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## **GENDERING THE FAMINES: WOMEN AND FAMINE RELIEF MEASURES IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY, 1850-1900**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present paper presents an analysis of conditions of women in the famine relief camps in Colonial Madras Presidency during second half of nineteenth century. Famine may be defined to be complete or very extensive and general failure of food or water, or both, over a large area of country. Famines occurred in the times of our ancestors of a greater severity in the pre-modern times. Women and children preponderate over adult male element during famines. That at all times women in this country perform more manual labour than the men as field labourers, weeding, planting, and picking crops, as carriers of burdens, as suppliers of grass, fuel, and water; whereas the men too indolent and too conceited to work at any task which custom has specially allotted to the women and as, these embrace nearly every ordinary avocation of life, the men have not much left to do. In family groups of South India the larger number consisted of elderly women, chiefly widows, unmarried girls, and children of both sexes. During famine times applications and recipients of relief were of all ages, but the women and children greatly exceeded the males in number. Mainly I would like to display the treatment of various categories of women like female labourers, traditional Gosha women and Pardhs noshing at the relief camps and relief kitchen areas by the British government.

### **Introduction**

The Madras presidency is located in south of the Indian peninsula. It is abounded on the northeast by Andhra Pradesh, on the northwest by Mysore and on the southwest by Kerala. The total area of the madras presidency is 50331 square metres. The capital of the Madras presidency is Madras. In Madras Presidency, famines had played more tragic part in the History of British India. The frequency of famines further increased during the second half of the 19 century. During the administration of the British India many famines and scarcities were faced by the people of Madras. People lived in distressed and helpless condition. There was no place for any systematic famine relief policies, either by the government or by the voluntary organisations. Famines have been defined as a state of hunger suffered by the population of regions a result of the failure of the accustomed food supply. Definitions of famine abound, most of them cantering on food scarcity leading to mass hunger and deaths. Famines were no strange to the Madras Presidency 150th years of colonial rule. However it was instructive and necessary to study about the famines and its effects on women. Both the government and voluntary agencies were took interest in reliving the distressed women. Importance of the is 1853 stands for Madras famine and 1901 denoted for appointment of Third Indian Famine commission. The paper is based upon both primary and secondary sources. The Important primary sources consulted for the preparation of the paper.



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## **Famine Commissions by the Government of Madras 1850-1900**

The first enquiry commission was appointed in 1860 under Bird Smith, to enquire in to the causes and effects of famine. A report was submitted to the government comprising its opinions and recommendations for the further famine relief operations. Before 1860s' the government did not take any effective systematic steps to check or prevent the distress of famines. The ultimate aim of the commission was to tackle or check the ravages of famine. The extensive enquiry made by the commission gave certain guiding principles for famine relief policy and administration. The main provision given by the commission was that new relief works were started according to the intensity and distress of the famine. The gratuitous relief was also given to the destitute and infirm people. The Second Famine Enquiry Commission (1866-67 the failure of South west monsoon in the year 1866-67 caused the famine in Madras and other places. The effect of the famine was more severe in Orissa than in Madras, hence called as Orissa famine. Even though relief works were started in many places and the gratuitous relief was given in large numbers, which was enough to control the large crowds including men, women, and children. The Important object of famine code of 1883 and famine administration was, 1) To avert the loss of human life and giving subsistence to the effected people. 2) To keep the Spirits of the people and place them in a position to reverse them. 3) In ordinary pursuits with the advantage of themselves and state on the advent of better time, and 4) To prepare them then withstand to face the calamities of future famines which may be said in a word "preparedness" The first Indian famine Commission was appointed by the government of India on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1878 under John Strachey's Chairmanship to enquire into all aspects of famines The commission submitted its report in 1880 to the government. The main reasons for the appointment of 1880 famine commission was that the ravages of 1876-78 famine was very severe. The relief measures adopted by the government official was not enough to mitigate the distress of the people. The famine relief officers were not aware of geographical, climatic conditions. A historical survey about famines gave an idea to the protective and preventive measures for failure famine. The second Indian famine commission was adopted under leadership of the J.B. Lyall having six member committee to enquire into the effectiveness of the policy adopted during famine years and also recommended measures for more effective relief the committee submitted its report in October 1898. The main reason for the appointment of famine commission of 1898 was that the relief measures furnished in the 1880 famine Indian commission was not satisfactory to meet the distress of the people. The disaster created by 1896-97 famine was not under control. The third Indian famine commission was appointed in October 1900 under the chairman ship of A.P. Mecdonell and submitted its report in May 1901, mainly emphasised on the moral strategies dealing with famines. It also insisted the importance of the preparedness of famine relief officers before the advent of famines, which gave good results in the famine relief policy. The commission also insisted the responsibility of the people and assistance of non-officials were necessary for the successful of relief operations. The policy of Famine codes,



devised following the famine of 1896-97, was put to test in the two famines of 1896-97 and 1899-1900. In all most all respects that policy was found deficient and proved a failure.

### **Worst Victims of Famine were Women Some case studies**

Sir Richard Temples attempt draw a line between distress and starvation was condemned, whilst his expectation that the supervising staff on all the works and in all the villagers was sufficient for every purpose was scouted as dependence upon impossibility. Affecting case from Coimbatore came under my notice at the kitchen. A girl, eight or nine years of age, came too late to get in, leading a little brother by the hand, and carrying an infant sister. The baby was so literally skin and one that its skin hung from its legs and arms like empty sacks. It was scarcely alive, but I have never seen the life left in a creature so reduced as it was. The girl story as interpreted to me by the sheristadar, was, that her father was a labourer on the relief works; that she had come in time to get her porridge yesterday, but that this morning she had been delayed at home while her mother went out to gather sticks. The sheristadar ordered her to get a ball of Joweree. About four persons made a grievance that the quantity of porridge given them was insufficient, but many complained that the Jowaree was not cleaned before it was boiled, and that the porridge was consequently full of little stones and grift. I have been much struck by the absence amongst the famine subjects of the modesty which so generally prompts the native women to cover their breasts, and have been assured by more than one officer that it is the result of their intense misery. It is true one native gentle man on the selem committee (a Madrasee) told me that this modesty was not habitual in Selem district as in the neighbourhood of Madras. Rev. J.S. Chanler, of Battalagundu, who writes 'On Friday, the 19<sup>th</sup> instant, a child died in my compound that had been picked up in the streets, after having disserted by the mother for three days. On the Saturday, the 27<sup>th</sup> instant, another child died from same cause. On the morning of that day my school boys found body of the famine stricken women in a Battalaguda River. Disappointment of Gratitude, Poor ryots by scores and others of every caste, creed and profession armed with '*chits*', stating the urgency of their case from the village munsif or kurnam where they reside, each chit generally tells a sad tale. A widow wrote to the government, that her husband died of cholera some months ago. She had a little land and two buffalos are yet alive. If she can get a little seed grain she hopes to get some of her neighbours to sow a small piece of her ground at least. She is very poor; has four children, and two of them are sick. They need cloths badly. Please do for this poor women all you can. On a recent tour, I heard directly of not less than 30 deaths from starvation, in five or six villages. I also saw several in a starving condition, some of whom have since died. In one enclose I saw a man, willing and strong to work, but, from hunger, lying upon his back, with arms and legs extended, apparently insensible. The emptiness of abdomen showed the cause of trouble. A little distance from him lay his wife, in a half conscious sate, with an infant trying to extract nourishment from its mothers breast, and an older child lying a little way off, in the same condition as the mother.



That man died soon after. From the note book of Dr. Cornish, sanitary commissioner of Madras Presidency, of 1,189 women examined, 245 or 20 percent. Of the whole, were noted as in weak health and emaciated more than usual. The women of this part of the country are mostly Tall Square of flesh, and I hardly saw one really stout women amongst them. Many of them besides the 20 percent above noted as in reduced condition, were pale, anaemic, and evidently unhealthy, as shown by the condition of their tongues and spongy unhealthy gums. The non-working children, as regards the elder ones, were pretty well taken care of, but the babies in arms, in considerable proportion showed that they were slowly starving from defective breast milk of mothers.

### Typical Cases of Distress

**Narasamy**, Vissnava Brahmin, Her husband died two months ago, The widow has a dilapidated house and half a cawnie of land, which cannot be cultivated, as she has no male relation or cattle, She cannot, according to her caste rules, leave her house for twelve months after the death of her husband. **Nagamma**, Brahmin, six months ago her husband died, she herself has no land, she lives in her own house, which is mortgaged. She has one brother, who gets his living by begging, and who occasionally helps her. **Chengamma** widow, Karamala caste, has no property or house to live in, lives in chutram, is reduced to weakness by the famine. She will not go the relief camp on account of caste prejudices. **Luchimi** widow, her husband dies before five days ago. Has now neither land nor house; all were sold owing to the famine. **Sayamma** widow, reddy caste, lives in house of another, having no property of any kind. She looks weak, did work on the roads, but is now unable to, her feet are swelling. **Chengamma**, priah, Has no one to support her, has no property, will not go to relief camp, as she thinks ‘ There is no one to feel for her’

**Traditional Gosha Women and Parda Nashin Women during Famines.**

Some poor creatures declared they had been living on greens, and they quite looked it, and now, they said, they would get a little meat or fish. Some old women between sixty and seventy had longed for little mittoy, a luxury they enjoyed in better days, which days had now so long passed away, and now, for once-they would treat themselves to some and gratify their longings.

Mr.R.W.D’E. Ashe, senior Assistant Collector, Ganjam, ‘Gosha women would not do any work’ gosha women belong to upper caste, upper caste men object to their women being seen and to their doing any work. Mr.W.L. Venkataramiah, Chairman, Ganjam District Committee, Indian Famine Charitable Relief Fund, the gosha women were, All the better classes among the Telugus and Uriyas, Brahmins and Sudras alike. Mr.R.R.R. Dewan Bahadur Dharma Rao Nayudu Garu, Waltair, The people treated gosha women in Vizagpatnam district, Rajputs, Telugas, and Iyercas and Kshyattriyas. Musلمان women are treated as parda nashin they are also relieved under gratuitous relief. Mr.Mahdi Hussein Saheb Bahadur, Deputy Collector, Adoni, in his report to the collector Kurnool, for gosha



females relief in the shape of grain dole was given. In the Kurnool town there a great number of *gosha* women urging for relief, as the special Assistant Collector was put in charge of this work. I am unable to give detailed information as to different modes of relief given them. Most of the able bodied women were required to grind cholam in return for wages given them. The workers were given grain doles gratis as also the respectable families. In several families, of even the poorest, the females are quasi Gosha, and are utterly unproductive members. I mean unproductive in an economic sense-for otherwise, poverty and progeny seems to go only too much hand in hand. As one of them pithily said to me, we cannot work- we will not steal-we must not beg-we are left to starve.

Mr. P. Ramarao, First grade Pleader and chairman, Municipal Council of Bellary, about 3.5 percent. Of the population of this town were placed on gratuitous relief at the period of maximum pressure. They were no all incapable of work physically, but were not accustomed to the kind of work on the relief works. The persons relived were mainly Hindu and Mohamadan women. In ordinary years a large number of these did domestic work such as pounding and grinding grains; some did spinning, preparing thread, dyeing and such sundry work. Large number of them were *parda nashin* aim of the opinion that central kitchens were preferable, but people will not resort to them freely. There is a caste stigma here. Only the very lowest will resort. Substitution of kitchens for gratuitous relief will practically exclude certain classes from relief. It is rather difficult to maintain a sufficient number of kitchens for all requiring gracious relief. Government relief was given in grain, and I think it is the best. The persons were required to attend periodically at certain centers. Only *parda nisashin* women were relived at home. The *parda nashin* women are Mahomedan women are generally covered with thick veils of cloth. Others absoluteltely refused to come and they were given doles in their homes.

A correspondent of the Swdesamitran of 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1900, Says, Famine has begun to prevail even in the city of Madras, and thousands of poor people have come to it from various parts of the country in order to obtain their livelihood. Although instances of poor people subsisting on fruits of the prickly- pear and tamarind nuts have been reported by the news papers, none of us have ever witnessed these pitiable signs until recently, when I had the misfortune to see a pariah woman and her two children eagerly eating the fruits of the prickly –pear from a bush near the Adayar bridge in Madras on being questioned, the women said that she and her children had no food during the previous six days and that one of the children died on the that account. Similar hungry people are seen in all roads and streets of Madras. But the government has not taken and steps to give relief to them. During the past famines the government protected the people by establishing feeding houses for the old and infirm persons, by opening relief works for those who were not able to work, and by regulating the prices of food-grains in the Bazzars. But now when famine is ranging furiously and rice sells at less than five measures a rupee, we do not know why the government has not done anything in the



matter. If the government continues to be in different for some time more, large number of people are sure to die of starvation. Is the government indenting to come forward only after these poor persons die and to assist the survivors in carrying the dead bodies to the burial grounds, as it has done lately in connection with the plague.

### Women Labourers during Famines

All relief was to be given either by means of relief works, closed camps, or village relief. Relief works were to constitute the backbone of the system, and were divided into two classes: (1) Professional Agency Works, works supervised by officers of the Public Works Department. (2) Civil Agency Works, i.e., works not requiring, to any great extent, professional supervision, and supervised either by officers of public Works or Civil Departments, according to circumstances of convenience. All persons capable of labour and in fair health and condition were to be drafted t, along with such members of their families as would accompany them, to Professional Agency works; while weaker people who were nevertheless capable of some work were to be drafted to Civil Agency works, but transferred, as they gained strength, to professional Agency works, the object being to employ the largest possible number of people to whom it might be necessary to afford relief on the latter class of works.

Works was to be exacted on six days in the week, but pay for the seventh day was included in the following scale: ---

#### *Upon Professional Agency Works*

			<b>r</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>p</b>
For a man, the value of one lb.of grain ...	+	0	1	6	
<b>For a women, do.</b>	....	+	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
For a child of 7 years, do.of ½lb.of grain ...	+	0	0	9	

#### *Upon Civil Agency Works*

			<b>r</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>p</b>
For a man, the value of one lb.of grain ...	+	0	1	0	
<b>For a women, do.</b>	....	+	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>9</b>
For a child of 7 years, do.of ½lb.of grain .....	+	0	0	6	

By grain was to be understood the kind in ordinary use among the labourers on the works at the time of payment of wages and of medium quality. The following tests were to be enforced to prevent the works becoming unduly attractive: -- 1st. --- *prima facie* evidence that the individual really required employment on relief work. 2nd.—Distance of the Work from the house of the labourer. 3rd. --- Tasks. The Tasks fixed were: On professional agency works-75 percent, of what the individual



would be able to perform if he worked to the full extent of his ability. On Civil Agency works-50 per cent of what he would be able to perform if he worked to the fullest extent of his ability. The distance test was to be considered complied with when the labourer went to a professional agency work and performed the tasks exacted there. Civil officers were to refuse employment to all persons except those who were destitute, and were to decide who were and who were not fitting objects for employment on relief works. Gratuitous relief was to take the forms of (1) relief in villages which were to be confined to destitute person's resident therein who were unable to work; (2) relief in camps, the object of which was to restore the strength of those who were resident in them, so as to enable them to be transferred to relief works. Wanderers coming to a village in a state of destitution were to be fed and passes on to the nearest relief camp. These principles were acted upon up to the end of the famine of 1876-78 famine.

Classification of labourers women were prescribed in Madras famine code. In in the first class women labourers were given  $1\frac{1}{4}$  lb grain and 1 anna, second class women labourers were given the wages of  $1\frac{1}{4}$  lb grain and  $\frac{3}{4}$ anna, third class women labourers were given wage of  $1\frac{1}{8}$  lb grain and  $\frac{1}{2}$  anna in 1892 famine.

Mr. T.Ranga Rao, Deputy Collector, Cuddapah, Nursing mothers and women in advanced pregnancy were treated as equalant to  $\frac{1}{2}$  units, i.e.,  $\frac{1}{2}$  children according to the standard task for typical gangs in famine relief works, but full wages were given. Under section 135 of the famine code, gosha women relieved by grain doles were required in return to perform some suitable work, such as gridding grain for kitchens, spinning cotton, winding silk. Such work not being practicable in most cases.

The reverend Mr.W.H. Campbell, Missionary, Jammalamadugu, A women with a child of two or three months old in for gratuitous relief. But the collector might say that she should go to the works. Several cases which were taken off the list improperly were of this nature. A mother with a child of two or three months old on the breast and with other children could not be expected to walk to work which is five or six miles distant. I have seen women with twin babies on their knees attempting to break stone. Hon'ble P.Rajarithna Mudaliyar, Diwan Bahadur, Inspector General of Registration, As a rule, all nursing mothers, i.e., mothers with infants not more than six months old, and women somewhat advanced in pregnancy, ought to be formed in to special gangs and set to work at metal breaking not far from their villages or in some tope conveniently situated. If such gangs are allowed to work at a distance from the main relief works, the nearest village officer might be entrusted with the duty of measuring the work daily and paying the wages accordingly, subject of course to the instruction and control of the relief officer in charge. Pregnant women admitted to such works should be given gratuitous relief for atleast one month before and one month after accouchement.



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