

An Overview of the Great Famine of 1876-1878

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Abstract

Indians faced a number of famines from ancient times. In ancient periods, it appears that a major famine arose in every fifty years. In spite of vigorous relief measures adopted by the rulers, the famines intervened the peaceful lives of people. There were 14 famines, occurred from the start of the 12 century to the close of the 17 century, maximum were cramped to small local areas. The occurrence of famines increased in the phase of 19 century. In the 49 year period between 1860 and 1908, nearly 20 years were adversely affected by famines or scarcities. The current analysis is to focus on the understanding of the causes and consequences of the Great famine that occurred during 1876-1878.

Keywords: Great Famine, Madras Presidency, Relief Measures, Scarcity, Britishers, Indian Government, Population

Introduction

Indians faced a number of famines from ancient times. In ancient periods, it appears that a major famine aroused in every fifty years. Kautilya mentions in his work Arthashastra various relief measures, adopted during famines such as revision of taxes, emigration, the granting of money and grain from the state funds, construction of artificial lakes, tanks, wells etc. In spite of vigorous relief measures adopted by the rulers, the famines intervened the peaceful lives of the people. There were 14 famines occurred from the start of the 12 century to the close of the 17 century, maximum were cramped to small local areas. The occurrence of famines increased in the phase of 19 century. In the 49 year period between 1860 and 1908, nearly 20 years were adversely affected by famines or scarcities.¹

Objectives

- To identify the causes for the out break of the famine in 1876.
- To scrutinize the consequences caused by the famine.
- To focus on the alleviations adopted by the colonial Government.

Methodology

The descriptive and narrative method is widely adopted in this research paper.

It examines the impact of famine relief measures and it proposes long term preventive strategies to Madras presidency.

A Famine is an extreme and protracted food scarcity resulting widespread and persistent hunger. It is evidenced by loss of body weight and emaciation and a peak in the death rate caused by either starvation or disease resulting from the weakened condition of the folk. While deaths caused by starvation occur mainly among the poor, epidemics of smallpox, cholera or the plague may affect any segment of the population.²

In Madras Presidency, famines had played a tragic part in the story of British India. Under the rule of the Britishers, many famines and scarcities occurred and the subjects faced a lot of hurdles and obstacles. People lived in a distressed and helpless condition. The Madras Presidency was formed at the close of the 18 century and in the start of the 19 century. Prior to that period, the Company's possessions were limited to the Northern Circars, the Chinglepet district, and a few isolated factories along the coast. The company obtained Malabar, Salem and parts of Dindigul in 1792. The death of Tipu led to the

merging of Coimbatore, Canara and the Wynad with the Company. Many territories were added like Nellore, North Arcot, South Arcot, Madura, Tirunelvely.³ Later Kurnool was annexed and North Canara was transfer to Bombay Presidency.

Causes for the Famine

The Great famineravaged the country for three years and was a great calamity of its kind, in respect of the area and the population affected and the duration and intensity of the distress. The immediate cause for the faminewas the natural factors such as drought, floods and cyclones, but there were important contributing factors like poverty of the peasants, backwardness in agriculture, and the lack of irrigation facilities. This famine was caused by drought, but not by the drought of a single season or of a single year. The harvests of 1875 had been indifferent, especially in the Ceded Districts. In 1876, the south-west monsoon or summer rains, on which the northern districts were largely dependent, proved very deficient; and the north-east monsoon or autos rains, on which the southern and eastern districts almost entirely rely for their cultivation, failed still more completely. When the monsoon failed in October 1876, it was recognized that a twelve- month's famine was at hand, and inevitable. In 1877, the south-west monsoon failed a second time, and the distress was gradually intensified throughout that year. Relief was not obtained until November 1877, when the north-east monsoon at last gave a sufficient rain-supply, and the crops of the coming season were assured.⁴

With the possible exception of certain tracts like the west coast where, on account of the Western Ghats, rain seldom failed and the delta and other areas irrigated by the big rivers, almost the entire Presidency was famine prone. In a Presidency, where a bulk of the masses lived with a long term

poverty, famine was certainly not a new phenomenon.

The most acute and extensive famines that proved too costly for the Presidency occurred between 1876 and 1878. In all a total area of 2,05,600sq.miles covering a populace of 36,000,000 affected. In Madras, 5 million people died in a year. Since the famine of 1876, no famines of that kind was seen in Tamil Nadu. The scarcity was felt with great severityover the entire Mysore region, the south side of the Hyderabad State, and all the Deccan districts of the Bombay Presidency, Madras, Maharastra, western UP and Punjab.⁵

Out of 21 it ranged through 14 districts into which the Presidency had been divided covering a zone of 83,000 square miles having a populace of nearly 20 million. The area in Madras seriously affected by famine was estimated at 74,000 square miles, covering 16,00,000 inhabitants. In Madras nearly 35lakh were died and in U.P it was over 12 lakh. No districts entirely escaped between the Krishnariver and Cape Comorin; but the severity was the most in the tract immediately south of the Toongabudra, including the Bellary district, Kurnool, Cuddapah, Nellore and farther south in North Arcot and Salem. In Mysore nearly 20 % of the people suffered.⁶

Alleviations

At that time of famine, the riots started to sell their possessions i.e, their cattle. Leaving their families they began to migrate to Ceylon, as patches of thousands. The people migrated in search, not of food, but of fodder. The government opened the reserved forests to public grazing, yet a whole lot of cattle died. Food supply was quickly done by the railways.⁷

As the relief manoeuvre was not in time, Madras' cultivating population was reduced starvation. As a result a many villages were deserted and vast areas of land were not cultivated. Through poverty existed

in all zones, nowhere was it so deep, so widespread and so devoid of all prospects of relief in the Presidency of Madras. Government launched numerous measures and stratagem to suppress famine in the presidency.

The Government made half-hearted efforts to render helps the famine stricken. The India Government felt that famine relief would involve a great financial strain and sent Sir Richard Temple to Bombay and Madras “ to consult with the Government of the two Presidencies” and impress upon them the need for economy in relief expenditure.⁸ It was pointed out that while it is the wish of the Indian Government that every endeavour should be made, so far as the resources of the state admit, for the avoidance of deaths from famine.

The British government appointed a commission to recommend famine relief measures. Viceroy Lord Lytton appointed a commission to formulate general principles of famine relief under the captaincy of Sir Richard Strachey to suggest particular measures of preventive or protective character. The commission recommended that employment to be given to be able-bodied person under food for work programme. It recognized the responsibility of the authority to give relief in time of famine, but said that the state should simultaneously check the rise of thrift and self-reliance among the people, land revenue or rent might be suspended or remitted in famine affected area, while the expenses of famine relief should be borne by the provincial governments etc.,

It was discovered after a while that no adequate stores of food remained in the country, and but for the efforts of Government, and the vast imports of food brought into the country by the European mercantile houses from Bengal, Burma, and the East, a much greater proportion of the population, would have perished than actually occurred. During the eighteen months ending January 1878, the total

quantity of food grain imported into Madras by sea was nearly 700,000 tons.⁹

The difficulty remained however of bringing these stores of bread, to the people, and this were with much labor and some delay affected by the railways, especially the Madras Railway. The total quantity of grain distributed in the interior by these lines between August 1876 and November 1877 was 724,339 tons, yielding a freight of Rupees 55,36,950. It was never possible to obtain a complete record of the death caused directly and indirectly by this great calamity, but probably nearly four millions of persons perished in that manner. In some large tracts of country half the population temporarily disempowered. In the famine were a 21.8 per miles if population were entered in the recent census as having died under the general heading of ‘other causes’, while in the non-famine were a only 8.5 per miles were so entered.¹⁰

To comply with the recommendations, steps were taken to create new resources by means which, in normal times a surplus of revenue could be secured to meet the extra-ordinary charges thrown on the government by famine and Rs. 15 million was fixed to be entered in the budget under the head “Famine Relief and Insurance”.¹¹ A committee sat in Madras in 1881 and framed a code of Famine Administration for this Presidency. The code centres in the Collector, the whole administration in time of famine and arranges for the expansions of other departments so as to meet the demands made upon them by that officer. A leading feature in the arrangements is the preparation in advance of lists of aids to be executed when distress comes on. To deal with the issue of unemployment, alleviation were to be opened for the non-disabled, the rest were to get free relief. To deal with the supply of food, private agencies interfered and solved. To increase food production, a programme for irrigation was given.

The land owners get respite through suspension of land revenue.

Conclusion

Prevention is better than cure, so some efforts were made by the government by adopting direct and indirect measures to eradicate Famine . Famine Insurance and relief fund was started and aimed to enhance the condition of the peasants. Agricultural policy was framed to attain self-sufficiency in food grains so that famines and scarcity in future can will be avoided. The Green revolution was started by the Government of India which lessened the complexity of food problem. These resulted in great way to reduce famines. The modifications in the political and economic field since 1947, made the problem become less complex.

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