



The Political Uses of Crisis: The Bihar Famine of 1966-1967

Author(s): Paul R. Brass

Source: *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 2, (Feb., 1986), pp. 245-267

Published by: Association for Asian Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2055843>

Accessed: 16/04/2008 12:12

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=afas>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We enable the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The Political Uses of Crisis: The Bihar Famine of 1966–1967

PAUL R. BRASS

The term “crisis” is used extensively in our everyday vocabulary, where it encompasses a wide range of events and happenings in personal and familial life, in the economy and politics of states, and in international relations. In the social sciences, the word is used to refer to many types of situations, but it is most widely used to refer to a situation that is abnormal and threatening to the established order—in the sense that, if the crisis is not resolved, it portends a breakdown to some more-or-less better defined end-state, which will terminate the old order without building a new one. Examples include personal psychosis in a family, revolution or civil war in a political system, depression or runaway inflation in an economy, and large-scale starvation, rioting for food, population movement, and looting during a famine.

Most crises, however, do not terminate so dramatically; the feared end-states do not materialize or they are averted by human action. Consequently, the issue arises as to whether a crisis—in contrast to a catastrophe or natural disaster—may be defined in objective terms or whether it is an inherently subjective situation. Political scientist Murray Edelman argues that the term crisis, though seemingly “based on objective criteria,” when used with reference “to a set of political events” is actually “a form of problematic categorization” involving “arbitrary labeling” (Edelman 1977:43). Edelman states that in political contexts the term crisis is used to specify a “unique and threatening” event, whereas the situation may in fact reflect persistent underlying problems to which those in authority would rather not draw attention. A crisis may be created to direct attention away from the underlying problems, or the problems may be treated as normal rather than as crises. This characterization suggests that the ways in which events are defined as comprising a crisis are as important in the study of crisis as the analysis of the relevant events themselves and of the responses of people to those events (Billings 1980).

Paul R. Brass is Professor of Political Science and South Asian Studies, University of Washington.

The author's interest in the Bihar Famine began in 1966–1967, when he spent the year in India as Faculty Research Fellow of the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS). His project included a study of food policy in north India, and his interest in the Bihar Famine was rekindled when he had an opportunity to participate in the project on Crisis, Order, and Anomie in South Asia of the Committee on South Asian Political Economy of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). Work on the Bihar

Famine was initiated, and this article was written for the SSRC project.

The author's research extends considerably beyond the topics covered in this article, which is part of a larger project on the Bihar Famine that includes an extensive discussion of crisis situations in general and of other aspects of the Bihar Famine in particular.

Support of AIIS and SSRC at various stages of this project is gratefully acknowledged, although neither is responsible for errors of fact or the opinions expressed herein.

Elizabeth Mann helped to edit this manuscript into a size suitable for the *Journal*.

Whether viewed as objective, subjective, or manufactured phenomena, the following features are central to most crisis situations (cf. Billings 1980; Brecher 1978; Robinson 1972): (1) a crisis situation must be perceived by someone or some group to have reality; (2) its character must be defined before others, particularly those least directly or not at all affected by it, can be convinced of its existence; (3) by definition it involves a real or implied threat of a major loss or an unwanted change that threatens the established order; (4) by definition it implies the need for a response.

The key aspects of crisis suggest a number of topics for analysis: How is a crisis defined and who defines it? What kind of rhetoric or other means of persuasion is used with what purpose and effect to persuade others of the "reality" of a crisis and the need for a particular type of response? To what extent can a crisis be anticipated and prevented? What are the various types of responses to crisis? Who stands to benefit or to lose from a particular kind of crisis resolution? How is the burden of crisis distributed?

The great drought of 1966 in Bihar and the declaration of famine that ultimately followed it in 1967 precipitated a major political crisis in which all the dimensions and aspects of a crisis situation noted above were manifest. Controversy raged among the politicians concerning the seriousness of the anticipated crop failure, the extent of its distribution, the severity of the distress it produced, the adequacy of relief measures and the responsibility for them, whether or not the situation might have been anticipated and prevented by alternate policies, and what policies might be adopted in the future to prevent a recurrence. The press reports about the developing crisis situation and the responses of the politicians and authorities to the situation turned the Bihar Famine of 1966–1967 into a political drama in which many of the principals self-consciously played their roles on the public stage. I focus on three aspects of the Bihar Famine crisis in this article: the process of defining the situation in Bihar; the rhetoric used in labeling it and in distinguishing it from a "normal" situation; and the responses of the authorities to the crisis.

The Bihar Famine of 1966–1967

A double calamity in 1966 in Bihar led to the declaration of a state of famine. Having gone through a year of less-than-normal foodgrain production in 1965–1966, which aroused concern over conditions of scarcity in some parts of the state and fostered government measures to combat the scarcity, the majority of the districts in Bihar suffered from a severe drought during the main *kharif* season, between July and October 1966. In the midst of the drought, which was described by observers as "the worst drought in living memory," there also occurred "extensive and heavy floods in north Bihar" during the month of August (Government of Bihar 1973:76, hereafter referred to as *BFR*). Despite the extensive flooding in north Bihar, which normally aids the *rabi* (winter) crop, production in all but three districts of the state during the 1967 *rabi* season also was substantially below normal. On April 20, 1967, the state government declared the existence of famine in two Chota Nagpur districts, Palamau and Hazaribagh (see map 1), and in large areas of five south Bihar districts.¹ Further areas were added to the list on May 4 and June 14. All other areas of the state, "where the

¹ North Bihar refers to the 1967 districts north of the Ganges, namely, Saran, Champaran, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Saharsa, and Purnea. South Bihar refers to the districts of Shahabad, Patna,

Gaya, Monghyr, Bhagalpur, and Santal Parganas. Chota Nagpur includes the districts of Palamau, Hazaribagh, Dhanbad, Ranchi, and Singhbhum.

yield had been less than 50 percent” of normal production, were declared to be “scarcity affected areas” by a state government declaration of May 25, 1967. Altogether, 36 percent of the area of the state was declared to be undergoing famine and 30 percent to be suffering from scarcity; the population affected consisted of 34 million persons, of whom 13.4 million were in the famine area (*BFR*:80). In August and September 1967 there were again floods in several districts of the state, which, it was reported, “further aggravated” the “distress” of the people (*BFR*:81) and added to the impact of the existing food deficit (*BFR*:95). However, with the 1967 *kharif* crop, the situation in Bihar returned to normal, and the declaration of famine and scarcity was revoked on November 15, 1967 (*BFR*:81).

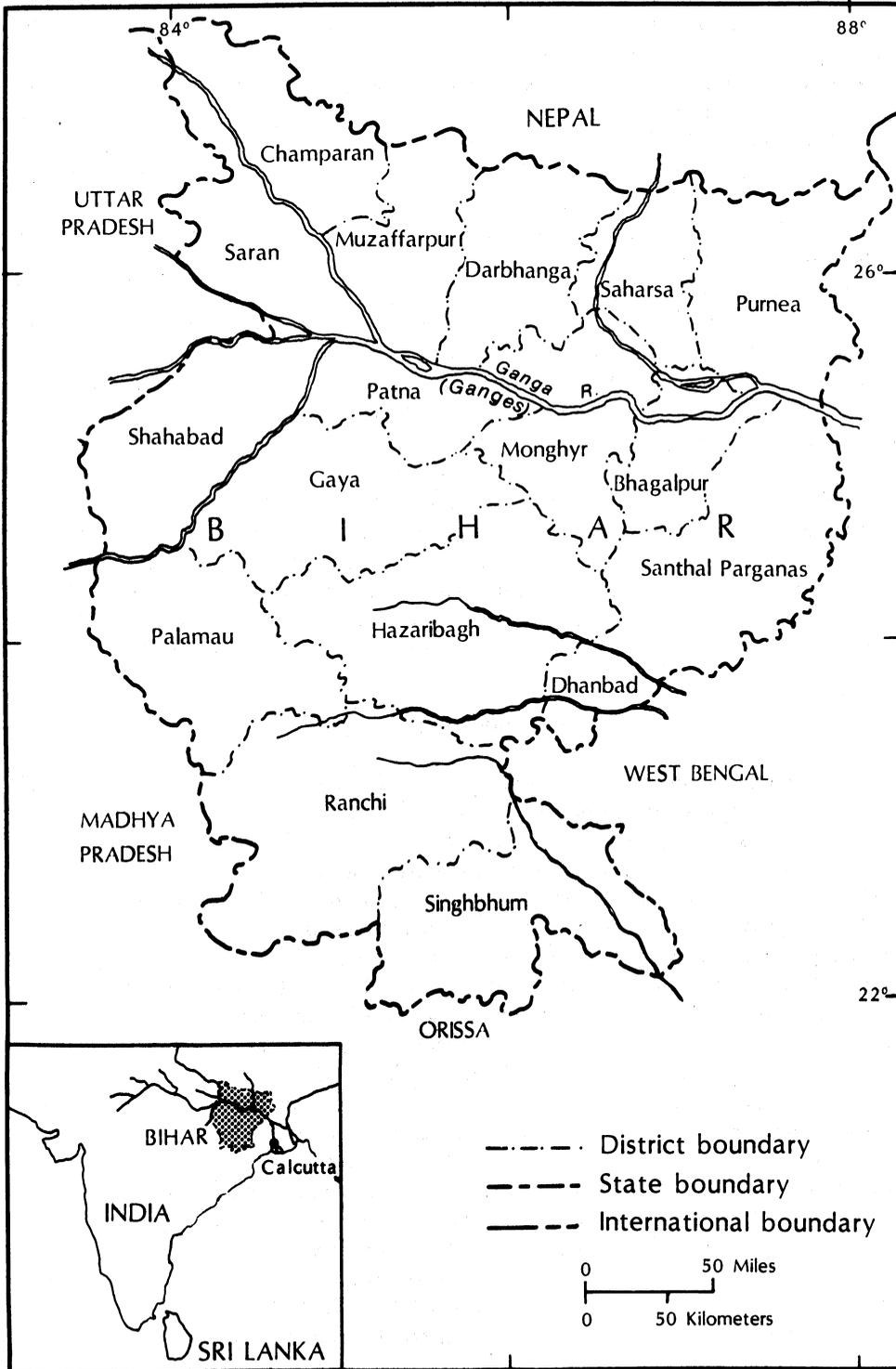
The principal measures adopted by the authorities to cope with the situation included the import of foodgrains, mostly provided by P.L. 480 wheat imports from the United States, via the central government; the distribution of wheat through fair-price shops; and the institution of hard manual labor schemes to provide employment and purchasing power to the poor and landless, who had no other local work because of the severe decline in agricultural operations. Approximately 20,000 fair-price shops were set up throughout the countryside to provide foodgrains at controlled prices from government stocks. Of the more than 30 million people provided with ration cards, 7.3 million (20 percent) of the population were granted free rations (*BFR*:80). In addition to government operations, the Bihar Relief Committee was set up under the direction of Jayaprakash Narayan, and it opened a large number of free kitchens. Many international philanthropic agencies—the agencies included CARE and OXFAM as well as other smaller groups—also set up relief-distribution systems in Bihar.

Proximate and Remote Causes

The official version of the causes of the Bihar Famine of 1966–1967 is contained in the *Bihar Famine Report*, published in 1973. It places the famine of 1966–1967 as the latest in a sequence of recurring natural disasters of flood and drought that, if they affected the main *kharif* crop, might lead to a sufficiently large “shortfall in production” (p. 7) to produce widespread scarcity or famine. Insofar as the famine of 1966–1967 was concerned, it was attributed to a “failure of crops of 1966 immediately following partial failure of harvests also in the preceding year,” both of which were “due to deficient and unfavourably distributed rainfall” (p. 68). Moreover, the “partial failure” of 1965–1966 was preceded by several “indifferent years” (p. 84). The Bihar Famine of 1966–1967 was not considered different, except in magnitude, from previous famines. “Whenever famine occurs in Bihar,” the *Report* says, “it is always due to failure of periodical rains, and as upon these depend the success or failure of the rice crop, it follows that a famine in Bihar is always caused by a failure of the rice crop” (p. 92).

Three problems arise in connection with this analysis of the causes of the Bihar Famine of 1966–1967. First, the picture of a sequence of crop failures in Bihar, which conforms to the classic sequence of major famines in Indian history, is distorted. According to figures provided in the *Bihar Famine Report* itself (p. 109), total production of foodcrops in 1965–1966 was 96.2 percent of normal. Only in one district in the entire state was production below 75 percent of normal. In five districts, production was above normal. In the remaining eleven districts, production ranged between 83.7 and 99.9 percent. It would seem, therefore, to be an exaggeration to describe the 1965–1966 crop as a “partial failure.”

Second, the *Report* follows a general pattern in India of associating drought, crop failure, and famine as natural and inevitable sequences, whereas Morris D. Morris has



Map. 1. Bihar Districts, 1967

SOURCE: Based on F. Tomasson Jannuzi, *Agrarian Crisis in India: The Case of Bihar*, frontispiece and p. xi.

noted that “famine is neither a direct nor an inevitable consequence of drought” (Morris 1974:1855). Drought-induced scarcity in Bihar requires the importation of grain from other parts of India or other countries to make up the shortfall and to prevent famine, and therefore it is necessary to consider the food situation in India as a whole at the time.

The shortfall in 1966–1967 occurred in a context of *increased* food availability from internal production in India as a whole. That was the first year of widespread adoption of the high-yielding varieties of wheat in the Punjab and Haryana, and it marked the beginning of the Green Revolution and increases in production associated with it. Although aggregate rice production declined in the entire country primarily because of the drought in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), the aggregate decline was only 151,000 tons because of increases in rice production in that year in Andhra, Madras, Mysore, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Kerala. Taking into account all food-grains, production in India (see Table 1) increased by nearly 2 million tons over 1965–1966.² This increase, however, must be placed in context. Total production in the previous year, 1965–1966, had been the worst for the country since 1957–1958, which had also been a major drought year in Bihar and eastern U.P.

These figures are not presented to minimize the seriousness of the situation in Bihar in 1966–1967, when a severe food shortage existed that called for a greatly expanded inflow of grain to the state. That inflow might have been provided in several less dramatic ways than the ones actually adopted, say, by letting market forces operate, by procuring grain from states with surpluses to distribute to Bihar, or by purchase from abroad. Instead, initially the Government of India distrusted and discounted reports coming from Bihar and treated them as being politically motivated; it required Bihar politicians and relief workers to create a crisis atmosphere in order to procure help from outside. Ultimately, when the Government of India realized the gravity of the situation in Bihar, it, too, had to turn the situation into a grave national crisis in order to secure a massive release of P.L. 480 wheat from the United States to India. In effect, the Bihar drought was minimized 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 the people of Bihar from a situation partly of their own manufacture.

A third problem with the *Bihar Famine Report* analysis is that it treats the famine and Bihar agriculture as if neither had anything to do with economic-development planning and broad agricultural policy-making in India. To the contrary, the handling of the Bihar Famine crisis of 1966–1967, especially the treatment of it as an “unprecedented” situation, served the purpose of drawing attention away from the persistent problems of Indian agriculture and the failure of three five-year plans to resolve them. The *Economic Survey of Indian Agriculture for 1966–1967* admits that failure in these words:

All the efforts at achieving self-sufficiency in foodgrain production during the three Plan periods did not fully succeed for one reason or the other and the last year of the third Plan saw a sudden downward shift from the rising trends of crop production. This came as a great shock to everyone concerned with agriculture and created doubts in the minds of many as to the soundness of the planning process so far in

² Chopra (1981:288) gives the total foodgrain production in India for 1965–1966 as 72,347,000 tons, and for 1966–1967, 74,231,000 tons. Table 1, which is based on production figures by calendar

year, shows an increase in total production of food-grains between 1966 and 1967 of nearly two million tons.

Table 1. Indian Foodgrain Production, Procurement, and Imports, 1950–1976 (millions of tons)

Calendar Year	Production	Internal Procurement	Imports	Per Capita Availability (grams per day)
1951	50.8	3.8	4.8	367
1952	52.0	3.5	3.9	361
1953	59.2	2.1	2.0	396
1954	69.8	1.4	0.8	441
1955	68.1	0.1	0.6	428
1956	66.9	neg.	1.4	417
1957	69.9	0.3	3.6	431
1958	64.3	0.5	3.2	395
1959	77.1	1.8	3.9	459
1960	76.7	1.3	5.1	448
1961	82.0	0.5	3.5	468
1962	82.7	0.5	3.6	462
1963	80.2	0.8	4.6	442
1964	80.6	1.4	6.3	453
1965	89.4	4.0	7.5	526
1966	72.3	4.0	10.4	410
1967	74.2	4.5	8.7	401
1968	95.1	6.8	5.7	460
1969	94.0	6.4	3.9	446
1970	99.5	6.7	3.6	457
1971	108.4	8.9	2.1	470
1972	105.2	7.7	0.5	473
1973	97.0	8.4	3.6	425
1974	104.7	5.6	4.8	453
1975	101.1	9.4	7.4	410
1976	120.8	12.7	6.5	450

SOURCE: John Wall, "Foodgrain Management: Pricing, Procurement, Distribution, Import and Storage Policy," p. 88. In Montek S. Ahluwalia et al., *India: Occasional Papers* (World Bank Staff Working Paper, no. 279) (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1978).

existence for achieving self-sufficiency in food production. (Government of India 1969:i)

The great drought and famine of 1966–1967 in north India might have been used to draw attention to three general features of the agricultural situation in India that had contributed to its occurrence. First, the drought and famine pointed to a persistent problem namely, the historically low and unstable yields of the main food crop, rice, in the main cropping season in a vast area of the country (Brass 1983) rather than merely to a sudden, unanticipated crisis. Second, the drought and famine indicated clearly that some areas of the country were in a better position than others to withstand the lack of rainfall, namely, the canal and tubewell-irrigated areas. Third, the drought and famine suggested that what had been pointed out in a Planning Commission report on the Eastern Districts of U.P. (Government of India 1964), that there were severe environmental constraints and a dearth of capital resources, made it difficult to

envisage major changes in the development of agriculture in the region from Eastern U.P. to Bengal unless considerable external resources were provided to alter agricultural practices. Although these and other underlying factors that made the Bihar Famine of 1966–1967 possible were mentioned in passing in the *Bihar Famine Report* (pp. 92–94) and were noted by non-Congress politicians and the press in Bihar during the crisis itself, they were discounted in a general absorption in the proximate causes of the scarcity and the immediate danger of starvation for the people of Bihar.

The Parties Involved

The crisis of the Bihar Famine occurred at a point of a generally developing crisis in Indian politics, to which Bihar Congress politicians, national leaders in Delhi, opposition politicians, the administration, and the press all contributed. The process of defining the Bihar situation as a famine crisis was inseparable from and dependent upon interlocking relationships and antagonisms among these principal actors. A full account of that developing political crisis cannot be given here, but its main elements will be described briefly.

The central actor in the drama of the Bihar Famine was the state government and administration, whose responsibility it was to assess the developing situation, to take the preventive measures that were possible, to organize relief measures to minimize the suffering of the people of the state, and to determine when the crisis had passed. However, the state government was not a single entity over the entire period of drought and famine or at any point during that period. The General Elections of 1967 intervened in February 1967, in the middle of the developing crisis. Before the elections, the state government had been run by the Congress under the leadership of Chief Minister K. B. Sahay. The government and the state Congress were, however, divided internally among three main factions. The defeat of the Congress in the 1967 elections led to the installation in March of a non-Congress coalition government with former Congressman Mahamaya Prasad Sinha as chief minister, leading an unstable coalition of six parties. Thus, in addition to the Bihar government as central actor in the Bihar drama, the following state-level actors must be added: factions in the Congress, non-Congress parties that were in opposition before the election, and most of the same parties that were in power after the election.

One critical aspect of the political situation in 1966–1967 was the fragmentation of Bihar Congress politics. Since the death of Bihar's first chief minister, Sri Krishna Sinha, in 1961, a continuing succession struggle had been going on among the three principal caste-faction leaders, Mahesh Prasad Sinha, Binodanand Jha, and K. B. Sahay. Although K. B. Sahay supported Binodanand Jha in the initial contest for chief minister after Sri Krishna Sinha's death, and Jha then became chief minister of Bihar in February 1961, a three-way struggle for power in the Bihar Congress continued thereafter. In 1963, Jha was removed from the chief ministership under the Kamaraj Plan and replaced by K. B. Sahay.

During the summer of 1966, as the drought began in Bihar, a major struggle was developing among the three factional groups over the distribution of Congress tickets to contest the 1967 elections. In November, at a time when it was clear that most of the *kharif* crop had failed in most parts of the state, the Bihar Congress leaders were deadlocked on the candidate list, which had to be prepared in Delhi. Disaffection with the results, however, was great, and thousands of Congress workers deserted the party, many to join existing opposition parties or to found a new party, the Jana Kranti Dal.

Considering their internal division, the Congress leaders did not look forward to the 1967 elections with much confidence. Moreover, the opposition, buoyed by the defections from the Congress and by a wave of discontent among many large segments of the electorate for reasons other than the drought, was preparing for the 1967 elections with greater vigor than ever before. Discontent was widespread among leaders of the backward castes over the continued dominance of the old elite castes in the Bihar Congress and in Bihar public life generally; prices for essential commodities had risen significantly in the months before the elections; a police firing leading to the death of a college student in September 1967 had enraged students throughout the province; and many of the hundreds of thousands of government employees in Bihar also were antagonistic to the Congress because of government's failure to respond adequately to their demand for increased wages and dearness allowance. The drought in 1966, coming on top of all these other sources of discontent with the Congress, provided a common basis for opposition to the ruling party that both reinforced and transcended the specific grievances of several categories of voters.

Differences also existed between the Congress leadership in Delhi and in Patna. Indira Gandhi had been installed as prime minister in January 1966, with the support of Congress President Kamaraj, some of the state Congress party bosses, and the chief ministers of the major states, who were critical in influencing the votes of MPs in the Congress Parliamentary Party in favor of Mrs. Gandhi and in opposition to Morarji Desai. In the process of selecting Mrs. Gandhi as prime minister, K. B. Sahay had been a lukewarm supporter and had been unable to procure a vote for Mrs. Gandhi from the Bihar parliamentary delegation in caucus (Brecher 1966:211–12, 221, 230). Moreover, it became evident to the national leadership in the summer and fall of 1966 that K. B. Sahay could not unite the warring Bihar factions and that his inability to do so endangered the prospects of the Congress in the forthcoming elections. Mrs. Gandhi could not have been happy, either, with K. B. Sahay's record in support of her or with his leadership in Bihar politics. During the developing drought and the process of selecting Congress candidates, which occurred simultaneously, it became apparent that there were differences between Mrs. Gandhi and the Bihar chief minister.

Other "actors" or sets of actors in the Bihar drama of 1966–1967 were the state and local administrative officers, whose tasks were to send reports to the government concerning the developing crisis, to provide a factual basis for assessing its seriousness, and to supervise and implement preventive and relief measures. The quality of the Bihar administration, which once had had a reputation for being among the most efficient in the country, had also deteriorated, especially since the death of Sri Krishna Sinha. The state administration lacked the confidence of the state government and was the butt of criticism in the local press. The central government also had little confidence in the ability of the Bihar administration to cope efficiently and impartially with a major crisis such as a drought.

Another set of actors consisted of the prime minister, other political leaders in the central government, the planning commission, and central administrative officers sent to the state government during the crisis. The prime minister and the chief minister of Bihar were known to be at loggerheads during this period. The official roles played by central government political leaders, ministers, and members of the planning commission included visiting the state during the crisis to gain an understanding of its dimensions, arriving at independent assessments of the crisis, and determining on the basis of such visits and assessments the quantum of financial aid and foodgrain to be sent to the state to help it cope with the crisis. In addition to the political leaders from the central government, who visited Bihar only occasionally during the crisis,

several administrative officers of the Bihar cadre stationed in Delhi were deputed to Bihar to help the state government in its relief operations.

Also directly involved in famine relief operations, as indicated above, were various relief agencies, Indian and international, of which the most important politically was the Bihar Relief Committee (BRC), directed by Jayaprakash Narayan. The BRC ultimately developed an extensive local staff of about five hundred office-bearers on district- and block-level relief committees set up in famine-affected districts as well as other part-time assistants and personnel provided by the state government, principally the home guards, to assist the BRC in its work.

Another actor of great importance in the Bihar Famine was the United States government, which was requested to release fresh shipments of P.L. 480 wheat to India to help the central government satisfy the demand for foodgrain coming from Bihar. When the Bihar Famine developed, the U.S. government was in the midst of re-examining the pattern of P.L. 480 grain shipments to India and other countries; the shipments had become increasingly centralized and politicized under the direction of the president. Moreover, at the time Lyndon Johnson was known to be angry with Mrs. Gandhi and the Government of India for their disagreement with U.S. policy toward Vietnam, and he had adopted a “short-tether” policy of adjusting the release of aid, including food aid, to India in relation to the responsiveness or non-responsiveness of the Government of India to suggestions for changes in Indian agricultural policies and to U.S. foreign policy interests.

Finally, framing the whole drama—commenting on it, in fact, virtually creating it—were the local and national press. The Bihar press, particularly the two Patna English-language dailies, *Searchlight* and the *Indian Nation*, adopted vigorously critical positions toward the Congress government and the administration of the state. 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.³

Each actor in the drama of the Bihar Famine had an interest in the definition of the crisis and in the choice of responses to it, which existed independently of an objective assessment of the situation. In fact, it is difficult to construct an objective description of the drought and its consequences for the people of Bihar that is separate from the subjective perceptions of the several actors involved in it and from the measures they took to cope with the situation. It is much easier to sort out the interests of the several actors in relation to one another and to show the ways in which they used the crisis to gain advantage or prevent harm in their relations with each other, to show how the developing situation became a changing backdrop that kept altering the ways in which the parties interacted, and to assess the consequences for the people of Bihar of the changing perceptions and interactions of the principal actors.⁴

Defining the Crisis in Bihar

There is a nearly universal tendency in discussions of “the world food crisis,” and of the dramatic instances of it that constitute famines, to “focus on the ratio of food

³ I have not been able to determine to what extent the reporting done by these two papers at the time reflected the professional desires of the journalists and editors to cover faithfully and report accurately the developing famine conditions and to what extent it reflected links between the journalists and editors with dissident Congressmen and

with Jayaprakash Narayan.

⁴ In the remainder of this article, I shall discuss primarily the roles of the state Congress and opposition and some aspects of Center-state relations. A full discussion of Center-state relations in the crisis and the roles of other actors is being deferred until the larger manuscript is completed.

supply to population," which, Amartya Sen argues, "hides more than it reveals" and which "has persistently deranged public policy over the centuries" (Sen 1980:620; Sen 1981). Insofar as the Bihar Famine is concerned, most public analysis of the situation—as opposed to the dramatization of its consequences—and a large part of the political debate on the subject focuses on this very question of "the ratio of food supply to population." At the time most discussions of the Bihar food situation began with statements of the "normal" situation, which itself was usually described as bordering on a crisis of food supply. The standard figures recited at the time are presented in the *Bihar Famine Report* as follows. Calculating the daily minimum requirement of foodgrains per capita at 17.5 oz. per day for a population estimated at 51.2 million and allowing an additional 10 percent for fodder, the annual consumption requirement for the people of Bihar worked out to 8.6 million tons (p. 74). However, the "annual average production of foodgrains" in the period of Bihar's third five-year plan was only 7.3 million tons (p. 87), leaving an average food deficit in the state of "about 13 lakh [1.3 million] tonnes." The deficiency was made up, so the story went, partly by annual average imports of 300,000 tons and the rest by the consumption of other kinds of foods.

Such aggregate figures for the state obviously ignore differences in production and consumption in the various regions of the state; but that is no criticism of the approach, for the government was readily able to produce similar figures by district and, somewhat less readily, by subdivision and by community-development block. The figures that are not at all readily provided, that are, in fact, hidden by such an approach, are obvious differences in consumption patterns by class. Such differences are ignored in a debate on food supply that is largely restricted to the more superficial issue of the aggregate size of the food deficit per capita.

As the terrible summer of 1966 moved on and the deficiency of rainfall became increasingly evident, officials of the state government were frequently quoted in the press making assertions concerning the likely shortfall of production in the *kharif* crop in relation to "normal" years. Terms such as "unprecedented drought" were used to preface such estimates, and the estimates were followed by statements to the effect that production was expected to touch "a new low" (*Indian Nation* [hereafter referred to as *IN*]:Sep. 4, 1966).

In the midst of the drought and the apparent withering of the paddy crop—particularly in several south Bihar and Chota Nagpur districts—several districts of north Bihar, which had been less severely affected by the drought, were visited by large-scale floods. The floods on top of the drought made it possible for the dangerous situation in Bihar to be generalized to the state as a whole. The floods, like the drought, began to be described as "unprecedented."

Food scarcities are endemic and persistent in the Chota Nagpur region of Bihar. They are less frequent in the higher-rainfall and better-irrigated districts of south and north Bihar. In 1966–1967, Palamau and Hazaribagh districts in Chota Nagpur were the worst hit, but several south and north Bihar districts were nearly as badly affected. Politically, the south and north Bihar districts were far more important to the leading parties in the state. These districts were more populous, had higher rates of voter turnout, and were the principal support districts for both the Congress and the two leading radical Left parties, the Samyukta Socialist Party and the Communist Party of India (CPI) (Brass 1974:94; Brass and Franda 1973:350). Under the circumstances, the wider incidence of the drought in 1966–1967, the floods in north Bihar, and the distribution of the politically critical districts in state politics made it difficult for distinctions to be made that would concentrate relief efforts in the areas of highest

need and created a contrary compulsion to generalize the need and to ignore both immediate and long-term regional differences.

Similar compulsions operated to prevent focus on the needs of the poorest classes and their persistent suffering in good times and bad. Although the *Bihar Famine Report* and some scholars in Bihar have argued that the existing land-tenure system and the persistence of so-called “semi-feudal” conditions in the Bihar countryside ought to be included among the principal causes of low agricultural productivity and persistent rural poverty and malnutrition (*BFR*:93–94; Prasad 1979), the Congress in 1966–1967 was dominated by the elite proprietary castes with the greatest stake in the existing agrarian system. The radical Socialists and the CPI took up the cause of the backward castes and the poor in Bihar in state and local politics, but their leadership, too, came primarily from elite castes and from land-controlling middle-status castes. Since the drought threatened to bring scarcity even to the landed in Bihar in 1966, the demands of the parties of the Left for relief and their criticism of government failure in the past focused on the general needs and the neglect of the agricultural classes in the state as a whole rather than on the specific needs of the poorest. One consequence of the generalization of need for the agricultural classes in Bihar was that “distribution of loans,” which went mainly to the landholding classes, “exceeded relief works,” which supported mainly the poor and landless, “as a major component of the relief programmes” (Singh:153).

Another consequence of the definition of the Bihar drought as unprecedented was to mask the fact that the crisis situation was less of a deviation from the normal situation for some people in the state than for others. As one Congress legislator put it during the election campaign held in the midst of the drought in March 1967, in response to a question concerning how bad the situation was in his constituency: “Generally it is bad. People are starving. But, to some extent, it is a normal condition. The landless and poor suffer like this normally (interview in Patna, Mar. 16, 1967, para. 44 [paraphrased]). The Congressman so quoted was not making an accusation here, but the implication for the definition of a famine, or for any crisis situation, is that a crisis threatens some people or all people with the fact that they may have to suffer as the poor do normally.⁵ The Congressman’s statement emphasizes the way in which the use of aggregate figures and gross comparisons with past crises hide social as well as regional disparities in the extent of suffering caused by a famine crisis and divert attention from the issue of whether local resources might be distributed more equitably in times of crisis and in normal times. Such figures and comparisons hide what was obvious to this Congressman: that the situation in 1966–1967 was *not* unprecedented for those landless and poor whose needs go unattended except when a crisis is defined by the authorities.

Creating a Crisis Atmosphere

As the drought and flood situation worsened in the summer of 1966 and as it became clear that a considerable decline in aggregate production was inevitable in many districts, demands began to come in from various areas of the state for the state government to declare particular districts “drought-affected” or “famine-affected.” Un-

⁵ Cf. Fr. Robert M. Donahue, “Famine Relief in Bihar, 1966–67,” in *National Workshop on Famine Relief and Reconstruction* (1971:15), who comments that the increased publicity about the

drought came “not because there was no suffering before, but because the tragedy had begun to touch the middle class instead of the poor alone, whose sufferings often go unnoticed.”

der the terms of the *Bihar Famine and Flood Relief Code* of 1957 (Government of Bihar 1957), such a declaration involves the recognition that existing relief measures are inadequate to cope with the distress of the people and that, therefore, "a widening of ameliorative measures" (p. 23) is required. These demands came from Congressmen and nonparty citizens as well as from opposition parties. As early as the end of August, the state government used the term "famine," although it was not willing to make a declaration of famine.

The demands were justified by statements such as that the drought in a particular district was the "severest ever, threatening an impending famine" (*IN:Sep. 10, 1966*). By mid-September, the district officers and state officials also were using stronger terms to describe the situation. The state Food Commissioner described the drought on September 4 as "one of the worst . . . in living memory" (*IN:Sep. 9, 1966*). The central government, however, toward which all the appeals and demands for significant assistance were ultimately directed, remained far more restrained in its assessment of the situation, and it was unwilling to single out Bihar for special attention. For example, on September 9, 1966, the central government minister for food and agriculture, C. Subramaniam, was reported to have "told the Lok Sabha . . . that the food situation continued to be 'difficult' in the States of Assam, Bihar, Kerala and West Bengal" (*IN:Sep. 9, 1966*).

By the end of September, and during the first half of October when the Hathia rains also failed, it was apparent that nothing could be done to prevent most of the main season paddy crop from drying up even in areas where it had been transplanted successfully. At this point, demands from the districts to declare each district drought-affected or famine-stricken became more intense. Demands to declare particular districts as drought-affected or famine-stricken were often timed to coincide with visits by ministers of the state or central government or by prominent politicians. Frequently, the visitors themselves made the demands. Increasingly touring ministers and politicians, followed by the press, were moved to present the situation in descriptive and in human terms rather than in statistical terms. In one press report, dated October 13, a reporter described "the rice-belt of Bihar" near the state capital of Patna as looking "like the desolate wastes of the Rann of Kutch in mid-summer" (*IN:Oct. 13, 1966*). Dr. Ram Subhag Singh, a Union minister from Bihar, after touring Shahabad district, was quoted as saying, "It was all so pitiable. Brave men had tears in their eyes—a sight never seen before in the district" (*IN:Oct. 14, 1966*). The divisional commissioner of Tirhut commented from another part of the state on the same day that "heart-rending sights could be seen" on a tour by road through Muzaffarpur district (*ibid.*).

The scenes referred to were usually of two sorts: withering crops or devastation during the floods and reports of hungry and starving people. However, there 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. At this stage, much of the expressed concern was premonitory rather than immediate.

The premonitory concern was voiced particularly by state government officials and ministers who were fearful that they would be unable to meet the statewide developing crisis, and who were building a case for assistance from the central government. Thus, on October 1, the chief minister of Bihar, K. B. Sahay, reportedly "described the State's food situation as 'precarious' and said it would start deteriorating from November onwards, when each month will be worse than the previous one." He added that "Bihar was in dire need of food aid to save the people of the State from starvation" (*IN:Oct. 1, 1966*). Rajendra Misra, president of the Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee, re-

portedly said on October 11 that “Bihar was on the brink of a famine. Without Central assistance, it would be difficult for the State Government to save the people from starvation.” He went on to point out that “if prompt assistance was not forthcoming from the Centre ‘in this hour of crisis,’ it would be difficult for Bihar Congressmen to face the electorate” (*Times of India* [hereafter *TOI*]:Oct. 11, 1966). Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, then a union minister was told during a visit to Bihar that if the central government did not come to the aid of the state government, “the situation might go out of control” (*IN*:Oct. 11, 1966).

The statements of state government officials and politicians at the time suggest that they saw themselves in a situation of crisis portending disaster, namely, a famine. They feared, or at least they argued, that they could not deal with the crisis and prevent famine with their own resources. The state Congress leaders also feared that if the situation went “out of control,” they would lose the election. They called for support from the Congress government at the Center, therefore, to avert a dual disaster—for themselves as well as for the people of Bihar.

The Response of the Central Government

The central government, however, refused for several months to accept the estimates of the impending disaster coming from Bihar, from a government whose leadership was out of favor, and from a state administration it considered incompetent. The first major public disagreement between the state and the Center during the drought occurred at the end of August, when the program adviser to the Planning Commission visited Bihar to assess the drought and flood situation in the state and to submit a report and recommendations to the Planning Commission on the amount of aid to be given to Bihar for relief and for manual-labor schemes (*IN*:Aug. 22, 1966, and Aug. 24, 1966). Just before the arrival of the program adviser, the chief minister of Bihar announced that 50 percent of the standing crops in the state had already been “destroyed because of drought conditions” (*IN*:Aug. 20, 1966). However, upon his return to New Delhi, the program adviser reported his assessment that the crop prospect for Bihar was only “about 20 percent below the average” (*IN*:Sep. 3, 1966) and that only 10 to 15 percent of the sown area in north Bihar had been submerged by the floods. Both the political leaders and the senior administrative officers of Bihar expressed their disagreement with and their distress over the program adviser’s assessment (*IN*:Sep. 5, 1966, and Sep. 19, 1966).

It was not until the end of October that the Union government, responding partly to increased political pressures from Bihar MPs and to new information from its own officers, came to accept the seriousness of the situation in Bihar; the Government of India began to gear up to provide massive material assistance, and to provide symbolic support as well. As the Government of India now saw it, the crisis was a dual one. There was, they realized, an extreme crop failure in the offing, accompanied by rising prices and other signs of famine. From their point of view, the second aspect of the crisis was their belief that the government of Bihar could not cope effectively with the crisis on its own. Thus, the Bihar drought threatened also to be a crisis for the Government of India, requiring not only assistance but also direction and responsibility. The Government of India was prepared to provide assistance openly and direction informally, but it was not prepared to bear any responsibility at all.

Thus, the Union finance minister, during a visit to Bihar on October 26, “made it plain that it was the responsibility of the Bihar Government to step up food pro-

duction to meet the crisis," and he urged the state government to "streamline its administrative machinery for relief operation" (*IN*:Oct. 27, 1966). Upon his return to New Delhi, the finance minister, in a report to the central cabinet subcommittee on food, accepted the seriousness of the situation in Bihar, but he also gave "his view . . . that the estimates of the crop damage and relief requirements assessed by the State Government [were] on the high side." He felt that this "obviously [had] been done to secure as much food and financial help from the Centre as possible" (*TOI*:Nov. 1, 1966).

From November onward, until the election campaign went into full swing and fully absorbed the time of both state and central politicians, the new pattern of relations between the Government of India and the state government concerning the drought crisis in Bihar had three elements: increased central assistance and involvement in dealing with the crisis; direct and indirect criticisms of the Bihar government's handling of the crisis; and symbolic displays by central leaders of their deep concern for and identification with the people of Bihar. Some of the criticism directed at the Bihar government at this time came from factional opponents of the Bihar Congress chief minister, and it was strong and direct. At a meeting of the Congress Parliamentary party on November 1, several MPs severely criticized the Bihar government for its delay in providing "relief to the people" and for its inadequacy. Some members spoke of the "incompetence" of the Bihar government and called for "a general toning up of the administrative machinery" (*IN*:Nov. 2, 1966).

Central government leaders did not use polemical language, but it is clear that their views were similar. Union Food Minister Subramaniam and Prime Minister Gandhi reiterated the position of the central government in response to the persistent demands coming from both U.P. and Bihar at a meeting of the Working Committee of the Congress on November 2, which was attended by the chief ministers of the two states. They said that the Center would provide as much assistance as possible, but that it "would not be able to meet the entire deficit." Moreover, they made it clear that they thought the Bihar demands were excessive, and that if the "administrative machinery" were "strengthened," including the "distribution machinery" in the rural areas so that "whatever was available was distributed properly," Bihar would be able to get through the crisis adequately and "ameliorate the suffering of persons with meagre means" (*IN*:Nov. 3, 1966).

The first week in November (two months before the elections) marked the turning point in the response of the central government to the crisis in Bihar. From this point on, the Government of India initiated the organization of the administrative apparatus necessary to handle the massive relief operations that were to be undertaken. Administrative officers from New Delhi were deputed to Bihar to coordinate relief activities and to act as a link between agencies and departments of the state and central governments. The Joint Emergency Committee of the Union and Bihar governments, consisting of several Union and state ministers, including the chief minister of Bihar, and senior administrative officers, also was established. The allotment of foodgrains to Bihar was increased significantly from November onward, rising from 70,000 tons in October 1966 to 150,000 tons in December, and it increased every month thereafter to the peak allotments of 205,000 to 225,000 tons from April to October 1967 (*BFR*:162). The involvement of the central government, and its commitment to respond in a major way to the crisis from November on, led to correspondingly dramatic increases in other aspects of relief.

On November 16, Mrs. Gandhi made a broadcast to the nation in which she identified herself and the country with the people of Bihar. In that speech, she "called

for a political truce to speed up famine relief work in drought-affected areas." She pleaded that people's "survival should remain above politics in this unprecedented situation." She called for the "fullest mobilization of talents and resources at all levels" in the country. She said that the Government of India would try to obtain substantial imports, but that, in the meantime, "people must learn to share the regional surpluses on an equitable basis throughout the country." She went on with emotion, "We are one nation, one people. The distress in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and other drought-affected areas is India's distress. We must stand together to fight the drought. We must share what we have" (*Asian Recorder*: Dec. 3–9, 1966:7424).

As far as practical relief was concerned, the Government of India in effect provided unlimited financial support for the duration of the crisis. It provided as much financial support as could be spent usefully (personal interview in Patna, Apr. 10, 1967; document BG 37:5). However, with regard to the allocation of foodgrains, the Government of India provided approximately 2.5 million tons between October 1966 and December 1967, less than one-half of the amount requested. Virtually all the grain provided to Bihar by the central government came from the United States, in fact, and it was shipped to Bihar directly from ports of entry (*ibid.*).

The statements made by leaders of Bihar and the central government during the crisis indicate that politicians and officials have their own definitions of what constitutes a crisis situation and of what constitutes a famine. The definition of crisis that emerges from their statements is a situation that is beyond the ability of the government to cope with it, a situation that will get out of control if external resources are not provided to deal with it, and a situation that—as far as the politicians in power are concerned—threatens their political positions.

When existing resources are perceived to be inadequate to cope with a crisis, the authorities may pursue two strategies. They may choose to correct the inadequacy through internal effort, which may involve the redistribution of available resources, or they may claim that the need is so great that no amount of internal effort will be sufficient and therefore external assistance is required. Obviously, nonrevolutionary governments will avoid taking redistributive measures if the possibility of external assistance is available. The major efforts taken by the Bihar government from June through November were directed at persuading the central government that the state totally lacked surplus food, which might have been procured and redistributed to feed its people, and that the Government of India would have to make up the entire deficit. For its part, the Government of India was reluctant, despite Mrs. Gandhi's impassioned speech of November 16, to take redistributive measures to procure grain in vastly increased quantities from surplus states to give to scarcity states. It, too, looked to an external source, the U.S.A., for most of its needs. In effect, therefore, with only minor qualifications, the governments of Bihar and of India provided only those resources internally that involved no significant redistributive measures—such as shifting administrative personnel—or involved reallocation of resources—mainly money, whose redistributive consequences were easily postponed or hidden.

The Declaration of Famine

Although the Congress state government was eager to impress upon the central government that the state was "on the brink of famine," it was not willing to declare a state of famine, largely for three reasons. First, such a declaration just prior to the election would suggest that the situation was out of control and that the state gov-

ernment had permitted a crisis to turn into a disaster. The state government wished the Center to perceive Bihar as on the brink of, but not in the midst of, a famine situation gone out of control. The second, more practical reason for the unwillingness of the state government to declare a famine before the central government accepted the seriousness of the situation was that it indicated the need for “a widening of ameliorative measures” and “a more ample provision of funds” to deal with the situation (Government of Bihar 1957:23), which would have placed the state government in the position of having declared a need for the provision of resources to the districts that it claimed it did not have. The third reason for the unwillingness of the state government to declare a famine in Bihar was that it would have widened the breach between it and the central government, which, for its own reasons, opposed a famine declaration in Bihar.

For all these reasons, the Congress government resisted the declaration of famine until the election. After the Congress government lost the election, the non-Congress coalition had to face the issue of declaring a famine—something that they had demanded the Congress government do prior to the election. At that time, the objections to a declaration of famine remained basically the same as they had been before: that a mere declaration of famine would not produce the necessary resources; that a declaration would create in the public mind the anticipation of an increase in resources that could not, in fact, be provided; and that whatever increase in resources could be provided would not require a famine declaration. Other reasons for resistance were gone, however, particularly the onus of blaming the state government for permitting a famine situation to develop, since the non-Congress government obviously could not be held responsible for a situation that had developed before it came to power. One powerful new reason for a famine declaration had been added, namely, that several of the non-Congress parties had committed themselves to such a declaration by their demands on the Congress to make such a declaration before the election.

The squeeze in which the Bihar government had been placed was evident to the Congress opposition in the state legislative assembly at the time. The leader of the opposition, Mahesh Prasad Sinha, had opposed the declaration of famine before the election, and he privately opposed it after the election, but he gleefully played the appropriate public political role by turning the vise tighter and demanding that the government fulfill its promises to declare Bihar a famine-stricken state. This report of my interview with Sinha at the time reveals how he played this political role:

PRB: What is this controversy that is developing now about the question of declaring Bihar state a famine state?

Sinha: The controversy is purely political.

PRB: By?

Sinha: By both sides. These people, when they were in opposition, the government, present government, when these people were in opposition [before the election], they were crying hoarse over the fact that the entire state should be declared a famine state because when you declare a particular area as famine area, then you have got to feed the entire population and you take the responsibility of giving them jobs and also taking the responsibility of providing them with foodgrains, work, and everything. That is, a different code is maintained. But, now when they [non-Congress parties] have gone in power, we say that, as you were always telling us [the Congress government in power before the election] and asking us to declare the entire state famine state, now you are in power, now please do it.

PRB: Well, what do you think? Should Bihar be declared a famine state or not?

Sinha: No, that can't be. No, no, nothing can, *mane* [I mean], no, in spite of all the efforts of the Center to feed us, we cannot feed entire population of five *crores* [50 million].

PRB: So there is no point in . . .

Sinha: But I'm going to mention this in my speech tomorrow. I'm going to play the role of the opposition.

PRB: What are you going to say?

Sinha: Yes, about this, that you declare the entire state. (Personal interview in Patna, Apr. 2, 1967, para. 68).

The state government ultimately squeezed out of the Congress vote on April 20; it declared two districts and parts of five other districts to be famine areas, rather than the entire state. The declaration was, of course, followed by a succession of further demands from blocks, districts, and regions of the state for inclusion of areas left out of the famine declaration (see, for example, *IN*:Apr. 24, 25, 27 and May 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 13, 1967). Several other areas were soon added to the list, and on May 25, all areas of the state not included in the famine area where *kharif* yields had been estimated as below 50 percent were declared "scarcity affected areas" (*BFR*:79). In the process, many areas that had not satisfied the technical criteria for inclusion as scarcity-affected were nevertheless included. The *Bihar Famine Report* notes that, in Saharsa district, where production ultimately was recorded as 68.5 percent of normal, "the District Officer . . . said that there was hardly any scarcity in the district . . . warranting relief operations on a large-scale" (p. 462). Nevertheless, the government included most blocks in the district, 79 percent of the population, in the scarcity-affected areas.

Conclusion

On the Bihar Famine

On the definition of famine. Six issues recur in scholarly and official discussions of the definition of famine (see, for example, Alamgir 1980, Bennett 1968, Currey 1978, Government of Bihar 1957, Morris 1974, Sen 1980, and Sen 1981):

(1) Whether or not scarcity of food is invariably, or even generally, associated with famine;

(2) The nature and extent of the food deprivation that occurs and the terms that are used to describe it—hunger, malnutrition, "prolonged foodgrain intake deficiency per capita" (Alamgir 1980:7), and starvation;

(3) The groups of people affected by a famine. Does it involve only the "poorer classes"⁶ or does it involve the community as a whole? The ways in which both groups are affected;

(4) The appropriateness of using various signs or symptoms associated with food deprivation and the loss of opportunities for employment as indicators of the existence of famine;

(5) The appropriateness of using the inadequacy of traditional private mechanisms or routine government-relief measures to deal with the situation as indicators of famine;

⁶ The *Bombay Presidency Famine Relief Code* of 1885 (p. 1), defines famine in relation to the threat of death by starvation among the "poorer classes" (cited in McAlpin 1976).

(6) Emphasis on famine as a situation that requires a large-scale government response.

Most definitions seek an objective basis for defining famine. A crisis, however, is a human creation, not an objective occurrence. The atmosphere surrounding the Bihar Famine of 1966–1967 demonstrates the inseparability of the objective and subjective aspects of crisis situations, and, specifically, food crises, that threaten starvation for many people. Crop failure, food shortages, and rising prices can be measured. So can human suffering that results from them, whether it be food deprivation, disease, or personal dislocation. However, the making of a social crisis out of a crop failure or food scarcity is a subjective matter that in no way follows automatically from the severity of the situation. Moreover, disasters such as widespread starvation, endemic malnutrition, and epidemic diseases also can be measured, although not without controversy. More important, such disasters can and do occur without a crisis being declared.

Therefore, searching for an objective definition of either a food crisis or a famine in a politicized society in an interdependent world is a pointless exercise. We can, however, search for conditions under which similar situations of distress will or will not be treated as food crises or famines in different societies and political systems. In a politicized competitive political system such as India in 1966–1967, all traditional distinctions and criteria ultimately become reversed for political reasons or dissolve into politically motivated decisions.

For example, the administrative distinction between scarcity and famine becomes more difficult to maintain the wider the geographical area affected and the more the area affected is considered politically critical. However, it also depends upon the material and political resources available at higher levels. Under some conditions, scarcity will be treated as such and the local people will be allowed to suffer with minimal external assistance. Under other conditions, their distress will be exaggerated and generalized and external resources will be sought. A famine crisis is most likely to be declared when the evidence is so widespread that it is difficult to conceal or when politicians fear for their political futures.

Another distinction commonly made is between everyday occurrences of hunger, malnutrition, and suffering and the more severe and widespread food deprivation associated with famine. In Bihar in 1966–1967, the term used to distinguish “normal” suffering from that anticipated if adequate measures were not taken was “unprecedented.” An unprecedented drought, crop failure, or food crisis that requires a declaration of famine is one that threatens to affect those not accustomed to such suffering. This distinction, which has no standing in the definitions of social science, is politically critical.

Many definitions of famine insist that famine cannot usefully be seen as an individual matter—nor as simply a widespread occurrence—but that famine is a community matter, a systemic matter, in which community resources are inadequate and systemic breakdown is threatened (see Currey 1978 and Morris 1974). The Bihar Famine approached these dimensions, and it was seen in this way by the authorities. However, a democratized political system cannot permit this sort of eventuality if its leaders are to remain in power. Such a breakdown may occur only if there is also a political disaster, a war, or deliberate political neglect. A democratized political system averts such a disaster by distress exaggeration, by dramatization, and by seeking external support within the political system or outside it.

Insofar as the Bihar Famine of 1966–1967 is concerned, the main conclusion concerning the definition of a famine situation that emerges from this analysis is that famine ultimately is defined in relation to political reasons, and it is declared for political reasons. A crop failure was predicted on the basis of the deepening drought

in the summer of 1966, disaster was anticipated, and the politicians were eager to prevent its consequences by securing maximum relief. Among the consequences they feared in the face of an election was loss of their own power. However, famine was not declared before the election because the Congress government at the Center and in Bihar did not want the political liability of declaring a famine *before* the election; neither did the Congress governments wish the financial responsibility for famine relief.

Ultimately famine was declared by the non-Congress government that came to power after the elections. Famine was declared for political reasons, because the non-Congress leaders had been demanding such a declaration before the election and they could not retain the support of their local leaders if they broke faith on this matter. In neither case—in the nondeclaration of famine by the Congress or the declaration of famine by the non-Congress government—did objective signs and symptoms of famine provide the basis for decision. The focus was not on the *need for a famine* declaration. The focus was on the *consequences*, principally political, of a famine declaration.

Was there a true famine in Bihar, either in the administrative or a social-science sense of the term? There was not, according to several of the social-science definitions; famine was “contained” (Berg 1973), and disaster was averted. However, in terms of the definitions in the British-created and British-derived famine codes, there was. Crops failed over a large area; as a result, agricultural employment declined; prices rose dramatically; and large-scale starvation of the poor would have resulted if work and free food had not been provided. In terms of administrative definitions and the needs of the people, therefore, the declaration of famine in Bihar was an appropriate response.

On the causes of the famine. The official explanation of the Bihar Famine was that it was caused by drought-induced crop failure that led to a further food availability decline (FAD) in an already food-deficit state. The food shortages, it is said, then had to be made up by heroic local, national, and international relief efforts, which involved the import and distribution of millions of tons of foodgrains and the provision of employment and direct free supplies to those who required them.

Sen has argued that the FAD explanation of famines has tended to serve as a cover for other causes of famine, which is often actually brought about by major shifts in entitlement to food rather than by genuine food shortages. Other possible interpretations of the causes of the Bihar Famine of 1966–1967 include shifts in historic trade patterns, government food-procurement and food-zone policies, neglect of agriculture and irrigation, and constraints on increased production (such as the existing land tenure system). Here I am limited to showing how the retention of the FAD theory as an explanation for famine and scarcity serves three important functions for the authorities. First, it equalizes need within the area defined as famine-stricken or suffering from scarcity. All regions and all classes are said to suffer equally, if in different ways. Existing inequalities are thus maintained. They may even be exacerbated, although the function of the theory is only to prevent undue attention to existing inequalities. Second, the theory serves to minimize the ability of the authorities and people to help themselves, thereby justifying external assistance. Third, the theory diverts attention from inequalities and suffering that exist in normal times in particular regions and among disadvantaged social groups. Describing a crop failure and food shortage as “unprecedented” screens the fact that it is an everyday occurrence for many individuals in the best of times.

The Bihar Famine as a Type of Crisis Situation

The course of the Bihar Famine and its treatment by the authorities, political leaders, and the press as a “crisis” suggest some general features of crisis situations

Table 2. Index Numbers of Total Foodgrain Production in Bihar, 1956–1957 to 1973–1974

Year	Index Number ^a
1956–57	100.0
1957–58	73.7
1958–59	132.2
1959–60	116.1
1960–61	134.8
1961–62	134.6
1962–63	132.0
1963–64	139.0
1964–65	139.7
1965–66	n.a.
1966–67	67.4
1967–68	137.1
1968–69	139.2
1969–70	128.3
1970–71	148.7
1971–72	170.2
1972–73	157.7
1973–74	154.4

SOURCES: Government of India, Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Economic and Statistical Adviser, *Growth Rates in Agriculture, 1949–50 to 1964–65*, pp. 80, 118 (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1968); Government of Bihar, Planning Department and Department of Agriculture, Bihar State Planning Board, *Report on Reasons for Shortfall in Foodgrains Production during Fourth Five-Year Plan*, p. 26 (Patna: Secretariat Press, 1975).

^a Base, 1956–57 to 1964–65, agricultural year 1956–57 = 100; base, 1966–67 to 1973–74, first plan period average = 100. The two base figures, although derived from different sources, seem to be virtually identical.

that seem to have broad application. Two of those features are emphasized above: the arbitrariness of the distinction between crisis and noncrisis situations and the consequences of the politicization of crisis situations.

On the arbitrariness of the distinction between crisis and noncrisis situations. The official version of the origin of the Bihar Famine is that it occurred as a result of an “unprecedented” drought followed by equally unprecedented floods, which led to the worst crop failure in memory. In fact, drought and floods are recurring features in many parts of Bihar, and the drought and crop failure of 1957–1958 were only marginally less severe than those of 1966–1967 (see table 2).⁷

The Bihar Famine crisis, therefore, does support Edelman’s argument that the distinction between crisis and noncrisis situations is an arbitrary one. Moreover, crises are not simply unexpected and unprecedented events that happen; they are situations that involve conscious definition, persuasion, and rhetorical maneuvers. They provide supreme contexts for the art of political manipulation.

⁷ In 1981–1982 I conducted a tour of the most severely affected districts, and I found that villagers in the areas that were most seriously affected in 1966–1967 had experienced years in the interim

that were, in their eyes, worse than 1966–1967 without the atmosphere of crisis or a famine declaration (details will be provided in the final manuscript).

Defining a situation as a crisis may be a masking device that is used to conceal underlying realities that might otherwise emerge in stark form. Rhetoric used to define the Bihar Famine crisis masked, however ineffectively, the bankruptcy of Indian economic development policy, which had grossly neglected agriculture and irrigation, particularly in the rainfed areas of north India. The rhetoric also masked the inability of the governments of Bihar and of India to provide satisfactorily for the basic daily needs of their people, let alone their survival in a crisis. Defining the situation as a crisis drew attention away from the everyday facts of malnutrition and endemic diseases. It also drew attention away from the widespread character of the food problem in India and from the ineffective policy of the Government of India, which permitted malnutrition and starvation except in times—*not of famine*, which occurs regularly in different parts of India—of *crisis*.

On the politicization of crisis. A central feature of the Bihar Famine was its high degree of politicization. The kind of politicization that occurred in Bihar cannot be expected in the normal course in other equivalent situations, in India or elsewhere. Famine and scarcity have occurred before and since the Bihar Famine, and both have occurred with a lesser degree of politicization or have been ignored by politicians and the press. The degree of politicization that occurred during the Bihar Famine was a function not of the severity of the crisis but of the intensity of division within the Congress between the state and the Center and between Congress and non-Congress parties in Bihar.⁸

The Bihar Famine crisis was not only politicized from its onset, but it was democratized. In such a situation, the people, the press, and the opposition politicians have a say in defining whether or not a situation is or is not a crisis and what sort of crisis it is. One consequence is the loss of control by the authorities, not so much over the situation as over their own positions. A common situation is that a grave crisis provides increased security for those in authority; if they are insulated from everyday political conflicts, a grave crisis may enable them to deal more effectively with political conflict. In a democratized crisis, the crisis for the people becomes a crisis for the politicians as well. The definition of the situation then is influenced greatly by how much danger it presents to the people in power. In either case, the most important conclusion about public crisis in a country where the authorities and the politicians have to be concerned about popular support is that crisis is defined ultimately by the authorities and politicians in terms of their own interests.

List of References

- Alamgir, Mohiuddin. 1980. *Famine in South Asia: Political Economy of Mass Starvation*. Cambridge, Mass.: Oelegeschlager, Gunn, & Hain.
- Asian Recorder*. Weekly. New Delhi.
- Bennett, M. K. 1968. "Famine." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills. Vol. 5. New York: Free Press.
- Berg, Alan. 1973. "Famine Contained: Notes and Lessons from the Bihar Experience." In Gunnar Blix et al., *Famine: A Symposium Dealing with Nutrition and Relief Op-*

⁸ There have also been situations in India and elsewhere where the degree of politicization of a food shortage has exceeded its actual severity. If a scale of correspondence were constructed between the degree of severity and the degree of politicization of drought/scarcity situations, the corre-

spondence in the 1966–1967 Bihar case would be fairly close. The main point, however, is that the degree of severity and the degree of politicization of such situations do not automatically correspond, but vary partly independently of each other.

- erations in Times of Disaster*. Symposia of the Swedish Nutrition Foundation 9 (May): 113–29.
- Billings, Robert S., et al. 1980. "A Model of Crisis Perception: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 25, no. 2(June): 300–16.
- Brass, Paul R. 1967. Personal interviews conducted on March 16, April 2 and 10, in Patna.
- . 1974. *Language, Religion, and Politics in North India*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1983. "International Rice Research and the Problems of Rice Growing in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar." In *Rural South Asia: Linkages, Change and Development*, ed. Peter Robb, pp. 229–50. London: Curzon Press.
- Brass, Paul R., and Marcus F. Franda, eds. 1973. *Radical Politics in South Asia*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Brecher, Michael. 1966. *Succession in India: A Study in Decision-Making*. London: Oxford University Press.
- . 1978. "Introduction" and "A Theoretical Approach to International Crisis Behavior." In *Studies in Crisis Behavior*, ed. M. Brecher, pp. 1–24. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books.
- Chopra, R. N. 1981. *Evolution of Food Policy in India*. Delhi: Macmillan India.
- Currey, Bruce. 1978. "The Famine Syndrome: Its Definition for Relief and Rehabilitation in Bangladesh." In *Ecology of Food and Nutrition*, vol. 7, pp. 87–97.
- Edelman, Murray. 1977. *Political Language: Words That Succeed and Policies That Fail*. New York: Academic Press.
- Government of Bihar. Revenue Department. 1957. *The Bihar Famine and Flood Relief Code*. Patna: Secretariat Press.
- . 1973. *Bihar Famine Report, 1966–67 (BFR)*. Patna: Secretariat Press.
- Government of India. Directorate of Economics and Statistics. 1969. *Economic Survey of Indian Agriculture for 1966–67*. Delhi: Manager of Publications.
- Government of India. Planning Commission. 1964. *Report of Joint Study Team, Uttar Pradesh (Eastern Districts): Ghazipur, Azamgarh, Deoria, Jaunpur*. Delhi: Government of India Press.
- Indian Nation (IN)*. Daily. Patna.
- Jannuzi, F. Tomasson. 1974. *Agrarian Crisis in India: The Case of Bihar*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- McAlpin, Michelle. 1976. "Speculations on the Social and Economic Consequences of British Famine Policy in Bombay Presidency, 1870–1920." Mimeograph.
- Morris, Morris D. 1974. "What Is a Famine?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Nov. 2, pp. 1855–64.
- National Workshop on Famine Relief and Reconstruction. 1971(?). *Famine Relief and Reconstruction: Report of the Workshop (January 12–16, 1971)*. New Delhi: Central Institute of Research & Training in Public Cooperation.
- Prasad, Pradhan H. 1979. "Semi-Feudalism: The Basic Constraints of Indian Agriculture." In Arvind N. Das and V. Nilakant, *Agrarian Relations in India*, pp. 33–49. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Robinson, James A. 1972. "Crisis: An Appraisal of Concepts and Theories." In *International Crises: Insights from Behavioral Research*, ed. Charles F. Hermann, pp. 20–35. New York: Free Press.
- Sen, Amartya. 1980. "Famines." In *World Development*, vol. 8, pp. 613–21.

- . 1981. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Singh, K. Suresh. 1975. *The Indian Famine, 1967: A Study in Crisis and Change*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House.
- Times of India (TOI)*. Daily. New Delhi.