Chapter V
POLICIES OF BRITISH RULE DURING THE FAMINES

Relief measures of 1890-1901

The Government of India in 1868-69 enumerated the policy of famine relief thus: “We say that human life shall be saved at any cost and effect and if it is asked, what the general principles are by which the district officers should be coided in refusing the aid needed to preserve life, the reply must be that there are no such principles in which such aid can be refused. This declaration failed to satisfy everybody and so in 1878 the question of famine relief was submitted to the first Famine Commission under the Chairmanship of Sir Richard Starchy.

The Famine Commission’s attempt at collecting statistical information about production and consumption of food grains in British India was a pioneering effort. Since there was a disconcerting increase in the visitations of famine after 1860; the Commission wisely thought of considering the question of adequacy of food supply taking good years with bad to meet the domestic needs. The commission concluded that India had an annual surplus of 5.1 million tons in food grains and that the country had the capacity to feed itself without resort to imports even in a drought year1. Government’s resolution on implementation of the first part of Famine Commission’s Report stated inter alia. “The Government of India believed that there will always be available in India, a sufficient food supply in an uneffected tract’s to feed the inhabitants of any area visited by famine, provided the state of communications admits of such food being transported. The prohibition of export can scarcely by justified in any conceivable circumstance and importation and shortage of grain or other similar measures are as a general rule, unnecessary.”

The Famine Commission of 1880 formulated the general principle for the proper treatment of famines and also suggested particular measures of a preventive or protective character. They laid down the principle that the efforts should be to provide the means of earning their livelihood. The recommendations were: (1) Able bodied persons on performing a reasonable work should get wages sufficient to live; (2) People unable to work should get gratuitous relief at home or in the poor houses. To
ensure careful organisation and control of gratuitous relief in villages constant village inspection should be undertaken and that distressed tracts should be divided into circles each under a competent and experienced officer. (3) There should be no interference with the trade. Land revenue should be remitted and loans should be given to land owning classes with a corresponding duty on them towards their tenants. (4) In times of drought, facilities should be given for the migration of cattle to forest areas.

These recommendations were accepted and embodied in the provincial Famine Code promulgated in 1883. The famine wage was defined as the lowest amount sufficient to maintain health under given circumstances. A famine insurance fund was inaugurated by the government and every year a sum of Rs. 1½ crores were allotted to this fund. The fund was to be used for relief, protective works like railways and canals and for the reduction or rather the avoidance of debt.

The Famine code was drawn up for each province, showing among other steps to be taken at the time of famine, measure to be adopted and how the campaign against famine should be conducted by the “many grades of public officers” concerned in the work. Great care was taken to prevent the unobserved approach of famine under the provisions of the Land Revenue Act every village Accountant (Patwari) had to keep up a dairy and in that he had to enter a note, which he was directed to prepare with special care on the general conditions of the crops and husbandry, and the cattle of his circle, which rarely exceeded five square miles in sine. He was also directed to report any calamity occurring to land, crops or cattle and so on, to his supervisor and to the officer incharge of the tehsil immediately on its occurrence. The immediate supervisors of this village Accountant who were known as Kanungos, each supervising 20 village Accountants, were directed to examine their dairies at each visit and to report any matter calling for attention to the Tehsildar.

The officers incharge of districts were responsible for seeing that the village agency was in an efficient state, but in addition to this a special department of Land Records and Agriculture was created and it was the main duty of the officer incharge
of this department to visit all parts of the province and see that this agency was in proper working order and that approaching famine or scarcity was promptly reported.

Although there was no serious alarm of famine before the year 1883 terminated, there had been a considerable failure of the winter rains in the southern part of the Province, which coming after several indifferent seasons, occasional and uneasiness, and preparations were made for the commencement of famine relief works, both under civil officers and this department, in the Delhi and Hissar Divisions.

During the early months of 1884, the condition of the Southern Punjab comprising Karnal, Delhi, Gurgaon, Rohtak and Hissar district caused anxiety and required same measures of relief, especially the scarcity of fodder for cattle was reported to be so serious that some action should be taken by the Government of Indian in the Agricultural Department in conjunction with local governments.

The people of this region were accustomed to occasional drought and migration to neighbouring district for food and work in times of crop failure. Condition for emigration were favourable in 1884 as work was available easy, not only or the crop lands of the central and western districts of the Punjab and Western parts of North Western Provinces, but also on earthwork on the construction sites of canals and railway lines in this region and its neighbourhood. This was the main reason that the relief measures during the famines of 1884-85 were paid little attention and even the relief needed persons instead of going on work started by the government under the relief measure programme, they emigrated to nearby Punjab districts where work was easily available, employment on earth works was so plentiful that a relief work started on the Rohtak district failed to attract many labourers and had, therefore to be closed down after some time. Even the wages given by government on relief works were very low. The full daily ration prescribed as sufficient to maintain able-bodied labourers of class. A doing a full task in health and strength is as follows in English and Indian measures.
### Table 5.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ration</th>
<th>For a Man</th>
<th>For a Woman</th>
<th>For working children age 7 to 12 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OZ</td>
<td>CH</td>
<td>OZ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flour</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulse</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>1/4</td>
<td>1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghi or Oil</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condiments and Vegetables</td>
<td>1 1/2</td>
<td>1 1/2</td>
<td>1 1/2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Oz = Ounces, Ch = Chattakas)

Whereas minimum ration under Punjab Famine Code (1893) to be distributed to the labourers was comparatively very 10% as table given below shows:

### Table 5.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ration</th>
<th>For a Man</th>
<th>For a Woman</th>
<th>For working children age 7 to 12 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OZ</td>
<td>CH</td>
<td>OZ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flour</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulse</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>1/3</td>
<td>1/6</td>
<td>1/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghi or Oil</td>
<td>1/3</td>
<td>1/6</td>
<td>1/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condiments and Vegetables</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>1/4</td>
<td>1/2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Oz = Ounces, Ch = Chattakas)

The Government met the famine by giving the following relief measures.

1. The suspension of the revenue where deemed necessary.
2. The grant of lands for digging wells, and later on, when the rains of 1884 broke, of agricultural advanced for seed and cattle.
(3) The provision of road and tank work by the district boards for the unemployment ordinary rates of wages.

No regular famine relief works were opened, but in addition to the employment provided by the district boards a considerable amount of earth work was in progress on the canals and railways.

In Hissar district works were started from provincial and district funds for relief of the suffering agricultural population. The embankment of the Delhi-Sirsa road was carried out by the Public Works Department; at a cost of Rs. 17,000 and nearly the whole available balance in the district fund was devoted by the committee to the excavation and enlargement of village tanks in various parts of the district, works provided by the Railway Department at Tosham and by the Government cattle farm at Hissar, were also a great assistance. The roads to railway station and to encamping ground were metalled. In May 1884 in Hissar 750 people were employed under the famine relief works.

Rohtak district was the most affected, a large drainage work was started in May 1884 in one part of the Rohtak district, but very few labourers came to it and it was closed after about 2 or 3 months. 670 people were on relief works in the district. The road between Rohtak and Bhiwani was metalled in 4½ miles. Rohtak-Jhajjar road was metalled in six miles to provide employment to the people, in order to relieve the burden of the famine in the district.

The largest amount of land revenue was suspended in Rohtak, where Rs. 2,29,000 of the Kharif demand of 1883 and Rs. 2,23,000 of the Rahi demand of 1884 were suspended. During the year under report Rs. 51,500 were given as advances, of which Rs. 24,985 were allowed for agricultural improvements and Rs. 26,515 for purchase of seed grain and bullocks. The special advance for purchase of bullocks and seed grain was to be recovered by fixed installments.

In Gurgaon district, 3,200 persons were employed on relief works started by the Government. The roads from Sohna to Nuh and from Ferozepur to Alwar were metalled under the relief works. In different parts of the district, 169 tanks were excavated at a cost of Rs. 21,380 and Rs. 19,626 were spent on irrigation.
embodiments. Revenue suspensions in Kharif crop of 1883 and rahi crop of 1884 were amounted to Rs. 1,16,000 and Rs. 1,15,000 respectively\(^{10}\). In addition to this taccavi loan accounting to Rs. 57,855 for walls and Rs. 36,590 for bullocks was distributed. No details of the number relieved are available. In the Ambala district total revenue suspended was Rs. 30,200 of which 11,400 was suspended in Ambala tehsil and 7,933 in Naraingarh tehsil as a failure of Kharif crop of 1883. The rahi crop of 1884 also failed badly, proposals were made for the suspension of Rs. 29,600 which would have been a substantial help to the people, but only a third of this sum was actually hold over. This clearly shows that in spite of all devastation and destruction the British beaurocracy was the least sympathetic towards the famine affected people\(^{11}\).

The policy of giving large suspension of revenue was adopted and continued over since in the drier tracts of the Karnal district, whose crops depend on the floods of the Sarusti and Ghaggar, whenever the necessity had arisen. In Karnal Rs. 45,000 of the rahi demand was suspended. In the Kaithal Thesil alone, excluding Pehowa, Rs. 38,474 were suspended of the Kharif demand in 1883 and Rs. 18,462 of the rahi demand in 1884 and Rs. 40,819 in 1885-86. The road from Panipat to Safidon was completed and Kaithal and Patiala roads were also improved to provide employment to the relief needing labourers\(^{12}\).

In Delhi region the Najafgarh and Azadpur roads were remetalled under the Government relief works and more than Rs. 40,000 of the revenue demand were suspended. A total sum of Rs. 85,000 was advanced in the year 1883-84 and Rs. 70,000 in 1884-85 to the three districts of Rohtak, Gurgaon and Delhi under the Act XXVI of 1871\(^{13}\).

The most serious aspect of the famine of 1884 as of similar famines in the Sourt Eastern Punjab, was the great mortality among the cattle owing to the non-availability of fodder and water especially in the Hissar and Rohtak districts. A proposal to advance Rs. 2 lakhs in these two districts to the agriculturists was made by the Commissioner of the Delhi Division for grant of loans to enable them to purchase fodder to save their cattle from destruction. The financial commissioner turned down
the proposal, and held that it would be cheaper in the end for the people to sell their plough bullocks at low prices and to buy others when rain began to fall, then to attempt to keep them alive on purchased fodder; and that it would be a great mistake, "to encourage the people to run largely into debt for this purpose, when a second failure of the rains would inevitably result in the death of the cattle by starvation." He showed that in those district the people were in the habit of selling their surplus cattle after harvest operations were over the buying others when required. He further argued that it was undesirable to interfere with habits of this kind, which were the result of long experience in a tract of country where reasons were unusually uncertain.

Three conclusions were accepted by the local government. As regards cattle required for agricultural purpose "wrote the local officials of the Government", it is for better, because it is a far more certain methods of relief, to make advances for the purchase of bullocks when the drought ceases, then to make advances nominal to keep them alive during the season of drought. The free suspensions of lend revenue which have been made will indirectly enable the agriculturists to procure fodder for their cattle. The people must be left themselves in this matter; the proceeds of the sale of surplus cattle at the spring fairs will, no doubt, in many cases provide the means of purchasing fodder for the remaining cattle needed for agricultural purposes. Should it is necessasry hereafter the Lieutenant Governor will be preferred to make large advances for the purchase of cattle."

In short the relief measures during the famine of 1884-85 in Haryana region were more or less satisfactory though much could have been attempted had the government been not a colonial government. We find that in each district full use of its machinery was made, even for the small works management was given in the hands of civil officers. However, the relief measures were halfhearted and efforts were not made to win the confidence of the people. The British beaurocracy was not at all sympathetic towards the famine affected people. It is evident from the fact that the proposal of Rs. 2 lakhs which were to be advanced during the famine of 1884-85 was declined by the Financial Commissioner and as a result so many cattle died in acute shortage of fodder.
The relief measures undertaken included among other test works, construction of roads and digging of tanks, opening of hospitals and poor houses, forming of relief committees and remitting of land revenue and advance of loan for the purchase of seed and cattle etc. The gratuitous relief was also given to those who were incapacitated.

A sizeable portion of population in Haryana was affected by the famine. Most affected people were from the lower castes and village menials who had to suffer a lot. In terms of classes, mostly the peasant having small land holdings or landless labourers were the worst sufferers. Famine affected people were also from higher castes and communities but their actual number could not be ascertained. The reason being that they did not seek support from relief sources and agencies because of their caste restrictions. It may, however, be accepted that the information about the famine or the relief measures particularly during 1884-85 is so meagre that a correct estimate cannot possibly be made, because it was regional in nature.

The middle peasants and landlords were able to meet their demands. Many a time they were able to exploit the miseries of poorer peasant. It is important here to note that business groups which had their respectable position in the society (two and villages), they tried to make money as far as they could. The government and the law was in no way a hindrance to them.

While reviewing the relief measures it can be said that the government being an alien government, its interest for the affected people was much less.

**The Failure of Relief Measures**

These measures of relief were lacking in many ways. Firstly, the government was slow in opening relief works for the affected population. It made no arrangement for those who were status conscious and were reluctant to join the relief works. Secondly no provision was made for the supply of fodder though mortality among cattle was very high. Thirdly, nothing was done to check speculation both in fodder and grain, trade. Fourthly, the amount of *taqavi* was inadequate as compared with the loss of cattle. Fifthly, the suspensions of revenue demand were not only made in few
cases but were collected in some parts immediately after the rains, forcing peasants to borrow money from the money lenders. Lastly, government's efforts regarding famine relief administration remained unsatisfactory. So far as the statistics regarding nature of relief works, gratuitous relief, their durations, number of persons employed, the total amount spent, and also the mortality among cattle and men were concerned, no to-talk of long-term measures for the prevention of famines.

**Relief Measures of 1858-1879**

The relief measures undertaken by the government were carried in accordance with the rules adopted on 18 July 1860 which, in turn were based on the policy accepted during the Indian famine of 1837-38. The works started for sufferers of famine were divided three categories viz. ordinary, special and miscellaneous or local. In the early stage of famine and even later, the public works already in operation employment. Four large relief works regarded as being of permanent utility were opened under the supervision of professional officers; the laborers were paid low daily wages in return for fixed task of work. Besides, some minor works opened to provide for the employment of those who were unable to travel far from their homes, the wages in such, and cases being paid in cash. The districts in which large and small works were opened included Delhi, Gurgaon Kamal. Thanesar. Ambala. Ludhiana, Hissar, Rohtak and Sirsa. In Lahore district, the relief work initiated only for the benefit of migrants from Malwa. Haryana and Hindustan. All these works remained operative for about 10 months from January to October 1861. "The Maximum number of persons relieved in one day was 24,365 in Delhi district. The workers were ordinarily organized in gangs of 500 each, to which a separate cash-keeper and a series of petty officers were attached. The government expended an amount of 1.1,19,992 rupees on such works.

Gratuitous assistance constituted the second method for relief to the famine-affected people. Such relief was supported essentially by public charity, though the government promised to add an equal amount of collections which were raised in the Punjab. This relief was extended to help the very old, Young and the infirm who were absolutely unable to work for the collection of subscriptions no controlling authority
was created but several committees were formed at Agra Bombay, Calcutta and Lahore and, for the first time an appeal was made to. England and-other European countries, for liberal subscriptions. In January 1861, a "Punjab Famine Relief Fund Committee" was organized at Lahore, with branches all over the affected district. The Punjab Committee raised 84,034 rupees in the Punjab and received from Madras, Bombay, Calcutta and England an amount of 9,66,241 rupees. The government contributed an equivalent amount collected in the Punjab on the. Condition that the Committee will nominate on or two of its officers to each of the relief committees and the committees were asked to accept the fundamental rules of famine policy laid down. by it officially in this way, it acquired control over the utilization of private subscriptions.

The Punjab Famine Relief Fund Committee considered it, necessary to help the agriculturists in purchasing seed grains and plough-cattle. The Committee, therefore, made grants to each district according to the estimated local loss. These, were distributed among the Needy through the collector and his subordinates and were given in the division of Delhi, Ambala and the district of Shahpur. The government also made contributions and the advances at the close of the famine, made both from the government treasury at the close of the Famine Fund amounted to 3,33,456 rupees and 2,27,000 rupees respectively. Those' from the latter source were drawn on easier terms than was permissible in the case of the former and it was anticipated right in the beginning that these would not be recoverable. Without these measures wrote the Commissioner of Hissar, the favorable rains vouchsafed would have been of little avail, the agricultural community mast have succumbed, and the ruin which had marked former visitations of the kind, would, have been the inevitable consequence.

No detail of remissions of land revenue demanded is available but the doubtful and 'irrecoverable' balances of 1860-62 amounted to 14, 25,635 rupees. All these, according to major wace's evidence before the Famine Commission of 1880, were ultimately remitted. In some cases the government also remitted the balances of fines lavied after the revolt of 1857. Thus, the total expenditure on relief to the distressed population, in the shape of provision of work, gratuity and taqaavi turned out to be
18,11,152 rupees, of which 12,73,670 rupees were spent by the Punjab Famine Relief Fund Committee, while the government share stood at 5,37,482 rupees. Hence, major expenditure on relief was done by way of private charity.

**Limitations of Relief Measures**

The measures taken for relief to the distressed had many limitations. Firstly, relief were unpopular because of extremely low wages, which means extreme hardship to the people especially when the prices of food grains rose to seven seers per rupee. In a large number of cases, the people worked in rotation, families being divided into sections; one going to work for a certain period, while the other remaining at home. Later, they interchanged their positions at many of these relief works and places were deplorable as Colonel R.B. Smith reported, "the condition of the laborers was very wretched. They looked wasted away and were quite incapable of any really hard work. The children as usual showed the marks of famine more strikingly and he saw some very sad examples of utter and apparently almost hopeless exhaustion among them. Besides, the entry of the relief works was extremely restricted being confined only to those who were physically fit for work. But in a famine like that of 1860-61, when a large percentage of people were affected, it became difficult to draw a line between the fit and the, unfit. A majority of people who came to these works were professional laborers.

Secondly, the distribution of gratuitous relief was limited in scope. The poor-houses were generally disliked by the people and admission to them was restricted. People belonging to status conscious. Families whose adherence to traditional prejudices were strong and those unwilling to leave their homes, died uncared for. Though, a large amount of money was collected for charitable relief yet a significant proportion remained unspent. If this amount had been spent in a more liberal way, a large number of people could have benefited. Thirdly, despite the policy decision of government to the effect that the advances made from the 'Punjab Famine Fund' would not be recovered it ordered for such collections along with *taqavi* as soon as the famine was over. This decision and the attempts to relieve these recoveries immediately after the famine must have caused immense hardship to the exhausted
population. Fourthly, the fanatical adherence of the government policy of non-interference with private trade only added to the miseries of the people, because the traders raised prices to extremely high levels and even in those areas where drought had not occurred. Fifthly, it was noticed that the government preferred Europeans to Indians in matters relating to administration of relief measures. The government almost invariably appointed Europeans for supervising a poor-house, a large relief work or any other key position in the relief administration. Even when it was suggested that the waste lands be distributed among the famine-stricken under a permanent settlement as a future safeguard against famines, the government held that such uncultivated lands might be better given to the Europeans. Lastly, the attitude of the government officers towards famine victims was not always sympathetic. Though some revenue was remitted, yet bulk of the demand was fully recovered in most cases, so that affected people were pushed towards further indebtedness. The use of force and threat among the revenue officials was common and in the canal irrigated areas. The people were induced to complain against their harsh attitude and strictness in collecting water cesses.
Notes and References

5. Famine Commission Report, 1898, Chapter II.
6. Ibid
10. Famine Commission Report, 1898 Chapter II.