CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Periods of severe agricultural distress had always occurred in the country but they were fewer and widely spaced before 1850. It is not surprising. In a country where the vast majority of its people depended on agriculture, a prolonged drought would always cause famine. But during the second half of the nineteenth century the frequency of severe agricultural distress in the province increased much and the government was forced to sit up and take notice of them.

Agriculture in India, however, entirely dependent on rainfall. Especially the kharif crops, such as paddy, millets and maize are sown between June and July. Paddy required heavy and regular rains and failure or shortage of the monsoon, therefore, at once damages the paddy crop and affects the food-supply over a large part of the province.

The monsoon is, therefore, the most important single factor in the agricultural economy of the Central Provinces. All famines in the province began with the failure of the monsoon. The failure of the monsoon immediately affected autumn crop directly and the rabi crop indirectly. The distress would appear instantly
necessitating relief measures, which had to be continued till the return of normalcy in the following year. However, the situation would sometimes improve with the arrival of winter rains. But if they also failed the people were doomed to a devastating and prolonged distress.

Since the most important cause of the famine was failure of monsoon, it naturally follows that the irrigation was an equally important protective measure. It is interesting to note that the importance of irrigation was realized from the very beginning of the period under study. Baird Smith, who enquired into the famine of 1860–61 in the North Western Provinces, strongly recommended the extension of irrigation facilities. But these recommendations were not fully implemented. The Orissa Famine Commission which followed this enquiry also laid similar emphasis on irrigation. But between 1856–80, there were very few irrigation works taken up by the private persons. The government did not seriously act in this matter. The Famine Commission of 1880 criticised the government policy with regard to the irrigation and stated that certain irrigation schemes should be adopted in the various provinces. Curiously the government spent more money on railways and other public works in the province and paid little attention towards the irrigation. However, railways did help in opening the province, but irrigation facilities were of much greater importance. In
In this respect the policy followed in the province was in sharp contrast to that followed in the Panjab in spite of the fact that such illustrious disciples of Henry and John Lawrence as Richard Temple and George Campbell headed the province for so long. The Lawrence brothers had planned and executed canal projects very shortly after the annexation of the Panjab. Such projects should have been taken up by the government of the Central Provinces. As late as in 1901 the Government of India appointed Irrigation Commission to report on irrigation works. This Commission suggested some measures for the province. It is satisfactory to note that the recommendations were accepted, even though the progress was not rapid. The poor tenants suffered in the times of drought because of the lack of irrigation facilities which they could never provide for on their own.

The condition of ryot remained largely unaltered. The government was not prepared to grant them rights in land at the cost of the landlords. The tenancy legislation touched the problem only marginally. The majority of the ryots still suffered under the arbitrary rack-renting by the landlords. Even the niggardly grant of rights by the tenancy laws could not be taken full advantage of by the poor ryot. The judicial remedy available to them was extremely technical and much too expensive for the poor ryot. Moreover, they could not stand up to the enormous economic and social powers of the landlords. They could not take steps to improve their fields. They were usually
left only with a bare subsistence. One bad season would reduce them to starvation. The government and its officers were always in sympathy, if not in league, with the landlords.

The government did not take steps to improve tenant-rights. Though tenancy law was passed by the government were of little advantages. It appears that the government never really gave up its elitist policy.

No effort was made to save the ryots from the clutches of the village moneylenders. The latter had the former firmly in their clutches. Often the ryots had to pledge their crop still green in the fields to them. Quite often every gramme of their surplus produce was appropriated by them. The government did precious little to provide credit facilities to the ryot or to save them from the clutches of the moneylenders.

The poverty among the ryot also caused grave sufferings. They were left with little purchasing power. This fact became obvious repeatedly by the large number of persons seeking relief in times of famine during the period under study. Thus it is evident that the economic condition of the ryot was extremely deplorable. The government instituted an enquiry in 1897 but nothing was done after the submission of its report.

In times of famine, quite often enough food was available but the poor people did not have money to purchase
it. In old days the farmers could store foodgrains for their requirements to be used in a bad season.

Opening of the province through roads and railways led to large exports and the poor people suffered from starvation. Heavy mortality occurred and the government failed to make adequate supply of foodgrains at reasonable prices. Moreover, times of drought, the government blindly supported the free trade policy even while the prices rose. Sometimes the prices rose to intolerable level. The poor people who had no money found themselves not in a position to purchase the foodgrains. It appears that quite often the non-interference with private trade was an important factor responsible for the heavy mortality in times of drought.

Lack of adequate transport facilities in large parts of the province, especially in the interiors, was the cause of untold sufferings. It is a sad commentary on the state of affairs that in every famine the people could not be provided with adequate supplies due to the lack of transport facilities. It resulted in heavy mortality and emigration. There were certain tracts especially in the hill districts and the forest tracts of the province where special efforts to transport foodgrains were required. The government could not provide adequate supplies. It was only in the last decade of the nineteenth century that the government took effective
measures to remedy this shortcoming. It appears that the policy with regard to the improvement of transport in the interiors was taken into the consideration only when the government had learnt that it was of utmost importance. But still the efforts to improve the situation were hesitant and insufficient.

A consistent policy with regard to the relief during the famines was evolved in three stages. First stage was that of experiment, second stage was the period of formation of Famine Code. In the third stage finally the policy was given definite shape after gaining considerable experience and on the basis of the various recommendations of the Famine Commissions.

In the first period, 1861-75, no especially widespread and devastating famine occurred. The famines that occurred in the province were limited in extent and severity. The government realized that it was one of its duties to rescure the people. In this the experience of the Revolt of 1857 might have had a hand. It made every possible effort to save the human life during the famine of 1868-69. However, these efforts did not lead to any remarkable success. A definite policy was not there to guide the administration without which it is difficult to combat a calamity like a famine. During every famine measures were adopted mainly on the initiative of local officers. After the return of normalcy the measures were
evaluated and the policy was revised whenever, it was found necessary. It was interesting to note that the recommendations suggested by Baird Smith were never given proper effect. The government remained silent on the matter. These recommendations, however, full of promise, were not implemented and acted upon.

The policy was liberalised in each subsequent famine. But the success remained illusory. It was especially the case in the famine of 1868–69 when the government came forward to rescue the people. The relief measures were adopted on an unprecedented scale. Still all the distressed people could not be effectively helped. The measures proved to be inadequate.

In the famine of 1876–78 the government reaffirmed its policy to prevent deaths from starvation. But did not give up its policy of free trade and the policy of non-interference with private trade was strictly enjoined upon the officers. The measures adopted during the famine were not very effective because they were not well planned and properly executed.

Then the famine was over, the government appointed Strachey Commission which submitted its report in 1880. The Commission inaugurated the second stage in the evolution of a famine policy. Its recommendations were noted for the wide scope and depth. They were accepted
by the Supreme Government and were implemented later on.

Accordingly Famine Code was framed in the Central Provinces. It detailed various measures which were to be adopted in the future famines.

Till the second half of the last decade of the nineteenth century nothing was done by the government in order to improve tenant-rights. Tenancy law was passed in 1883 in the Central Provinces. It did not bring about any great benefit to the tenants. As a result, their conditions remained practically the same.

The famine of 1896–97 severely affected the Central Provinces. The severity of the famine was such that the inadequacy of the Famine Code became apparent at once. The Code in fact was not framed to meet the distress of such magnitude and extent. Strachey's recommendations were based on the experience gained by the management of much limited distress. Heavy mortality among men and cattle occurred during the famine. It was caused also to some extent by the mismanagement. The government could not adequately relieve the people and they suffered from starvation. Cattle suffered more because of the lack of the fodder. No prompt and adequate measures of fodder-supply were adopted in the famine-stricken regions. Consequently, the cattle suffered and died in large number.
The government appointed a Commission to enquire into the famine which submitted its report in 1898. Unfortunately the recommendations were not yet digested and acted upon when the country was struck by much more severe famine, which in fact proved to be the severest one of the century. The distress again caused heavy mortality the people suffered miserably due to the lack of purchasing power. The government tried its utmost to rise to the occasion and adopted relief measures which were noted for their advance in the famine policy. For instance the relief to the aboriginals was a new feature of the relief policy. They suffered and died in the forests during the famine of 1896-97. But in 1899-1900 they were offered work, and were thus rescued successfully.

Another Famine Commission was appointed in 1900 to enquire into the famine of 1899-1900. It submitted its report in 1901. In the years which followed the famine its recommendations were evaluated and implemented. They were taken up by the government to improve the economic condition of the people. Some protective measures such as the construction of roads and railways were taken in hand. These measures helped to reduce the suffering of the people.

It would appear that the government had developed a definite and well thought out policy with regard to the famines by the turn of the century.
Thus the relief policy grew in the course of time. The government was able to successfully check the severity of distress to a considerable extent in the current century. The mortality in times of drought was also reduced which would otherwise have been much larger. The government also successfully curtailed the number of emigrants in times of famine.

However, it must be noted that, while a famine policy was taking shape quite often the government failed to take prompt measures to relieve the distressed people. Moreover, the measures were not adopted in accordance with the needs of the people. Very often the relief measures were hesitant and did not fulfill the requirements of the situation. Economy in the relief measures was the main consideration of the government. It led to the curtailment in the wage scales, which caused suffering to the people on the relief works. The minimum wages prescribed by the Famine Code were paid on the relief works. These wages were less than what was recommended by Famine Commissions. This caused suffering to the people. As a result, more than the normal mortality on the relief works was not unknown.

Very often the lack of promptness and delay in opening relief works caused avoidable sufferings. It happened when the distress was on though the government was not yet prepared to immediately open relief works.
Organisation of relief measures took time and when the relief works were finally opened the health of the people would already be deteriorated.

The government was aware of importance of irrigation as a preventive measure against famine. Still it was neglected in the Central Provinces.

The new forest laws brought to the forefront the problem of a new class of sufferers in times of famine. This class consisted of tribal people who depended on forest produce. It was unfortunate that the government entirely failed in affording relief to these people in the earlier famines.

The drought was always accompanied by a scarcity of fodder. The non-availability of fodder caused serious difficulties for cattle. The cattle formed the mainstay of the farmers. The neglect of provision of fodder and loss of cattle took long to remedy.

It is interesting to note that the Famine Commission of 1880 recommended the diversified form of employment but the government entirely failed in this direction. The pressure of population on land increased and it continued to increase. No conscious effort was made to develop industries in which the surplus agricultural labour could be absorbed.
The government of the province always remained conscious of the financial aspect of the famine management. It was not prepared to reduce its revenue demand although it was occasionally brought to its notice that it was burdensome. Very often remissions and suspensions of land revenue came too late and in too small a dose to be of much use to the people. One of the principal reasons, perhaps, of not undertaking large irrigation projects was their cost. The geography of the province was such that such costs would be high. The province continued to suffer from the lack of network of feeder roads to the interiors and feeder railway lines. Again the cost of constructing them in the province, which would naturally be high, must have been a deterring factor. It appears that the government was not prepared to give up its traditional ideas about public finance even though a large number of its subjects continued to suffer by droughts and famines. It is ironic indeed that the government followed such a niggardly policy in a financially surplus province which the Central Provinces was.

A comprehensive famine policy should consist a proper reform of the land revenue system and the object of the policy should be consistent with the welfare of its subjects as far as possible and practicable.

After the final evaluation of the famine policy, the government was able to combat subsequent famines
whenever they occurred. But the greatest failure of the
government lay not so much in relief measures after the
occurrence of the distress as in the efforts to prevent
them from occurring at all. It took no, or very
inadequate measures, to improve the economic condition
of the people which could be the real insurance against
famines.