CHAPTER IV

Colonial Governance and the Question of Public and Private Relief

We have defined public relief here to mean that organized by the government or its agencies. It entailed funds allocated by the government for the general administration of the country in the shape of funds for relief from famines or other natural calamities as well as contributions made by individuals (princes or men of importance) and organizations for relief organized by the colonial state. Private relief, on the other hand, was organized by individuals or organizations and was not affiliated to any government body. Yet private relief was often organized by the government through persuading individuals or organizations to take up relief activities on certain occasions. Sometimes private and public relief were organized together and for similar purposes. There was very often co-operation between public and private initiative in ameliorating distress. The dividing line between private relief organized at the behest of government officials and that which was purely local in organization was extremely thin and often difficult to differentiate. Private initiative at offering relief took the form of charity and the expense was not recoverable; whereas public or state sponsored relief was characterized in terms of the duty of the state, and, the costs incurred on relief were to a large extent recoverable. Relief was given in the form of wages for work done or
allocated. Yet at times the state organized relief which was not remunerative, making the distinction between public and private relief barely noticeable. This took the shape of giving food, shelter and clothing to those who were unable to perform the type of tasks assigned to the able-bodied. While private charity was based on customary traditions and practices, state relief was based on an imperial ideology of how a colony was to be governed and what its people could expect from the state. However, state relief had to come to terms with customary notions of relief, that is, by maintaining the existing social hierarchy. Missionary relief was also not government sponsored charity even though it sought to further state ideology. However, while private charity continued to enlarge its scope of activities throughout the late nineteenth-century [1] the state worked out ways of limiting the scope of relief policies for obvious reasons of economy. While the state made attempts to increase its efforts towards co-operating closely with private relief, private relief organizations sought to distance themselves in order to maintain their identity and avoid state hegemony. The failure of private charity could pass off as a result of the decline of the old order initiated by British rule. The failure of public relief, however, was a matter of concern and signalled the failure of the state to efficiently govern its people, resulting in debates of a primarily

1. Organizations such as the Indian National Congress, the Sarvajainik Sabha, the Mahila Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Nari Samaj, etc. were all increasingly involving themselves with charitable work. Meredith Borthwick, The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 271-292.
The government officials conducted meetings of the wealthy, usually in public halls and asked for donations. Speeches were made in praise of the rich and their natural benevolence. One such meeting was held in 1874 at Calcutta, to which donations were sent by the Maharajas of Benaras, Vizianagram and Bengal. Usually, Her Majesty's contribution from her private purse was also announced on such occasions to elicit support.

Next in line for the government to organize in terms of relief were the zamindars and the land holders. The zamindars occupied an important place in the imperial set up, used as they were in day to day governance. They had to be kept under close scrutiny and in political subservience. To most officials this was a group which took advantage of a prevailing crisis to demand concessions from the state but had to be forced to do the needful for the peasants. During such moments of distress the zamindars often found it difficult to pay their land revenue instalments with the "punctuality which [was] usually observed and enforced" by the British state. The deputy secretary to the Government of India was of the view that in such circumstances, where it was difficult to pay instalments of land revenue punctually, "the government would by no means desire to adopt the coercive measures...authorised by law, and is ready to allow some reasonable period within which the zamindars

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2. Report of the proceedings of the meeting held at the Town Hall of Calcutta to adopt measures for famine relief in 1874. Agriculture Revenue and Commerce Department (hereafter ARC), Famine Branch, February 1874, Nos. 99-139.
might discharge fully his obligations to the state". He, however, argued that it would "be necessary that this measure should be restricted to cases where, by reason of his exertions for the public benefit, the zamindar might be in temporary difficulty". He believed that it was consistent with the principles of the state that it should deal liberally with those zamindars who may have distinguished themselves by employing labour on works of permanent improvement of land, or importing grain for distribution, or sustaining their ryots in a season of difficulty - or by any act of munificence towards their tenantry, or charity towards the people in reference to the scarcity, which may be shown to the satisfaction of the collector [2].

A large number of officers "strove to enlist the zamindars and wealthy residents and induce them to undertake the charge and management of relief works". Primarily support was enlisted on the basis of personal relationships. Only a few zamindars came forward on their own to help the state. A large number of them quit relief works half way due to the lack of finances. For the government, however, every little penny counted. As the collector of Darbhanga, justifying certain expenses wrote, "this expenditure had to be incurred whether local residents contributed or not, and it would have been obviously unwise of us to refuse a contribution of one half of the cost because we could not get [from private donars] what the Government thought at first...viz two thirds" [4].

3. ARC, Famine Branch, January 1874, No. 209, pp. 100-01.
4. ARC, Famine Branch, May 1876, Nos. 6-9, part B.
That the zamindars and the landed classes were only too eager to indulge in philanthropy is also worth pointing out. A central feature of taluqdari life in north India was the "quest for marks of British favor". This included a range of hierarchized titles from the jewelled robe and khillat [Robe of Honor] to the most coveted Star of India. The government measured out its rewards very carefully. Even the bestowing of a small title such as "bahadur" was subject to lengthy debates. Ordinary taluqdas had to work hard to get titles. Their behaviour was continuously monitored and relief work undertaken during famines suitably rewarded. T.R. Metcalf points out that the "award of honours, of whatever sort, was a carefully calculated business, and one on which substantial effort was expended". These awards served the purpose of not only "rewarding loyalty, [but also] to bend taluqdari enterprise towards the goals the British saw as most appropriate, but to keep these men dependant" [^].

As an illustrative example of this policy we might cite the instance of Lala Murlidhar, a pleader and vice president of the Umballa municipality. He was granted a sanad every year between 1899 and 1905, for his services in the realm of famine and plague relief. That such awards had political associations is obvious from the fact that in 1920, he renounced all his titles in protest against the Hunter Committee report investigating the Jallianwala Bagh

massacre, due to loss of faith in British justice [6].

Certain limitations were also evident in the public charity organized by the government. Archbishop Steins was of the opinion, that "charitable subscriptions had been too much limited to a certain number and class, that is, to those who could subscribe large amounts". Steins was of the opinion that on "many occasions the small subscriptions, essentially when they went over an immense number of people, were of greater value". He also pointed out that "when all the different sections of the community were represented on the committee, there was less fear for what was called partial distribution" [7].

The relationship between private and government relief also needs to be analysed. At one level both were for the benefit of the people, but in their principles were meant for different purposes. At another level in order to encourage private initiative a feeling of oneness was consciously engendered by the authorities. To put it in the words of the Viceroy, Lord Northbrook

the Government should be assisted...by those who will aid the Government in the different localities, and more especially that the Government officers should be assisted throughout the country by those benevolent men who are ready to help in assisting their fellow-countrymen, and who are the best agents for spreading relief widely throughout the districts which require it [8].

The relationship between public and private relief at the level of ideology


7. The above opinion was expressed by Steins at the Town Hall meeting (refer to note 2 of this chapter). ARC, Famine Branch, February 1874, Nos. 99-138.

8. Ibid. Emphasis added.
also reflects the post-1857 attempt of the colonial state to forge stronger links with the people it sought to govern. The attempt to bridge the gap between the governing and the governed (though with utmost caution) in fact helped in the creation of a public arena for relief, which then proved to be an extremely fertile ground for political contestation. The basis for this contestation was to be found in the enduring tension between two aspects of colonial ideology. One of similarity and the other of difference, which in turn shaped differing strategies of governance for the colonized. Informed by the liberal outlook in Britain, India became something of a "laboratory for the creation of a liberal administrative state, and from there its elements could make their way back to England itself" [9].

The relationship between government relief and private initiative, then, had elements both of persuasion and coercion. In a number of cases the government publicized that it would contribute a sum equal to the amount privately subscribed, while in other instances it tried its best to generate two-thirds from amongst the people [10]. Local committees often assured the authorities that they would "be able to raise sufficient funds to carry on with the aid of the Government subsidy" [11].


10. ARC, Famine Branch, January 1874, No. 20 (ii), p. 112.

11. ARC, Famine Branch, January, 1874, No. 120 (ii).
The government's uncertain attitude towards private relief and the space it occupied in a colonial formation meant that officials praised and criticized such initiatives at the same time. Since private charity involved itself primarily with the distribution of cooked food and clothes, it was seen as being superficial in nature encouraging relief without work. But since public relief was limited due to financial constraints, some officials argued in favour of such forms of charity. State officials thus did not miss any opportunity to criticize the inadequacy of private relief. The Sanitary Commissioner for Madras wrote, "the quality of food was inadequate....there appeared to be no definite weight on scale of food....A large number of....women and children were recipients, and they all bore famine-marks on their faces" [12]. Expressing an opposite point of view, for Sholapur in 1877, officials argued that "a great deal of relief was being given by private charity", and a native charitable committee was set up in every big town in the district. The collector is said to have "noticed with satisfaction the extent to which the helpless village poor are cared for by their own people, even in these hard times" [13]. Integral to both private and public relief was the organization of funds for relief activities. While private charity relied on donations or subscriptions to various funds and organizations, it was not open to public scrutiny. Government funds, especially those organized through public subscription were legally open to public scrutiny. The

12. ARC, Famine Branch, April 1877, Nos. 51-61, p. 521.
13. ARC, Famine Branch, April 1877, No. 17, pp. 462-63.
Government of India did realize the significance of public contributions. Funds for government assistance were raised both in India and other countries. This assistance was important according to the Viceroy for two reasons. "In dealing with distress of the nature which is now threatened" he argued,

it is difficult for any fixed rules to provide for different [categories] of distress which should be relieved; and especially in India it has been found, that there are many classes of the population to whom it is necessary that relief should be brought to their own doors [14].

Funds were important for the Government of India, but were, perhaps, of greater significance for the provincial government. More so because the local government was always dependant on the Government of India and often faced with a severe financial crunch. The gravity of the problem was apparent during famines requiring immediate resources for relief alleviation. These local governments therefore occasionally asserted their independence to avoid mass starvation and consequent deaths. The Government of India was not always consulted in matters of local funds - raised or expended by committees and officials who were incharge, to which serious objections were raised by the Government of India. An evidently upset official of the finance department was of the opinion that the

question is one of principle....for I can hardly conceive of anything more radically unsound, or more damaging to the credit of the Government, than an attempt to administer local funds without the intervention of the bodies in whom the administration of those funds is vested by law....yet we preach to the people of India the advantages of self-

If the controlling of funds proved to be a difficult task so too was the disposal. In one instance the disposal of the balance of a relief fund for the support of famine orphans became a major issue. The debate over this particular issue discloses that the government had promised to contribute an amount equal to the general subscription. The amount collected by subscription in 1874 was utilized for investment purposes and the government securities yielded an interest of four percent which was then used for the maintenance of orphans. In 1876 it was resolved that since distress had ceased, the government's contribution was unnecessary. Secondly, due to a few casualties, the expenditure on the orphans had actually reduced. Third, when these orphans were to reach a certain age limit Government aid was to cease. What followed was a tussle between the provincial government of Bengal and the imperial government over the profits from the fund. According to the Bengal government, it had a right over the profits, however, for the imperial authorities since the sum was under its supervision and since it had spent on various other things during the famine, it too had a right over the fund [16].

A large number of officials were, however, against the use of the fund for any other purpose and felt that it ought to be maintained for a similar purpose in the future. Some others felt that it could be used elsewhere but

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15. ARC, Famine Branch, March 1877, Nos. 1-33, K.W., p. 4.
16. ARC, Famine Branch, October 1876, Nos. 1-4, part B.
argued that the committee report need not mention the other purposes for which it was being used because,

the burden of meeting the distress was divided between the Government and the charitable public, the former engaging to support mere life, while the latter undertook to go further, and to relieve the other wants of the famine-stricken population with a degree of tenderness and liberality, which would have been neither politic nor possible for the state [17].

Significantly, while the state saw itself as accountable, it resisted any interrogation of its own procedures. For instance, a large number of officials and the Comptroller-General felt that the account could be left as it was or else "it would involve an explanation which the general public would not readily appreciate" [18]. At the same time they argued that "if we keep the money as is intended by His Excellency, it will be years before the account is finally closed, and it is very likely indeed to be lost sight off. Certainly when the balance comes to be used its history will be quite forgotten" [19].

Evidently public relief was controversial and debated in government circles. This substantive tussle over funds and the above discussion also give us insight into the nature of public charity and reveals some aspects of official relief. First, it highlights that the government did not always make contributions which it pledged in principle. Second, as admitted by the

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17. A notification by the Executive Committee on the 'Objects of the Central Relief Fund', dated 4.3.1874. Ibid.
18. A letter dated 4.3.1874. Ibid.
19. ARC, Famine Branch, October 1876, No. 4, part B.
government, its relief activities were linked to its political image. Third, the people were often kept in the dark about the actual use of their contributions. Fourth, these enormous public contributions, however small by government standards, actually led to struggles for control because they were profitable investments for a government always under financial restraints. And last but not least, these public contributions were actually taken over by the imperial government under the pretext of the vast expenditures that it had incurred during a famine.

Local governments did exercise a degree of independence and assertiveness. This is evident from a controversy between the Government of India and the Bombay government over the publication of a report that sought to expose contradictions in the principles of famine relief policies of the Government of India (being debated upon between the Viceroy and the President in Council). The Government of India argued that even if the facts presented by the Bombay government were true and the report had been published in the spirit of doing public good, the element of "conflict" in government circles should have been concealed "considering the terrible gravity of the circumstances":

in the presence of one of the greatest calamities recorded in this history of the Empire, it might, we think, have been presumed that a sense of common responsibility could have induced the Government of Bombay to abstain from aggravating any cause of conflict or irritation which could weaken the authority, or add to the difficulties of the Government of India....The conclusion which the public will certainly draw is, that there has been a transaction of somewhat suspicious character, or questionable propriety, and that is another, and significant, illustration
of the divided counsels of the Supreme Government [20].

After a few days of intense debate an additional note was published to "prevent similar misconceptions arising in England....so that the explanation [would] also receive wide publicity" [21].

A large number of instances suggest that the government feared adverse popular reaction, whether it was related to certain malpractices or to the use to which funds were actually put [22]. But what they perhaps feared most was popular reaction resulting from news reports both within the country as well as those published in Britain [23].

Press reports regarding the sale of children were specially alarming. In almost every such reported case the India Office sent telegrams to the Government of India to authenticate such news. The sale of children was significant as it signified extreme poverty and more so the failure of the government to give adequate relief. Even though the local government negated the truth of such reports and sent details to the contrary, such reports were to be found in abundance in the nineteenth century. In one such instance, newspaper reports regarding the sale of children in Madras, in 1877, spread

20. ARC, Famine Branch, February 1877, Nos. 1-20, pp. 100-02.
21. Ibid.
22. The above is evident from a debate between government officials over the proper use of funds. ARC, Famine Branch, February 1877, Nos. 1-20, pp. 95-103. Also refer to pages 105-106, below.
at an alarming rate and was cause of much concern to the Government of India. However, as always the local government sent in detailed denials [24].

Newspaper reports containing allegations from other organizations, forced the Government to take defensive positions. For instance, the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha complained in 1877 about the reduction of wage rates by 33 percent, along with food by half, resulting in hundreds of starvation and cholera deaths [25].

After the Famine Commission's findings, each region went on to draft its own regionally specific famine code. Interestingly, for most of the provinces, though private charity was essential and could not be turned down, "indiscriminate distribution of alms" was considered to be "demoralizing in itself", and also proved to be "ineffective in relieving genuine destitution" [26]. At the level of policy efforts were made for the first time to devise ways of co-


25. ARC, Famine Branch, April 1877, No. 1029, K.W. An official M.K. Kennedy wrote a letter warning one Mr. Hope stating that according to the Bombay papers, the Sabha have sent a long telegram [addressed] to the Secretary of State, London Times, on the famine matters here, in which they make several false statements....I need not tell you what the Sabha is and how it is composed....They got up a monster demonstration in Sholapur.... It was fine time for them and their agents so long as nothing but little scattered works were going on under lax supervision, but it is different now. Government here are not, I believe, going to take any notice of the Sarvajanik Sabha's move; but I write to let you know....in case of any telegram coming from home [Ibid., March 1877, No. 67, K.W., p. 9].

26. Revenue and Agriculture Department (hereafter RA), Famine Branch, October 1888, Nos. 1-3, File 2, p. 5.
operation in the distribution of relief between the government and private agencies. The Punjab Famine Code stated, "the preferable course is to invite charitable persons to co-operate with Government officers; and, though free play should be given to their liberality, [steps] should be taken by persuasion and advice to harmonize their efforts with those of organised public action." [27].

While most provincial codes argued for accepting private relief after famine had been declared, the Bengal code preferred to rely on private relief as soon as distress was evident. Arguing that "when distress cannot be relieved by private charity", then an "application was to be made for funds to the district authority" [28]. The Famine Commission too considered private charity as essential and wanted to bring it under Government's control [29].

It was often stressed by officials that the various private relief organizations were ineffective in mitigating relief in the manner envisaged by the Government of India. This unorganized nature of private relief was

27. Ibid.
29. Home Revenue and Agriculture Department (hereafter HRA), Famine Branch, March 1881, Nos. 1-27, p. 20. While there is evidence of co-operation through persuasion and advice in relation to private relief, the coercive powers of the state in relation to the victims of famine and distress must also be noted. Poor houses were unpopular because in the name of discipline unwanted measures were undertaken. The police had legal powers to "compel the famine-stricken to go to works and to poor houses, and to detain them compulsarily... even against their will". RA, Famine Branch, June 1884, Nos. 2-6, File 3, p. 213.
presented as an excuse for attempting to take over private charity by bringing it under government control, through similar rules and regulations governing public relief. The secretary to the Government of India wrote to the various collectors suggesting that the relief organizations be improved in their districts, irrespective of their peculiarities. Arguing that the large sums of money collected by them would be "expended to the greatest advantage on the objects prescribed" and that "the misapplication of funds and opportunities for speculation" would be guarded against, ensuring that relief reached "the intended recipients". Administrative constraints, however, prevented the government from giving additional duties to the already overtaxed executive staff, with "their multifarious duties in connection with state relief". It was therefore suggested, in 1899, that to control and ensure the proper functioning of charitable relief it would be "well worthwhile in every severely affected district to have a special officer appointed by the fund to maintain general supervision over local committees" [30].

The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence and the widening of an arena where public and private relief worked hand in hand, contradicted each other, and struggled to acquire an independent space. This growing conflict between private and state relief efforts made it imperative for the state to seek the co-operation of private initiative. But at the same time the state consciously attempted to distance itself from private relief. The Governor

30. RA, Famine Branch, October 1899, Nos. 30-49, File 11, p. 652.
General in Council, in 1896, was of the opinion that whenever, any general public appeal [of a private nature] is made for money to be expended throughout the province or throughout India, the same considerations apply in main as in the case of English charity. Government officials may very properly associate themselves with such an appeal; but it must be made clear that they do so merely as sympathizing with and sharing in the feelings of benevolence that have suggested the appeal, and they are in no sense its author; that it is spontaneous, and not officially prompted or promoted [31].

It was generally held, then, that any appeal by the government of any province or presidency should be determined by the local conditions, and if it were made the objects to which private charity was to be devoted were to be defined. This, it was clarified was necessary, "so as not to encroach upon the field of Government operations", and it was to be made clear that the Government reserved to itself the power of controlling private relief to ensure the fulfilment of its purpose [32].

The state was not only becoming conscious of its uneasy relationship with private relief in India but equally so in England. When the question of opening a subscription list in England in 1898 came up a large number officials thought it was the right time to ask for funds. These officials were convinced of making a successful collection, just as in 1877, "a sum of 700,000 sterling was collected in England to be applied in India" [33]. The Government of

32.Ibid.
India, however, argued that since it was responsible according to the Famine Commission Rules "for saving of life by all the available means in its power", it was not expedient that the Government should ask for private subscriptions to supplement its own expenditure on famine, "especially as it [was] clear that such subscriptions [would] make no appreciable difference". It was emphasized that "to invite subscriptions which are to be spent in the performance of a task for which we have undertaken responsibility, would be to invite them for relief of the Indian exchequer - an end towards which we could neither ask nor receive contributions with propriety". The reason for hesitation in issuing an appeal for assistance by the Government of India to the people of England, was that such an appeal was "liable to serious misconception" [34].

Thus, while the Government of India did not think much of the amount collected by private subscription, it was hesitant to make official appeals. It repeatedly argued that "to ask, however, is one thing; and to receive with gratitude and apply to the best possible advantage money which may be spontaneously offered is another". In 1896, officials stressed on what Lord Lytton had argued for in 1877: "while it is not desirable....for the Government to take part in the collection and distribution of subscriptions, every encouragement should be given to the spontaneous flow of private charity" [35].

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
It thus seems quite evident that the arena of charity and affording relief during times of distress was becoming quite complex in the period under study. Private relief was becoming increasingly important and even necessary. This forced the Government of India, in 1896, to highlight areas of demarcation between government and private relief, the importance of private charity, and the caution that was deemed necessary in organizing private relief.  

A government report, stated that should the English people at any time think fit to send of their benevolence aid to those who are in distress, not only will it be welcome, and most useful in the mitigation of very real suffering, but the fact will be of the greatest political value, as, tending to draw together in the bond of sympathy the peoples of the two countries. We would prefer, however, that anything that may be in contemplation in the shape of public organization for the collection and receipt of subscriptions should be deferred till the situation has more definitely declared itself.  

The significance of the viewpoint lies in the fact that the people (both in India as well as in England) were going to be included in the mitigation of their own distress. Whatever the form this organization might assume, it was going to be of political value and was also going to bring people of the ruling and the ruled countries together over relief issues. In some ways it was going to ensure popular participation and bring this form of participation closer to the state, by their working together.  

It thus seems clear that the demarcation line between 'private' and 'public' relief was extremely vague and almost overlapping. Detailed study

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., p. 1576.
makes it clear that in reality private relief was used to help people during most cases of distress and that the scope of private relief was actually increasing, while at the same time the state was keeping it under vigilance. State relief limited itself to arranging for food supplies, granting remissions and giving loans. The relationship between private relief and the people was humanitarian in nature, the basis for which, paradoxically, was laid and augmented to a large extent by the state itself. State control it must be emphasized was over both British and Indian charity [38].

In a large number of instances of relief efforts there were unspent balances [39]. Yet many were denied relief on the grounds that there was a general paucity of funds [40]. It is thus obvious that unspent balances once made over to the Government of India were, perhaps, never directed to relief work again. Secondly, an excessive and unnecessary control and strictness was maintained during distress due to Government pressure on maintaining

[38] RA, Famine Branch, March 1898, No. 24, File 23, part B. That relief and charity efforts were beginning to be of immense political significance, is evident from a minor disagreement but one of immense symbolic value. This was over the issue of forwarding a resolution passed by the Methodist Episcopal church of Lucknow, highlighting successful state relief efforts, to the India Office. A large number of officials were of the opinion that while there was "no such precedent of forwarding such resolutions to the India Office" this particular resolution was to be forwarded as an exception to the rule as it highlighted Government relief efforts and could prove to be of immense political value in Britain [Ibid.].

[39] RA, Famine Branch, October 1898, Nos. 9-15, File 31, part B.

[40] RA, Famine Branch, December 1899, Nos. 6-8, File 110, part B.
economy. The left over funds were also consolidated under the category of the Indian Famine Charitable Relief Fund (IFCRF), and placed under the custody of the Comptroller General with the permission of the Committee in 1898, formed under the auspices of the IFCRF. The Committee could use that balance "but with the consent of the Government of India". It was also resolved by the Government of India that if in future any fund was to be raised by "private subscriptions or otherwise for relief of famine in India", the Committee, would have the ultimate authority for its control [41].