Wollo) experienced recurrent crop failure induced by drought, and famine conditions resulted during 1972-73, the imperial regime of Haile Selassie hardly reacted, turning a deaf ear to calls by academics at Addis Ababa University, among others, for relief in order to prevent the spread of the famine.[23] When famine began to take root in Ethiopia again during early 1982, the military regime was slow to react. And, when a full blown crisis took place in 1984-85, the regime was more concerned with celebrating the tenth anniversary of the fall of the imperial order, which cost the country almost 100 million dollars, instead of launching timely relief operations.[24] In recent years, North Korea

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of the British government, whose economic policies were much influenced by the 'laissez faire' of Adam Smith. The government was reluctant to intervene at first, and when relief measures were undertaken by the government to offset the loss of the potato crop and feed the starving masses, they were inadequate, harsh and often ill-conceived.

[22] Errors in planning and misjudgements in administrations followed on a large scale and Stalin did not even declare a famine. It turned out to be a holocaust, murder by mass decree (Dando 1981: 141-142; Hadzewycz, et al. 1983; Bernstein 1984).

[23] It was only in late 1973 that foreign aid started arriving in Ethiopia after media reports, especially by television journalist, Jonathan Dimbleby, which exposed the seriousness of the situation and the governmental attempts to cover their inappropriate and inadequate measures (Kumar 1990: 179-181).

[24] A point made by Dalit W. Giorgis, a former commissioner of relief and rehabilitation in Ethiopia and a member of the central committee of the Worker's Party (cited in Freedom House 1990: 51). Mr. Giorgis also points to the fact that if the

provides an extreme example of the strong association between lack of political freedom and famines.[25] Requiring one million tonnes of grain, the North Korean regime is confident that the famine will be contained. It is notable that the regime does not face the threat of domestic criticism from either political parties or the media and continues to hold power in spite of serious policy failures. The Irish, the Ukrainians, and the Ethiopians did not enjoy political freedom while North Koreans continue to have their freedoms suppressed. Political freedom is undoubtedly an important factor is famine prevention as it provides, in addition to formal economic models of early warning, an alternative system of early warning and also holds a government accountable for policy failures. In the following chapters of this thesis, an attempt will be made to analyse whether political freedom is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for famine prevention. So far, I have basically followed Sen's line of reasoning, although I prefer to use the concept of "political freedom" in a narrow sense to Sen's use of "democracy". Some of the objections that can be raised to Sen's basic argument will be discussed in the concluding chapter of this thesis. But for the time being, it is important to arrive at a workable and precise definition of political freedom in order to test Sen's contention, which is the very purpose of the following chapter.

Ethiopian government had made an international appeal at the highest level sooner, other donor countries would have probably responded better (ibid.).

[25] Ever since the Autumn of 1995, North Korea has faced famine conditions, brought on initially by floods. After letting the situation deteriorate for almost two years, the regime finally decided to appeal for international assistance in 1996-97. Kim Hyong U, the North Korean ambassador to the United Nations, insisted in an interview that the main cause of the food shortage was natural disaster and that this crisis was only "temporary". (Kim Hyong U, in an interview with Ralph Begleiter, *CNN World News*, 04.02.97)

4. Political Freedom

4.1 Introduction

Having scanned a considerable portion of the enormous literature available on freedom and liberty (I shall use both terms to mean the same), it seems difficult to identify some single core meaning of freedom which can then be conceptualised or variously interpreted. As Berlin so aptly put it, "almost every moralist in human history has praised freedom. Like happiness and goodness, like nature and reality, the meaning of this term is so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems able to resist" (Berlin 1969: 121). "Freedom" with its synonym, "liberty", tends to be used often to designate whatever actions, institutions, policies, or political system one happens to value most, from obedience and law to economic well-being. Dictionary definitions of "freedom" and "liberty" have, for the major part, been categorised in two ways. A first feature of freedom pertains to the quality or state of being free: as the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action; liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another (independence); and the quality or state of being exempt or released. A second feature refers to a political right, franchise, or privilege, and consequently concerns the enjoyment of political and civil liberties. In addition, freedom and liberty are often referred to mean the power or condition of acting without compulsion. Freedom is seen to have a broad range of application from total absence of restraint to merely a sense of not being unduly hampered or frustrated, while liberty is viewed to suggest release from former restraint or compulsion.[26]

Over the centuries a number of features have been identified with freedom and liberty: lack of coercion, the presence of opportunities, the ability to do what one wants, self-determination, rational action, and self-realisation (Brenkert 1991: 5). It is

[26] Various sources have been used in this context. Among them are the following: the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1997), Merriam-Websters Dictionary (1997), and the Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus (1990).

not obvious, however, that one could plausibly argue that all are conceptualisations, albeit in various ways, of some self-same concept (or core meaning) of freedom. On the contrary, they can be seen, according to Brenkert, to constitute more than one, and perhaps several, concepts of freedom (ibid.).[27] An interesting observation in this context is that, even though there is an overwhelming agreement on the inherent value of liberty today, there seems to be great disagreement on what liberty is. Lawrence Crocker (1980), while expressing this dilemma writes that, "it is this fact that explains how it is possible for the most violently opposed political parties to pay homage to the 'same' ideal" (ibid.: 1). Hence, the task in this chapter is to discuss various conceptualisations of political freedom, with the ultimate aim of arriving at a formulation suitable for examining the role of political freedom in famine prevention.

4.2 Freedom and Politics

It is important to examine the connection between freedom and political freedom as many writers have not clearly separated the two concepts. What seems abundantly clear is the dominant role played by politics in the enjoyment of freedom in general. Freedom has always been a major subject in political philosophy and one seldom finds theories of government which ignore the effect of political institutions upon freedom. With regard to freedom and politics, Hannah Arendt remarked almost three and a half decades ago that, "The field where freedom has always been known, not as a problem, to be sure, but as a fact of everyday life, is the political realm" (Arendt 1961: 146). It seems quite obvious that not every form of human interaction and not every type of society is characterised by freedom. Where individuals live together in a non-political body as, for instance, in the privacy of the household or in tribal societies, the factors

[27] Indeed, there seem to be various conceptions of freedom, emphasising different aspects of human activity. Mortimer Adler and the Institute for Philosophical Research (1961), have for instance, identified "five subjects of controversy" pertaining to freedom. These are: the Circumstantial Freedom of Self-Realisation, an Acquired Freedom of Self-Perfection, A Natural Freedom of Self-Determination, Collective Freedom, and finally, Political Freedom.

ruling their actions and conduct are not freedom but the necessities of life and concern for its preservation.

> *Without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance....Freedom as a demonstrable fact and politics coincide and are related to each other like two sides of the same matter. (ibid.: 149)*

Most authors emphasise, with regard to freedom, its great variance of meaning. But Sartori points out, that "if political freedom is disentangled from other freedoms, what is striking is its continuity and persistence of meaning over time" (Sartori 1987: 301).[28] Political freedom is most often used, in a narrower sense, to refer to those liberties on which the political process depends in order to function properly. Thus, it is said that in order for democracy to function in the spirit of its rationale, a broad range of liberties is required. Sartori writes that "political freedom is not of the psychological, intellectual, moral, social, economic, or legal type. It presupposes these freedoms - it also promotes them - but it is not the same as these" (ibid.: 298).[29] Even though one normally associates political freedom

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[28] Thus what Sartori seems to advocate is the isolation of the concept of political freedom from the general umbrella of freedom, in order to be able to study the concept with a reasonable consistency in meaning.

[29] Various formulations of what political freedom signifies have been forwarded over the years. Friedrich, for instance distinguishes between three dimensions of political freedom - *independence*, *participation*, and *creation* (Friedrich 1963: 850). Rossiter's general idea of liberty today (which can also apply to political freedom), lies in four notions: *independence* (a situation of minimum external restraints), *privacy* (an attempt to secure autonomy), *power*, and *opportunity* (Rossiter 1958:18). A useful classification is provided by Brenkert (1991: 139), who argues for a model of political freedom as *empowerment*, which again is the effective ability of individuals to exercise their right to political self-determination. There are accordingly, three inter-connected aspects to political freedom as empowerment: *entitlement* (to be free is for one's self-determination to be protected and guaranteed); *involvement* (individuals may, and significantly do, effectively participate in the determination by institutions of which they are members); and *enablement* (individuals have available to them various opportunities and means required to carry out activities essential to their lives as political beings).

with democratic governments where there exists the rights to vote, to participate in politics and to influence government policies, democracy is not synonymous with freedom. Even in certain non-democratic countries there exists a substantial degree of freedom as well as some measure of respect towards basic human rights.[30] There may be a number of reasons why some so-called democracies fail to observe or protect the basic rights and freedoms of its citizens.[31] These may include wars, insurgencies (often ethnically based), and the influence of military establishments in the political process. The connection between democracy and political freedom is, thus, not easily defined as being synonymous. Political freedom is an essential component of democracy, and in spite of many imperfections, democracies still continue to guarantee the best conditions for the enjoyment and expansion of important freedoms. But by using the much narrower concept of political freedom I wish to focus primarily upon the role of political parties in opposition and an independent media in helping to combat famines.

4.2.1. Some preliminary definitions

A preliminary dictionary-based definition of political freedom could sound as follows:

> *Political freedom relates to the freedom associated in purposes of governance. It is the freedom from arbitrary or despotic control and involves the positive enjoyment of various social, political, or economic rights and privileges.*

This is a rather wide definition and includes the positive enjoyment of social and economic rights, in addition to political rights. Inasmuch as this enjoyment of the

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[30] Thus, in certain non-democratic societies governed by, for instance, a "mild" dictatorship, citizens may be left alone and not interfered with in certain areas. A classic case of a mild dictatorship is Singapore. Many other Asian countries, like Malaysia, South Korea, and Indonesia have during some period or the other had/ continue to have similar political systems.

[31] The boundary between "democracy" and "non-democracy" is often a blurred one, and beyond this distinction there lies a much broader range of variation in political systems. Further complications arise by the constraints on political activity, organisation, and expression that may often, in reality, make a system much less democratic than it appears on paper.

various categories of rights are important, it is, nevertheless, crucial to highlight the political aspect of freedom from such a definition in order to gain a fuller understanding of the concept. Mortimer Adler provides a descriptive and comprehensive definition of political liberty, which helps start this process of inquiry.

> *Political freedom is "a freedom which is possessed only by citizens who, through the right to suffrage and the right of juridical appeal against the abuses of government, are able to participate in making the positive law under which they live and to alter the political institutions of their society" (Adler 1961: 8).*

Political liberty, in this view, applies only to those living under constitutional government and have the status of citizenship. By being citizens, they are conferred the power provided by suffrage, i.e., the power to participate in forming the public will, in making law, and in the creation and shaping of political institutions of the society in which they live (Adler 1961: 136). Thus, provided the favourable conditions that enable universal suffrage in society, "good and bad men alike possess the freedom that consists in the power which the individual has to realise his private will in public affairs (ibid.). Most definitions of political liberty emphasise that those who reap the benefits of freedom must be citizens. This is, for example, a view also taken by Axel Hadenius (1992), who goes on to provide a more detailed definition of the freedoms involved in the concept of political liberty.

> *Political freedoms "pertain to the actual right of all citizens to express their opinions openly, in speech, in writing and in various media, to organise parties and other associations and to engage without hindrance in political activities in the form of meetings, demonstrations, strikes, etc. At the same time we must consider the incidence of political violence and harsh reprisals" (Hadenius 1992: 51-52).*

This definition has the benefit of providing a concrete and operational concept of the term by specifying certain liberties that are held to be crucial: freedom of expression and opinion; freedom of assembly and association; and freedom from arbitrary control. A natural question at this stage would be to question whether suffrage is vital to concept of political freedom. Two aspects of the discussion of the definition of political freedom, undertaken so far, need to be highlighted. In spite of

suggestions to the contrary, political liberty as a distinct form of freedom has been established. If one acknowledges this then two further points need to be emphasised. First, political liberty is dependent on an individual having the "good fortune" to live in a society governed constitutionally. This, in contrast to a despotic society. Second, an additional "good fortune" that strengthens the case of political liberty is an individual's admittance to the citizenship of that society and enjoying the rights and privileges (especially the right to suffrage) that comes along with it. It is thus, argued that political liberty is inseparable from the status of citizenship and also that such freedom is exercised "only in those specifically political activities through which the individual *qua* citizen participates in the business of government" (Adler 1961: 149).

The natural question that can be raised at this stage is whether individuals or groups that are disbarred from suffrage on account of, for instance, insanity, infancy, criminality, race, nativity, etc., also possess political freedom. A popular answer to this problem is that these individuals do not possess political freedom, but what they do enjoy is *personal freedom*, i.e. they may be free to pursue their activity in matters not prescribed by law. And even if they find that the laws go against what they believe is right, it is argued that, these individuals should acknowledge the authority of the law and bring their own will into harmony with it. However, political liberty involves much more than merely possessing and exercising the right to vote in elections. Political liberty, in this sense, would involve greater participation by the citizen in political affairs; a citizen who is empowered or provided with the opportunity "to register his individual will effectively, though often indirectly, in the shaping of the political institutions, the public policies, and the positive laws of his society" (ibid.: 149-50). In my view, this over-emphasis on citizenship as a pre-requisite for political freedom needs to be qualified especially if the importance of political freedom is to be seen in regard to an individual's or a group's right to freedom from hunger and famines. The simple reason for this is that groups vulnerable to poverty, hunger, starvation and famine can include both citizens as well as non-citizens. By using a too narrow definition of political freedom as pertaining only to citizens, one takes for granted that these vulnerable groups not only exercise their political freedoms

consistently (which may very well be the case), but also that the members of these groups are necessarily official citizens of a country. Refugees and unregistered voters are totally excluded if we apply such a rigid definition. Nevertheless, one must acknowledge the fact that with regard to famine prevention, one would not normally expect the affected populations alone to express discontent over inadequate relief facilities, etc. One expects other individuals, as members of political parties and other organisations and as members of an independent press, to exercise their political freedoms on behalf of the affected masses. Therefore, political freedom in this thesis will primarily refer to the ability of civil society in general to exercise their political freedom on behalf of the victims of famine.

4.2.2. "Negative" and "Positive" notions of freedom

In order to limit the discussion on freedom and to show how the concept of political freedom can be applied to the study of the right to food and protection against famines, I feel a compelling need, at the outset, to locate political freedom within the rather well-known categories of negative and positive freedoms. The negative view looks at freedom to be the absence of interference by other human beings on an individual's actions. This is a manner in which freedom has been mainly understood in the Anglo-American "liberal" tradition, with proponents ranging from Thomas Hobbes and J. S. Mill in the 17th and 19th centuries respectively, to contemporary philosophers like John Rawls and Robert Nozick. The positive view sees freedom in terms of the presence of various possibilities and opportunities enabling individual capability to do something. Of the many political theorists who have held this doctrine one can mention a tradition from Rousseau to Marx and Marcuse.

In his classic discussion of freedom in "Two Concepts of Liberty", Isaiah Berlin (1969) undertakes a sharp distinction between the concepts of ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ freedom. This distinction has been held to be crucial to different approaches to the idea of freedom and its implications, although some, like Oppenheim (1961) and

MacCallum (1967), among others, refuse to accept this familiar distinction.[32] The *negative* view advocates freedom with regard to independence of an individual from interference by other persons, institutions or governments. "I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others" (Berlin 1969: 122). It thus follows that mere incapacity to attain a goal is not lack of political freedom. According to the *positive* view, freedom entails what an individual is actually able to do or to be. Positive freedom is the "freedom which consists in being one's own master" or of being an "instrument of my own, not of other men's, acts of will" (ibid.: 131). Berlin believes that this conception of positive freedom is synonymous with knowing what is rationally or ideally best to do or what is necessary. This idea is then connected with that of a rational "higher self", which has the task of controlling and disciplining the lower or irrational self or the "passions". This higher or "real" self is then associated with "something wider than the individual...as a 'social whole' of which the individual is an element or aspect..."; this entity is then identified as being the 'true' self which, by imposing its collective, or 'organic', single will upon its recalcitrant 'members', achieves its own, and therefore their 'higher' freedom (ibid.: 132). When the political state is seen to embody such a higher rationality, it can justify coercing others for their own sake, arguing that this will make them do what they would have otherwise chosen for themselves had they been fully rational. Having said this, Berlin feels that positive freedom can lead to totalitarian or coercive regimes and instead advises democratic states to be concerned with negative freedom. This is seen further when he writes that "the essence of the notion of liberty, both in the 'positive' and the 'negative' senses, is the holding off of something or someone" (ibid.: 158). It is thus, quite apparent that Berlin focuses on

[32] For Felix Oppenheim, the concept of 'social freedom,' is both "freedom from" and "freedom to". Some authors, like Sartori (1987), feel that the term "negative" has a derogatory sense attached to it and gives the impression of political freedom as an inferior kind of liberty. Instead, the terms, "defensive" or "protective" freedom are preferred.

negative freedom (the lack of coercion), rather than *positive freedom* (self-mastery or self-determination).

4.3 Locating Political Freedom within the Negative and Positive Notions

Discussing the evolution of political freedom under various schools of thoughts and locating them under the simple categories of liberal, conservative and radical models would lead to the criticism that such models are mere abstractions. However, Brenkert (1991) has attempted to do just that, arguing that such models are abstractions only in the sense that none of them have been proposed by a single thinker. In attempting to see whether political freedom can be located in either one or both of the negative-positive distinction, I have found it useful to use Brenkert's classification.[33]

At the core of the *Liberal* tradition lies the view that people are free only when they are not subject to constraint by others. As John Locke remarked, "for liberty is to be free from restraint and violence from others" (Locke 1982: Section. 57). Hobbes too, tends to bend more towards the ‘negative’ concept of freedom when he writes, "liberty, or freedom, signifieth, properly, the absence of opposition; by opposition, I mean external impediments of motion". In connection to a person, liberty "consistieth in this, that he finds no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire and inclination to do" (Hobbes 1962: 159). Similarly, Benn and Peters (1965: 230) also can be seen as belonging to this view when they suggest that "in general, when we say that a person is free, we mean that, if a person *wants* to do something, he will not be impeded by some

[33] In order to grasp the essential features of the intricately complex political movements of liberalism, conservatism and radicalism, a certain amount of abstraction is, I believe, necessary. By using the liberal, conservative and radical models in this discussion, I will be able to highlight the emphasis on negative and/or positive freedoms within these three major schools of thought that have dominated the sphere of politics.

kind of constraint or limitation".[34] Finally, Berlin himself falls within the liberal tradition.

> *Liberty... is not incompatible with some kinds of autocracy... Freedom in this sense is not, at any rate logically, connected with democracy or self-government. (Berlin 1969: 129-30)*

We could, therefore, assume that liberal or negative freedom is not primarily political since it does not require any particular political system or a specific type of society. The strengths of this negative or "freedom from" view can be identified with its concern for the protection of individuals from the forces of government and society. However, many have argued that it leaves out certain essential features of the concept, like, for instance, that of 'positive freedom' (Brenkert 1991; Gould 1988). Liberal freedom aims to seek out those forces that constrain individuals and in doing so it describes society as one in which other people, and social and political institutions, pose as constant sources of threat.

The *Conservative* tradition reflects a set of concrete, historically inherited inter-relations (rights) and liberties by which power is dispersed in ways such that it is not exercised arbitrarily by members of society. It has its prominent exponents in Burke, Nisbet and Oakeshott, who link political freedom with tradition, law, order, and a government which openly defends diverse moral and religious beliefs.

> *[L]iberty, the only liberty I mean, is a liberty connected with order: that not only exists along with order and virtue, but which cannot exist at all without them. It inheres in good and steady government, as in its substance and vital principle. (Burke, quoted in Brenkert 1991)*

According to Brenkert (1991: 32), the conservative tradition does not provide a negative concept of freedom in that it does not simply spell out an arena within which the individual is free from interference by others. On the other hand, it is not a positive concept of freedom either, in that it does not specify who or what controls a person's

[34] It must be mentioned that they too recognise that this interpretation of freedom is rather vague and therefore needs to be qualified.

actions, and does not focus on self-mastery or self-government.[35] This tradition has the strength that it emphasises the fact that the society (or community, or nation) in which individuals enjoy rights and liberties, disperses power and this power shall not be exercised arbitrarily. However, it is difficult to distinguish among the customs and traditions which form the basis of political freedom. Freedom of speech is often not seen to be very crucial and may even be curtailed when it attacks or questions the basic values and morals of society or simply proves to be offensive to people. As Oakeshott (1962b: 43-46) remarks, "the major part of mankind has nothing to say". Further problems occur when they question the 'one man one vote' principle. By advocating inequality in political rights for the masses, the conservative tradition runs into further problems.

In contrast to the two previous traditions, the *Radical* tradition believes that people's freedom is restrained by the oppressive and irrational nature of the capitalist system. Individuals may need to be forced to be free while a different socio-economic and political system is devised. Political freedom is, thus, basically summed up in Lenin's words.

> *While the state exists there is no freedom. When freedom exists there will be no state. (Lenin 1966: 343)*

As conservatives and liberals disagree about what the political system should do to protect or enhance freedom, radicals seem to reject such political frameworks altogether. Marcuse (1969: 6-7) argues that radical freedom rejects political freedom, the state, and civil society, and accordingly, these ought to be replaced by a communal system that allows a *human freedom*, not just political freedom.[36] Hence, this tradition

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[35] Conservatives have by and large advocated rule by an elite, an aristocracy, fearing any rule by the masses. Nisbet (1986: 40), for instance, claims that "one will search the history of conservative thought in vain for anything resembling a one man one vote philosophy". Burke (1973: 64) and Oakeshott (1962a) air similar views in that only an elite can be in possession of the knowledge and understanding of the matters of government since they have experience, training and commitment.

[36] cited in Brenkert (1991).

sees freedom requiring both, a new social order (a new communal context) and a new individual, and this is why radicals often speak of "liberation" or "emancipation" instead of liberty or freedom (Brenkert 1991: 102). Unlike conservatives and liberals, radicals do not believe that an individual can be free within various political forms of government. Human freedom can be achieved within a society whose activities and structures are rationally self-determined by its members (ibid.: 113-114). Cohen (1981) and Lukes (1985) have argued (albeit controversially), that radicals like Marx adhere to a negative concept of freedom, while others like Sen (1987a) feel Marx expounds the positive view.[37] The unique aspect of the radical tradition lies in the fact that it stresses the importance of socio-cultural and economic conditions. But even as they reject the domain of politics, radicals (in line with the conservative tradition) emphasise an elite rule.[38] This aspect renders the radical view problematic as one of the most important aspects of political freedom lies in the principle of equality in political rights for the masses, no matter what stage of development the society is going through.

4.4 A Critique of Berlin's Distinction

Berlin, in essence rejects the notion of positive freedom as leading to totalitarian or coercive regimes and goes on to define negative freedom rather narrowly as merely the absence of external constraint imposed by other people on one's actions. A major problem with such an emphasis is that one may be free of external constraint by others

[37] Radicals themselves reject the separate identification of negative and positive freedom. They see the two types as being bounded together, thereby creating a new unique category (Brenkert 1991: 105).

[38] Marx and Engels (1976: 90) comment that "the state is the form in which the individuals of a ruling class assert their common interests". Lenin (1966: 287) feels that the state is a "special organisation of force; it is the organisation of violence for the suppression of some classes". Further, even universal suffrage in the hands of the bourgeois is an instrument of domination - it does not express the will of the majority of toilers (ibid.: 279).

and still not be free to realise one's chosen purposes, as the necessary means and conditions are not available. In such a case, the mere lack of constraint results in only a formal freedom and not a concrete freedom. Gould (1988: 37-38) makes a distinction between 'enabling' conditions (the positive conditions for action) and 'constraining' conditions (the absence which defines negative freedom) while emphasising that *concrete* freedom requires, both the absence of external constraint together with the availability of objective conditions necessary if choices are to be effected.[39] Some commentators have argued that these so-called 'enabling' conditions, may be subsumed under the concept of negative freedom. The argument is that the absence of a necessary or enabling condition for the realisation of one's choice may itself be seen to constitute an impediment or a constraint on one's action. Thus, Gerald MacCallum (1967) challenges a distinction between negative and positive freedom and claimed that there are not two concepts or types of freedom. In fact, social or political freedom can be analysed with the help of a triadic relationship:

> *[agent]* x *is (is not) free from* y *to do (not do, become, not become)* z. *(ibid.: 314).*

For MacCallum the disagreements relating to freedom are not really about what freedom is or what true or important freedom should be. Freedom should be seen in the context of the range of the variables in the above triadic relationship. According to such a view, 'enabling' conditions would have to be characterised as what one is free from the absence or lack of.[40] Oppenheim (1961) also forwards a triadic relationship of freedom, similar to MacCallum's:

> X *is free with respect to* <u>*person*</u> Y *to do* Z.

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[39] Gould provides a simple example in support of her argument, namely; even though one may be free to travel at a destination of one's choice, without the presence of the 'enabling' condition of adequate finances, one will not be in a position to act on one's original choice (Gould 1988: 37-38).

[40] Gould (1988: 38) feels that such a proposition results in an oblique view as it does not pay attention to the crucial distinction between the freedom from constraint, and the freedom to realise one's purposes.

However, the difference between this and MacCallum's definitions is Oppenheim's restriction of his second variable (Y) to persons. Crocker (1980), while using MacCallum's schema, points out that the main difference between negative and positive liberty, as he sees it, is the range of the *y* variable - the "preventing conditions". "The proponent of positive liberty argues for a longer list of preventing conditions as constituting limitations on liberty" (Crocker 1980: 5). He goes on to remark that *poverty* will not typically figure among liberty's preventing conditions in the negative account, while it would figure in the positive liberty version. Being essentially in agreement with MacCallum, Crocker feels that the line between positive and negative freedom, in many important respects, is "so insubstantial and arbitrary, that there is no good moral reason to insist upon it" (ibid.). C. B. Macpherson (1973) has proposed enlarging the concept of negative freedom to incorporate the freedom from economic exploitation and social domination, together with the narrower notions of external constraint which characterises traditional democratic theory.

> *We may conclude that the unequal access to the means of life and labour inherent in capitalism is, regardless of what particular social and economic theory is invoked, an impediment to the freedom of those with little or no access. It diminishes their negative liberty, since the dependence on others for a living, which deficiency of access creates, diminishes the area in which in which they cannot be pushed around. (ibid.: 101)*

What Macpherson attempts to do is to assimilate social and economic freedom under the concept of negative freedom. He feels that if this is not the case then one will not be totally free as one could be subjected to economic exploitation and social domination. However, in spite of providing an insightful view, Macpherson does not assign an adequate importance to the distinction between freedom from economic and social impediments, and the positive provision of economic and social means for the proper exercise of one's freedom.

Rawls, in his attempt to show the "priority of liberty", emphasises the importance of negative freedom, while simultaneously acknowledging his basic concern for positive freedom when he speaks of the importance of "primary goods" commanded by the

people. Such primary goods include "liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect" (Rawls 1971: 62). While possessing such primary goods, one is positively more free to pursue one's objectives and ends. Even though both negative and positive kinds of freedom are deeply rooted in human aspirations, freedom of thought and liberty of conscience, freedom of the person and the civil liberties, should not be sacrificed to political liberty, which for Rawls, consists in the freedom to participate equally in political affairs. Thus, even though certain positive or 'enabling' conditions need to exist, the ultimate importance lies in freedom from obstruction (guaranteeing equality) while exercising political liberty. This is borne out when Rawls assumes that freedom should be seen in relation to three items: "the agents who are free, the restrictions or limitations which they are free from, and what it is that they are free to do or not to do" (ibid.: 201). And it follows, he argues, that the general description of liberty has the following form: "this or that person (or persons) is free (or not free) from this or that constraint (or set of constraints) to do (or not to do) so and so" (ibid.: 202). [41]

In conclusion it is only fair to mention that Berlin recognises that without the presence of certain conditions, the realisation of freedom may be ineffective. *Poverty* or *lack of education* may, for instance, render liberty useless. By undertaking a categorical distinction between liberty and the conditions of liberty, Berlin (1969: LIII) emphasises that negative freedom, as a protection against coercion or interference by others, is an important value in itself. Thus, it follows that even if positive enabling conditions existed, these would not automatically be of use in achieving one's aims, since the freedom to make use of such positive conditions may not be protected. However, along with Macpherson and Gould, I think it is inappropriate to separate

[41] Thus, the main focus in Rawls' schema is his emphasis on constraints, thereby subscribing to (in my opinion) a negative version of freedom. Focusing, as he does, on a theory of right and justice, Rawls writes that any particular liberty is characterised by a rather intricate complex of rights and duties. "Not only must it be permissible for individuals to do or not do something, but government and other persons must have a

these positive conditions from the meaning of freedom, which "in its full sense requires not only negative liberty as the absence of constraining conditions, but also positive liberty as the presence of or access to enabling conditions" (Gould 1988: 40). Herein lies the challenge of being able to amalgamate the negative and positive freedoms into a single concept of *concrete* freedom especially in the study of poverty, hunger and famines. Political freedom that enables and guarantees the individual to *freedom from* obstruction and interference should be seen in regard to political freedom where the state or government empowers the individual with the *freedom to* certain 'positive' or 'enabling' conditions. It is such a single concept of political freedom that is most relevant for use in analysing government policies designed to combat and prevent famines.

4.5 Food, Freedom and Famines

Food constitutes a basic right and a basic need for all individuals. Without food the right to life for humans loses its meaning as human living is dependent on the ability to access and consume food on a daily basis. In this sense, the right to food can be said to form the basis of all society and be constitutive of the most fundamental of all human rights, the right to life. While man achieves unprecedented scientific and technological progress, large populations of people go hungry every night. The gravity of the situation is put into perspective when, according to a recent FAO estimate, more than 800 million people face chronic undernutrition, and 200 million children under the age of five suffer from chronic calorie and protein deficiencies in developing countries alone (FAO 1996).[42] In spite of the fact that the "right to food" has been frequently

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legal duty not to obstruct" (Rawls 1971: 203). In this sense, Rawls is in agreement with Berlin's emphasis on negative liberty.

[42] Governments focused on the global problem of food production and consumption at the 1974 World Food Conference and proclaimed that "every man, woman and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition in order to develop their physical and mental faculties" (FAO 1996). However, after more than two

endorsed internationally with both unanimity and urgency, Alston (1984: 162) remarks that, "no other human right has been as comprehensively and systematically violated on such a wide scale in recent decades".[43]

Sen (1987a) has pointed out that in connection with the problem of hunger and famines, the distinction between 'positive' and 'negative' theories of freedom is crucial.

> *If a person is not free from hunger and lacks the means and the practical opportunities to feed himself or herself adequately, then that person's positive freedom must be seen as having been thoroughly compromised. On the other hand, his or her negative freedom may be completely unviolated, if this failure to acquire enough food is not a result of his or her having been stopped by interference from others. (Sen 1987a: 3)*

Sen goes on to highlight a further distinction, one of 'instrumental' versus 'intrinsic' views of freedom. According to the instrumental view, freedom is seen to be important mainly because it is a means to other ends, instead of being valuable in itself.[44] The intrinsic view, on the other hand, sees freedom to be valuable in itself, irrespective of

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decades the Conference's goal of eradicating hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition "within a decade", has not been reached.

[43] The right to food has been discussed regularly at innumerable international conferences, been proclaimed in national constitutions, and advocated by governments, legislatures and individuals alike. Articles 3, 25 (1), 22, 28 and 29 (1) of the Universal declaration of Human Rights (1948), and article 6 (right to life) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976) relate directly to the right to food. However, the most important article in this context is Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic and Social and Cultural Rights (1976) which proclaims the *right to adequate food* as well as the *right to be free from hunger*. It also stipulates the ways in which these rights may be implemented (personal communication with Asbjørn Eide).

[44] Sen writes that, "Our freedom to choose one bundle of commodities rather than another may have an important effect on the living standards we can have, the happiness we can enjoy, the well-being we can achieve, and the various objectives of our lives we can fulfil"(Sen 1987a: 3).

what it allows one to achieve or do.[45] Consequently, the freedom to earn profit in agriculture, without interference from the state and other public institutions is seen to be conducive to greater productivity, and can consequently be placed within the *instrumental-negative* view of freedom, something that Milton Friedman (1980) advocates. Buchanan (1986), is seen by Sen, to construct a "non-instrumental" *intrinsic* view of negative freedom, whereby liberties and democratic rights are given more importance, i.e. freedom is valuable in spite of what it enables one to do.[46] In contrast, the approach emphasising that "basic needs" for food and other essentials be fulfilled, or the one encouraging public policy to guarantee "freedom from hunger" (Streeten, et al. 1981; Streeten 1981; Shue 1980) place primary emphasis on *positive freedom*. These approaches concentrate on what people are actually able to do or be, instead of what people are prevented from doing or being by others. Further, these views can be defended on grounds of both, intrinsic and instrumental importance (Sen 1987a: 6). What is, however, abundantly clear is that the provision of food is the most basic of all wants.

> *Whether one speaks of human rights or basic human needs, the right to food is the most basic of all. Unless that right is first fulfilled, the protection of other human rights becomes a mockery for those who must spend all their energy merely to maintain life itself. (The Presidential Commission on World Hunger, 1980; quoted in Alston 1984: 162)*

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[45] "The good life may be seen to be a life of freedom, and in that context freedom is not just a way of achieving a good life, it is *constitutive* of the good life itself. The 'intrinsic' view does not deny that freedom may *also* be instrumentally important, but does reject the view that its importance lies *entirely* on its instrumental function" (Sen 1987a: 3).

[46] Friedman (1980) is concerned with the "fecundity of freedom" while Buchanan is more concerned with freedom's role beyond a means to other ends. Sharing Buchanan's intrinsic importance to freedom can be found in the works of John Rawls (1971) and Robert Nozick (1974).

In most developing countries there is an enormous force of economic needs and, Sen (1994) focuses attention on the distinction between these economic needs and liberty.

> *It is not hard to feel that this force [of economic needs], can outweigh other claims, including the claims of liberty and political rights. If poverty drives human beings to take terrible risks, and suffer terrible deaths .... it might well be odd to insist on discussing their liberty and their political rights. (Sen 1994: 31)*

In spite of the force of such needs, Sen, among others, vigorously advocates the primacy of political rights even in the case of poor countries, the line of argument being that political rights are not a "luxury" as many have argued it is. What is important, according to Sen, is to stress the importance of the "force of economic needs" on the one hand while recognising the "salience of political rights" (ibid.: 32). Thus, one needs to acknowledge the comprehensive interconnections between the enjoyment of civil and political rights and an appreciation of economic needs. Therefore, the core of Sen's argument is that the relationship between political rights and economic needs is an important *instrumental* one, namely, by providing incentives and information political rights contribute towards the solution of economic deprivation. In addition, political rights also play a constitutive role as one's understanding of economic needs depends on "open public debates and discussions, and the guaranteeing of those debates and those discussions requires an insistence on political rights" (ibid.). With regard to famines, the primary freedom which is thought to be important and valued concerns the freedom to live long. This is a *positive* freedom, albeit, one of many.[47] Thus, famine policies should ideally be influenced by negative political freedom (absence of restraints) which in turn should promote the positive freedom to live long (active governmental measures to reduce "vulnerability" to famine). And most importantly, political rights play both an *instrumental* and a

[47] Thus, for Sen, longevity, which is an *achievement*, can "also be seen as an important indicator of the *freedom* to live long" (1987a: 9). Sen goes on to use the metric of life expectancy, as a basic indicator of a foundational positive freedom, in studying the famine-prevention records of various developing countries.

constitutive role in issues pertaining to famine by providing incentives and information and thereby contributing towards the prevention of mass deaths as a result of famine.

4.6 Operationalism of "political freedom" to study Famine Policy

Over two decades ago, Stein Rokkan (1968; 1970), in a seminal work, provided a most useful way of examining the origin and expansion of democratic norms and practices in the structuring of mass politics in the smaller European democracies. Rokkan argued that in the process of democratisation, four "locks" or "institutional thresholds" needed to be surmounted successfully and in sequence in order to increase the likelihood for achieving a stable democracy. The first threshold is that of *legitimation* which relates to the right to petition, criticism and demonstration against the regime, involving the rights (and limits) of assembly, expression and publication (Rokkan, et al. 1970: 79). The second threshold is that of *incorporation* which concerns the rights of participation in the choice of representation for new groups and questions specifically how long it took "the potential supporters of rising movements of opposition [before they were given] formal rights of participation..." (ibid.). The threshold of *representation* is the third lock and pertains to the access of representatives of new groups to legislative institutions. The final threshold is that of *executive power* which involves looking at the access of representatives of new groups to the instruments of governance (ibid.).[48] This presents a useful manner of analysing the evolution of Indian democracy over the years, something that Sisson (1993: 40-45) has done. Sisson shows how "the transfer of power in India [from a colonial administration] brought to fruition a long process of democratisation" (ibid.: 45).[49]

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[48] Inherent in each threshold is the possibility of crisis and reversal, given that dominant elites are threatened by impending change, which would serve to constrain their actions and place limits on their access to public goods. Thus, implicit in the formulation is the requirement for each successive threshold to be consummated in order to protect the values associated with the previous thresholds.

[49] Sisson writes that this process of involved " a series of accommodations between an authoritarian imperial regime and a rising political class that developed from a congress of

In his influential book *Polyarchy* (1971), Robert Dahl differentiates between seven sets of conditions required for a democracy, or polyarchy. These include the following: the freedom to establish and participate in organisations; freedom of expression; the right to vote in elections; the right to stand for elective office; the ability of political leaders to compete for votes/ political support; alternative sources of information; and free and fair elections. Dahl assumes that by fulfilling these conditions a country has a good chance of being a polyarchy. In a later work, Dahl (1992) argues that certain democratic rights and liberties are likely to be institutionalised before others, and accordingly posits a "plausible sequence" which fits rather nicely with my emphasis on political freedom in the form of an independent media and opposition parties. According to Dahl, "the earliest political right to develop is likely to be the right to *alternative sources of information*, independent of government control: samizdat, journals of dissent and opposition, an opposition press, and so on" (ibid.: 246)[50]. After this phase has been achieved, society may allow a general freedom of expression, protected by courts and other institutions.

> *Governments and oppositions may even become habituated to the notion that so long as people do not actually* organise *into parties or other explicitly political organisations, they may express themselves almost without limit. (ibid.)*

A most important step is reached with the freedom to organise applies not only to gather together in informal organisations, but also for activists to organise themselves openly in political parties with the aim of participating and winning at the elections. The final step can be reached after the above the conditions for the above three thresholds have been satisfied, namely, free and fair elections, which is accompanied by a full range of democratic institutions (ibid.). To Dahl, free and fair elections are the culmination of a process, not its beginning.

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groups of intelligentsia, social reformers, and the propertied interests to a political class with a mass base that claimed to represent the various interests of the Indian political community" (Sisson 1993: 45).

[50] Dahl's emphasis in italics.

4.6.1. The case of India

India meets all four of Dahl's criteria, although to various degrees. Whether one uses criteria formulated by Schumpeter (1950), Huntington (1984), Lipset (1961), Sartori (1987), Coppedge & Reinicke (1988), or Hadenius (1992), India is indeed democratic. Since independence, 11 national elections have been held, with a comparatively large proportion of voter turnout, increasing from 16 percent in 1952 to 61 percent in 1989 (Sisson 1993: 37). Elections are competitive and a large number of parties contest them. Five elections (1977, 1980, 1989, 1991 & 1996) have resulted in the defeat of an incumbent government at the centre, and a competitive party system (with frequent shifts in power) exists at the state level. In this thesis, I have chosen not to focus on the incidence of elections, but rather on the presence of the more basic freedoms that are, according to Dahl, institutionalised prior to free and fair elections.[51] The role of political freedom with regard to preventing famines is limited to two main aspects; the ability to organise political parties and the existence of a formidable political opposition, and the freedom of expression and alternative sources of information as mainly exemplified by an active and independent press.

4.6.2. Two criteria of political freedom

1. There exists *freedom of assembly* and consequently, meaningful and extensive *competition* among individuals and organised groups (especially political parties) for all effective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force. The following questions are relevant to this criteria: Is there freedom of assembly and demonstration? Is there a significant *opposition vote*, *de facto* opposition power, and a realistic possibility for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? Is there freedom of political or quasi-political

[51] Obviously the importance of political parties in opposition and a free press are highly dependent on regular free and fair elections. However, there may be occasions when opposition parties are active together with a vigorous press without a country resembling a democracy, like, for instance, in the case of a one-party dominant political system.

organisation, including political parties, civic associations, ad hoc issue groups and so forth?

2. A situation whereby a sufficient level of *freedom of expression* and *freedom of the alternative sources of information* (mainly in the form of a free press) exists in order to guarantee criteria 1, and ensuing free and fair elections. The following questions are relevant to this criteria: Are there free and independent media, literature and other cultural expressions? To what extent does the government control the press and other media? Is there open public discussion and free private discussion? Are there free trade unions, professional, private and peasant organisations or equivalents, and is there effective collective bargaining? Is there protection from political terror, and from unjustified imprisonment, exile or torture, whether by groups that support or oppose the system?

These two criteria focus on basic liberties that, according to Rokkan's schema, falls within thresholds of legitimation, incorporation and representation. Even if one accepts the indivisibility of internationally accepted human rights, with regard to a basic need such as food, one still needs certain political mechanisms that can articulate needs and consequently help meet these demands. It is in this context that I agree with Dahl when he writes that "the achievement of certain rights and liberties is likely to precede the achievement of others" (Dahl 1992: 245). By defining political freedom in the form of the basic liberties of freedom of alternative sources of information and the presence of active opposition parties, one avoids the problems of calling a system democratic merely because elections are held, without the actual existence of concrete rights to petition, criticism, demonstration, etc.

4.6.3. How valid are these criteria?

The above two aspects of political freedom are generally held to be universal rights[52] because all peoples can and should enjoy them in one or another effective form. I

[52] I admit that whether these aspects of political freedom qualify as "universal rights" or not is a debate that is often played out in international forums. Cultural relativists

realise that these freedoms do not include all universal human rights; they primarily include a number of *civil liberties* (rights of the individual against the state) and *political rights* (legal rights determining the laws of the community and who governs).[53] The two kinds of rights are interdependent: civil liberties without political rights are apt to be lost, and political rights without civil liberties are rather meaningless. A free society may be quite imperfect, but I believe a perfect society would be free. Even though most civil and political rights have been termed as "first generation" and "negative rights" (rights held against the state), the right to security of the person and the right to free elections can be seen as being positive rights in that some affirmative action is required on the part of the government to assure them. However, what is relatively constant in the group of civil and political rights is the notion of *liberty*, a shield that safeguards the individual alone and in association with others, against abuse and misuse of political authority. Without guaranteeing a considerable enjoyment of civil and political rights, governments have a poor record in providing for the wants of peoples. The Janata Party in India had this to say before the 1977 elections.

> *History is replete with instances when those who conspire against the rights of people attempt to undermine freedom by portraying it as a luxury. They conceal the fact that fundamental freedoms are weapons that the poor need to fight tyranny. Bread cannot be juxtaposed against liberty. The two are inseparable. (quoted in William Kintner 1977)*

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would, for instance, argue that there are no universal moral norms, and consequently no universal human rights. According to them what qualifies as human rights should be determined according to one's culture, the community where one's socialisation has taken place.

[53] Belonging to the first generation, are such claimed rights as are set forth in Articles 2-21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including freedom from racial and equivalent forms of discrimination; the right to life, liberty, and the security of the person; the right to a fair and public trial; freedom of movement and residence; the right to asylum from persecution; freedom of thought, conscience, and religion;

In terms of providing effective relief during famines, one needs both civil and political rights to function in an *instrumental* sense, i.e. in order to contain the effects of famine. Although non-democratic governments can improve, say, the distribution of food, they have a poor record of promoting food production. Such regimes are *more* capable than democracies, of sacrificing their people to what the ruling elite or party understands as the 'national interest'. Gastil, et al. (1978: 6) refer to such sacrifices which were common during the 1930s in the former USSR, in the mid-1970s in Kampuchea (Cambodia) with its widespread famine, and in Vietnam with severe food shortages resulting from a "re-ordering of priorities." However, as Sen (1983: 756-757) points out, by far the classic example of such sacrifice took place in China which, in spite of a high rate of growth and food production was still not able to predict, identify and diagnose famine conditions which, in the end, resulted in the deaths of millions during the "Great Leap Forward". Is Sen's comparison of India and China more an exception than the rule? Does a conclusion based on such a comparison warrant generalisation to other circumstances when famines have taken place? In the following chapters, I will now apply the two criteria of political freedom as outlined in the previous section, to examine the famine prevention records of mainly India and also the successes and failures achieved elsewhere.

4.7 Summary

This chapter on political freedom started with a general discussion of the concept of freedom followed by an attempt to locate freedom within politics. An important distinction that was made early on was that of negative and positive notions of freedom as expounded by Isaiah Berlin. Having done so an attempt was made to place the idea of political freedom as held by the various schools of thought, within the negative and positive categories, before undertaking a critique of Berlin's formulation. Food is

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freedom of opinion and expression; freedom of peaceful assembly and association; the right to participate in government, directly or through free elections, etc.

indeed the most basic of all human needs and is also often referred to as a basic right.[54] This discussion led to the general conclusion that in issues pertaining to food and famines, what is needed is something that could be termed as "concrete freedom". This concept would ideally include elements of both negative and positive freedom. In addition to using the positive-negative distinction, the role of freedom in preventing famines was also discussed briefly in terms of an "instrumental" and "intrinsic" distinction. The major conclusion here was that political freedom plays an instrumental role in both, providing information to the authorities regarding the *basic needs* of the population facing the threat of famine, and also ensures that the *basic rights* of the population are guaranteed, protected and enjoyed by holding the authorities accountable in the event of policy failures or inadequate relief efforts. Finally, two criteria for an operationalisation of the concept of political freedom were forwarded, relating to the existence of political parties in opposition and an independent news media.

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[54] Abraham Maslow wrote almost half a century ago about five categories of needs in the order of their assumed priority: "physiological" (biological) needs that included air, water, food, etc.; "safety needs"; "affection or belongingness" needs; "esteem needs" and "self-actualisation" or self-development needs (Maslow 1943: 394). Undoubtedly to Maslow, the physiological needs are the most prepotent of all needs. Thus a person who is lacking food, safety, love and esteem would probably hunger for food more strongly than for anything else. Henry Shue constructs a list of *basic rights* in an attempt to forward the minimal well-being prerequisites for the assurance of civil and political rights. The "subsistence" or "minimal economic security" rights consists of "unpolluted air, unpolluted water, adequate food, adequate clothing, adequate shelter, and minimal preventive public health care" (Shue 1980: 23). Accordingly, it follows that the enjoyment of these basic rights is necessary for the "exercise" of "all other" rights in practice. Smith (1986) narrows down such a list of basic rights to include only minimal food and health. His argument is that especially if poor peasants lack the autonomous capacity to assure themselves the minimal consumption of local food staples, they render themselves potentially more "vulnerable to coercion" as they would necessarily have to depend on better-off households for their production and consumption requirements.

5. Opposition Politics

5.1 Introduction

The Indian Constitution, which came into effect in January 1950, provides for a number of features pertaining to tolerance of dissent. The Constitution provides for a multiparty system; a federal system[55] of politics and administration with central, state (regional), district, block and panchayat (village) levels; legislative forums, etc.; suffrage is universal for both men and women eighteen years of age and older, with neither property nor literacy requirements; parliament and state assemblies are to be elected every five years; and an independent Election Commission exists for registering all eligible voters, for recognising state and national parties[56], for establishing procedures for the nomination of candidates, and for managing all elections. The Constitution of India provided 170 million Indians with the right to elect their own government for the first time in 1951-52 and India has thereafter evolved a multiparty system which accounts for a competitive political process.[57] In a substantial

[55] The ethnological peculiarities of India excluded, more or less, the possibility of erecting a unitary state. The diversity in population could be accommodated only in a federal state. Further, the fathers of the Constitution were more inclined towards a strong Government at the Centre.

[56] Formal recognition of political parties is granted on a state-by-state basis if a party meets criteria specified by the Election Commission. If a party is recognised in four states or more, it is accorded the status of a national party.

[57] Subsequent elections were held in 1957, 1962, 1967, 1971, 1977, 1980, 1984, 1989, 1991 and 1996. State assembly elections were held simultaneously with the parliamentary elections from 1952 to 1967 and separately thereafter. The party system in India evolved from, what Kothari (1970: 160) terms, an "identifiable political centre" that emerged in the years prior to independence. The institutional expression of this centre was the Indian National Congress, with a small elite, homogeneous in social background. In addition to the performing a key role in ousting the British from India, Congress also performed other functions of opposition like, for instance, criticism of policies, competition for popular support, non-co-operation and non-violent protest,

sense, India has, for the major part, had one national party in Congress, and many opposition parties with core support in one state or region only. In formal terms, the country has had several national parties. This trend of Congress party dominance has somewhat changed in recent years and the Hindu party, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), is at present the single largest party in parliament. Over the years, the Election Commission has recognised several parties as national, but only the Congress has actually contested seats in all the states and in almost every constituency. Two communist parties (with their strengths chiefly in Kerala and West Bengal) have been recognised as national parties, and, for most elections, one or two socialist parties rooted mainly in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra, the BJP, and offshoots of the Congress and Janata Parties, have been recognised. On several occasions the Congress party split, with each fraction claiming to be the true successor; but only Indira Gandhi's Congress (I) has managed to retain a national following (Weiner 1989: 191; Thakur 1995: 221-222). Weiner (1989: 185) points out that "political parties and organisations in India are an outgrowth of an historical process, not a foreign transplant". Thus, for instance, even before the British introduced the elective principle to India, there were already organisations of landholders and organisations representing the interests of the new urban elite (ibid.). Hence, the emergence and working of the party system has been conditioned by the historical situation of the movement proceeding from tradition to modernity. Political dissent has a long tradition.[58]

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and participation and even willing co-operation at lower levels of government for brief periods (Kothari 1973: 310).

[58] Kothari (1973: 309-310) mentions a number of reasons that may have contributed to a preservation of heterogeneity in India: the variety of religious and ethnic groups that have settled down; "the eclectic rather than proselytising style of spiritual integration of Hinduism; the absence of either a unifying theology or a unifying and continuous secular tradition; and above all, a highly differentiated social system that has brought functional hierarchies, spatial distinctions, and ritual distances into a manifold frame of identifications and interdependence". Further these pluralistic tendencies were inherently present in Hindu society through patterns of dominance in a

5.2 Oppositional Politics and Famine Prevention in India

Since independence in 1947, India has not experienced a famine, even though it has had its fair share of drought and food crises (Sen 1981; Drèze & Sen 1995; Maharatna 1996: v). The important role played by opposition parties and the nature of the political system in combating the threat of famine has been raised by Amartya Sen (1982).[59] Oppositional activity has been particularly noteworthy within the agricultural sector, in issues pertaining to land reforms, food distribution and labour reforms. In the following sections I will now mainly look at the various ways by which opposition parties can influence government drought and famine policies, especially upon the outbreak of a crisis. The discussion will, in particular, focus on the Bihar and Maharashtra droughts before going on to analyse the role of opposition parties in preventing famine in general.

5.2.1. Early traditions

In India, the many famines of the late nineteenth century coincided with, and in part helped to stimulate, the growth of a nationalist critique of British colonial rule. Already in 1896, the Indian National Congress (INC) had, in its annual session, passed two resolutions which linked poverty and famines with excessive taxation and administrative extravagance.[60] Famine became an essential ingredient of the nationalists' "Drain Theory", i.e., famine seemed to provide the nationalists with ample evidence that India had been stripped of its wealth by the British. Dadabhai Naoroji, one of the main advocates of this theory, made frequent references to famines in his

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legitimised status hierarchy, with the presence of the caste system. Indian society has also shown a marked tolerance of dissent and deprivation.

[59] See discussion on Sen's model of early warning and prediction of famines as discussed in Chapter 3.

[60] One such resolution stated that the state had a "solemn duty to save human life and mitigate human suffering" and urged the government a policy of retrenchment in order to "husband the resources of the state", support for indigenous crafts, and assist towards the "introduction of modern arts and industries" (quoted in Arnold 1988: 117).

book, *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (Arnold 1988: 116). Nehru commented on the Bengal famine, from his imprisonment in Ahmadnagar Fort in 1944, where he called the famine as the final tragic act in Britain's long history of "indifference, incompetence, and complacency" towards the people of India (quoted in ibid.: 117-118). Indeed, one finds evidence that famine actually functioned as one of the catalysts in urging nationalist leaders to think about an alternative political order and economic strategies that would secure an enduring freedom from want.

5.2.2. The Bihar crisis, 1966-67

While examining the role of oppositional politics during this period, I find that three features stand out: the differences between the Congress party in Bihar and the Congress party government in New Delhi, the opposing views emanating from various factions within the local Congress party in Bihar, and finally, the role of other opposition parties. At the beginning of the Bihar food crisis of 1966-1967, brought on primarily by drought, the central government in New Delhi distrusted and discounted reports originating from Bihar regarding the seriousness of the situation. Such reports were treated as being politically motivated, in that local politicians and relief workers in Bihar were seen to create an atmosphere of crisis mainly in order to procure help from outside. Indira Gandhi and the Bihar Chief Minister of Bihar K. B. Sahay, were known to be at loggerheads during this crisis on account of the former's lack of support during the election of Mrs. Gandhi as the prime minister in January 1966. When the central government finally realised the seriousness of the situation, it had to *declare* a national crisis in order to secure the release of P.L. 480 wheat from the United States to India.

Virtually coinciding with the start of the drought, the summer of 1966 witnessed the rise of a struggle between three rival factions within the Congress party for tickets (the nomination of party candidates) in order to contest the elections of 1967. In November 1966, as the drought became prolonged and the list of candidates formulated, many within the party became dissatisfied and left either to join opposition parties or to establish a new party, the Jana Kranti Dal (Brass 1986: 251). Many leaders of the

backward castes resented the fact that old elite castes continued to dominate in the Bihar Congress. Some of the criticism from Congress factions focused on the delay of the Bihar government in providing relief and on the inadequate nature of this relief. Some members, for instance, blamed the government of being incompetent and advocated "a general toning up of the administrative machinery" (*Indian Nation*, November 2, 1966).[61] Politically, the southern and northern districts in Bihar - among the worst hit by drought - were important for both the Congress and other leading opposition parties. These districts were populous, had active voter turnouts and were politically vital for Congress, the Samyukta Socialist Party and the Communist Party of India (CPI). The Samyukta party and the CPI were active in forwarding the cause of the backward castes and during the drought, the usual criticism directed by these parties against government policies were accentuated further. These parties demanded increased relief and criticised more actively than before, the governments' neglect of the agricultural classes (ibid.). A major cause for such opposition parties concerned various components of the relief programmes undertaken, where the distribution of loans mainly went to the landholding classes and far exceeded the amount spent by the government on relief works which supported mainly the landless and the poor (Singh 1975: 153).[62] The main agencies involved in the Bihar Famine were the state government of Bihar and the Bihar administration, who jointly had the responsibility of assessing the developing situation and then to undertake preventive measures in order to lessen the impact. But once the famine took place, they also bore the responsibility to organise relief measures and to determine that the situation of crisis was over. An interesting fact, in this context is that, during the entire period of the drought, the state government was not a single entity. Nation-wide elections in India took place in February 1967, as the famine began to unfold. It must be emphasised that politicians in Bihar allowed civil servants to deal with most of the relief efforts, which although the usual practice during normal times, assumed greater importance due to the forthcoming elections. Berg (1971: 120n) writes that election campaigning often

[61] cited in Brass (1986).

prevented effective relief operations as elections detracted attention away from relief works and political pressures often resulted in relief to areas without the greatest needs. Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasise the often unintended and yet positive benefits that ensued from this election, which far outdid the problems arising from it.

> *... the election drew more attention to the food needs than otherwise would have been the case. Political pressures and concurrent electioneering virtually guaranteed that that no needy areas were missed. Similarly, the election provided an escape valve for the frustrations of the suffering. Possibly these frustrations might have been vented in quite a different form had there not been this outlet. (Berg 1971: 120n)*

Thus, it is difficult to judge what the opposition would have been able to accomplish without the incentive of an election in the forthcoming. Even the ruling Congress party had to become extra sensitive to the needs of the affected when their very own survival rested on winning the elections. Congress leaders in Bihar requested assistance from New Delhi both, to prevent losing the election and to save the starving millions affected by the drought. The Bihar government resisted declaring a famine until the election. With the discontent over the general rise in prices for essential commodities, the drought proved to be a spark that "provided a common basis for opposition to the ruling party that both reinforced and transcended the specific grievances of several categories of voters" (Brass 1986: 252). After the Congress government lost the elections, the non-Congress coalition government was faced with the issue of declaring the famine, something that it had demanded the previous government do before the election. However, it was easier for the new government to do so since it could not be blamed for a situation that it had inherited. Further, since opposition parties had already committed themselves to such a declaration prior to the elections, they had no choice but to make a declaration (ibid.: 260).

> *In effect, the Bihar drought was minimised initially by Indian politicians for internal political reasons, which nearly led to disaster; when disaster seemed imminent, the politicians created a crisis out of the situation, which saved them and*

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[62] cited in Brass (1986).

the people of Bihar from a situation partly of their own manufacture. (Brass 1986: 249)

Famine was thus declared for political reasons.

5.2.3. The Maharashtra drought, 1970-73

Drèze (1990a: 46, 62, 89) holds the view that India's real success in averting a major famine dates back to the Maharashtra drought. The main reason for this is that Bihar's success, in contrast to Maharashtra's, was due to a considerable extent of food imports from abroad together with an impressive example of successful co-ordination between voluntary agencies and the government. In contrast, the main component behind Maharashtra's success lay in the extensive "employment guarantee" schemes that the government undertook during the period of the drought.[63] A detailed study of the political mechanisms involved in Maharashtra during this period has been hard to find, and thus it is difficult to analyse in detail, the role of political parties during this crisis. Nevertheless there exists evidence that opposition parties were actively involved in staging demonstrations and arranging/ influencing other forms of protests in the form of *gheraos*[64], picketing, meetings, and in arousing the consciousness of women in the region. The striking aspect again, similar to Bihar, is the responsiveness, enthusiasm, and urgency that the government of Maharashtra embarked with in its relief efforts. The Chief Minister of Maharashtra was suddenly seen to be zealous and resourceful, coining new slogans like "Work for all who want it, with virtually every visit to the drought-affected areas (Subramaniam 1975: 189-90). Local politicians could not afford to leave the issue of drought untouched. The plight of the affected had to be addressed.

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[63] Drèze also compares the daily attendance figures as a proportion of the population, of the public works projects in Bihar and Maharashtra and finds that the average daily attendance in Maharashtra was almost eight times higher than in Bihar (Drèze 1990a: 62).

[64] A much used form of protest in India where important officials and functionaries are surrounded by a group of protesters usually in an office areas and thus preventing the free movement of these people.

Drèze emphasises "two different but highly complementary types of incentives" that contributed to successful relief efforts in Maharashtra. These incentives arose from the "*meritocratic* nature of the Maharashtrian administration, and the *democratic* nature of Indian politics" (Drèze 1990a: 92).[65] The public administration in Maharashtra stood up to the enormous challenge posed by the drought and in particular, the impressive role played by the District Collectors needs to be highlighted.[66] Nevertheless, Drèze & Sen (1989: 122) have argued that in order to make the administrative mechanism operational, a political trigger is needed. This line of thought seems to fit in rather well in the case of Maharashtra, where political influences and pressures made famine prevention a main concern and preoccupation of the government. During 1973 alone, a total of 696 drought-related questions were asked in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly and Council (Drèze 1990a: 92). An important phenomenon was the constitution of various committees to tackle different aspects of the crisis. Of special importance were the co-ordination meetings where the Chief Minister of Maharashtra consulted with members of the State Legislature. This was also the case at the district level, where relief committees consisted of, in addition to civil servants, all members of Parliament (MPs), members of the State Legislative Assembly (MLAs), and members of the State Legislative Council (MLCs) from the district concerned (Bhattacharya 1975: 22). In addition, an active press ensured daily coverage of the crisis such that no political party could avoid discussing the drought and consequently proposing alternative relief solutions. However, a unique feature of rural Maharashtra was the dynamic force of voluntary agencies that backed popular demands for relief. Local political leaders also grabbed this opportunity to gain political mileage and accumulate political capital (ibid.).

[65] Drèze's emphasis in italics.

[66] During a drought in India, District Collectors assume full responsibility for the management of relief operations - projects that involve millions of people and carry enormous responsibility

While examining the role of opposition parties during this crisis, one sees that their greatest influence was perhaps in activating poor men and especially women to stake their "perceived right" of employment by resorting to marching, picketing, and rioting.

> *If six famines in the past ten years have taught the people anything, it is that they can secure nothing without pressurising the administration for it. "They would let us die if they thought we would not make a noise about it". But morchas[67] and gheraos are becoming more numerous .... (Mody 1972: 2483)*

Around 1,5 million labourers involved in relief projects organised a State-wide strike in May 1973 to demand for higher wages - a strike turned out to be a huge success. Further, Omvedt (1980) writes about how the women's movement in particular, was especially supported by the Leftist political parties, and which led to a great deal of radical political activity on the part of rural women. The interesting aspect of this political activism, according to Drèze (1990a: 93n), is the solidarity and organisation that characterised it - something that is rare during a famine, where unorganised revolt and increasing individualism are common. Thus, in this case one recognises the role of political parties in organising and co-ordinating public pressure and public action. In contrast to Bihar, elections did not play a dominant role in the declaration of a crisis or in starting much needed "food for work" programmes. What is striking about the Maharashtra case is that political parties, along with voluntary organisations, contributed in generating a great deal of public pressure which helped to avert a major tragedy.

5.2.4. Opposition activity during recent droughts and anticipated famines

Even though Bihar and Maharashtra represent two major food crises, there have been a number of other instances where drought and famine have been successfully combated in India. The state of *Gujarat* in north-west India has relied substantially on the arrival of the monsoon rains for its income. In contrast to previous droughts, where widespread deaths due to starvation took place, the last major droughts that took place

[67] protests.

during 1975/76 and 1985/86 have been relatively well managed by the State government.[68] Hubbard (1988) analyses the relief operations undertaken in Gujarat in 1985/86 and reaches the main conclusion that an effective administrative system capable of discovering early symptoms of hardship, together with active opposition political parties contributed to a successful aversion of a major crisis. Explaining how the relief operations were set into motion, he writes:

> *As soon as it was clear that a major scarcity threatened, a cabinet sub-committee on relief was set up in the state government, meeting weekly, chaired by the finance minister and serviced by a relief commissioner. At the same time, a state-level relief committee (including members of opposition parties and voluntary organisations) and district and taluka-level relief committees were constituted, and each cabinet minister was assigned special responsibility for one or two districts. (Hubbard 1988: 125)*

Writing on the political checks regulating the performance of relief efforts, Hubbard highlights the role played at all levels starting from the *panchayati raj*[69] to the legislative assembly of the state. One senior officer responsible for relief operations in Rajkot district remarked that "Political careers are made and broken during scarcities", referring to the fact that politicians step up their competition with each other in order to project the impression of efficiency during such crises (ibid.: 130). Particularly noticeable were the eagerness of opposition parties to criticise any deficiencies in governmental relief efforts. In his study, Hubbard finds that there is good reason to emphasise the important role of opposition politics, especially at the local level of the *panchayati raj* institutions. However, what also characterised Gujarat's success in combating famine during 1985-86 was the fact that political opposition was strongly supported by a very effective civil service (ibid.).

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[68] In virtually all of its nineteen districts a situation of scarcity through drought has been declared at some time or the other during the past three decades.

[69] village level administrative organs.

Another state in western India, *Rajasthan*, has also been plagued by numerous droughts during the past few decades.[70] Mathur & Jayal (1993) use the drought of 1987 in Rajasthan in order to illustrate the manner in which the Government responded to the emerging crisis. One general observation from the above study is that drought-proofing, i.e. measures planned in advance to prevent drought, have been accorded very little priority in India, especially if one looks at the amount spent on such measures in comparison to amounts spent on relief efforts.

> *Relief tends to hide all the failures of public policy and its implementation and reiterates the emphasis on drought as a natural calamity. The state political leadership measures its success by the amount of relief funds it is able to attract from the Central Government* ... Pride is in the way the crisis is met. *The failure of the State Government in preparing for the crisis is hardly noticed. (ibid.: 70)*[71]

Many politicians were concerned with the availability of drinking water, while simultaneously raising issues relating to electricity, roads, public transport, etc. During the course of the 1990 elections, a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alleged that the opposition had not been consulted on drought relief, and recommended that a so-called "Desert Development Board" be set up with representatives from all political parties, to deal with drought relief (ibid.: 74). Frequent charges were also levelled against the government with regard to the drought-relief related corruption. The Congress government was also accused of initially taking credit for a fodder scheme organised by the Marwar Akaal Sahayata Samiti, but when allegations were made regarding the misappropriation of funds, the Congress distanced itself from the issue (ibid.). In contrast to Gujarat and Maharashtra, one does not find any active co-operation between opposition parties and the government in relief measures in Rajasthan. It is also unclear whether opposition to government policies were articulated during the drought itself. One reason for lack of substantial criticism could be the success of the government efforts. However, when campaigning for the

[70] Between 1967-68 and 1987-88, near-famine conditions have prevailed in Rajasthan during approximately 13 years (Mathur & Jayal 1993: 63).

[71] Italics are Mathur & Jayal's emphasis.

elections started, charges of misappropriation of funds and corruption in the implementation of relief projects were levelled against the ruling Congress government. Like Bihar, one finds that elections prepared the ground for criticism of government policy as politicians competed with one another for the honour of being hailed as saviours of the affected masses.

5.2.5. Interest and concern on drought issues in Parliament

Only a few studies have been conducted in India concerning the role of Parliament in general and MPs in particular with regard to their influence in the decision-making process. Most such studies have concluded that MPs have had a limited role in expanding the policy-making agenda by voicing their concerns in the Lok Sabha, especially within the areas of science, technology and electronics.[72] However, the issue of drought and consequently, famine, poses a problem of far greater urgency than science and technology, not requiring any form of specialised knowledge. By creating conditions of hunger, starvation and famines, drought affects large areas of India virtually every year and one would expect that MPs, especially those belonging to opposition parties, would be very active in articulating the interests of the drought-affected population in parliament. Mathur & Jayal (1993) have undertaken a study of the parliamentary debate on the drought of 1987 in the lower house of the Indian parliament, the Lok Sabha. After the Minister of Agriculture made a statement on the drought situation on 10 August 1987, a total number of 93 members responded by participating in debates, while a total of 136 members participated by forwarding questions (See table 5.1). It is interesting to note that MPs from the north-eastern states did not participate at all, especially given that one state, Nagaland, had claimed that all its districts were affected by drought. Further, when one looks at the representational

[72] Some studies in this respect are the following: the study of the role of Scheduled Caste MPs in influencing decision-making by Narayana (1980); the study of the role of Parliament in holding the executive accountable with regard to Electronics Policy by Jain (1985); and the study of the Parliament's role in issues of science and technology by Rahman & Haritash (1985).

spread of MPs, one finds that in two severely affected states, Gujarat and Rajasthan, the proportion of MPs who participated were only 15 % and 32 % respectively.

Table 5.1: Districts Affected by Drought and Statewise Participation of MPs, 1987

States	Number of Districts affected by drought 1987	Total no. of districts affected by drought	Total number of MPs	Participation by MPs in Debates	Participation by MPs through Questions
Andhra Pradesh	18	23 (78%)	42	10	17
Bihar	-	-	54	4	10
Gujarat	17	19 (89%)	26	4	11
Haryana	12	12 (100%)	10	4	2
Himachal Pradesh	12	12 (100%)	4	1	1
Jammu and Kashmir	12	14 (86%)	6	3	1
Karnataka	18	20 (90%)	28	4	11
Kerala	14	14 (100%)	20	4	12
Madhya Pradesh	21	45 (47%)	40	11	10
Maharashtra	9	31 (29%)	48	6	19
Nagaland	7	7 (100%)	-	-	-
Orissa	8	13 (62%)	21	5	11
Punjab	11	12 (92%)	-	-	-
Rajasthan	27	27 (100%)	25	8	5
Tamil Nadu	14	20 (70%)	39	3	5
Uttar Pradesh	55	57 (96%)	85	17	10
Union Territories	12	-	13	3	2
West Bengal	-	-	42	6	9
Total	**267**	**-**	**503**	**93**	**136**

Source: Compiled from Government of India (1989) and Mathur & Jayal (1993: 85-86).

Upon closer examination, Mathur & Jayal (1993) found that approximately half the number of MPs who participated in parliamentary *debates* on drought were first entrants to the Lok Sabha and a similar proportion were from the agricultural profession. Another way in which MPs can express concern over drought is through *written questions* to the Ministers concerned, which elicits a written answer. But even here, during 1987, only 136 questions were asked (often many questions from the same MP). An analysis of the number of questions asked on drought in general (mostly preventive measures) and relief (more immediate government efforts) in the period 1985-89 is shown in table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Questions on Drought and Relief in the Lok Sabha, 1985-89

Year	Total no. of questions on drought	No. of questions on relief
1985	50	20
1986	69	33
1987	107	52
1988	71	52
1989	21	14

Source: Mathur & Jayal (1993: 107)

The table shows an interesting contrast between general questions relating to drought-proofing and drought protection policies of the government (in a long-term perspective) and the more immediate questions pertaining to relief. In virtually all years (between 1985 and 1989) general questions on drought protection and relief have been few considering the fact that the Lok Sabha has over 500 members and that some region of India experiences drought every year. When a nation-wide drought took place in 1987, only 52 questions on relief were asked in the Lok Sabha - not significantly different from other years.[73] But nevertheless, one would expect MPs, especially from drought-affected states, to participate more vigorously in parliament. Thus, in conclusion, one is forced to bring up the issue of *elections* as being the main motivating force behind active participation by MPs. Mathur & Jayal (1993) conclusion is as follows:

> *... legislative interventions on drought reveals the MP as substantially committed neither to his constituents nor to the national interest .. If he represents the 'interests' of his constituents, it is their interests as he perceives them, interests translated into material terms and eventually into votes for re-election. (ibid.:116)*

It is also necessary to mention here that lack of participation by MPs in Parliament must be qualified somewhat by the admitting that they do make considerable use of informal channels to influence the minister or civil servants concerned.[74] In contrast to long-term policies of drought-proofing, there has been an overwhelming importance attached to drought relief - even in the general questions on drought in parliament, which concentrate on financial allocation for relief projects - an emphasis actively propagated by successive governments. It is this that explains India's success at averting a major disaster. An overriding emphasis on relief shows the political uses of

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[73] A reason for this lack of participation could be the absolute majority that Rajiv Gandhi's ruling Congress party enjoyed in the Lok Sabha during this period.

[74] Such informal influence may take the form of favouring an individual or a group or attempting to locate a development project in a specific region, etc. Thus, MPs may seek to attract the benefits of a government policy by reorienting the implementation process (Mathur & Jayal 1993: 88-89).

relief allocation and the lack of conviction among political parties in a long-term perspective on drought.

5.3 A Comparative Look

The general impression of Africa is that most governments are controlled or perennially staffed by a single party or clique. Democracy has been limited even in those states with multiparty institutions - though in the 1990s pressures for greater democracy seemed to be growing.[75] Most African legal systems are based on laws introduced by European powers during the colonial era, though the countries of North Africa derive many of their laws from the tenets of Islam. Even though colonial rule in Africa gradually ended in this century, external powers have been eager and quick to seek and secure political and military influence and many African countries continue to receive large amounts of economic and military aid from various international donor countries. [76] In spite of the general dismal record with regard to political freedom, Africa has had its fair share of successes with regard to famine prevention and it is vital that one recognises these successes while also looking into the causes of the failures.

[75] Some African island territories remain under the control of European countries: Réunion and Mayotte (France), St. Helena (the United Kingdom), the Canary Islands (Spain), and the Madeira Islands (Portugal).

[76] By 1884 the European powers had begun a scramble to partition Africa so that by 1920 every square mile except for Ethiopia, Liberia, and the Union of South Africa was under colonial rule or protection. Anti-colonial and independence movements developed and became widespread after 1950, and, one by one, the colonies became independent.

Table 5.3: A Comparative Measure of Political Freedom in a Select Group of Countries, 1995-1996

(The figures in brackets represent scores for Political Rights and Civil Liberties, respectively. A score of 1 represents the most free and 7 the least free)

Free	Partly Free		Not Free	
Cape Verde (1), (2)	Bangladesh (3), (4)	Senegal (4), (5)	Eriteria (6), (4)	Liberia (7), (6)
Botswana (2), (2)	Zambia (3), (4)	Burkina Faso (5), (4)	Chad (6), (5)	Zaire (7), (6)
Mali (2), (3)	India (4), (4)	Uganda (5), (4)	Cambodia (6), (6)	Sudan (7), (7)
Malawi (2), (3)	Ghana (4), (4)	Tanzania (5), (5)	Mauritania (6), (6)	China (7), (7)
Namibia (2), (3)	Niger (3), (5)	Zimbabwe (5), (5)	Burundi (6), (7)	Somalia (7), (7)
	Ethiopia (4), (5)		Rwanda (7), (6)	Nigeria (7), (7)
			Kenya (7), (6)	Afghanistan (7), (7)
				North Korea (7), (7)

Source: compiled from *The Comparative Survey of Freedom 1995-1996* by Freedom House (1997b).

Table 5.3, places a select group of countries into "free", "partly free", and "not free" categories. Some countries which have, in recent years, achieved impressive successes in preventing and combating famines are indeed those in the "free" category - mainly Botswana, Mali, and Cape Verde. In addition, most countries which have successfully combated famines are those in the "partly free" category, mainly India, and Zimbabwe. Interestingly enough, Ethiopia has also managed to reduce its famine vulnerability as its political system turns more stable. Even though many "partly free" countries are governed by elites elected undemocratically, they have nonetheless, succeeded in preventing a major tragedy and loss of human lives. Bangladesh, for instance, was under General H. M. Ershad's dictatorship for almost a decade and yet the country did not witnessed a major famine, the last one having occurred in 1974 - this, in spite of several disasters caused by cyclones and floods. On the other hand, the records of many countries in the "not free" category which have undergone a major food crises at one point or another in recent years presents a different picture. Some examples that come immediately to mind are Rwanda, Burundi, and the more recent examples of Zaire and North Korea. But even within this category, there have been some successes in combating famines as, for instance, in Chad, Sudan, Kenya and Sudan.

5.3.1. Famine prevention in some "free" countries

One of the best examples of how democratic politics has contributed towards successful famine prevention is the case of *Botswana*, a land-locked, sparsely

populated and drought-prone country (Drèze 1990b). Botswana is a multiparty republic with a parliamentary form of government. The Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has been the dominant party since the country achieved independence and the main opposition party is the Botswana National Front (BNF).[77] Botswana achieved some success in averting a major famine during the drought of 1979-80, although relief operations did not succeed in preventing an increase in malnutrition and starvation deaths. However, during the long drawn drought of 1982-87, the country, against all odds, undertook significant "entitlement protection" measures in the form of the restoration of adequate food availability, the large provision of employment for cash wages and the direct distribution of food to selected groups (ibid.: 154).

> *Careful planning (and buoyant government revenue) would not have gone far enough in the absence of a strong motivation on the part of the government to respond to the threat of famine. Drought, relief, however, has consistently been a high political priority in Botswana, and an object of rival promises and actions on the part of competing political parties. (Drèze 1990b: 153)*

Botswana's success, especially during 1982-87, was largely on account of a combination of adequate political incentives and efficient administrative guidelines. The success of famine prevention measures in Botswana, as in India, can be largely attributed to the accountability of the ruling party to the electorate (mainly the BDF) and the activism of opposition parties (mainly the BNF), in addition to a vigilant press and active public pressure (ibid.: 153). The importance of competitive politics is borne out by the fact that the decision to launch major relief efforts in 1982 was taken in the absence of a formal early warning system. In spite of localised food shortages, *Mali* did not face a famine threat in 1991. There exists, in Mali, a programmed response mechanism institutionally linked to the national (formal) EWS. The political climate

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[77] After gaining independence from Britain in 1966, Botswana has been ruled by elected governments. Botswana is a parliamentary democracy with a system of traditional chiefs. The latest elections for the National Assembly took place in October 1994. The BDP retained power by winning 26 of the 40 contested seats, but this was a

within which this response took place changed radically during 1990-91. The Union Dèmocratique du Peuple Malien (UDPM) came to power after the conflict between the Tuareg in the north and the Malian army erupted and President Moussa Traoré was overthrown in March 1991.[78] Ever since the drought of 1973, emergency food aid has consistently helped Mali to overcome its food crisis but the important drawback in previous years had been mainly in the distribution of such aid. With the UDMP in power, this aspect radically improved. Domestic debate is open and extensive in Mali, and in addition to President Konaré's Alliance for Democracy in Mali (ADEMA), there are about 50 registered political parties who provide regular and often scathing criticism of government policies.[79]

> *On the government side, the change of regime in March 1991, as well as armed conflict in the north of the country, gave rise to intense uncertainty, and a high political price was attached to getting the response right. (Buchanan-Smith & Davies 1995: 148)*

Another example of success in not so much preventing, but combating famines, is the case of *Cape Verde*, whose record, according to Drèze (1990b) is more impressive when one compares the situation prior to independence from Portugal and the period after independence in 1975. Prior to independence, the Portuguese government was

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loss of 9 seats from the previous Assembly. The Botswana National Front (BNF) won 13 seats, a gain of 10.

[78] For over three decades after independence from France in 1960, Mali was ruled by military or one-party dictators. After President Traoré's overthrow in 1991, Mali has functioned as a Presidential-parliamentary democracy. Democracy was further strengthened after a negotiated end to the Tuareg rebellion. After a national conference followed the coup, a free and fair election helped Alpha Oumar Konaré to the presidency in April 1992. According to Freedom House (1997), a period of democratic consolidation has followed ever since and with an increasing respect for fundamental freedoms.

[79] However, Buchanan-Smith & Davies (1995: 144) point out that democratic politics has not been the only aspect that has influenced Mali's famine prevention strategy. A

seen to provide large-scale relief only when motivated by its concern for its international image (ibid.: 133). The first sixteen years of independence saw Cape Verde being ruled under a single party, the Marxist Partido Africano da Independencia da Cabo Verde (PAIVC), while in the first democratic legislative elections in 1991 the opposition Movement for Democracy party (MPD) won a landslide victory.[80] "Drought relief has been among the top political priorities" since independence, writes Drèze (ibid.: 135), and an effective and integrated relief system successfully averted famine during the drought in 1975.

5.3.2. Famine prevention in some "partly free" countries

In this category, one finds mostly countries with a dominant political party. *Zimbabwe* is a classic example of a one-party state without comprehensive political freedom, but which has had impressive successes in preventing famines. Upon independence from Britain in April 1980, Zimbabwe has been governed unilaterally by Robert Mugabe and his African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party. Tolerance of dissent has been minimal and both freedom of opposition parties and the press have been targeted by the government. Nevertheless, a defiant press was instrumental in covering the drought of 1982-84. However, in spite of no real opposition parties, ZANU was able to provide timely and adequate relief to the drought-affected affected populations.[81] Drèze (1990b: 149) highlights an interesting aspect of the relief

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number of other actors like Mali's small and relatively mobile population and its relatively few food shortages need to emphasised in addition to democratic politics.

[80] The President and members of the Parliament in Cape Verde are elected through universal suffrage in free and fair voting. The new Constitution, adopted in 1992, provides for popular referenda in some circumstance, only when these do not challenge individual liberties or the rights of opposition parties to exist and operate freely.

[81] Zimbabwe is officially an independent republic with the president as head of state and a parliament consisting of a unicameral, 150-member House of Assembly. However, citizens of the country cannot change their government democratically mainly on account of ZANU's dominance and influence over the electoral process and its ability to secure large state subsidies. The general election, held in April 1995, did

programme during this drought, when distribution of food was primarily limited to rural areas, instead of the frequent bias of public distribution systems in general in favour of urban classes. This was an important feature that helped to bring the after-effects of drought under control. A main reason for this "rural bias", according to Drèze, could be due to the politics of ZANU and the predominantly rural character of its support base (ibid.). In spite of being plagued by repeated food crises almost annually, *Ethiopia*, has not experienced a major disaster since its last major famine of 1984-85, when an estimated one million people lost their lives. In 1991, the government of the Marxist dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam was overthrown and a transitional government was formed by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).[82] When a localised and severe food crisis took place in 1990-91, preventive mechanisms were set into motion to avoid another major famine like the one in 1984-85. Buchanan-Smith & Davies (1995: 56) write about how this change in the political life of Ethiopia (from 1991 onwards) ushered in a new political and economic climate which, by mainly improving relations with Western donors, helped to bring about a more flexible approach to emergency relief. Another important feature of both the transitional and the present government in Ethiopia has been their emphasis on decentralisation, thereby allowing for a better functioning of the formal EWS and the response systems (ibid.). Nevertheless, one does not find evidence here of concrete rights for opposition parties. Like Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, most other countries in this group of "partly free" countries have a dominant one-party system of government. This is, for instance, the case in Uganda (under President Museveni's National Resistance Movement, NRM), Senegal (dominated by the Socialist party, PS), Burkina Faso (under the Organisation for Popular Democracy/ Labour Movement,

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not appreciably change the situation. Owing in part to a boycott by several opposition parties, which claimed that the electoral system was unfairly weighted against them, the governing ZANU-PF won all but two seats in the House of Assembly.

[82] In the May 1995, the EPRDF won an overwhelming victory in the election which was boycotted by opposition parties. In spite of this boycott, most observers were of the view that the elections, the first of its kind, were relatively free and fair.

ODP/MT), and Tanzania (ruled mainly by the Chama Cha Mapinduzi party, CCM). Unless opposition parties are allowed to function like they do in India, political freedom in these countries remain fragile. And this fragility in the political system increases vulnerability to famine.

5.3.3. Famine prevention in some "not free" countries

During the drought-related food crises of 1990-91, Sudan provided an example of how a politically hostile environment can hinder the smooth functioning of early warning systems and affect response systems providing relief.[83] In spite of repeated famines and food crises in the past, the Sudanese government's position during the emerging crisis of 1990-91 was similar to 1984, when President Nimeiri refused to acknowledge any risk of famine for fear of undermining the credibility of his government. Similarly, although the government of President al-Bashir did not totally deny the problem in 1990, it projected the problem in terms of a "food gap" (Buchanan-Smith & Davies 1995: 101). Hence, in spite of repeated warnings from the national EWS about the alarming situation in the Darfur region, government officials were not pressurised into taking timely action. By December 1991 less than one-fifth of Darfur's estimated relief needs were delivered. Notably absent are opposition parties in Sudan. Even though a number of opposition parties have joined ranks to form a National Democratic Alliance (NDA)[84], this broad coalition of secular religious forces has not been able to

[83] Since gaining independence from British rule in 1956, Africa's largest country, Sudan, has been the very picture of political instability as civil wars and military coups have prevented any form of real political freedom for the citizen. General Jafar Numeiri ruled the country from 1969 till 1983, when he was overthrown and a civilian government under Sadiq el Mahdi took over. However, civilian rule did not last very long as Mahdi's government was toppled in 1989 and a new military government under Lt-General Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir took over the powers of government.

[84] A major partner of this coalition is the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) led by Colonel John Garang. A tribe that has particularly been affected by the civil war and by the rebel army organised by the SPLA are the Dinka. "The Dinka dominate in the rank and file of the SPLA and recruitment from this area has diminished the agricultural work force. Not only that, but the rebel army relies on the civilian

challenge the government of al-Bashir and the National Islamic Front party (NIF) under prime minister Hasan Al-Turabi. Sudan has banned all political parties and consequently there exist no forums for extracting government accountability.

Even more extreme than the Sudanese example is *North Korea*, where severe famine caused by floods, has been raging since July/ August 1995. With only 20% of its land suitable for growing crops, fuel shortages, and the collapse of trade with former Soviet block partners, the food crisis in North Korea has steadily deteriorated.[85] The citizens of North Korea are allegedly denied all fundamental political freedoms and there is no opposition to the Communist one-party rule.[86] The international media has widely reported the severity of the food crisis that is supposed to have affected 23 million people, with more than a million people rendered homeless. After initial reluctance, the government finally appealed for food aid in early 1996, agreeing in return to hold talks with Japan, South Korea and the U.S. over its nuclear programme.

> *For a country whose guiding principle has long been self-reliance, the decision to ask for help was a painful one, made more controversial by widely-voiced suspicions abroad that relief supplies would be diverted to the military. ("North Korea on the*

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population for food. But most other tribes in south Sudan see the Dinka as a primitive people whose numerical superiority has given them too much influence in the SPLA. Few of them are sorry to see the Dinka under threat" ("War puts Dinka way of life under threat", *The Telegraph* , London, 29th April 1996).

[85] Kim Il Sung, who was installed with Soviet backing in 1948, created a Stalinist personality cult and used an ideology stressing self-reliance and independence to justify his country's isolationist attitude towards the rest of the world. After Kim the "Great Leader" passed away in 1994, his son, Kim Jong Il, took over the reigns of government without assuming all the top positions of his father.

[86] Under North Korea's Criminal Law, citizens are subject to arbitrary arrest, detention and execution for "counter-revolutionary crimes" and other broadly defined political offences, which can range from attempted defections, criticism of the ruling family or listening to foreign radio broadcasts ("Isolated North Korea forced to seek help to fight famine", *CNN*, January 27, 1996).

brink of famine: Asking for international aid came hard", CNN's Mike Chinoy, *27.02.97)*

The total inability of the government to tackle the situation early has resulted in untold misery. Even though news out of North Korea is hard to come by, the U.N. World Food Programme feels that "malnutrition has been developing for months, every day that goes by, it becomes worse".[87] In spite of such extreme examples of repressive governments not being able to avert starvation and famines, there are a number of examples within the so-called category of "not free" countries where famines have been successfully combated in spite of not having opposition parties, a free press, or other democratic institutions. In spite of Daniel arap Moi's strict rule, *Kenya* was able to avert a major disaster during the severe drought that affected its Turkana district in 1992. Despite a ban on opposition parties (imposed since 1982 and lifted formally in the multiparty elections of December 1992[88]), the press played an active role in bringing the issue of drought into national and international attention (Buchanan-Smith & Davies 1995: 193). Another case that provides an interesting example is that of Nigeria, where the military government (again with the help of an active press) was able to prevent a famine during the drought of 1972-73 (Reddy 1988).[89] Other countries, under this category, that have had more limited success in combating famines are Chad, Zaire and Mauritania.

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[87] Trevor Page, of the U. N. World Food Programme, quoted in the CNN report, "Isolated North Korea forced to seek help to fight famine", 27.01.96. As U. N. spokeswoman, Sylvana Foa put it, "Worsening food shortages and the inability of the public distribution system to provide a regular supply of basic staples have led to consumption of wild foods...people are eating grass again ... " (quoted in "North Korea at risk of famine", by *CNN* corespondent, Richard Roth, 14.05.96).

[88] President Moi, under pressure from international aid donors, lifted the ban on opposition parties in the elections of December 1992. He won the elections with 36 % of the vote, amidst opposition discord and suspect electoral conduct (Britannica Year Book, 1992).

[89] See chapter 6 for details.

5.4 Summary

The discussion in this chapter has focused on two major crises that were successfully averted in India, Bihar in 1966-67 and Maharashtra during 1970-73. Even though these typify more as exceptions than the rule, parties in opposition have been active during recent droughts in the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan. Nevertheless parliamentary interest in drought and famine issues in India, seen in the number of MPs participating in debates and through written questions, has been limited. Elections, however, serve to awaken politicians from their slumber. In contrast to long-term preventive measures, there has been an extraordinary emphasis by the government on drought *relief*, which in itself "is a comment both on the political uses of relief allocation and on the Government's self-evident lack of conviction in a long-term perspective on drought" (Mathur & Jayal 1993: 91-92). The section covering some of the successes and failures in preventing famines in the rest of the world show that, in tune with the findings in India, opposition parties (when given the chance) have been vigorous in their campaigns in issues relating to famine protection and relief. Nevertheless, the presence of opposition parties are not a sufficient criteria for averting a major famine crisis, even though opposition parties, no doubt, contribute when given the opportunity. Examples from Nigeria and Kenya show that even in the absence of a formidable political opposition, countries are able to implement successful famine prevention measures provided, among other things, the regime is genuinely concerned with the interests of the victims. Thus presence of opposition parties are necessary but not a sufficient condition for preventing famines.

6. Press Freedom

6.1 Introduction

As early as in 1784, the liberty of the press was defined by Lord Mansfield as consisting in "printing without previous license, subject to the consequences of law".[90] It is generally understood that the freedom of the press is not just confined to newspapers and periodicals but also includes pamphlets, leaflets, circulars, and every sort of publication that offers information and opinion (Singh 1992: 81). While freedom of expression is an internationally recognised individual human right[91], the freedom of the press and of all media, in general, is required in order to guarantee this right to individuals. By being free of government control an independent press guarantees the political and cultural freedom of society. Thus, according to the International Commission of Jurists, the press "stands as a permanent means of communication and control between the people and their elected representatives in Parliament and Government".[92] It is interesting that the Constitution of India, unlike the American Constitution, does not expressly mention the freedom of the press, i.e. the freedom to print and to publish what one pleases without previous permission. The preamble to the Constitution, however, emphasises the "liberty of thought, expression,

[90] quoted in Singh (1992: 81).

[91] According to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers". The freedom of opinion and expression is an internationally protected human right and is also affirmed in article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR). The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) also touches upon this right in regard to issues concerning education, training, and culture. Further, freedom of expression is an integral part of all regional international human rights treaties and is also enshrined in most national Constitutions.

[92] quoted in Singh (1992: 81).

belief, faith and worship". The idea and notion of the free press is derived mainly from Article 19 (1) (a) of the Constitution which stipulates that all citizens of India have the right to freedom of speech and expression. This freedom of expression is termed as a "fundamental right"[93] of all citizens and since free expression presupposes a free press, one can conclude that this freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution, albeit in an indirect manner. In fact, the Supreme Court of India, the so-called "guardian of the Constitution" has ruled that, "there can be no doubt that freedom of speech and expression includes freedom of propagation of ideals and freedom is insured by the freedom of circulation" (quoted in Noorani 1977: 24). There is, nonetheless, a clause in the Constitution that specifies the restrictions that can be imposed on the citizen's enjoyment of the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression. Article 19 (2) of the Constitution provides that the state can impose *reasonable* restrictions on all fundamental rights when such rights conflict with the

> *... interests of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or mortality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence.*

Thus, the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression is not uncontrolled or absolute. The government can impose reasonable[94] restrictions on an individual's right as long as they may be necessary for the protection of general welfare. The required balance between social interest and individual liberty is, however, a difficulty one to maintain and this clause has been used by governments to control the press on certain occasions.

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[93] Article 19 of the Constitution guarantees to the citizens of India five other fundamental freedoms in addition to the freedom of speech and expression. These are: freedom of assembly, of association, of movement, of residence and settlement, and the freedom of profession, occupation, trade or business.

[94] What constitutes "reasonable" is of course a much debated issue.

6.2 A Brief History of the Press in India

In spite of catering primarily to British and industrial interests, many English dailies played a crucial role in arousing the political consciousness of Indians in the pre-independence era. Apart from the four major newspapers, *The Times of India* (1861), *The Pioneer* (1865), *The Madras Mail* (1868), and the *Statesman* (1875), the growing popularity of the nationalist movement was reflected in the growth of the nationalist press. Among these were the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *The Bengali*, *The Hindu*, *Kesari*, and the *Maratha* (Bhaskar 1989: 49).[95] The press actually ended up playing an important role in the "political emancipation" of India by popularising revolutionary ideas and by fighting religious sentiments (Desai 1966: 224). While Rudyard Kipling wrote about the romantic and glamorous India and praised the British *raj*, nationalists like Tilak were tried for sedition in agitating against the British military and sent to prison. Among the famous quotes of the time was Tilak's, "Swaraj [independence] is my birthright and I will have it".[96] Upon independence, India adopted a liberal version of press freedom, accepting the western concept of freedom of speech and newspaper publications mainly in the private sector. India's first Prime Minister, Nehru, while addressing the All India Newspaper Editor's Conference, remarked:

> *... the freedom of the press is not just a slogan ... It is an essential attribute of the democratic process. I have no doubt that even if the government dislikes the liberties taken by the press and considers them dangerous, it is wrong to interfere with the freedom of the press. By imposing restrictions you do not change anything. You merely suppress thoughts underlying them, to spread further. Therefore, I would rather have a completely free press, with all the dangers involved in the wrong sense of that freedom, than a suppressed or regulated press.*[97]

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[95] But of equal importance were also the many "sickly-looking" little Indian newspapers that began to circulate all over the sub-continent. They contended, along with the major newspapers, "for a primacy of Indian public opinion and sought to make themselves heard in the outside world" (Hohenberg 1971: 134).

[96] quoted in Hohenberg (1971: 135).

[97] U.N. Economic and Social Council, *Annual Report of Information, 1962-63*, p. 37 (quoted in Sommerlad 1966: 142).

In the initial post-independence period, Verghese (1978: 220) notes that the relations between the government and the press were friendly and cordial even as the government under Nehru began to control the import of newsprint (something which subsequent governments have regularly done).[98] However, with time, and especially since the 1960s, the Indian press began to come into its own and became more critical of government policies. The adversary role of the press at the national level gained momentum after Indira Gandhi split her Congress party in 1969.[99] Between 1969 and 1975, Indira Gandhi's government undertook a number of measures (e.g., the introduction of newsprint quotas and licence requirement to import printing machinery) to weaken the press. In 1971, the state defined the role of the press as follows: "to report to the people and not advise the government" (Dunnett 1988: 243). The government also sought to introduce a scheme whereby it would have 50% control in management on all papers exceeding a circulation of 15,000 (ibid.). The stage was set for a severe curtailment of press freedom.

India entered its darkest days of press freedom on the night of June 25, 1975, when Indira Gandhi declared a state of *Emergency*, a period of censorship that lasted until the general elections of March 1977. During this period the government suppressed individual freedoms, curtailed the jurisdiction of the courts and rendered the Constitution useless. A total of 208 dailies and 1,434 weeklies were closed down by

[98] The lack of foreign exchange reserves is most often cited as the major reason.

[99] The so-called "monopoly press", certain large newspapers associated with big business, was seen by the authorities to be anti-government, anti-poor and in favour of vested interests of various types. Consequently, the central government decided in 1971 to introduce a bill in order to diffuse the ownership of these newspapers. This bill, however, met with resistance and was set aside (Verghese 1978: 220-221). Apart from the rather well-established control on the import of newsprint, the regional press also began to be disciplined when some governments began to hold back *state advertising*, which normally comprises a large portion of the advertisement revenue in general.

the government, while the Press Council of India was abolished (Bhaskar 1989: 71).[100] The reasons behind this censorship are complicated and not essential to this argument. It might suffice to mention here that anti-government movements in many regional states, especially in Gujarat and Bihar during the early 1970s, was a major reason. Censorship was enforced by referring to the Defence of India rules, and certain extensive dos and don'ts for the press were issued. The prohibitions were in effect wide and covered a wide array of activities of the press. Even after the end of the Emergency, government power over the media remained considerable and was reflected in the news coverage and management of the monopoly radio and television channels, respectively. It is only in recent years that private radio and television channels have cropped up and foreign news channels have been permitted to broadcast in India. Not surprisingly, after the end of the Emergency, the circulation of newspapers and periodicals in India has increased remarkably.[101]

The Indian press today is generally regarded as being plural and independent and a role model for the Third World. One periodical summed it up as follows:

> *Among the world's largest and oldest, though not necessarily the best, the Indian press remains unmatched in the Third World, reflecting India's vast diversities in*

[100] An important way in which the government controlled the press during this period was by denying advertisement revenues to unfavourable newspapers. As such newspapers supportive of Indira Gandhi's Congress party and its ally the Communist Party of India (CPI), were the ones to receive the bulk of government advertisement (ibid.). The aim seems to have been based on "the well-understood principle that a newspaper that is not financially viable will be unable to express strong opinions and very soon will cease to express any opinions at all" (Irani 1989: 37).

[101] In the period between 1976 and 1981, the circulation of daily newspapers in all languages increased from 9,3 million copies daily to 15.3 million, an increase of 65 per cent. In contrast, during the 1971-76 period, the corresponding increase was only 2.5 per cent (Jeffrey 1987: 607). Increased literacy and a growing interest in politics are also vital to this explanation.

technological, social and economic standards. Indian publications are the most free of all their counterparts...[102]

Similarly, Dunnett (1988: 245) concludes that the Indian press is largely free and does perform the "watchdog" function. And even though the product quality levels are poor in most Indian-language papers, the press has survived. "Given the alternative possible scenarios of a poor developing country, survival must be judged a success in itself" (ibid.).

6.3 Freedom of the Indian Press and Famine Prevention[103]

The ideal role played by the press in reporting hunger, food-crises, and anticipated famines can be summed up with regard to two vital points: the disseminating of information; and the "watchdog" function. First, the *dissemination of information*, although not the only objective of the press in developing countries, is a first and basic function. "It is a response to a fundamental human desire and indeed right - the right to know" (Sommerlad 1966: 55). This function is carried out by providing information from all over the country and the press can perform the role of an informal "early warning system" (EWS), by making authorities aware of an imminent food crisis. This is done, for instance, by reporting on situations of drought, floods, other climatic disasters or any situation where conditions for the acquirement of food are so poor that famine is imminent. Second, the press functions as a *"watchdog"*. Editors, publishers

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[102] From the *Far Eastern Economic Review's* cover feature entitled, "The Indian Press", 18th July, 1985.

[103] I use the term "press" interchangeable with "media". However, the press has traditionally played a far more significant role in covering issues relating to food crises than other media simply due to the fact that radio and television in India were government controlled until only recently. The press has been the only form of media that was relatively independent right since India's independence. I say "relatively" since the Emergency of 1975-77 severely crushed the illusion that the Indian press was free from censorship. And even after 1977, state power to control the press remained considerable.

and journalists decide whom to write about, whom to quote, what events to record, etc. Reporting on food-crises and anticipated famines requires not only a desire, but also a reasonable amount of knowledge. When an issue is brought to the forefront and reported, the press (ideally) expects those in authority to change their tactics, alter their strategies, and re-investigate their priorities in order to cater to facilitate a better response to a crisis. In this sense it exerts the *accountability* principle.

6.3.1. Early traditions

No systematic and comprehensive study has been undertaken to examine the role of the press in covering early issues of food crises, hunger, starvation, and famines. However, the editor of an old and distinguished Indian newspaper, *The Hindu*, Ram (1990) points out that there is still some evidence that newspapers began to voice views on hunger and famine already during the famine of 1887-8. Some of the editorials in *The Hindu*, during this period relate famine in extremely general terms as a consequence of British rule. For instance, one editorial entitled, "Indian Famine and the British Exchequer", read:

> *... but for the extreme costliness of British rule and the drain of millions of Indian money every year as the price of the good government that the country enjoys, India would be far more prosperous than she is, and there would be no such thing as famine. (*The Hindu, *15 March 1897)*[104]

In its editorials, the *Hindu* was able to take up critically, issues pertaining to the lack of relief response by the British authorities. This included both the lack of financial allocation for relief purposes ("niggardly outpourings"), and various other factors responsible for the slow progress of relief efforts. These issues were, for instance, raised in the editorials of 25 February and 1 March 1897, titled "Governor and the Famine" and "The Distribution of Famine Relief", respectively (ibid.: 159). Criticising the lack of concern of the authorities under "normal" times, an editorial commented the following:

[104] quoted in Ram (1990: 159).

> *The moment the distress passes away the Government is quiet and happy again, and does not concern itself with the condition of the ryot until another similar calamity happens. Of course, a Commission is now and then appointed; but the recommendations, so far as they interfere with the convenience of officials, are never carried out. ("The Starving Ryot",* The Hindu, *24 March 1897)*[105]

Press reporting assumed a new role in 1918, when the press actively covered the food riots and related disturbances in South India as a consequence of the failure of rains. This was not a case of famine, but a "food crisis" that led to widespread looting leaving hardly any area untouched (Arnold 1979: 111). The press vigorously covered instances of looting, grain riots and other related disturbances; reporting that became instrumental in shaping public opinion, and a certain amount of pressure was put on official British policy. Arnold observes that newspapers were also able to voice the views of the public to a section of the district-level officials. These officials were often seen to intervene by, for example, asking private traders to sell their grains at a cheaper rate to the public (ibid.). Among the most active newspapers, especially from the so-called "nationalist press", were the following: *New India*, *The Hindu*, *Desabhaktan*, *Andhrapatrika*, *Swadesamitran*, and the *West Coast Spectator*. Among the Anglo-Indian newspapers, the *Madras Mail* often criticised the official handling of the crisis (Ram 1990: 161). Thus, the press was instrumental in bringing to the forefront issues connected with high prices, artificial shortages, hoarding, etc., which resulted in the authorities taking measures to counter the trend (Arnold 1979).

6.3.2. Press coverage of the Bengal famine, 1943-44.

India's last famine took place in the province of Bengal, prior to Indian independence and is said to have claimed between 2 to 3 million lives.[106] The important role played by one of India's foremost newspapers, the *Statesman*, in reporting widespread hunger, starvation and famine deaths in Bengal has been much emphasised by Sen (1981),

[105] quoted in Ram (1990: 159).

[106] The exact number of deaths is a matter of great controversy.

Stephens (1966) [107], Aykroyd (1974), Greenough (1982), Ram (1990), and Drèze (1990a), among others. The *Statesman* published an entire page of photographs of emaciated famine victims on August 22, 1943. These pictures, depicting mostly women and children lying on the pavements of Calcutta provided, for the first time, graphic and detailed information about the disaster to India and the world (Aykroyd 1974: 69). In the weeks to follow, the *Statesman* published more photographs accompanied by articles providing information about the grim situation. One particular editorial seemed to blame the authorities totally with the title, "This Sickening Catastrophe is Man Made" (*Statesman,* editorial, September 23, 1943). [108] There was great reluctance to declare a famine at first. When the government did decide to acknowledge such a situation in Parliament in October 1943, the *Statesman*, in an editorial titled 'Seen From a Distance', questioned why "the speech contained no direct admission of grave misjudgement on the higher authorities' part or even of error", especially considering "previous official assertions in London and New Delhi that there existed virtually no food problem in India".[109] Another editorial, characterised by informed and precise journalism, wrote about the government's policy of keeping the casualty figures as low as possible.

> *The Secretary of State for India seems to be a strangely misinformed man. Unless the cables are unfair to him, he told Parliament on Thursday that he understood that the weekly death-roll (presumably from starvation) in Bengal including Calcutta was about 1000, but that 'it might be higher'. All the publicly available data indicate that it is very much higher; and his great office ought to afford him ample means of discovery. ("The Death-Roll",* Statesman*, 16.10.43)*[110]

The *Statesman* was not the only newspaper to adopt a critical attitude towards government policies. Among the "nationalist press" a number of newspapers were active including *People's War* (Bombay), and *Amrita Bazar Patrika,* and *Hindustan*

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[107] Ian Stephens was the editor of the *Statesman* during the Bengal famine.
[108] quoted in Aykroyd (1974: 69).
[109] cited in Sen (1981: 79-80).
[110] cited in Sen (1981: 195).

Standard of Calcutta. *The Eastern Economist*, also squarely blamed the authorities. In an editorial titled "The Bengal Famine: India and Her People on Trial", it indicted the British government for "such a woeful lack of imagination and efficiency that they have allowed a situation to develop which has gone out of control" and went on to suggest that the tragedy was not due to the scarcity of food during the past months but rather due to "more deep-seated" causes.[111] At the risk of undermining the importance of other publications, one must acknowledge that the *Statesman* "distinguished itself in its extensive reporting of the famine and its crusading editorials", a fact also acknowledged later by the Famine Inquiry Commission (Sen 1981: 195n). The newspaper "reflected the active function of independent journalism and the professional credibility and influence of a serious newspaper" (Ram 1990: 170-71).

6.3.3. The Bihar Crisis, 1966-67

The Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, while touring Bihar and other areas struck by drought a few months prior to her election defeat in February 1967, told the nation:

> *Countless millions of our people, men, women and children ... have had the bread taken out of their mouths by an abnormal failure of the rains ... Green fields that promised an abundant harvest have withered ... The toil and sweat of months have been reduced to dust. There is hunger and distress in millions of homes. (quoted in Aykroyd 1974: 137)*

Most people predicted the worst to happen in Bihar and yet in the final analysis the relief efforts in Bihar emerged to be a success beyond all expectations. The press deserves its fair share of credit for its role in this success.

> *The press reports about the developing crisis situation and the responses of the politicians and authorities to the situation turned the Bihar Famine ... into a political drama in which many of the principals self-consciously played their roles on the public stage. (Brass 1986: 246)*

[111] cited in Ram (1990: 171)

In spite of dismissing earlier reports of hardships faced by the population as being politically motivated the government did, in the final analysis, react and it reacted well. The press in Bihar, especially two English-language dailies, *Searchlight* and the *Indian Nation*, played a crucial role by "framing the whole drama" and then "commenting on it" (ibid.: 253). The importance of these newspapers lay in their vigorous adoption of a critical attitude towards the Congress party government at both the centre and in the state of Bihar.

Their correspondents toured the countryside during the drought and wrote numerous reports of famine conditions and starvation deaths that contradicted the statements of the government and the administration, which said that the situation was under control. (ibid.)The Indian Nation, using terms such as "unprecedented drought", provided early warnings to the authorities as the summer of 1966 progressed, where officials were quoted voicing their concerns over the likely shortfall in the production of crops in relation to normal years.[112] The press reported on the withering of crops, the devastation following the floods, and on hungry and starving people. Brass, however, feels that the press could have been much more active in providing a more detailed early warning relating to the other symptoms of famine. "[T]here were no systematic reports in the press at this time of various other signs and symptoms of famine, such as wandering, migration, increases in criminal activity, and the like" (Brass 1986: 256). The press also tended to concentrate on sensational stories, frequently accompanying touring ministers and politicians. A reporter, for instance, described the rice-belt of Bihar as resembling "the desolate wastes of the Rann of Kutch in mid-summer" (Indian Nation, October 14, 1966).[113] However, the press definitely criticised those responsible and criticism did seem to covey to the authorities the urgency of the response required. The state administration of Bihar was not well known for its effi-ciency, and during the early stages of the famine various national and local newspapers described the state administration as "incompetent", "bungling", "unimaginative", and "unresponsive" (Berg 1971: 115). Among the national press, two newspapers, the Statesman and The

[112] *Indian Nation* (September 4, 1966, cited in Brass 1986: 254).

Hindustan Times, were particularly active in their coverage of the drought, and their attack was primarily targeted at the local politicians. One front page headline declared, "Power Politics While Bihar Starves" (The Hindustan Times, November 25, 1966).[114] Another report described the politics in Bihar as "a whole-time occupation" and voiced the view that politicians "think of nothing else except the elections ... they have no time to think of the drought or the starving millions" (Statesman, December 19, 1966).[115] In spite of its role in highlighting the plight of the affected population of Bihar, the press treated the crisis mainly as "unprecedented", a situation that the government claimed was largely brought upon by unexpected drought. By not being able to look into the more detailed causes of the crisis, namely the inadequacy of "early warning" techniques, the press seemed to imply that what took place was a sudden incident and that under "normal times", the food crisis would not be taken place (Brass 1986; Ram 1990). This was, and still definitely is, not the case in Bihar, where non-acute endemic hunger affects large portions of the population. However, in spite of not performing the "early warning" role to its full, the press in Bihar showed how well it could work in the presence of political freedom. By reporting the crisis and criticising existing policies, the press brought about awareness and helped to politicise the crisis that eventually resulted in the successful provision of relief to millions.

6.3.4. The Maharashtra drought, 1970-73

The drought in Maharashtra provided the government of India, both local and central, with yet another challenge in terms of providing food and employment to the affected populations. India was able to avert another major disaster mainly through the record scale and reach of public works programmes which formed a major component of the famine relief operations (Drèze 1990a: 89). Even here, the role of the press in stimulating public pressure in favour of increased public works and public distribution

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[113] cited in Brass (1986:256).
[114] cited in Berg (1971: 115).
[115] cited in Berg (1971: 115).

can be observed. Subramaniam (1975) notes the "phenomenal industry" that the relief measures turned out to be:

> *In every visit which was undertaken by the Chief Minister, he propounded a new slogan ... 'Work for all who want it'. The reverberations of this slogan from village to village, from worksite to worksite, coupled with the phenomenal industry displayed in the organisation of relief measures and the allotment of the necessary funds for implementing these measures, spread as it were a new gospel of faith and cheer and courage throughout the entire countryside, as a result of which there was an electric charge in the rural atmosphere. (quoted in Drèze 1990a: 91-92)*

In attempting to explain the reasons behind this "phenomenal industry" of relief operations, Drèze (1990a) highlights the important roles played by opposition parties and the press. During the period 1970-73, innumerable reports were published in newspapers and periodicals dealing with issues of drought, hunger and famine. Both local and national newspapers covered the situation in Maharashtra more actively and with a "greater sense of sophistication and nuance" than was the case in Bihar (Ram 1990: 177). "There were numerous reports, editorial page assessments, and leaders over this period" (ibid.). Among the publications that distinguished themselves were the following: the *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Janata*, *Statesman*, *Times of India*, *Hindu*, and the *Economic Times*. An interesting aspect of the relief operations launched was the radical political activity that it brought out among rural women. Many publications devoted considerable space for the coverage of such popular protest movements. The *Economic and Political Weekly*, in particular, was active as it published article after the other covering various aspects of the drought (Mody 1972; Patil 1973). These articles did not merely report the prevailing situation but went on to analyse the situation and suggest remedies. Popular demands for relief, as articulated in the press, were, fortunately enough, taken up and backed by voluntary agencies and local political leaders (Drèze 1990a: 92). Even if one recognises that local political leaders usually exploit a crisis situation such as this in order to gain a reputation for themselves, the inescapable fact is that the press in Maharashtra provided the "big push" that made it virtually impossible for political leaders to not voice an opinion on the issue. From the rather sketchy evidence available on the role of newspapers in

Maharashtra, one feels that the press became active more in the later stages of the drought. Newspaper editorials and reports focused a great deal of attention on relief efforts. To what extent the press provided early warning information prior to this crisis in Maharashtra is much in doubt.

6.3.5. Press coverage of recent droughts and anticipated famines[116]

Drought is a frequent occurrence in India and virtually one region or the other undergoes drought annually, given India's large size. The Indian press, it must be mentioned, has usually covered in detail the numerous instances of suffering that the affected populations experience during such a crisis. Field reports have been generally valuable:

> *... they [the field reports] have tended, in state after state, to challenge official claims relating to drought relief efforts, the efficacy and destination of funds spent on creating employment and elementary purchasing power in a situation of near-collapse of the economy of the afflicted households, and in general the drought policies of the state and centre. (Ram 1990: 174)*

A report that reviewed the drought of 1985-6 afflicting the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Karnataka, was critical of the government's late response to the crisis. It noted, for example, that "it was only in the last two months of 1985 that the State Government [of Karnataka] took note of the serious shortage of fodder, and that too after newspapers[117] carried detailed reports on cattle sales" (the *Indian Express*, June 1 1986).[118] A. Jayaram reporting on the drought in Karnataka wrote the following in an article in *Frontline*:

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[116] On writing this section I have relied heavily on N. Ram's excellent article from 1990, entitled, "An Independent Press and Anti-hunger Strategies: The Indian Experience".

[117] The newspapers referred to here are the local Kannada language newspapers like *Samyuktha Karnataka*, and the national dailies like *The Hindu* and the *Indian Express*.

[118] quoted in Ram (1990: 174).

> *All one hears from the demoralised peasants is an endless narration of misery ... It is being described as the worst drought of the century, though few have called it a 'famine' mainly because people, thought not cattle, have so far escaped starvation... All over northern Karnataka people complained of a sharp spurt in the prices of foodgrains. The revenue authorities maintain that the situation is not so grave as to warrant the opening of gruel centres ... For the present, the rural and the urban folk scan the spotless blue skies for that speck of cloud that might bring some succour. (A. Jayaram, "On a Tour of Drought-Hit Areas",* Frontline*, 22 February - 17 March 1986)*[119]

Many local newspapers - such as *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi* of Kerala; *Eenadu*, *Andhra Bhumi*, and *Andhra Prabha* of Andhra Pradesh; *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and *Jugantor* of West Bengal; and *Gujarat Samachar* of Gujarat, among others - have, over the years, excelled at covering issues relating to drought and famine and have helped to focus attention on particular regions and groups in times of crises. Nevertheless, the greatest impact is inevitably achieved by the more powerful national dailies like the *Telegraph*, the *Statesman*, the *Indian Express*, the *Times of India*, the *Hindustan Times* and *The Hindu*. In addition there are certain periodicals that have also proved to be rather influential in their coverage of hunger, starvation, drought and poverty. These include *India Today*, *Frontline*, *Sunday*, and the *Illustrated Weekly*. However, as both Sen (1982) and Ram (1990) recognise, the Indian press has exhibited tendencies of overstatement and sensationalism. At first, one sees the benefits of sensationalism in bringing urgent issues to the forefront. However, by doing this one risks making the reader suspect the real magnitude of the crisis. An example of complete exaggeration and distortion of facts is a ten-page report by one Nikhil Lakshman entitled "Hunger" which carried the following cover page announcement: "As the Republic Celebrates Its 36th Anniversary, 100 Million Indians are Threatened by Famine" (in the *Illustrated Weekly*, 16 January- 1 February 1986). By using the terms "drought" and "famine" interchangeably, the journalist confuses the reader and brings forth doubts about the credibility of the report (Ram 1990: 178). Expressing

[119] quoted in Ram (1990: 175-76).

similar sentiments, one commentator recently wrote a series of articles under the heading "Everybody Loves a Good Drought". In one such article, the problems of manufacturing drought and the ensuing notoriety traditionally associated with the Kalahandi district in Orissa is highlighted. Kalahandi has, in recent years, been associated with some of the worst droughts in spite of the fact that it produces, on an average, more food per person than Orissa and India as a whole. By blaming mother nature for the water crisis, the authorities have often managed to dupe the press into diverting attention from elsewhere (P. Sainath, "Everybody Loves a Good Drought", *Telegraph*, Calcutta, January 16, 1997). Very often the press tends to break a story following a visit by an important personality. This applied to the situation in the above-mentioned Kalahandi district of Orissa, where news of hunger was reported following Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit in July 1985.

> *Drought, food, sales and starvation deaths in Kalahandi did seem to scandalise mediamen throughout the country. Almost every national daily wrote editorials condemning the situation - State government officials, local politicians and journalists however are not surprised at the situation and ask why the nation's press has suddenly taken up cudgels on behalf of the starving people of Kalahandi who have been suffering from two decades of chronic drought. (Saibal Dasgupta, "Orissa: In the Shadow of Neglect",* Indian Express magazine, *25.08.85)*[120]

6.3.6. Press freedom in India today

India has a long tradition of press coverage on issues dealing with poverty and famines and this is borne out from the previous analysis on press reporting during the food crisis of 1918 and the Bengal Famine of 1943-44. The survey of civil and political liberties carried out by Freedom House depicts India's press as being "partly free".[121] A major reason to doubt India's freedom of the press stems from the times of the Emergency when constitutional safeguards meant to protect freedom of speech and

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[120] cited in Ram (1990: 181).

[121] Freedom House (1997b): *Freedom in the World: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties 1995-1996*. Roger Kaplan (general editor).

expression were set aside. Even today the Official Secrets Act allows the government to ban publication of articles dealing with sensitive security issues. However, journalists feel that in practice this is occasionally used to limit criticism of government actions, particularly in Punjab and Kashmir. Sikh militants in Punjab and right-wing Hindus in Gujarat and Maharashtra frequently harass journalists. Government radio and television monopolies ensure coverage favourable to the ruling political party, even as private commercial channels are booming. The mass media in India works in the absence of an absorptive infrastructure and hence the media's efficiency is weakened by widespread illiteracy and a limited audience. However, it has been alleged that the most important limitation to the media's efficiency in India is its inclination towards being a "uni-directional transmittory mechanism", i.e., a centre to periphery type of direction that is unable to represent particularistic interests (Kahane 1982: 92). I do not entirely share this view. First, one must acknowledge that newspaper circulation in India, especially those published in Indian languages, although not as high as in the West, has nevertheless increased radically in recent years. Jeffrey (1993: 2004), for instance, shows that improved technology, increase in literacy[122], improved purchasing power and political excitement, awareness and "politicisation", have driven the expansion of the Indian newspaper industry in the past one and a half decades. Second, by looking at the role played by the press in reporting situations of hunger and famine, one notices the crucial role the press plays in bringing to the forefront the concerns of the affected populations. Despite the fact that press freedom in India is not totally without hindrances in some form or the other, an active judiciary works consistently to safeguard the provisions of the Constitution and this was seen during the Emergency of 1975-77. The judiciary is independent of the government in ordinary cases, although the system suffers from overload and is often

[122] The all-India average literacy figure stands at approximately 52 % of the population over 7 years of age (Jeffrey 1993: 2008).

inaccessible to the poor. What is important, however, is that issues relating to acute hunger and famine have received a fair share of coverage and thus the role of the press cannot and must not go without due recognition. India has a vigorous private press and although it has not always been successful in providing "early warnings" to the authorities and in covering non-acute endemic hunger, it has definitely succeeded in extracting political accountability from the government whenever relief measures have not measured up to expectations. This is an achievement that rightly needs to be acknowledged.

6.4 A Comparative Look

The role of the media in focusing attention on famines in recent times must, of course, recognise the heroic efforts of Michael Buerk of the BBC and the camera work of Mohammed Amin, who together managed to focus world-wide attention on the Ethiopian famine of 1984. Even though certain formal Early Warning Systems (EWS), including Ethiopia's own national EWS, had provided early warnings regarding the urgency of required relief, most Western governments reacted only when pressurised by their own electorates. However, African *successes* at famine prevention have largely gone under-reported in the international media. Even though the news media in most African countries are government controlled, freedom of the press (in varying degrees) is found in Botswana, Mali, Namibia, Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritius, Senegal, and South Africa, among others. Contrary to popular belief, state action in many parts of Africa is not totally immune to public pressure and popular protests. Ungar (1990: 371) points out that even though many African leaders may not tolerate institutionalised opposition political parties, "they can sometimes be persuaded to accept the existence of an opposition press". A classic example is Kenya, where, despite imprisonment of journalists, Moi's regime allows criticism and discussion of various social issues at a certain level. It is said that opposition to Moi's rule does not come in Parliament but in newspapers and magazines (ibid.: 372).

6.4.1. The Nigerian famine

An excellent account of the role of an independent press working against famine is provided by Reddy (1988), who charts the coverage of especially one newspaper, the *Daily Times*, since the start of the drought during 1972-73 in northern Nigeria. In the initial stages of the drought most newspapers reported precious little on the desperate situation and it was only from September 1973 that the press began to actively cover the food crisis. Critical reports entitled, "Villagers Flee From Drought", "Bako Cries Out: My State is Suffering", and "Drought Disaster Latest: Many Lives Wiped Out", were some of the headlines that made the front pages of the *Daily Times*. Reddy observes that at least in the case of the *Daily Times*, there was no "early warning" role of the type often found in the Indian press. However, the newspaper played an important role in enlarging the national consciousness of the crisis and hence expanded "the scope of remedial action" (ibid.: 340). And then in November, the newspaper did something unique. It launched a national emergency relief fund for the drought-stricken states, promoting it with the following appeal:

> *The truth is that with, and in spite of, government efforts, there is not enough food to go round and these our fellow countrymen have not got the money to buy the subsidised food ... their suffering should be on the conscience of every other Nigerian ... We should not allow international relief organisations to come and do what we should and are able to do for ourselves and get the credit for spending one quarter of whatever they collect from foreign governments on food and seventy-five percent on administrative expenses. ("FELLOW COUNTRYMEN PLEASE - S-O-S",* The Daily Times*, November 12, 1973, quoted in Reddy 1988: 341)*

The response to this appeal was enormous and the newspaper carried out its vigorous campaign for funds during the next few months. In addition, daily reports of the deteriorating situation were also published under such headings as, "The Drought: What a Great Misfortune!", "The Drought: a National Disaster", and "Drought Shocker" (ibid.: 341). In many editorials, the tone became more and more critical with the aim of conveying the sense of urgency that was required of relief operations. In addition to reports, the *Daily Times* also published innumerable photographs and analytical reports. Reddy concludes that the newspaper "became highly conscious of

the importance of its role in combating the effects of drought, and this was acknowledged both by the public and by key government officials" (ibid.: 343). The newspaper's political editor, Haroun Adamu, remarked:

> *The press of this country can count as one of its major successes, the awakening of Nigerians, especially those in authority, to their responsibility to a section of this country, which is going through an agonising experience of slow and inevitable death through hunger. (*Daily Times*, December 1973, quoted in Reddy 1988: 343)*

6.4.2. Droughts in Kenya and Zimbabwe

During the severe drought in Kenya during 1984, early and adequate response was made possible, some argue, due to the "political commitment" of the government, while others feel that the main reason for this timely intervention was the government's fear of political instability that would result from a widespread famine.[123] Although it is said that the freedom of the Kenyan media is limited but nonetheless more extensive than in most African countries, the press did not play an adversarial role during this crisis. However, in spite of enjoying limited coverage in the domestic press, the drought begun to attract considerable concern in the international media. The national media played a far more active role in speeding up relief activities in Turkana in 1992, when Kenya underwent another bout of drought. Towards the end of September 1992, newspapers such as *The Nation* and *The Standard* carried daily coverage of the famine conditions in Turkana and the press was able to bring the plight of Turkana back into focus after electioneering had diverted attention from the imminent famine. It criticised the lack of concern with the crisis and reported stories of children being sold for food in Turkana (Buchanan-Smith & Davies 1995: 193). "It is of note that the media, so recently freed from tight censorship, was able to play this role and to report upon officials and politicians who desperately tried to cover up the crisis" (ibid.). However, even in this case, the press did not function in the early warning role. Rather, "by the time the stories hit the press, it was already very late" (ibid.).

[123] Cohen and Lewis (1987: 276) and Downing et al. (1987: 266) cited in Drèze (1990b: 138).

In addition to the so-called "Zimbabwean miracle" in food production, the government of Zimbabwe has been credited with impressive programmes of direct entitlement protection that averted a famine during the drought of 1982-84 (Drèze 1990b: 144). Even though Zimbabwe is a multiparty state, in reality, the country has been ruled by a single party, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) led by President Robert Mugabe.[124] The Zimbabwean press is regarded as one of the most active and independent in Africa and it played a vital role in extracting governmental accountability during the period of drought by its extensive coverage. Even though some of the larger newspapers, like the *Herald,* did not always criticise the government outright (on account of their generally support to the Mugabe regime), they nevertheless succeeded in conveying the sense of urgency of the situation that is so crucial for the timely launch of relief efforts. Thus, the press reported constantly on "the prevalence of undernutrition and hardship in the countryside, echoing parliamentary debates on the subject of the drought, calling for action against profiteering, and exposing the 'scandal' of rural women driven to prostitution by hunger" (ibid.: 145).

6.4.3. Press freedom in some famine prone countries

While the international media was highly active in covering the 1984 famine and the 1990-91 food crisis in Ethiopia and the 1984-85 famine in Sudan, the 1990-91 drought in Chad received little international attention. Consequently, even though Chad needed a smaller fraction of relief in comparison to the more politically sensitive operations in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan, Chad's needs were simply overlooked by the international community (Buchanan-Smith & Davies 1995: 132-33). It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between the role of the international and the domestic media. Although a relatively independent and active press can exist without full-fledged democratic institutions as in Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana, democracy is still the best form of government to enhance press freedom. In a survey on press freedoms in the

[124] Zimbabwe is officially an independent republic with the president as head of state and a parliament consisting of a unicameral, 150-member House of Assembly.

world, Freedom House (1997a) assesses the system of mass communication (broadcasting and print) in 187 countries of the world.[125] Looking at the degree to which each country allows the free flow of information to and from the public, Freedom House determines the classification of each country's news and information media as being "free" (0 to 30), "partly free" (31 to 60), or "not free" (61 to 100).

[125] Freedom House (1997a): *Press Freedom 1996: The Journalist as Pariah*, Leonard R. Sussman, (ed.).

Table 6.1: Press Freedom in a Select Group of Countries, 1996[126]

Free (Scores between 1-30)	**Partly Free** (Scores between 31-60)		**Not Free** (Scores between 61-100)	
Mali (24)	Senegal (31)	Zimbabwe (56)	Zambia (60)	Somalia (79)
Botswana (30)	Cape Verde (32)	Ethiopia (57)	Kenya (62)	Sudan (80)
Namibia (30)	Malawi (36)		Ghana (62)	China (83)
	Burkina Faso (37)		Cambodia (65)	Zaire (84)
	Uganda (38)		Eriteria (68)	Burundi (85)
	India (48)		Liberia (70)	Nigeria (92)
	Tanzania (49)		Mauritania (71)	Afghanistan (90)
	Bangladesh (49)		Chad (72)	North Korea (100)
	Niger (54)		Rwanda (74)	

Source: compiled from Freedom House (1997a). Scores in brackets.

The overall conclusion of the survey is that only 22 % of the world's population live in countries with a free press (64 countries), 38 % reside in countries with a partly free press (65 countries), while 40 % live in non-free-press countries (58 countries). Table 6.1 shows the ratings of a select group of countries that have faced food crises at some point of time or the other. In spite of the fact that the press in Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria are placed in the category of "not free", they do, nevertheless, report quite actively on drought and famine-related issues. The extent they are critical of the government in other issues is definitely limited, but on issues of famine the press in these countries has assumed an active role that deserves credit. This is an interesting contrast which also bears out the force and urgency that food crises demand. The remaining countries under the "not free" category have had limited success in combating famines. While Sudan, Mauritania and Chad have had some success, the most extreme examples of failure involve North Korea, Rwanda, Somalia and Zaire. In spite of belonging to the "partly free" category, among the countries who have

[126] No strict criteria have been used in selecting these countries expect for well known past records of hunger, starvation and famine caused by either war or natural events. Certain other countries have been chosen for purposes of comparison.

experienced most success in averting famine threats are India, Senegal, Cape Verde, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia (in recent years) and Burkina Faso.[127]

Apart from India, the classic example of a free press working against famines is Botswana, where the democratic nature of its regime and the comparative efficiency of its administration have successfully neutralised many of the features that are thought to make the country vulnerable to famine. Drèze writes in this context that when drought hit Botswana in 1981-82, early action on the part of the government was forthcoming even in the absence of formal early warning systems.

> *As in India, the politics of famine prevention in Botswana are intimately linked with the accountability of the ruling party to the electorate, the activism of opposition parties, the vigilance of the press, and ....the strong demands for public support on the part of the affected populations. (Drèze 1990b: 154)*

Table 6.1 shows that apart from Botswana, only Mali and Namibia possess a free press.[128] However, Buchanan-Smith & Davies (1995: 163) argue that even a free press cannot immediately deliver the goods in a country like Mali for a number of reasons.

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[127] Freedom of expression is generally respected in Senegal although the broadly-defined laws against "discrediting the state" and disseminating "false news" may result in self-censorship. Independent media operate freely despite the potential legal threat and often criticise the government and political parties. Although the main newspaper in Cape Verde, together with radio and television broadcasting, are controlled by the government, coverage is usually fair and balanced. Press censorship in Zimbabwe has been more extensive where the government controls all broadcasting and newspapers directly or indirectly. Election media coverage has especially favoured the government. The independent media in Ethiopia has been targeted by the government for a long time even as all broadcasting is government controlled. In Burkina Faso, independent radio and newspapers operate with little overt interference and there is broad debate, including publication of material highly critical of the government (*Comparative Survey of Freedom 1995-1996*, Freedom House, 1997b).

[128] A variety of independent newspapers and radio and television operate freely in Mali, which boasts of having one of the most open media in Africa. The media in Namibia are free and even though the government dominates the electronic media, it

This argument can, I believe, also be applied to a number of other famine-vulnerable countries. First, with the centralisation of the press in the capital, resources may not yet exist for the regular flow of information from rural to urban centres. This also affects the ability of the press to *predict* famine. Second, "the primary constituency of the press" (interest groups in urban areas) will not always be favourable to advertise the need for famine relief in rural areas, fearing the diversion of resources from the cities. And finally, if the nature of press freedom is not explicit, a government (particularly one that is newly elected and fragile) may desire to control the press, especially when the press reports against government interests.

Thus, an important conclusion here is that "a free press is a vehicle which can go some way towards meeting these needs [pertaining to information and prediction of food crises], but cannot do so in isolation from the political context in which it operates" (ibid.). Thus, the role played by the media and opposition parties in combating famine actually depends on the nature of politics in the country. In this sense, true press freedom is highly dependent on a democratic political system, although (and as we have seen in Ghana, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Kenya), the press may be relatively free and active in combating famine even in the absence of substantive political freedom.

6.5 Summary

The key functions of the press in relation to famines has been seen in regard to the dissemination of information and its "watchdog" role. The main drawbacks that usually accompany these functions relate to inadequate coverage during "normal" times (thus not providing adequate early warning or coverage of non-acute endemic hunger) and the use of sensationalism, exaggeration and confusing concepts (and the associated problem of loss of press credibility among the public at large). The analysis of role of the Indian press seems to offer sketchy evidence of the "early warning"

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has by and large respected the editorial independence of the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation, which regularly criticises the government.

aspect and I think Sen's emphasis on this feature is exaggerated. One is more inclined to assign the role of the Indian press as being, for the major part, one of providing extensive coverage on drought, hunger and starvation *once a crisis has erupted*. The press seems to do its job best in reporting and criticising inadequate relief measures and thereby helps to usher in a sense of urgency on the part of the government. In this manner, the Indian press extracts the principle of accountability and plays the role of a "watchdog". In spite of a number of drawbacks in press coverage of hunger and related issues - such as sensationalism and neglect during "normal" times to cover non-acute endemic hunger - the press in India has provided its fair share of distinguished journalism.[129] The press in most other famine-vulnerable countries have not fully been able to live up to its "early warning" role. In Africa the press has usually swung itself into action quite late. However, wherever the press has been relatively independent or been allowed to report, it has managed to arouse the concern of the government and the international community. In this sense, the press in Africa, like in India, has performed more in its accountability role than in its "early warning" role. Consequently, too much reliance on the national press to provide early warning can be risky. Food crises are often newsworthy in the media (both national and international) when they are visually shocking. Press reporting needs to be supplemented by permanent and effective formal early warning systems, especially in the case of Africa. In India, the press needs to clearly focus more on covering issues relating to non-acute endemic hunger, especially as one-third of the population goes hungry every night. The press needs to report such issues consistently in addition to reporting a sensational and "unprecedented" crisis. The role of the press is thus a *necessary* but *not* a *sufficient* condition for preventing famines. When it is able to provide timely warnings of a crisis and is able to follow it up with vigorous coverage, the role of the press is crucial.

[129] Especially active in such issues, the *Indian Express*, and the *Economic and Political Weekly*, to mention a few, have published reports based on concrete information about existing situations while being in possession of a firm grasp of economic and political theory.

When the early warning aspect of press coverage is missing then the role of the press becomes considerably diminished, but by no means, unimportant.

7. Political Freedom and Famine: Final Remarks

The main purpose of this thesis has been to examine whether two aspects of political freedom - existence of opposition parties and an independent press - have contributed towards the "early warning" and prevention of famines. In this quest I have used, as a point of departure, Amartya Sen's contention that democratic politics are decisive in preventing famines around the world. The discussion has been based on an analysis of secondary literature, with a major emphasis on the political causes of famine - in particular - the relationship between famines and government policy. India has been the main focus of this inquiry, although an attempt has been made to briefly compare the famine prevention records of a number of famine vulnerable countries. My concluding remarks will be structured under two categories. First, I will summarise India's success at combating famines and will examine whether some of the lessons from India can be generalised to apply to other famine vulnerable countries. This summary will be based on the two sets of questions, as formulated under point **1.2**, that this study aimed to answer. And finally, a suggestion, requiring further and detailed research, that could help supplement the role of political freedom in explaining India's success at famine prevention, will be forwarded.

7.1 Lessons from India

A crucial point is whether we should only be concerned with a strict definition of "success" in famine prevention and not take into consideration strategies aimed to combat endemic hunger. This poses a dilemma in that if success is measured in terms of preventing excess deaths resulting out of the inability of vulnerable groups to acquire sufficient food to sustain life (see famine definition in chapter 2), then India's record is definitely a success. However, if success is to be measured in terms of implementing long-term measures aimed reducing vulnerability to famine, then India's record is hardly impressive. Success in India has been largely due to "crisis-induced" response, in contrast to conscious long-term famine prevention measures. Political

freedom in India works excellently during a major crisis. What is absent or lacking, however, is the "early warning" role of political freedom, which Sen emphasises so much. Political parties and the news media have often contributed constructively only after a crisis has erupted. India has, for the major part, depended heavily on the administrative apparatus to provide the much needed "early warning" information of impending food crises. And contrary to Drèze & Sen's (1989) contention, the "political trigger mechanism" in India has only worked when the threat of elections have loomed large in the horizon.

7.1.1. Crisis-induced response

Although the presence of active opposition parties and an independent news media, particularly a free press, were *necessary* for successfully averting famine in Bihar and Maharashtra, they are *not sufficient* to apply to all cases. In Bihar, apart from large amounts of food aid from the United States, political parties spurred on by forthcoming elections, vigorously took up issues relating to drought. The press did not play an early warning role, but it did focus attention to the deteriorating situation and thus helped to ensure that adequate relief measures were undertaken when the drought became prolonged. In Maharashtra, by contrast, a genuine attitude of consensus prevailed in government policy as attempts were made to involve members of opposition parties in committees and groups with the responsibility of planning relief. The news media in Maharashtra was, however, less active than was the case in Bihar. Virtually every year, some part of India has inevitably faced drought and in chapter 5, some examples of how drought was successfully contained in Gujarat and Rajasthan were discussed showing the role played by an efficient administrative service, in addition to active opposition parties (owing largely due to elections). The primary motivating factor both at the regional and national levels seems to be the threat of losing elections, and thus the early warning role played by opposition parties in India is suspect without the incentive of elections. Nonetheless, by focusing critical attention on famine protection and relief measures, opposition parties play a vital role, whatever their reasons may be. The press in India has been more consistent than opposition parties in covering issues

relating to drought, hunger and famine, although even here the demands of "newsworthines" and sensationalism have been dominant. The right to information still not guaranteed by law in India.[130] A recent positive feature, however, is the planned introduction of a new Broadcasting Bill which provides for the setting up of an independent Broadcasting Authority of India. Such a Bill will make it possible for Indian companies to own their radio and television stations.[131] In recent years, the press has actually begun to act more in its capacity of providing early warning information of impending food crises, and this feature is most encouraging. Jeffrey (1993), for instance, shows how improved technology, increased literacy and "political excitement" has driven the rapid expansion of the Indian newspaper industry in recent times.[132] In spite of often resorting to sensational news coverage, the press has been active, especially in covering the recent drought and famine-like conditions that have plagued, most notably, the Kalahandi district in Orissa. *The general conclusion is, however, that neither opposition parties nor the press have contributed entirely or sufficiently in India's success. In fact, even though both, opposition parties, and the press have played vital roles, their functions have been necessary but not sufficient.*

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[130] Recently, the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, Prof. M. Dandavate expressed the view that the right to information is essential to supplement the freedom of expression. The Chairman of the Press Council of India, Justice P B Samant feels that the media and the NGO's should publicise the need for a law on right to information. Others have suggested that some sections of the official secrets act will need to be amended for Right to information to become an effective instrument for the people (Calcutta Online, May 11, 1997).

[131] This Broadcasting Bill, recognising that satelitte televisions are being beamed into India from abroad, acknowledges the importance of giving Indian companies an opportunity of also getting their message across (The *Hindu*, 28.01.97; *Calcutta Online*, 17.05.97).

[132] Especially notable has been the increased number of vernacular language newspapers, who often prove to be more efficient at procuring local news and highlighting urgent issues (Jeffrey 1993).

They both need to improve their capabilities of providing "early warning" information of impending famines.

7.1.2. Long-term food security in India

In many developing countries like India, although food may be *available,* and its supply made *stable* (by taking adequate pre-emptive steps in anticipation of natural or man-made disasters), *access* to adequate and safe food for many is still impossible. The vast majority of the malnourished, on account of inadequate access to natural resources, jobs, and social support, can neither produce nor purchase enough food. As Andreassen, et al. (1992: 262) point out, an important aspect involves identifying threatened or vulnerable groups and "assessing the scope of the problem for each such group". And the best indicator of such vulnerability in developing countries has to do with the means to obtain food. The present food security policy of the Indian government consists of procurement of food and its distribution.[133] Procurement consists of paying remunerative prices to farmers, improving irrigation facilities, providing electricity, etc., thus encouraging increased food production. Through its Public Distribution System (PDS), the government aims to distribute foodgrains to vulnerable sections of the population. One recent, and far-sighted feature of this system has been the scheme whereby foodgrains are made available at half price for those under the poverty line.[134] In addition, the government usually intervenes to keep the price of foodgrains as low as possible. It remains to be seen whether the implementation of such new measures will be carried out thoroughly. What is urgently needed, however, are measures that aim both at, ensuring food security by encouraging own food production, and improving access to food by generating

[133] Maharatna (1996: 279), for instance, attributes the absence of any major famine in present India to the "end of colonial rule", and to the direct participation of the government in food supply management and food distribution at controlled prices.

[134] The present United Front government, under its "Common Minimum Programme", has decided to provide people below the poverty line wheat in the range of Rs. 2.40 to 2.60 per kilogram (The *Hindu*, 28:12.96; 22.02.97).

activities that ensure the appropriate use of natural resources for universal food sustainability.

7.1.3. India and "Africa"[135]

One objection, as discussed above, is that the 'lessons' of India can help in averting famine but not widespread malnutrition. It could, thus, be argued that perhaps some African planners have aimed at avoiding both famine and malnutrition. However, given the potential use of famine as a weapon of war and for other political purposes, not many African politicians can be said to have actively aimed in this direction (Harriss 1988: 166). Another objection to generalising from India's experiences could be that Africa did not have the advantage of clearly formulated Famine Codes like the ones formulated by the British in India in the late 1880s. These famine codes have formed an integral component of post-independence India's policies for combating famine threats. Another feature, that has helped India's case has been a well functioning and efficient *civil service* that India inherited upon independence. Most of Africa did not inherit such a bureaucratic tradition and had to start building their public administrative machinery from scratch upon independence. Still, and although underreported, a number of African countries have successfully combated famines on numerous occasions, even though such successes have varied considerably. These include Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and even to a certain extent Chad and Ethiopia. In most successes, governments have, for the major part, taken the initiative and the responsibility to provide public support (in co-operation with international relief agencies) for entitlement protection efforts among their populations. In many instances, formal early

[135] Africa is used with inverted commas to signify the heterogeneity and diversity among and within the many countries in the African continent. "Africa" is often used as a code word for stereotypes which are not useful for studying administrative and social reform within individual countries. But, according to Harriss (1988: 166), for purposes of general transferability of experience one is often forced to use such code words.

warning models contributed only in a small way in famine prevention, as even when such early warning was forthcoming, without political will, it is highly unlikely that relief measures would have been set into motion.

A common denominator in the many explanations of successful famine prevention mentioned in this thesis has been the emphasis on the government's capacity for crisis response. The natural question to ask here is whether an efficient famine preparedness system can exist *independent of* political freedom, whereby food shortages stop before they develop into dearth and famines. Or, to put it in another way, can governmental efforts sometimes succeed in famine prevention even under a system that is not a full-fledged democracy? Examples of from Nigeria (1978), Kenya (1991-92), Cape Verde (1975) and Zimbabwe (1982-84) seem to show that famines may be combated successfully in spite of the existence of one-party dominant or repressive political systems. "Even fairly repressive governments are often wary of the prospects of popular discontent in the event of a famine. Political ideology - if it takes the form of a commitment to the more deprived sections of the population - can be another creative force in motivating response" (Drèze & Sen 1989: 159). Indeed, this provides good grounds to not simply advocate that democracy prevents famines. Rather, one needs to take a detailed look into the presence of certain freedoms within a country, even though it may not be a democracy, in order to see how public action and/or governmental concern for the affected masses can produce policies that avert or combat famine. Nevertheless, one must keep in mind the political uses of declaring a famine, which is often detrimental to the long-term development of a formidable political opposition. In this connection, de Waal (1996: 200) has argued that although effective famine relief arises out of a "sound social contract, in which those in power are held to account if famine occurs", this can also be used to "entrench power and hegemony". Indeed, even though, for instance, the Mugabe government in Zimbabwe was forced to implement an expensive drought-relief programme during 1991-2, this has not translated into high-quality famine prevention programmes. In fact, "drought relief has become a tactical political resource, deployed in a rather crude manner to electoral advantage" (ibid.). Early this year, the Kenyan government of Daniel arap

Moi was accused of citing severe food shortages as an excuse to enact emergency powers suppressing dissent. In proclaiming the famine as a "disaster", President Moi invoked the Preservation of National Security Act, which gives the government powers in conditions threatening the state. Hence, in addition to regulating the price of essential commodities, this Act allows the government to detain people without trial, censor news and impose curfews.[136] Protection against famines has not emerged as a right in Africa; the only exceptions being certain urban areas where the right to cheap food has become entrenched. A main reason for this is that famine has almost never become politicised in Africa in the same manner it has been in India.[137] Except for the case of Botswana, a government commitment towards famine prevention has not lasted in many famine vulnerable African countries. Although the politics of foreign aid and resource/ logistical constraints is crucial, this thesis has focused on what governments can themselves do to reduce the threat of famines within their borders. What is urgently needed is a strategic political alliance built around freedom from famine.

7.2 A Supplementary Suggestion Explaining India's Success

In an influential work, Robert Putnam (1993) has forwarded a theory of *social capital*, which in essence proposes that community bonds or social connectedness have a strong impact on democratic as well as economic performance.[138] The concept of social capital refers to three features of social life - inter-personal trust, networks and

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[136] "Moi 'taking advantage of famine before poll'", *The Telegraph*. London: 20.02.97. In 1984, Moi similarly used the distribution of drought relief as a means of mobilising the Kenyan African National Union in rural areas (de Waal 1996: 200).

[137] An exception is the case of Ethiopia in 1973 when Haile Selassie's government fell party due to the Wollo famine.

[138] McNeill (1997: 417) writes that the term "social capital", "marks a significant step in the possible development of a new sub-discipline ... which draws upon sociology, political science and economics". As welcome as the term itself may be, many see "social capital" as being old wine in a new bottle, somewhat similar to Almond & Verba's (1963) well-known formulation of "civic culture" (Francesco Kjellberg: personal communication).

shared norms - that enable people to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives. Social capital facilitates co-ordinated action between individuals and is hence, a means of making collective action problems less devastating (ibid.: 167-71).[139] In other words, the more social capital a society or a community possesses the more it can co-ordinate its behaviour when necessary, which gives it more power, and which makes the democratic state more responsive to its demands. A hypothesis here could be that: "A community that has trust, networks and certain norms (i.e. social capital) is in a better position (*ceteris paribus)* to cope with famines. Organisation, formal or informal, gives more power to the group or community *vis-à-vis* famine-coping strategies". Thus, could it be the case that Indian society and its public administration is able to muster up adequate crisis relief in times of urgent need, even when the infrastructure for such emergency measures are not present in the Indian political and administrative fabric? Torry's (1986: 125-60) study of the psychology and morality behind Hindu peasant adjustments to famine focuses on the crucial role that inter-personal exchanges play in the normal survival pattern of Indian peasants. As only a small number of village households have the land to feed themselves during good years, the structure of food sharing is crucial as many village households normally survive with very little food security. By obstructing the circulation of food gifts and credit among households, famine often makes cheap credit from relatives disappear, and many resort to the costly alternative of borrowing cash from money-lenders (ibid.). However, peasants and the landless labourers, the main victims of famine, do not usually become helpless or panic. In fact, hardened by previous experiences (of perhaps, famine itself), communities may develop a series of adjustments to increasing stress. In all coping strategies, kinship, patronage and

[139] Social capital is not just a theoretical notion; it has been measured and tested empirically in Italy by Putnam and with amazing results; a correlation of $r = 0.92$ between "civic community" and democratic performance. Putnam also shows that levels of "civicness" or social capital in the Italian regions is *not* explained by socio-economic factors. It is in fact quite the opposite: civicness in northern Italy around

friendship structures play crucial roles. For example, in times of crisis the elderly may move in with their children, loans may be sought from relatives living outside the famine-hit area, the richer and more powerful members of a community may show a degree of patronage, etc. (Agarwal 1991: 173; Walker 1989: 49). Thus, in addition to governmental famine-relief efforts, social relationships with kin, and with villagers outside the kin network, may function as means of support: women may borrow small amounts of food, fuel and fodder from other women (Chen 1991); "helper" relationships among men may provide reciprocal labour, a sharing of irrigation water, etc. (Montgomery 1977); there may exist group help for various labour exchange agreements, characteristic of tribal communities (Kar 1982); and finally, traditional support systems may be present on caste lines and it may often be easier for the poor to receive help from richer peasants of their own caste than from other castes (Caldwell et al. 1986). A study focusing on such coping strategies with specific reference to famines could, perhaps, provide a supplementary explanation (in addition to the role of political freedom) towards India's success in combating famines. This could then be followed up with similar research in other countries.

As we approach the beginning of a new century, food crises continue to occur in various parts of the world. In spite of adequate production, food is not accessible for many. Preventing famines is only the first step in the long journey towards guaranteeing food security for entire populations in the developing world. While recognising that food is a basic need, we also need to be concerned with the pre-conditions for it's satisfaction. Hence, conditions such as freedom of expression, the freedom to investigate and seek information, and the freedom to do what one wishes so long as no harm is done to others, need to be defended; since without such conditions, the satisfaction of basic needs become difficult, if not severely endangered. Matters regarding peace; social, political, and economic stability; and equity in the context of democracy and good governance, are essential for obtaining food security and

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1900 explains the better economic performance of the region in the 1970s as compared with southern Italy (Blomkvist 1996).

preventing famines. There is an urgent need for a political will that recognises the importance of taking timely action *now* to fulfil the food requirements of present and future generations.

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