CHAPTER III

Famine Relief: Mentality and Practice in Government Policy

Two contrary views existed regarding famines in India in the late-nineteenth century. The first referred to the increasing prosperity of the country and the people and praised England as the 'creator' of this prosperity. The second incessantly reiterated the growing and alarming impoverishment of both the country and the people. While the so called "Bengali critics" asserted that the land revenue assessments were excessive, the British argued for a progressive reduction in assessment in the latter half of the nineteenth-century. The Famine Commission disproved the contention that the most highly assessed regions had suffered the most. It was with such an understanding of the "Real India" that J.D. Rees argued that "it is unfortunate that crop failure is invariably described as famine" [1]. It was also believed by many at the time that these periods which were held by "ignorant and malevolent" critics to prove the failure of British rule, in reality conclusively demonstrated the superiority of direct British administration to that of the indirectly ruled native states. This British superiority was described a result of their "positive genius for forethought and bandobast (administration)" [2].

2. Ibid., p. 74.
It was also argued by many British contemporary writers that India and the Indians must refrain from making any comparisons whatsoever with Europe and particularly Britain: "Experience in famine as in all other instances, should tell its own tale; but in contrasting results, the public must forget its European stand-point of view" [3]. It was also argued that civilization had advanced gradually in the West while in the East it had gone by "forced marches" with all leaps of course being taken in the dark. Famines it was stated were at one time rampant in Europe and the poor were forced to live on roots and acorns, but it was due to development that they had ceased to occur in Europe. Gratuitous charity, it was argued, was not part of public benevolence but incumbent on private relief. That the British as early as in 1769 (Bengal Famine) undertook to alleviate distress amongst the destitute, was a result of their European influence while India lacked any organized system of public charity. It was not only the "dawning recognition" of public duty, but also the force of moral persuasion and example on the part of the English residents in the country that the principle of famine relief was recognized. While the British were doing everything possible to mitigate distress, they saw the attitude of the natives as a major stumbling block, because the natives never really understood the meaning of the saying "God helps those who help themselves" [4].

4. Ibid., pp. 194-95.
This chapter attempts to focus, not on the state’s policies but on the mentality behind these, that is the way it viewed calamities in India and subsequently reviewed its own role. Some questions of importance which arise are: what was the role of the state? Was the state a uniform institution, if not, then where did the contradictions lie? Can differences be seen within the British state in terms of (a) the state as a policy-making body, (b) the state as a bureaucracy at the highest levels of policy formulations, (c) the state as an executor of that policy formulation, (d) and the state as the receiver of the end results of such policy definitions.

In attempting to delineate some aspects of famine it is being argued that mentality plays a significant role in all kinds of social actions and change. This, we believe, may help in modifying our understanding of the socio-economic and political structures. ‘Mentality’ here is being used as a general term, referring to the popular culture of the people, both of the colonizing and the colonized -- how they understood themselves and the world as well as how they expressed themselves, particularly in relation to famine or moments of distress. Just as there was no uniformity in state ideology, official mentality too was not always uniform. Within the larger imperative of the ‘necessity’ of British rule to civilize the Orient, there were varying attitudes and perceptions. These displayed the ambiguous nature of British rule, often confused and caught between humanitarian and pragmatic concerns. Different issues, within the wider concern for popular welfare, produced different
responses, that derived both from British as well as local ideologies. This very lack of ideological and practical consistency, perhaps made the question of distress and its relief politically volatile.

With regard to scarcity and the danger of famine in various regions of the country while it was understood that the free trade policy was harmful, it was also considered important that the government be restrained and not interfere, in order to keep larger British interests intact. For instance, on grounds of experience, a higher level bureaucrat claimed that in such times, the ordinary operations of commerce, and the ordinary processes of supply and demand, cannot be relied on for any adequate supply of food to the affected districts, and that, without the active intervention of the Government, the worst consequences are liable to ensue \[6\].

Reiterating a similar necessity, the Government pointed out with regard to paupers during the scarcity of 1877 in western and southern India that in "the event of their circumstances not being quickly ameliorated, their condition will rapidly become worse ....and that those who survive will be in a condition such as will unfit them to resume labour". The report also admits that the "present diet is insufficient for any purpose than simply to keep them alive for the time being, but insufficient....to enable them to resume labour when the time arrives for them to do so" \[7\].

\[5\]. Agriculture Revenue and Commerce Department (hereafter ARC), Famine Branch, January 1874, No. 45. A letter from the Secretary of State for India to His Excellency the Governor General of India in Council.

\[6\]. ARC, Famine Branch, May 1877, Nos. 60-67, pp. 663-64.
Another major arena of debate was over issues involving both administrative and resource management. During the scarcity of 1877 in western and southern India Sir Richard Temple visited the region of north Arcot. The detailed information collected by him from the areas of Cuddapah and north Arcot on the nature of relief activities and their results, with an eye to the particular necessity of avoiding excess expenditure, forced him to compare these two regions. In his Minute, keeping local variations in mind, he argued that: "I can discover no essential difference between the two districts, save this, that, in Cuddapah there is a 3 anna crop and in N.Arcot a 4 anna crop; that is to say, Cuddapah is twenty-five percent worse than N.Arcot". Temple argued that the difference in results between the two districts could be attributed to differences in management. Most understanding of the success of relief measures was governed by the evaluation of expenditures involved. However, there was no adequate way of evaluating the so-called wastefulness of expenditure in terms of the pain and sufferings being borne by the people. Economic considerations were so overbearing that "loss" and "gain" were only measured against the benefits accruing to the state. Highlighting the financial effect of such a difference on the basis of a "precise calculation" made from the data collected by him, Temple argued that in Cuddapah a sum of six lakhs of rupees was saved to the treasury, mainly "through the variation in policy". The fact that there was no loss of life in Cuddapah due to starvation, was presented as evidence of the genuine concern shown by the authorities in
ameliorating distress. The success of official policy was thus measured only in restricting the number of deaths and maintaining a stringent control over the finances. This attitude went into the making of government policy. Temple went on to argue that if the authorities had done enough they must have done too much:

In as much as there has been no loss of life proved to result from starvation in N.Arcot, it would seem to follow that the collector there has done enough. If that be so, it would then seem prima facie, to follow that the authorities in Cuddapah had been, and are doing too much.... A strong case arises for reconsidering the arrangements in Cuddapah with reference to financial economy, so far as that may consist with the safety of the people [7].

Issues regarding the inadequacy of relief measures or of stern policy implementation were related to British perceptions of what the people of this country were like and how they behaved. It is therefore essential to analyse the perceptions and attitudes of the British state officials regarding relief operations during times of famine. While attitudes and perceptions may or may not have directly resulted in policy making, they definitely reflected a particular thought process, which sometimes consciously and often unconsciously resulted in a particular kind of policy decision and more forcefully in policy implementation. Moreover, perceptions and attitudes affected not only official behavioural patterns but also popular response.

An important and rather circular line of rationalization among a majority of British officials was whether distressed Indians were naturally self-

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reliant or forced to be so in the absence of government aid. Either way relief was seen to be redundant. A note written by G. Campbell (a senior official) reflecting on Sir Richard Temple's Minute, is illustrative. Arguing that in comparison to people of other countries the people of India were "more self-reliant in the matter of food" and were therefore "less inclined to throw themselves permanently on Government" relief. At the same time Campbell admitted that this may be "due to the fact that they have been obliged to help themselves in default of other means" [8].

Other officials believed that there was too much relief and it had to be curtailed in the interests of the people. Her Majesty's Secretary of State for India, wrote in his correspondence with the Government of India:

I agree, therefore, with Your Excellency in deprecating an indiscriminate distribution of relief, which can only swell the amount of distress and ultimately demoralize the persons relieved....I have no doubt that Your Excellency will know how to maintain an even course between the conflicting obligations of a care for human life, on the one hand, and a strict and even severe administration of relief on the other [9].

Needless to say, when policies were made the administrative inconsistencies and contradictions were reflected in implementation leading to consequences which were disastrous. The various kinds of financial, political and moral pressures that the Government of India exercised over the administration led to further contradictions and misunderstandings between

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8. ARC, Famine Branch, February 1874, No. 133, p. 83.
9. ARC, Famine Branch, March 1877, Nos. 34-60, p. 286.
Government in policy and between officials. According to the Bombay government new orders were passed by the Government of India based on instructions issued to Sir Richard Temple regarding a change in policy in 1877, which was accompanied by observations which measured the necessity of saving lives against saving British rule. Since the latter concern prevailed it may be worth quoting these new instructions in detail:

Even for an object of such paramount importance as the preservation of life, it is obvious that there are limits which are imposed upon us by the facts with which we have to deal. If the estimate of the local governments are to be accepted, the relief of the existing scarcity in the Madras and Bombay presidencies, including loss of revenue, will cost less than six and a half million sterling. Considering that the revenues are barely sufficient to meet the ordinary expenditure of the Empire, and that heavy additional taxation is both financially and politically impracticable, we must plainly admit that the task of saving life, irrespective of the cost, is one which is beyond our power to undertake. The simple fact is this, that the recurrence of a few famines, such as that from which the country is now suffering, or such as would, if measures of relief were carried upon that principle, go far to render the future Government of India impossible. The embarrassment of debt, and the weight of taxation, consequent on the expenditure thereby involved, would soon become more fatal to the country than famine itself [10].

The Bombay government had its own interpretation of the above policy in which relief was conditional on labour extracted from the distressed. The secretary to the government of Bombay, PWD, generously concluded that in the opinion of the Government of India there was "no limit, in respect of cost, beyond which, even for the preservation of life, the measures of the government could not go". This specification that "human life shall be saved at any cost and at any effort; no man, or woman or child shall die due to

10. ARC, Famine Branch, March 1877, Nos. 1-33, p. 271.
starvation" gave the impression that there were no limits to the responsibility of the state either as regards to the effort it may make, or the outlay it may incur with the object of preventing people from dying of starvation. However for him the necessity of keeping expenditure within a limit, while giving the maximum possible relief meant that "it was the duty of this Government to exact labour strictly from all who are physically able to work". But if an individual "capable" of performing work, refused to do so the government would refuse him/her any relief [11].

The dilemma of the Government of India between saving life and ensuring British rule persisted throughout the nineteenth century. Administrative attempts to resolve the dilemma for lower level officials were equally unsuccessful. For instance the additional secretary to the Government of India while writing to the government of Bombay specified that the views of the Government of India had been seriously misunderstood. On behalf of the government he clarified that the Government of India was duty bound to provide adequate relief to its subjects. However, a "good government" in the future seemed threatened if an expenditure beyond its "capacity" was to be incurred. It was therefore necessary for the Government of India to restate this "truism" since officials assumed that the Government of India was in a dilemma over the fact "that in times of severe famine it must either allow people to die of starvation, or incur expenditure which might ultimately bring

11. ARC, Famine Branch, March 1877, Nos. 1-33, p. 272.
ruin upon the country" [12].

Related to this controversy was the question of recognizing an authority which would have the ultimate powers of interpretation. According to a senior official in the famine department if differences of opinion arose between the Governments on matters of principle, the opinion of the supreme Government was to be firmly maintained and enforced. But in all matters of detail which primarily concerned the local governments, it was believed that "interference with their discretion, or any persistent attempt to control it, can only result in friction which may paralyse the action of the whole administrative machinery" [13]. This opinion was based on the fact that the Government of India was dependant for all details on local officials.

One of the reasons for inconsistency in relief policy was the government's inability to trust its lower ranking bureaucracy which comprised of a number of Indians. The necessity for co-ordination and effective policy implementation meant that greater trust had to be placed in local officials who were actually providing relief and were in a position to actually assess the gravity of the situation. However they were considered to compromise on the guidelines of relief policy laid down by the Government of India. Government of India mistrust was also a result of, perhaps, the ideological difficulty of placing faith in the 'native' as he was by "nature" untrustworthy. So while

12. ARC, Famine Branch, February 1877, Nos. 1-20, pp. 100-01.
secret information about local administrations was essential and went into the making of central policy it was often at variance with the actual local practice of affording relief. As a result colonial policies were far too rigid and did not adequately accommodate local conditions.

Equally illustrative of policy regarding relief which the imperial state insisted upon was its notion of what a calamity requiring imperial assistance was all about. The assistant secretary to the Government of India while denying a special grant from the imperial funds to the Madras government for relief works in the Presidency in 1876 was of the view that

The theory is, that provincial assignments contained a grant for unforeseen contingencies, and that if in any year it is not quite sufficient, the balance must be provided by economy in other grants. It is only when famines on a great scale occur and rise to the importance of national calamities that imperial funds can be expected to contribute. Whether this is or not a correct view....is the view that has heretofore been maintained by the Government of India [14].

Interesting as the above quotation is, it in itself criticizes government policy. But more relevant to us is the fact that, clearly the Government of India was discouraging all attempts at preventive measures and was denying monetary assistance, knowing well enough that local and provincial bodies were always unable to help due to the lack of finances.

A striking feature which persisted at the level of policy was the determination of the government to, in most definite terms, reach out to all

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14. A reply to an 'Application of the Government of Madras for a grant of Rs. 41,000 from Imperial funds', from the Secretary to the Government of India to the Chief secretary to the Government of Madras. ARC, Famine Branch, October 1876, No. 1.
those people who for various reasons (of caste, custom, family habits, ill health, etc.) would avoid relief. For such purposes an efficient village relief system was to be organized to enable the government to prevent what it perceived as an inarticulate and indifferent death at home: "village officials will search out such cases, relieve them temporarily, and then send them to the relief officer" \(^{15}\). Such a policy it must be remembered was outlined and stressed upon because death due to starvation placed the government in an extremely vulnerable situation \(^{16}\).

A significant debate of some dimensions which arose in 1877 was over a further reduction in the scale of wages. The debate is interesting not because it claimed wages to be adequate or sufficient (as the case may be/may have been) but the reasons put forward reflect not only the government's respect for the people it ruled, but also its objective as the ruler. A printed report gives us the following information,

no doubt abstract scientific theories of great value on the subject of public health are of modern growth, but the Indian population with which we are now dealing have lived for centuries in disregard for them, and practically at the present date the poorer classes, even in countries which are more civilized than India, do not actually obtain either in food, lodging or ventilation the amount declared by scientific men to be necessary....The real point to be considered is, whether in ordinary times they get more than one pound a day for a male adult. This is an economic question which can be determined by calculating wages in the rural districts - not the wages of trained professional labourers employed by public bodies....but men of lesser physique and lighter frame, such as

\(^{15}\)ARC, Famine Branch, February 1877, Nos. 99-134, p. 209.

\(^{16}\)Sir Richard Temple's Minute. ARC, Famine Branch, Nos. 99-134, p. 228.
that of the village poor... [17].

Clearly then the colonized were to be deprived of the modern day developments, even at the cost of their health [18]. General growth and betterment of the masses was not to be expected from the colonial state. However, all this is not to deny that the state's role was unimportant. Even within the colonial set up there were instances when state officials did their best to alleviate distress and being closer to existing realities were more practical. In more than one instance, it was pointed out that, "Government orders for reduction of relief wages and kitchens had not...taken effect" resulting in considerable losses. In many other instances mention was made of officials and their charity. A lady missionary, Miss Anstey mentions a deputy commissioner who indulged in a great deal of private charity. The importance of the information that she gives us is an example of a deputy commissioner who had lived in this particular district of Mysore for twelve years and personally tried to make up for the deficiencies in government policy. She comments that "he knows the people, and they know him, he is

17. ARC, Famine Branch, March 1877, No. 67, p. 349.

18. Such attitudes were also a result of the great significance attached to environmental factors in the causation and transmission of disease. This meant that practitioners of western medicine saw an imperative need to adapt and modify their practice to physical circumstances that were very different from those found in Europe. However, even after this environmentalist paradigm was effectively deposed in Europe by the growth of the germ theory of disease, it remained dominant in nineteenth-century India. This environmentalist paradigm was also an orientalist one, embodying and projecting western ideas of how India was intrinsically different from the west. Arnold, Famine, pp 58-59.
their fellow-countryman, and is accessible to them at all times". He in his personal capacity subscribed to the various local/private relief funds and opened a free kitchen for the needy on his own account [19].

What comes to the forefront from the above discussion are certain whimsical notions which seem to have been important elements of colonial ideology, and reflecting on the nature of the colonial state. These pertain to ideas about self-reliance, self-respect, what good families were all about, the native's character, etc. While most of the helpless famine victims were referred to as "wretched objects" and "poor creatures" it was also expected that they were to be primarily looked after by their own people during times of distress [20].

The question of timely help to famine or scarcity victims was a "peculiar" one. For those people who due to "self-respect" or those who would but neither beg nor go to relief works (e.g. small landholders), it was thought necessary to give them loans in advance during times of scarcity, which could be repaid during better times. Thus, advances were made to be recovered, as there was a "strong sense of rectitude and honour among these people" [21]. Interesting as it seems advances were then being made and mortgaged against the needy

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20. ARC, Famine Branch, April 1877, Nos. 51-61, p. 521 and Nos. 1-29, p. 463.

21. Home Revenue and Agriculture Department (hereafter HRA), Famine Branch, September 1880, Nos. 1-4, p. 22.
man's sense of honour.

For those masses who, though they did not lack a sense of self respect but thronged relief camps any "assistance rendered before a clear necessity had arisen was [deemed] liable...to weaken the bond of common interests and sympathies so strong in village communities, and would destroy the self-reliance of the people" [22]. For this group of people it was considered essential to make "reductions in the rate [quantity] of food as punishment for insufficient work done". At the same time, however, it was also argued that "as experience goes, the people as a rule are exceedingly docile and anxious to comply with the requirements of Government". Further distinctions were made within this group of people, between those who were physically strong and those who were weak. Though officers were instructed to bear in mind that if they "err at all....they should err on the side of leniency." But at the same time officers were instructed to make sure that "every person who can even make believe to do a little work, though it were by only beating the ground with a stick", should be made to do so [23].

Not only were community bonds and traditional patterns of living woven within the ambit of policy making, but the physical being of every individual too became an arena for his/her subordination and discrimination. For example, women of the respectable classes were earlier on given relief at home

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22. HRA, Famine Branch, September 1880, No. 17, p. 38.
but now they too were required to perform under the pretext that, "pardanashin [24] women of the higher castes, would not openly accept public charity" [25]. They were, however, provided with raw material for spinning, weaving, rope making and grinding corn at their place of residence.

The decade of the eighteen nineties saw the persistence of earlier problems and attitudes. The Government continued to view its "role as one of Providence" [26], insisting on narrowing wages further, knowing well that they did not suffice [27], stressing on the need to use local funds during crises and "over-estimating the staying power of the people" [24]. On the one hand force was used on women, to complete work, by withholding their allowances, while on the other hand they were allotted work which was "not repugnant to the feelings of any female". On the whole there seems to have been a shift in the method of extending relief to the earliest possible moment rather than waiting for distress to become obviously apparent [29].

It was still believed and emphasized that "India having remained under foreign yoke....lacked noble qualities of self-help, self-reliance, enterprise,

24. Pardanashin in this context refers to secluded women.
25. HRA, Famine Branch, December 1880, No. 3, File 194, p. 84.
26. Revenue and Agriculture Department (hereafter RA), Famine Branch, April 1898, Nos. 30-37, File 39, p. 1785.
27. RA, Famine Branch, July 1894, No. 36, File 24, p. 221.
28. RA, Famine Branch, October 1894, Nos. 2-7, File 16, K.W.
etc....so greatly developed in the English nation". "The Indians as a consequence" wrote an official, "have simply come to consider our Government as nothing more than a paternal Government and solely look upon them to do everything" [30]. Significantly the Famine Commission was also of a similar view, when it stated that, "chronic famine is one of the diseases of the infancy of nations, and its remedy will never be found in prolonging the tutelage of the state" [31].

30. RA, Famine Branch, July 1899, No. 12, part B.