

## CHAPTER VIII.

## NATURAL CALAMITIES.

THE district is liable to scarcity and famine when the rains <sup>LIABILITY</sup> fail, and within the last 20 years it has suffered once from famine, <sup>TO</sup> in 1889, and twice from scarcity, in 1897 and 1900. The <sup>FAMINE.</sup> effects of a failure of the monsoon are less disastrous than in other districts, for the people are not so dependent on cereal harvests as those in the plains, the products of the forests going far to help them in times of drought; but when, as in 1889, there is not only a failure of the rains but also of the *mahuā* and mango crops, the distress is most severe. Unfortunately, moreover, there is no organized system of irrigation to counteract the capriciousness of the rainfall; the country is backward and the people are apathetic and indolent; and being the direct ryots of Government, they look to the latter to help them. On the other hand, the number of landless labourers is comparatively small, and the Khondmāls are less liable to suffer from scarcity than the Angul subdivision, for the rainfall is considerably heavier, no restrictions have been placed on the use of the forests, and this is one of the very few tracts in Orissa where the aboriginal tribes have been able to maintain their connection with the soil.

The following is a brief account of the periods of scarcity which have occurred within the last 20 years.

The first of these culminated in the famine of 1889. In the <sup>FAMINE</sup> Angul subdivision there had not been a good harvest of winter <sup>OF 1889.</sup> rice during the previous four years, while that of 1887-88 was on the average not more than 6 annas and that of 1888-89 not more than 8 annas of a normal crop. Considerable distress was reported in the autumn of 1888, and some measures of relief were adopted, the most important of which was the relaxation of the forest rules; but a copious fall of rain in September so improved the condition of things that measures of relief were gradually discontinued, except that the forest rules were not reimposed. In spite of this rain, however, the rice crop was an indifferent one, and a large portion of the higher land was left untilled, for there was a great drought from October till the following May. The *mahuā*, mango and palm crops failed both

in Angul and the adjoining States, and early in the year the agriculturists found themselves unable to keep the field labourers in their service and discharged them. The latter were thus suddenly thrown out of employ, and were unable to find work elsewhere. In ordinary years they might have subsisted for some time upon the edible roots, fruits, etc., of the jungles; but unfortunately in this year jungle produce also failed or became very scarce. The labourers, therefore, being suddenly deprived of all sources of subsistence, could only be supported by special measures until a demand again arose for their services.

The majority of the cultivators were in far better condition owing to the stocks of grain they held in reserve, but some were reduced to abject want, having sold a considerable portion of their slender stock at high prices, to find subsequently that they had to buy grain for their sustenance at a much higher price. In many cases, they parted company with their last piece of gold or silver, with their brass ornaments, and with the last utensil of their household; and a few actually sold their plough-bullocks. The distress during the months of April and May and part of June was naturally at its height, there being no work available in the fields, while a severe epidemic of cholera broke out. In the latter part of June, however, rain fell, and there was fresh vegetation; and at about the same time organized measures of relief were set on foot. The hopes of the people revived; the landed classes obtained agricultural loans, the able-bodied labourers found work, the infirm or helpless of both sexes received gratuitous relief, and jungle produce became again procurable. In this manner the people continued to live till the maize and millet crops, which happily yielded a bumper outturn, were gathered. They were followed by the early rice crop, which was also an excellent one. By this time the labourers were getting their usual work, the price of food-grains had begun to fall, and relief operations were gradually reduced, until they were closed entirely in November, when the early winter rice crop was harvested.

In the Khondmāls, the distress was far less severe than in the Angul subdivision. The failure of crops was as great, and there was absolutely no rain from November till about the end of May. About the end of April the trees and plants in the jungles began to wither, the heat became intolerable, and tanks and other reservoirs of water dried up. The supply of the jungle products upon which the mass of the people had mainly to depend, also began to fail, and it was apprehended that, if the rains did not soon break, there would be a serious famine. Fortunately, however, before the end of May there was some rain,

which, though small and insufficient for agricultural purposes, revived the jungle plants and trees. In June there was a fall of rain which averaged 5 inches all over the Khondmāls, and the pressure was relieved. In spite of this, it was found necessary to start relief works, such as the building of rest-houses, and *dharmasālās*, and the cutting of jungle. There was, however, less pressure than in the Angul subdivision, and the condition of the people was very much better. This state of things was attributed to the fact that the forests in the Khondmāls are not reserved or protected, and the people were able to fall back on the supplies of game, edible roots, wild fruit, and other products of the jungle, which contribute so largely to the means of subsistence of aboriginal tribes.

Briefly, this, the greatest famine within the memory of the present inhabitants since the great Orissa famine of 1866, was due partly to the short harvests of 1887 and 1888, partly to the failure of the mango and *mahuā* crops in 1889, and partly to the effects of a long drought which prevailed from October 1888 to the end of May 1889, on account of which all grain was tightly hoarded for some months, and the labourers were deprived of employment. The total cost of relief measures in the Angul subdivision amounted to Rs. 36,430, including agricultural loans to the extent of Rs. 12,590. In the Khondmāls some difficulty was felt in selecting relief-works; for the only one which the Khonds will take up readily is cutting down trees and jungle, which naturally can only be allowed to a limited extent; and though they do not object to digging tanks and wells, that is a work difficult to carry on in many places during the rains. The measures organized for the relief of distress in this tract consisted chiefly in giving agricultural loans; making advances, which after the field season were to be repaid, not in cash, but in labour; providing work on roads and tanks for those willing to perform it; making advances to weavers; and opening centres for gratuitous relief on a small scale. The total expenditure amounted to only Rs. 7,620.

There was some distress in 1897 due to the partial failure of SCARCITY crops in the Angul subdivision. In 1896, the rainfall was OF 1897. favourable until the middle of September, but after that it ceased till November. The injury done to the winter rice crop by this sudden cessation of rain at the time when it was most needed was aggravated by the visitation of an insect-pest locally known as *mahuā* (*Leptocoris acuta*). The outturn of this crop was thus not more than 8 to 12 annas on the average. The distress caused by the partial failure of the rice crop was,

however, not great, and it was found sufficient to open a few relief-works and to advance Rs. 20,000 in loans.

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OF 1900.

After this, the people had a series of bad years, owing to short crops, which exhausted their resources and culminated in general scarcity in 1900-01. This was most felt in the Khondmals, specially by those who depended for their sustenance on jungle produce, such as yams and edible bulbs, the supply of which grew scanty in July. Famine conditions prevailed, loans were given to cultivators, relief works had to be opened, and gratuitous relief was given to the old and infirm and to those who were physically unfit to do any work. In the following year their condition generally improved, but in the next year there was a slight falling off. In the third year all signs of distress disappeared, and there was a marked improvement in their condition, which has continued to this day. They have mostly paid off their debts, their condition and standard of living have improved, and the higher classes of agriculturists now expend larger sums on luxuries, social ceremonies and wearing apparel.