

# Faiture of Exchange Entitlement's Theory of Famine

## A Response

Amrita Rangasami

*The sudden collapse into starvation that has been identified with the famine condition, the author argues, is only the final phase of famine when the stigmata of starvation become visual and the victims have collapsed. Famine is not, however, an event marked by the death of the victim. The basic failure in the understanding of famine is the inability to recognise the political, social and economic determinants that mark the onset of the process. We need, therefore, to redefine famine and identify the various factors, political, social, psychological and economic, that operate to keep large classes in the population under continuous pressure.*

*The first part of the essay examines the inadequacy of current definitions of famine and suggests the need to question them. The available literature, including government records on famine as well as codes and manuals of relief administration, reflects the government view that famines are caused by the collapse of the network of social transactions and services, wages and assets, including the varied services and skills of the family unit or the village. The exchange entitlement theory is thus implicit in the literature and consequently does not represent an advance. The second part of the essay is devoted to its consideration.*

[The first part of the paper is published below. The second part will appear next week.]

### I

THIS paper is a response to Amartya Sen's work on famines<sup>1</sup> and the theoretical framework he has offered for the understanding of the phenomenon. Sen's theoretical framework rests on a definition of famine which, with minor adaptations, is derived from current definitions. The determinants in these definitions are demographic and biological. The social and economic determinants appear to be ignored.

I propose to examine, in the first part of my essay, the inadequacy of current definitions and indicate the need to question them. In so far as Sen's theoretical framework acquiesces in existing definitions, it appears to have a limited validity. A study of the available literature including government records on famine as well as codes and manuals of relief administration of India offers evidence of a coherent theoretical framework.<sup>2</sup> Primarily, these records reflect the government view that famines are caused by the collapse of the network of exchange of social transactions and services, wages and assets including the varied services and skills of the family unit or the village. In other words, the exchange entitlement theory is implicit in the literature and consequently it does not represent an advance. I propose to devote the second part of this essay to its consideration.

For the first part, I will draw upon conclusions I have arrived at in the course of field work among communities affected by scarcity and famine in different parts of India. I will also refer to material collected during library work here and in the United States.

Let me re-state what is famine according to Sen. First, Sen defines famines as "a particularly virulent manifestation of starvation causing widespread death".<sup>3</sup> He reinforces this specific association with death by referring to the definition of Masfield. "On balance it seems clear that any satisfactory definition of famine must provide that food

shortage is either widespread or extreme if not both, and that the degree of extremity is best measured by human mortality from starvation."<sup>4</sup> "In statistical terms it can be defined as a severe shortage of food accompanied by a significant increase in the local or regional death rate" and so on.

These definitions are only a variant of the one offered in the "Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences":

True famine is a shortage of total food so extreme and protracted as to result in widespread persisting hunger, notable emaciation in many of the affected population, and a considerable elevation of community death rate attributable at least in part to deaths from starvation.<sup>5</sup>

Sen also affirms that such mortality is an event in time that occurs suddenly. "In analysing starvation in general, it is important to make clear distinctions between three different issues: Lowness of the typical level of food consumption, declining trend of food consumption and a sudden collapse of the level of food consumption. Famine is chiefly a problem of third kind, and while it can be obviously helped by the first two features, it often does not work that way."<sup>6</sup>

I find it necessary to question the definition as well as the explanation.

Let me also briefly summarise Sen's position on the causes of famine. Sen, as far as I have understood, accounts for it in this way. In an economy with private ownership and exchange in the form of trade (exchange with others) and production (exchange with nature) it can be characterised as depending on two parameters, namely the endowment of the person, the ownership bundle and the exchange-entitlement mapping (the function that specifies the set of alternative commodity bundles that the person can command respectively for each endowment bundle).<sup>7</sup> He goes on to illustrate: For example a peasant has his land, his labour power and a few other resources which together make up his endowment. Starting from that endowment he can produce a bundle of food that

may be his or by selling his labour power he can get a wage and with it buy commodities, including food or he can grow cash crops and with that buy food and other commodities. There are many other possibilities. The exchange entitlement mapping specifies the exchange entitlement set of alternative commodity bundles respectively for each endowment bundle.

A person can be plunged into starvation if his endowment collapses either through a fall in the endowment bundle or through an unfavourable shift in the entitlement mapping. The exchange entitlement mapping will depend on the legal, political, economic and social characteristics of the society in question and the person's position in it.<sup>8</sup>

Particularly significant are the references to economic status and modes of production where Sen works out possibilities of starvation of such categories as the landless labourer, peasant and large farmer and concludes that similar contracts can be worked out outside agriculture as well.<sup>9</sup>

He points out that "the phase of economic development after the emergence of a large class of wage labourers but before the development of social security arrangements is potentially a deeply vulnerable one".<sup>10</sup>

Sen is keen to establish the limitations of the 'income-centered view' which as is widely known, has held the field till now.

Even in those circumstances in which income does provide command, it offers only a partial picture of the entitlement pattern.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, he offers his entitlement mapping as a general theory which can take in a whole range of possibilities:

The focus that emerges from this monograph looks at a different direction, namely the need to view the food problem as a relation between people and food in terms of a network of entitlement relations. Some of the relations are simple (e.g. the peasants' entitlement to the food grown by him), while others are more complex (e.g. the nomad's entitlement to grain through exchange of