

Starving in Silence:

A Report on Famine and Censorship

by Article 19

London: Article 19, 1990; 146 pages, £3.95

Censorship and famine are two things I had never particularly connected with each other until reading this book. Its basic argument is that major famines in the modern world cannot occur if there is open communication of information.

Starving in Silence includes two major case studies. The first is the censorship of the famine in China in 1959-1961 which claimed some 20,000,000 lives. Poor harvests played a role in this massive disaster, but the primary culprit was the Chinese government's push to create communes (part of the 'Great Leap Forward') and its refusal to accept information contrary to its belief in dramatically increasing productivity and abundance. While peasants were slaughtering their draught animals rather than lose them to communal pools, and being forced to enter inefficient 'back-yard' steel production, the government was deluding itself about massive increases in yields.

The famine would not have occurred had there been a free press with active dialogue about what was happening and why. The Chinese rulers hid the truth from the rest of the world as well as from themselves. The famine remains a taboo subject today.

This part of the report was written by a Chinese scholar who remains anonymous because of his frequent trips to China. His analysis is based on recent publications and on contact with many individuals within China. It is an eye-opening story.

As well as the basic insight about censorship and famine, there are a number of fascinating side points taken up. For example, the famine, rather than



leading to a slowing of population growth as might be thought, actually triggered a massive increase in the birth rate. Only later, when a stable, adequate diet was provided, did birth control measures begin to work effectively.

The second half of the book deals with famines in Ethiopia and Sudan in the 1980s. The story here is more complex. In short, while the world was being alerted to certain famines in Ethiopia through massive media attention, there were other famines - for example in northern Ethiopia in 1982-1985 and southern Sudan in 1986-1989 - that were allowed to happen because of censorship by the governments of Ethiopia and Sudan. This analysis by Alex de Waal deals with the crucial roles of war, government repression and censorship, Western official indifference, and the world media. It deserves close study.

Stories in the media can be considered to be a form of nonviolent action. *Starving in Silence* shows the amazing importance of this basic way of both expressing and generating concern. The book describes how the press plays a watchdog role in India that helps prevent famine.

The book suggests to me a need to examine more carefully the role of information and communication in nonviolent action.

Article 19, the publishers of *Starving in Silence*, is a human rights organisation that takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." Founded in 1986, Article 19 is both a research and campaigning organisation. It has published a variety of reports, including a world report entitled *Information, Freedom and Censorship* that documents the situation in countries around the world. For those who would like to support a human rights organisation with a broader brief than Amnesty International, Article 19 is a worthy choice. It can be contacted at 90 Borough High Street, London SE11 1LL, United Kingdom.

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