

The Great Famine of 1837-38

As he stood at dawn on the bluff overlooking the Jumna River, the stench of death rising off the riverbank, Proby Cautley realised that at last he had found his mission in life. He was thirty-six, an engineer, and he had lived in India all his adult life. It was the first Sunday of March 1838, God's day, but God was nowhere present on the landscape before him: not his God, nor any other as far as he could determine. Beneath him, on the banks of the Jumna, he counted three-score and twelve bodies – twice the number of his years – mostly the aged and the young, women and children, relatively few men. He pondered the reasons for the gender imbalance and decided upon two – the male of the species commanded feeding priority, and women, often burdened by their young, would more willingly die to let their offspring live.

The latest victims had come during the night. The evening before, when he rode along the bluff, not a corpse had been in sight. Before noon each day, the riverbank was cleared of the dead. Work gangs on government relief slung the Grim Reaper's harvest onto the oxcart that accompanied them. The Doab of northern Hindustan was in the grips of the worst famine it had ever known.

They crawl to the river and, as if exhausted by the effort, they die there, Cautley wrote that evening to his brother, George, whom he addressed by his middle name, Spencer. *A horrible death, without dignity, racked by pain, their empty stomachs distended and their leaking throats desiccated by thirst.*

After a scant monsoon two years before, the rains in 1837 failed altogether, and since then virtually no precipitation had fallen on the dusty plains between the Ganges and the Jumna. Yet the rivers were flowing with the snowmelt off the Himalayas to the north. This was the great paradox: though water there was, famine had dug in its fangs and would not let go. People kept dying. The scorched earth was hungry for more preys. Whole villages were already depleted. There was no laughter of happy children in the fields. No wives harangued their lazy husbands. No lowing of cattle. The stench of death was overwhelming. Yet Cautley realised no reason existed under the sun, moon and stars for famine to visit the bountiful valley, confident that he possessed the skills to ban the scourge from the Doab forever.

God puts everyone on earth to fulfil a mission, he scribbled across the page. Some never discover theirs. Others know but refuse to accept it. I have found mine here on the parched plains of Hindustan. My relief is immense and I am impatient to take up the challenge. The full force of the summer heat will soon be upon us, once more stoking the infernal oven of desolation. Except this time it will be worse. People no longer have resistance. They have used up their last reserves.

He penned the words furiously, heatedly even, sweat dripping from his brow. *The famine has brought a depth of misery to the country unknown in Europe. An estimated eight million people are afflicted, five million of them intensely. You cannot conceive of such abomination. Even I who live with it from day to day have trouble comprehending the full impact of Satan's work in re-engineering nature.*

The candles flickered. There was movement behind him. He hardly noticed. The scent of honeysuckle invaded the study and he heard the whispering of crinoline. Then a hand caressed his shoulder. "You need a break, darling."

Cautley turned slowly and smiled. "I didn't hear you enter."

"I tip-toed past the door. I didn't want to startle you," Fanny Bacon said. She spoke softly, with the slightest hint of a County accent. "You're always working. That will do you no good, you know. So why don't we take a stroll in the garden? The air is cooler now."

Frances Bacon was a tad taller than Cautley, lithe and usually vivacious. But the bone-dry air and the pall of death hanging over the town weighed upon her, like it weighed upon everyone else in the Company lines. Even her soft ivory skin had become, as she put it, *all chafing and scratchy*. On the rare evenings Proby was at home and not in the field inspecting canal fixtures she would usually drop by. She had arrived with her brother, George Bacon, the year before, just as the famine seemed to be reaching its peak. A botanist like their late father, George was an assistant superintendent at the Company Garden under Doctor Hugh Falconer, Cautley's closest friend. Fronting onto Janta Road, not far from Cautley's bungalow, the Garden was a bustling laboratory that turned out resistant strains of fruit and cereals, medicinal herbs and different varieties of tea: a 40-acre haven of verdure watered by a branch of the Eastern Jumna Canal, of which Proby was the superintendent.

Proby was still absorbed by that morning's revelation. Enough water ran in the Ganges and Jumna to irrigate all of northern Hindustan. Irrigation was the answer. That he had always known. But how to lift the needed quantities of water out of each river's *khadir*, economically and efficiently, so that it could be distributed throughout the Doab? Nobody had yet found an adequate response to that question. It was up to him to provide one.

"Proby, darling?"

"Ah yes, of course," he replied. "The jacaranda's in blossom. Did you notice?" He rose from the armchair in front of the writing

table and kissed her chastely on the cheek. "How good of you to come. You do look lovely. Yes, let's go for a walk."

His servants kept the garden behind the bungalow well watered in spite of the drought and the scent of jasmine masked the odour of death that hung in the still night air. He took her hand and squeezed it. "I'm glad you came," he said and, without warning, rising on the balls of his feet, he embraced her warmly.

Her heart pounding, she felt the blood rush to her head. Oh yes, she thought, hold me tight and never let go. She wanted to feel his tongue between her lips, then suddenly she quivered as his hands moved down her back. Her cheeks burning, eyes closed, she went as limp as a lily, nipples burgeoning in anticipation. But his hands only rested briefly on her hips. Almost immediately he removed them and suggested as innocently as a lamb: "Shall we take the air?"

The famine only got worse. Soon in the night, every night, between two and three hundred souls laid down by the river to die. The alleyways and bazaars of Saharanpur were packed with gaunt, despairing wretches in search of a few grains of rice. Mothers would sell their pretty children for sixpence, and die when that was spent. Cautley saw men grazing the brown earth like cattle. Every morning he rode past more abandoned homesteads. Whole villages stood empty, while lank, haggard shapes skulked through town, hoping to waylay the daring owner of a fish or bowl of curd, and at every corner, in the shadow of every doorway, crouched the living dead.

The famine had not arrived overnight. Since September 1836, day after day, month after month, the sky had been brazen and the earth turned as hard as the flagstones in the churchyard at Stratford Saint Mary. Slowly the wells ran dry, the grass

withered, shrubs charred, while cattle collapsed in the fields and birds fell gasping into leafless thickets. For miles around village thatches had been torn down to feed the starving livestock, leaving the peasants with neither food nor shelter. Except for the riverbank and along the canal not a blade of grass grew, not a bush survived. The land was bare.

Not long before the drought began, Bishop Daniel Wilson, primate of the Church of England in India, compared the Doab to a Garden of Plenty watered by the five fountains of the Lord. No one could imagine that within months the horrid triumvirate of famine, pestilence and crime would invade every district and every village. The profiteers made hay by gouging the unfortunate masses. Shortly before the Feast of Saint Patrick a scandal erupted when Captain Frederick Young, the district superintendent at Dehra Dun, discovered local merchants were adulterating their grain stocks to fully half their weight with powdered bones. Three were hung. But the rivers continued to run, fed by the sparkling glaciers of the Himalayas whose lofty summits were not many miles off.

Ironically, Cautley thought as he rode out next morning, this was a land rendered so rich by even the slightest irrigation that if tickled with a hoe it would laugh with a harvest. He called it *champaign*. Now the champaign was parched, crying for water. People cried for the Sarkar Bahadur to restore the canals built centuries before by the princes, and construct those that had been planned but never actually built. This was the dirge he listened to as he rode along the bluff above the Jumna.

On the ground between the river and the canal I see patches carpeted with crops, thriving because they lie adjacent to easily accessible water, while the surrounding countryside is baked hard with drought. In the villages of these watered strips I marvel at how brick houses have already replaced thatch hovels, and how the influence of an assured water supply has produced results that seem divinely sent. The canal has brought water to the fields and order

has replaced disorder, wealth has ascendance over poverty, industry has supplanted crime.

Truly, water seems the very light of the picture. Take it away and the picture darkens; the fields become waste and the villages abandoned, men fade from the landscape. Restore water and the picture will brighten; the fields again laugh with harvests, and onto the canvas returns a happy, contented people, secure in their industry.

He put down his quill pen and remembered a verse from the Book of Lamentation:

Our skin is hot as an oven, with the burning heat of famine...

And the hymn of anguish in the Book of 2 Kings:

There was no food for the people...

Then he began visualising the great Ganges Canal.

In the springtime before the drought began, George Eden, Baron Auckland, was appointed Governor-General of India. A Whig politician, he had proven himself an able administrator, having served three times as First Lord of the Admiralty. He was fifty-two, a bachelor in the prime of life. Two of his sisters, Emily and Frances, accompanied him out to India. One of his first acts upon arriving at Calcutta was to confirm the appointment of Captain Proby Cautley as superintendent of canals in the Delhi Territories, replacing Colonel John Colvin of the Bengal Engineers who had returned home to England. Lord Auckland had never met Cautley but his private secretary, John Russell Colvin, vouched for his competence.

For thirteen years Cautley had worked under Colonel Robert Smith on restoring the Eastern Jumna Canal. When Smith retired, Cautley was appointed engineer in charge of the 130-mile waterway, under the superintendence of Colonel Colvin. Now, with Colvin's retirement, Cautley became lord and master of the canals department, a fiefdom under siege. While keeping the Eastern Jumna Canal filled to capacity with 540 cusecs of water – the measure used by hydraulic engineers to quantify the flow of water in cubic feet per second – he explored the possibility of taking water from the Ganges to irrigate the entire 500-mile length of the Doab.

Colonel Colvin – not to be confused with John Russell Colvin – constantly pointed out that irrigation works had become profitable to the East India Company, both in terms of the rent-water revenues they generated and as a defence against famine. Colonel Colvin certainly merited his soubriquet of the “sagacious and benignant patriarch of irrigation in India.” But the eccentric Colonel Smith was no less a master of the science, sensitive to the needs of the people and perhaps even more widely experienced as a builder of great works. Cautley owed everything he knew to these two men of uncommon ability, the colonels Smith and Colvin.

At Colonel Colvin's suggestion, in November 1836 he first explored the possibility of drawing water from the Ganges at Haridwar to irrigate the Doab, but his preliminary findings were not encouraging. He then thought of placing the head of the canal on a tributary of the Ganges, 23 miles south of Haridwar. Even that option proved impractical. The project, therefore, was shelved. But progress marched resolutely on. In the intervening years a better understanding of hydrology had sharpened the engineer's response. Now, confident he could find a solution to the problems previously encountered, he decided to ask Lord Auckland to sanction a new survey when the Governor-General passed through town later that month.