CHAPTER XX

THE HISTORICAL BACKDROP:
FAMINES IN THE PRE-BRITISH PUNJAB

Since the dawn of civilization people had to face different natural calamities such as droughts, epidemics or occasional pestilence. Famine is one such phenomenon which history has recorded during different intervals. There are references to some gruesome famines which occurred in the different countries of the world. Among these, most severe were the Irish Famine of 1840, the Brazil Famine of 1877, the Morroco Famine of 1877, the Egypt Famine of 1897, the Chinese Famines of 1877, 1919 and 1929, and the Ethiopian Famine of 1972-74. This last named country is still in the grip of a terrible famine. In India famines have occurred in the past and some of the most disastrous ones that have been recorded were those of the years 1783, 1860-61, 1877-78, 1896-97, 1899-1900, the Bengal Famine of 1943 and the Indian Famine of 1967.

In Punjab, famines have also been a recurrent phenomenon. The earliest reference to famines are available in the hymns of

1. At present seven of the Indian States, namely, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Orissa, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Gujrat and Andhra Pradesh are severely suffering from drought and famine. For detail see, The Illustrated Weekly of India, January 26-February 1, 1986, PP.10-11.
the Rig-Veda, the Athrava-Veda and the Jatakas. But the detailed information available is to a famine which lasted for twelve years during the reign of Chandra Gupta Mauriya. The King tried to relieve the distressed people according to the existing Famine Codes. The Codes suggested the 'creation of reservoirs, provision of work for the poor, public assistance, calling on allies for help, extension of irrigation facilities, provision of seed and food to the agriculturists and the destitutes from the King's treasury, migration to sea-shores or banks of rivers or lakes, encouragement of subjects to grow vegetables, roots and fruits, where water was available, and the hunting of wild beasts, bird or fish for food. The Mauriyas also took some extra-ordinary measures such as the manufacture of the images of dieties and selling them as a source of income. However, these images were given different names to those which were being worshipped by them, for example, Sivaka instead of Siva, etc.

2. The Rig-Veda, contains famine-cry of the people which follows:

"From this misery and famine set us free,
From this dire curse deliver us.
Succour us with thine help and with thy Wonderous thought;
most mighty, finder of the way.
Now let your Soma juice be poured;
be not afraid, O' Kali's sons,
this darkening sorrow goes away;
yea of itself it vanishes" —Rig-Veda, 8.55.14.


The Rajatarangini informs about a terrible famine which occurred in Kashmir during the years 917-18 A.D., when 'One could scarcely see the water of Vitasta (Jhelum) entirely covered as the river was with corpses, soaked and swollen by the water in which they had been lying. The land became densely covered with bones'.

More references are available regarding Famines in the writings of the medieval chroniclers either because of the abundance of literature or the increasing frequency of droughts, scarcities or famines. In 1291 A.D. a famine occurred during the reign of Jalal-u-din Khalji severely affecting parts of the Delhi and Sivalak Hills. Zia-ud-din Barani, the author of Tarikh-i-Ferozesahi, wrote about the famine that 'the people came to Delhi with their families, twenty or thirty of them together, in the extremity of hunger, and drowned themselves in the Jamna'.

Details of relief measures are not given but the chronicler only added that the 'Sultan and nobles did all they could'.

Alauddin Khalji introduced a new economic policy, according to which the Government established grain-stores in every Mohalla of the capital (Delhi) and a limited quantity of grain was supplied to the people in times of famine. 'The rush of purchasers at these shops was so great that many were crushed to death'. Barani asserted that on account of various regulations

9. Lal, op. cit., pp.274-77. Barani did not mention if the grain was sold at cheap rates or given free.
of the Sultan no scarcity of grain was felt in Delhi even in times of drought 10.

In 1326-27 A.D. rains failed and affected severely parts of the Doab and the Panjab where the suffering was further intensified by the enhanced revenue introduced by the monarch, Muhammed-Bin-Tughlaq 11. Another famine occurred in 1335-36 A.D. because of the decline in cultivation, the ruin of the ryots, and the failure of the convoys of corn from distant provinces to Delhi and its surroundings. Rains did not fall at the same time and the famine continued for several years. Thousands of people perished for want of food, while communities were scattered and households were broken up 12. The Sultan had to leave his capital and stayed at Saragadwari, a place in the Farukhabad district. Ibn Batuta wrote his experiences about this famine that 'the price of one maund of rice rose to 60 dirhams, and a little later it rose still higher.... He saw three women cutting into pieces and eating the skin of a horse which had died several months before... Even hide was sold in the market, when oxen were slaughtered people used to take and consume their blood... Some students of Khorasan told Batuta that they had gone to a city called Akroha; they entered into one of the houses on a particular night and there found a man who had kindled fire and was holding in his hand a leg of a human being; he was roasting it in the fire and eating it, 13.

11. Ibid., p.100.
The measures adopted by the State to fight the calamity, such as advancing of loans, sinking of wells, encouragement of migration, establishment of a department of Amir-i-Kohl with an agricultural farm near Delhi to bring uncultivated land under the plough, distribution of six months' provisions to the people of Delhi at the rate of one and half Jitais (or 12 Chittack in terms of food) per day, and establishment of charity houses for the distribution of cooked food, were said to have gone a great way in relieving the famine stricken people.

No famine occurred during the rule of Ferozeshah Tughlaq except the one in Thatta (Sindh) in 1362-66 A.D., when price of foodgrains rose to one and two tankas a seer.

The invasion of Amir Timur brought havoc to Delhi and its neighbourhood. The famine was the natural consequence of the whole-sale destruction of stores of grains and standing crops by the invading army, and the pestilence probably had its origin in the pollution of air and water-supply of the city by the putrefying corpses of the thousands of victims of the invader's wrath. 'So complete was the desolation that the city was utterly ruined, and those of the inhabitants who were left died, while for two months not a bird moved wing in Delhi.' Since there was no stable Government at that time, therefore, nothing appears to have been done by way of relief.

During the reign of Lodis, the crops were abundant, and the prices of all articles of ordinary use were incredibly low. No scarcity was felt. It was reported that for one Bahlulli 10 maunds of corn and 5 seers of ghee and 10 yards of cloth could be purchased.

Parts of the Punjab, particularly the neighbourhood of Delhi, were affected by a severe scarcity in 1555-56 A.D. The historian Abdul Qadir Badauni witnessed the fact that 'men ate their own kind and the appearance of the famished sufferers was so hideous that one could scarcely look upon them'.

In 1573-74 A.D., the Punjab suffered from famine for six months, and 'the inhabitants rich or poor, fled the country and were scattered abroad'. The Emperor Akbar laid down the foundations of an embankment, opened alms-houses and free-kitchens in cities, and in order to provide employment, he recruited more soldiers in the army.

In the Annual Report of the Jesuit Missions of 1597 there is a reference that Punjab was again in the grip of a terrible famine which lasted from A.D. 1595 to A.D. 1599 and the Fathers had baptized many children abandoned by their parents.

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The emperor Jahangir had recorded a pestilence in 1614-15 A.D. which was attributed to the effects of drought; the country having suffered from want of rain for two years in succession. The area affected was the Punjab as well as Delhi, though the severity was localized in the Punjab.

In 1641 A.D., heavy rainfall in Kashmir resulted in the loss of the Kharif crops and consequent scarcity that caused about 50,000 people to migrate to Lahore. They were given shelter under the walls of the palace. Among the relief provided to the distressed people were one lakh of rupees distributed for general expenses, and 200 rupees worth of victuals distributed daily as long as they remained in Lahore. In addition, a sum of Rs.30,000 was sent to Tarbiyat Khan for distribution in Kashmir amongst those who could not come to Lahore, with instructions to open five kitchens for the distribution of soup and bread, for which food worth Rs.100 was provided daily. On the failure of Tarbiyat Khan, Zafar Khan with a further grant of Rs.20,000 was sent to replace him.

In 1658 A.D., scarcity occurred in Sindh. Grain was distributed among the weavers so as to keep them alive. One year later Sindh was again affected because of the unfavourable seasons and want of rain, combined with war and movement of armies.

24. Khafi Khan, Mantakhabul Lubab, Tr.by Elliot and Dowson, Vol.VII, pp.247-49.
on the transport of grain like Rahdari (toll collected on every highway frontier and ferry) and Pandari (a ground or house cess which was paid throughout the imperial dominions by every tradesman and dealer from the butcher and the potter to banker, etc.) were remitted. The Government also purchased grain and sold it at cheap rates 25.

No serious scarcity occurred in the Punjab during the reign of Aurangzeb. However, in the beginning of his reign the effects of the war of succession coupled with the failure of rainfall and consequently of harvest culminated into a scarcity. Aurangzeb abolished both Rahdari and Pandari in his demesne lands and requested the jagirdars to do the same in their estates. This was done and there was a free flow of corn to every place affected by scarcity. As a result the price of grain fell appreciably 26.

The period that followed the death of Aurangzeb and the rise of the Sikh Misls in Punjab was one of turmoil, anarchy and disorder. In such circumstances the invasion of Nadir Shah in 1739 A.D. brought devastation and famine to Delhi and its environs 27. But there is no such mention of any natural calamity.

27. FCR, 1880, Part III, (Calcutta,1885), p.79.
The most terrible famine of the century, popularly known as the Chalisa, occurred in 1783 A.D., owing to the want of rain. The distress in this famine was very severely felt as grain was sold at 4 seers per rupee. There were no means for transportation of grain from one part of the province to another. Consequently those men who could well-afford to pay any amount for grains to save their lives, fell victim to the disaster. While the Sikh authorities at that time took no effective measures to relieve the famished masses.

During the first half of the 19th century, six famines of various severity occurred in 1802, 1812, 1817, 1824, 1833 and 1837. These were apparently confined to the east of the Province. The famine of 1832-33 was severely felt at Hissar, Rohtak and Delhi territory. The famine was as disastrous as that of 1783 A.D., as many people sold their children who were to be found in the houses of prostitutes thirty or forty years later. This famine also affected the Subah of Kashmir which was under the control of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The Maharaja suspended and remitted the land revenue and no taxes were charged on the provisions imported into the valley. The Maharaja also invited a number of Kashmiri artisans well-versed in the manufacture of shawls to come to Amritsar to settle down there. But the relief

31. Ibid.
33. Ibid., p. 237.
measures could not prove to be a success because of the lack of co-operation of the officials who were corrupt. The Nizams and the Kardars in the distant areas concealed the occurrence of drought or famine from reaching the ears of Maharaja; made ineffective efforts of relief, but on failure to collect the revenue were constrained to report the matter to Lahore.

The famine of 1837-38 was the severest of the century and was mainly confined to the districts of Hissar, Rohtak and Gurgaon. The cause of the famine was the total failure of the rains of 1836 followed by the exceptionally bad years of harvest. The prices of foodgrains rose to three times their ordinary rates. Violent agrarian disturbances and robberies of grain-stores were so rife that the troops had in several cases to be called out. The extremity of suffering endured by the population was such as to leave behind a widespread and lasting recollection of the horrors of the famine. The measures of relief taken by the British Government were the provision of work at a very low rate of wages and remissions and suspensions of land revenue demand. While tagavi advances were discouraged and gratuitous relief to those who were unable to work was fully rejected and left to the private charity.

There is controversy regarding the measures of relief taken by the ancient and medieval rulers. It has been suggested

by some English writers that before the British period Indian rulers made no serious attempts to cope with famines. And, indeed, Vincent Smith went as far as to say that 'the ancient Governments, Hindu or Muslim, did nothing as a rule in the way of famine relief' 38. However, this generalisation is by no means just. If it were true, it would not only argue inhumanity but it would also show an astonishing lack of self-interest on the part of the rulers whose income was mainly derived from the land revenue. The truth is that famine relief and preventive measures were regarded both in Hindu and Muslim times as important elements in the policy of every competent ruler 39.

Kautilya, whose treatise have been discussed, devoted an important chapter in the Arthashastra to Remedies Against Natural Calamities, and one section of this deals with famine. Although these measures are of suggestive nature but throw a wide light on the then existing Famine Codes and also indicate that the ancient rulers were not indifferent to their responsibility of giving relief to the affected people during the time of famine.

In Muslim times, too, much attention was given to this aspect of administration. Sultan Jalal-ud-din Khalji tried to alleviate the distress by gifts to poor and indigent persons. While Alauddin Khalji asked his people to buy corn from the market according to their needs. Farishta wrote that in times of drought...


every purchaser was required to buy just the quantity he needed, otherwise he would be severely punished. Alauddin also introduced rationing. Barani informed that the notables who had no village or fields at their command were given grain for their requirement. A modern historian wrote that "as far as Delhi was concerned, it never suffered from famine and drought which might have occurred in distant provinces under Alauddin Khalji, a factor that must have added considerably to the stability of his rule." 41.

Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq was a rare example in medieval history who for the first time introduced a scientific famine policy. His famine policy was basically of two types: long-term and short-term. The short-term policy was consisted of giving immediate relief. He gave gifts to the people from the treasury. Ibn Batuta informs that when famine became unbearable the Sultan ordered six months provisions to be distributed to all the people of Delhi. The Jurists and Judges set out registering the names of the inhabitants in different streets, sending for the people and giving each of them victuals amounting to six months provisions. He also abolished duties on foreign goods coming to India. He issued orders for the sinking of wells, provided the people with seeds as well as the requisite sum of money. The long-term measures were an endeavour to re-organise production by bringing the uncultivated land under the direct supervision of the State and financial support. A large tract of land was chosen and an attempt was made to produce different crops in rotation and officials were appointed to look after it. 42.

42. Rashid, op. cit., p.85.
Sikander Lodi in order to mitigate the hardships of famine-stricken people of his time, remitted the payment of Zakat in corn. Henceforth, the system of paying corn as Zakat was abolished.

The famine policy of Sher Shah Suri consisted of storing grains. The author of Tarikh-i-Afghan wrote that "Sher Shah ordered that '10 Istar per Bigha' should be taken from all parts of the kingdom and kept in storage. The grain, thus, stored should be sent to the place where there was a scarcity or famine. By this measure so much grain was collected that things became very cheap as had not been seen before, and so long as Sher Shah lived there was no famine." Akbar put a special official on famine relief duty. He also made provisions for alms-houses and free-kitchens in cities and recruited more soldiers in the army to give employment to the distressed people.

Shah Jahan exerted himself to the utmost to provide relief. Free grain was distributed, gratuitous relief was given out and public kitchens were opened. The emperor also tried to improve agriculture by the construction of canals.

The endless wars of Aurangzeb in the second-half of the seventeenth century upset the economic balance of the country and aggravated the sufferings. But he, too, took some measures such

44. Abdullah, Tarikh-i-Daudi, p.56, quoted by Rashid, op. cit., p.87.
46. Ibid., p.184.
as the abolition of Rahdari and Pandari and tried to make the free flow of corn to the famine-affected districts 47.

Political anarchy that ensued after the death of Aurangzeb in Punjab led to the rise of the Misls. But the lack of any central authority and the sense of duty among the chiefs of the misls in regard to famine relief must have resulted into the sufferings of the people during the Chalisa famine of 1783 A.D.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s famine policy was consisted of remissions and suspensions of land revenue and provision of seed-grains during the periods of drought, scarcity or famine. But the corrupt bureaucracy sometimes tried to make such measures a little success because of its non-co-operative attitude with the Maharaja.

Thus, the above discussion clearly brings out that the early rulers, Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs were not indifferent to their sense of responsibility towards famine victims in providing them relief. It became all the more important when their only source of income was derived from land or agriculture.

The foregoing discussion on famines before 1858 reveals some interesting facts. It brings out that famines in ancient and medieval times were the consequence of drought, inundation and the ravages of wars causing devastation in rural and urban areas. Breakdown of the system of administration during the times of political upheaval may also affect a region. The best example of this kind was the invasion of Amir Taimur (1399 A.D.) which brought devastation to the Delhi and its environs.

The characteristics of famines before 1858 were: (1) Famines in ancient and medieval periods were local 48 and not widespread

because of less developed means of communications; (2) these were basically the problem of food and not work as will be seen during the British rule; (3) all types of people, rich or poor, suffered alike in the absence or shortage of foodgrains contrary to the British rule where people suffered in varying degree according to their economic status and lastly, (4) the intensity of famine was generally less severe because of (a) regional in character, (b) scarcity of population and abundance of land, (c) availability of non-agricultural occupations giving good resource of income during droughts or famines, (d) less dependency on land and consequently on rainfall, (e) self-contained economy and self dependant village society.

Among the measures of relief carried out by the ancient and medieval rulers were free distribution of grains, opening of free kitchens and public grain-stores to the people, remissions and suspensions of land revenue, payment of advances for seed, remissions of other taxes, construction of canals, embankments and wells, encouragement of migration and increase in the salary of the soldiers. The Government also did not hesitate to purchase grain from surplus areas for sale at cheaper rates in famine areas, and even maintained transport at Government expense for the purpose. Relief through individual charity was not so common on such occasions.

In sum, the pre-British rulers, though, did not innovate any systematic policy of famine relief as the present famine codes under the British, but they did their best with limited resources, less developed scientific methods, technology, and means of
communications at their disposal. Some of the rulers like Alauddin Khalji, Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq and Sher Shah Suri are the rare examples in the economic history of India who for the first time not only introduced scientific methods but also did a lot in improving the condition of agriculture as well as promoting the general prosperity of their subjects.